

# Qualitative interviewing: encountering ethical issues and challenges

*This article, in which Amanda Clarke recounts her own experiences as a novice researcher, explores the ways in which research can affect participants. The author argues that researchers must be mindful of the impact their questioning can have on subjects, especially those who are vulnerable, and suggests that a reflexive approach can help minimise the risk of harmful effects*

## key words

- ▶ qualitative interviews
- ▶ ethical issues
- ▶ rapport
- ▶ reflexivity
- ▶ distressing stories

## Introduction

This article discusses some of the ethical dilemmas I encountered as a relatively novice researcher undertaking doctoral work using a biographical approach to explore older people's perceptions and experiences of ageing (Clarke 2001). My primary aim is to heighten researchers' awareness of the impact of research on participants. While most research reports emphasise the therapeutic and empowering nature of qualitative research, I will address the potential for qualitative interviews to be exploitative or even harmful. Such considerations are particularly pertinent for research undertaken in healthcare settings with potentially vulnerable subjects, longitudinal and/or in-depth interviews, and participatory approaches where there is prolonged contact between researcher and participants.

According to Spencer *et al*'s (2003) framework for evaluating qualitative research, one underlying concern is the relationship of the researcher to the researched; reflexivity, they suggest, is one way in which 'quality' may be ensured. Reflexivity is defined as: 'showing awareness of the importance of the research on the researcher and vice versa; recognising how values, assumptions and presence of the researcher may impact on data' (Spencer *et al* 2003).

While most literature involves anecdotal reporting of incidents after the research has concluded or on theoretical issues, from the beginning of my doctoral work I wished to avoid what Stanley and Wise (1983) term the 'hygienic' representation of research, where problems and emotional connections to the research process are ignored. To this end, I kept a reflective diary and, in the final interviews, specifically asked participants about their involvement in the research process. In the last of a series of in-depth interviews, I asked why they volunteered to participate in the study, their thoughts about being interviewed and whether they felt involved enough or too little. The issues discussed below arose from this process.

Spencer *et al* (2003) outline the importance of researchers developing fieldwork skills such as empathy, sensitivity and rapport. Using examples from my research, I begin by focusing on issues arising from my attempts to build rapport and demonstrate empathy with interviewees. I then reflect upon the dilemmas faced when listening to stories about sensitive topics.

### **Developing rapport**

Building rapport with participants is frequently mentioned as an important part of the qualitative interview process, particularly in the feminist and participatory research literature (Oakley 1981, Finch 1984, Reinharz 1992, Baylis *et al* 1998). Since the aim of my research was to describe people's experiences and views of later life through listening to their life stories, a 'hit and run approach' (Booth and Booth 1994) would have been inappropriate: three to four in-depth interviews with participants in their own homes was required. Treating the interview as a two-way process involving the gathering and giving of information – reciprocity – was something that I actively sought (Booth and Booth 1994, Miller 1998, Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000).

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Feminist research approaches, in particular, encourage researchers to invest personal identity in the relationship and to share information – for example, about themselves and their families – in order to produce non-hierarchical relationships (Oakley 1981, Devault 1990). In addition to the issue of whether a non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant is ever truly attainable (Northway 2000), is the question of whether it is desirable. If there is an element of reciprocity in the relationship, participants might be drawn to say things that they could regret afterwards, even if this is not apparent at the time (Stacey 1991, Miller 1998). Since stories are social constructs narrated by people in the moment of the interview, neither the interviewee nor the interviewer can predict the course of the interview in advance.

Attempting to address these issues involves considering people's motives for participating in interviews; as Corbin and Morse (2003) point out, participants usually volunteer for a study because they want something in return, whether or not they are conscious of this. For example, they may want to voice a concern about a particular subject, speak to a sympathetic listener, seek information or help, or share their hopes and anxieties. Further, as many participants revealed to me, they may simply want to be friendly and helpful. This comment was typical: 'I've told my story to a student who is doing a study and will get a degree. One day, she will remember me and that I helped her. If I feel I can help somebody, I feel happy.'

Jones (1998) believes that particular care should be taken with individuals who agree to participate because they are lonely or friendly; such individuals could divulge more than they feel comfortable with and regret this following the interview. Yet participants may be far more discerning about the nature of research than researchers often give them credit for; to argue otherwise removes participant agency and control over what is revealed and withheld (Corbin and Morse 2003, Charmaz 1995, Nunkoosing 2005). As Bornat *et al* (2000) argue: 'People bring their own agendas and interests to the interview, consequently, interviewer topics may well be reinterpreted, managed or straightforwardly resisted by the interviewee.'

In my own study, one woman described another researcher who had tried to probe her too deeply about issues she felt uncomfortable discussing, so she told him to leave. Another told me: 'I've got lots of regrets of a personal

nature which I don't want to talk about.' Two participants said that they did not want to talk about their experiences of being in the army in Burma.

The control that participants may retain over the research process is further illustrated by my first visit to the home of 'DT' [all participants will be referred to by two initials, to preserve anonymity], recorded in my research diary. To help reduce the researcher-participant power imbalance (Parnis *et al* 2005) I asked participants where they wished to be interviewed: all chose their own homes. After about an hour, I left DT in her lounge in order to go to the bathroom. When I returned, there was a huge pile of ham sandwiches on the dining room table. I had not been expecting lunch and did not like to refuse her hospitality, so I accepted the sandwiches she kept putting on my plate, despite me being a vegetarian. The same thing happened when I visited her friend the next week – DT had apparently told her friend how much I liked ham sandwiches. Most participants offered me a drink and biscuits at the very least, while one woman asked me to dinner.

Oakley (1981) notes that although hospitality is something that is often offered, it is rarely mentioned in research reports (for exceptions, see Finch 1984, Warren 1990, Moloney 1995). Finch argues that such hospitality shows that the researcher is being welcomed into the participant's home as a guest, 'not merely tolerated as an inquisitor' (1984). The desire to offer hospitality may reflect participants' anxieties about the purpose of the research, about their own 'performance' in the interview and/or a concern about being helpful. The same, however, could be said of the novice researcher: I was nervous, anxious not to offend and wanted to be seen as friendly.

As stated earlier, this desire to be friendly can cause problems: as participants begin to trust the researcher, there is the potential for them to agree to things that they might previously have hesitated over or might later regret. This is illustrated very clearly by JB, a participant in my study. Although I attempted to make it clear that even with the use of pseudonyms protection of participants' identities could not be guaranteed – they might still be identified by their stories – JB was the only participant to express concern. After reading the transcript of her first interview, she was anxious that she had 'said too much' and indicated that she wanted certain paragraphs removed. I suggested that she re-read the transcripts and marked the sections she wanted

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deleted, assuring her that they would not be used in my thesis. JB explained that past experience had shown her how easily people could be identified from their stories. While her daughter was undertaking nurse training, she had attended a lecture where a doctor had discussed the case of 'a remarkable woman who had a hysterectomy'. At once, JB's daughter recognised the woman as her mother. However, when I saw JB for the third time, despite reminding her to show me what she wanted me to omit from her story, she said that she trusted me to edit the transcript: 'You do it the way you think best. I think you're a sincere person and if you were insincere it would come out, but you are genuine.'

Stressing the importance of developing personal relationships of trust and rapport has a fundamental bearing on what and how much people are prepared to disclose (Booth and Booth 1994). But, as this incident reveals, the researcher must take care to promote non-manipulative research relationships and make sound judgements concerning what is to be reported in the dissemination process.

This is further illustrated by my interviews with AL. In AL's first interview, she passed quickly over her first marriage; clearly, it was too painful for her to recall, and I thought it inappropriate to pursue the subject. When I visited her for the third time, however, AL shared her experiences in response to my own story. Since there had been a gap much longer than I had expected between this interview and the last, I explained that this was due to the unexpected breakdown of my marriage. AL put her arms around me and proceeded to tell me what had happened to her. The tape recorder was not switched on so I did not include the incident in her life story; I felt it was something that she wished to share only between the two of us and at that particular moment. This was later confirmed by AL who expressed satisfaction with the transcript of her life story.

Corbin and Morse (2003) argue that it is this trust and intimacy that creates both the potential threats associated with unstructured interviews and, concomitantly, makes them potentially therapeutic. Although the therapeutic value of research interviews is often cited (Cutcliffe 2002, Murray 2003, Parnis *et al* 2005), perhaps it is more evident when researcher and participant share similar experiences. In AL's case, not only could I empathise with

her experience, I was grateful too for the help and advice she offered (Jones 1998). AL, in turn, said that she felt valued by my statements of gratitude.

Giving as well as receiving information in order to facilitate a relationship between researcher and participant built on rapport and trust (Booth and Booth 1994) is not without risk. Building trust and rapport in the context of asking people to talk about their lives, raises the possibility of participants revealing stories that are personal and distressing – not only for the narrator, but also for the listener.

### **Distressing stories**

A question that arises for all social researchers is how to react when people talk about aspects of their lives that are distressing; recalling certain stories may arouse powerful emotions, both during and after the interview. As argued earlier, although participants have more control over what they express and what they withhold than researchers often admit, it is not always apparent where an unstructured interview is leading (Corbin and Morse 2003). Interviewers therefore need to decide whether to encourage interviewees to talk about particular subjects, to remain silent, or whether to stop the interview if it is upsetting them. Researchers need to be honest about the purpose of the enquiry – whether something is sought because of legitimate enquiry, curiosity or even voyeurism (Jones 1998, Barnes and Warren 1999). The interview should not be used as 'either interrogation or confession' (Nunkoosing 2005) or as a counselling session (Corbin and Morse 2003). At times, it may be in the interviewee's interest not to encourage him or her to discuss things that would be useful for the researcher to know.

During the course of my doctoral research, there were several times when I felt it was inappropriate to probe interviewees on issues that appeared to be upsetting or potentially upsetting. Ribbens (1989) suggests that researchers should listen and hear what is being said which, she argues, may not always be what is being verbalised. Parr (1998) has taken this further and suggests that this 'not only means paying attention to verbal cues such as intonation, nuances, pauses and inflection, but it is also necessary to pay attention to body language'.

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This is not an easy task: clearly, it is open to interpretation. People who have had difficult experiences may, on the one hand, distance themselves emotionally by presenting their accounts in a matter-of-fact way (Parr 1998) or, on the other, might become distressed and emotional (Jones 1998). In my study, DT recalled caring for her terminally ill husband: 'I went in the bathroom and he shouted, "Will you come back, love?" And I said, "What do you want?" And he said, "You forgot to kiss me" [she began to cry]. I shouldn't have said that [pause]. I shouldn't have said that, I knew it would make me cry.'

Other participants quickly passed over distressing events without any signs of emotion. One woman said: 'I wasn't going to tell you this, but I will: my father was an alcoholic and he gambled on the horses.' Since she only briefly alluded to the subject, I thought it was inappropriate to pursue it further. One couple spoke briefly about the death of their son, but it was clear by their tone of voice that they were distressed so I listened in silence, taking my cues from them. Another man mentioned a son he and his wife had fostered but who had run away. He mentioned this almost as an aside, looking down at the floor and muttering his words quickly. He hurriedly resumed the rest of his life story and, again, I did not probe for details.

None of these participants talked about these incidents again in later interviews and I did not raise them. Rightly or wrongly, I felt that they had been spoken of because they were part of their life stories; participants did not want to deny or ignore them, but neither did they want to expand on them. My questions would have been about the effect that these experiences had on their psyches, on their relations with others, while participants presented them as facts about their lives which, at that moment, they seemed unwilling to pursue. This is not to say that interviewers should ignore or repress difficult emotional material during interviews; to do so, could give a rather 'desiccated' and ultimately misleading picture of people's lives (Jones 1998). Conversely, participants may have wanted me to probe further. As Wong (1998) found, even when interviewees appeared angry or sad, most said that they enjoyed the interview (Lipson 1994).

According to Corbin and Morse (2003), being overly concerned about potential risks implies that the distress aroused by talking to a researcher is

necessarily greater than talking about the same subject to friends or family; on the contrary, they argue, researchers may be more likely to show interest and to empathise. Indeed, when PW told me that his wife had died from Huntington's disease I told him that, as a nurse, I had cared for several people with the same condition. This seemed to encourage him to elaborate on the experience of caring for his wife, although it was clearly painful for him; his voice broke and tears started to well up in his eyes. Although PW was clearly very upset by his recollections and I did not try to dissuade him from talking, he also seemed anxious to tell this part of his story, so I simply listened. He later told me that he had appreciated the chance to talk to me about this part of life; in the past, when he had tried to discuss it, PW said that most people were unable to empathise – few of them had heard of the disease. Interviewees should not be discouraged or prevented from talking about a particular subject simply because it is upsetting. If they are prepared to talk about a difficult or painful issue, the least interviewers can do is listen (Parr 1998, Bornat 1998).

Further, Booth and Booth (1994) highlight the importance of both researcher and participant reaching a level of comfort and readiness before the interview concludes. Towards the end of my interviews, if a participant had been talking about an upsetting experience, I tried to lighten the tone by asking about a less emotional subject or talking more generally about a news event or something that had happened to me recently. Similarly, Barnett (2000) recalls: 'I always took care after the interview to find a congenial and positive or sometimes humorous subject of conversation, so the experience came to a pleasant conclusion. I was aware, however, that this did as much for me as for my respondents.'

As Barnett states, such an approach benefits researcher as well as participant; listening in a sensitive and empathetic manner can be emotionally demanding. Frequently, I found myself sharing with participants feelings of loss, grief, disappointment and anger (Corbin and Morse 2003). I often felt exhausted following an interview and soon learnt to conduct only one a day. Ethics committees often require researchers to build into their studies support mechanisms for participants, but such support may be needed for staff too, particularly for novice researchers (Parnis *et al* 2005). To help

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them process and come to terms with what they have heard, researchers should seek support from clinical as well as academic mentors and supervisors. A research diary describing the researcher's thoughts and experiences, together with a record of participants' perceptions of the interviews, should open up the research process to scrutiny. Increasingly, funding bodies are requiring researchers to appoint external evaluators to monitor the impact of the research on participants. Although doctoral students may not have the resources to do this, the appointment of a user advisory board is more feasible (Tetley and Hanson 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Researchers need to consider carefully the potential risks of the interview situation as well as its potential to be therapeutic and to empower through reciprocity. The problems raised by qualitative approaches, although not solved, are at least made more explicit through taking a reflexive approach (Northway 2000). Researchers need to address problematic issues by being open and honest, and opening up the whole of the research process to scrutiny by, for example, their peers, clinical and academic supervisors, an independent evaluator, and a user advisory board. Seeking participants' views about their involvement in the study and, in particular, the interview situation will further facilitate this process.

Researchers should allow themselves to be exposed to the observations and sensitivities of participants in order to help increase understanding of the possibilities and problems of conducting qualitative interviews. The last word should therefore go to a research participant. When asked to express her feeling about being interviewed, AL replied: 'It's to do with the person and their approach. Attitude has a lot to do with it. We all have ups and downs, and you share with me. If you'd come all matter-of-fact, I wouldn't have been able to talk to you.'

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