Interviews in qualitative nursing research: differing approaches for ethnographic and phenomenological studies

Jeanne Merkle Sorrell RN DAEd
Associate Professor, College of Nursing and Health Science, and Coordinator of Advanced Clinical Nursing, George Mason University

and Georgine M Redmond RN EdD
Associate Professor, College of Nursing and Health Science, and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA

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INCREASED USE OF INTERVIEWS

A review of the past decade of research studies related to nursing and other health disciplines reveals increased use of interviews as a method of data collection. The manner in which interviewers evoke respondents' recall, information, expression, and feelings has a direct impact on the quality of the data obtained (Drew 1993). The research literature provides general information on how to conduct an interview (Burns & Grove 1993, Morse 1991, McCracken 1988) but there is little detailed guidance for the researcher in tailoring the interview format to a specific type of qualitative methodology (Drew 1993, Patterson & Bramadat 1992).

Although characteristics of interviews for the various qualitative methodologies, with their blurred boundaries, are not completely distinct, it is important for nurses using interviews as a data collection method to have an initial understanding of how an interview approach is shaped by a specific research methodology. The purpose of this paper is to describe how our reflection on characteristics of two types of research approaches — ethnography and phenomenology — helped us to shape interviews for a collaborative research study.

Design problem

The problem of designing an interview approach consistent with a specific qualitative methodology became apparent to us while implementing a collaborative research project related to Writing Across the Curriculum. This study was constructed to assess nursing students' experiences with writing assignments in nursing and English classes. Several nursing faculty on the research team were experienced in ethnographic methodology and conceptualized the data collection interviews in terms of an ethnographic approach. Other faculty, more familiar with phenomenological studies, preferred a different interview format.

This type of problem is likely to occur more frequently in the future as qualitative researchers collaborate on projects of mutual interest. Often a researcher has in-depth knowledge of one or two qualitative research approaches...
but is unaware of specific aspects of a qualitative approach used by a colleague. In order to design the interview format most appropriate for a particular study, it is important for qualitative researchers to be aware of the commonalities, as well as differing purposes and styles, of various research approaches. Although this information can be found in specialized texts outlining methodology for a particular qualitative approach, comparative information about ‘real world’ implementation of various interview approaches is not readily accessible.

**Ethnographic and phenomenological interviewing**

Ethnographic interviewing is aimed at describing the cultural knowledge of the informant, such as the cultural knowledge which students use in carrying out varied writing assignments for their courses. In contrast, phenomenological interviewing is concerned with uncovering knowledge related to specific phenomena, such as the students’ daily lived experience with their writing assignments. Both of these research approaches share certain commonalities related to use of the interviewer as the data collection instrument.

**THE INTERVIEWER AS AN INSTRUMENT IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

In qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the ‘instrument’ through which data are collected (Boyd 1993, Rew et al 1993). The skilled interviewer, as the research instrument, uses responses of the participant to guide data collection, probing for further information as needed for depth and clarity. Although interviews should be guided by a tentative interview schedule, the interviewer must identify a proper balance of structure and flexibility (Swanson-Kauffman 1986). The format, timing and sequence of questions may change as the data collection process continues. The researcher maintains control of the interview, but there must be sufficient flexibility to respond to important content responses and general non-verbal cues from the participant. Most interviews begin with open-ended questions and eventually narrow the focus as clarifying questions are asked and themes emerge.

Since an interview approach is individualized for different research approaches, it is important to ‘pilot test’ an interview format. Trying out a variety of openings and probes before undertaking the actual research interview will help the interviewer avoid situations where a respondent reacts with long silences, confusion or irrelevant chatter. Use of a pre-interview may also help to prepare both the interviewer and the respondent for the experience of the future interview (Patterson & Bramadat 1992).

The interview situation carries with it a unique intimacy that is shared between interviewer and respondent. Respondents often reveal information during an interview that they would not discuss in a questionnaire. As long-buried memories are evoked, they are often accompanied by strong emotions. Since the respondents may be unprepared to find their words mixed with tears, it is important for the interviewer to appreciate the intimacy of the situation, and to plan time during the interview to establish and maintain rapport. Varying lengths of time may be needed for a ‘warm-up’ period to establish trust between interviewer and respondent, and researchers focusing on very personal and private subjects need to plan substantial time for building rapport (Kondora 1993). Some respondents, in an effort to become more comfortable with the interviewer and more knowledgeable about the focus of the research study, may want to question the interviewer before they themselves respond to questions.

**Mutual sharing of information**

In contrast to empirical studies, where the researcher strives for objectivity, the interviewer in qualitative research provides for mutual sharing of information between interviewer and respondent, freely exchanging ideas, impressions and opinions (Boyd 1993, Lowenberg 1993). The interviewer needs skills in listening for and interpreting meaning so as to respond appropriately. Specific techniques may be used by the interviewer to stimulate the inarticulate respondent, such as sharing a personal story from the interviewer’s own experience.

Respondents should believe that their participation in the interview is important to the research. Interview strategies such as remaining attentive, providing non-verbal nods, moving closer to the respondent and maintaining eye contact communicate interest in the participants’ responses.

With careful attention to the general format for an interview, data emerge that are changed and enriched by the interaction between interviewer and respondent. This general format can be adapted for different research approaches, such as for ethnography and phenomenology. Since methodologies evolve from different traditions and disciplines, it is important for the researcher to design an interview format appropriate to the purpose and style of a specific qualitative approach.

**ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS**

**Purpose**

Ethnographic interviews, growing out of anthropological/ sociological traditions, are designed to discover cultural meanings which exist within a social group, emphasizing interaction, social context and the social construction of reality (Lowenberg 1993). The broad concept of culture used within these traditions may be viewed from two distinct perspectives. First, the materialistic or ‘etc’
perspective views culture as the totality of a social group's observable behaviour, customs and daily life. Second, the ideational or 'emic' perspective view defines culture in a cognitive way and refers to ideas, beliefs and knowledge which are characteristic of a group of people (Fetterman 1989). This latter view requires the collection of linguistic research data from individual group members to help the researcher understand why group members do what they do.

The interview is the most important data collection tool for ethnographers (Fetterman 1989). The ethnographic interview is a 'series of friendly conversations' (Spradley 1979). However, these informal conversations have a clear and specific research agenda. The interviewer uses this informal approach to discover categories of meanings in a culture, such as the culture of students in nursing programmes, or the culture of nurse executives. The interviewer is interested in what people think and how one person's perspective compares with another. This comparison helps the interviewer to identify shared values among members of a cultural group.

Style

Participants in an ethnographic interview are either referred to as 'key actors', describing an individual who is a member of the social group under study (Fetterman 1989), or 'informants' (Spradley 1979), who in their 'native language' provide a model for the ethnographer to imitate and who are a source of information about the important components, values and mores of their culture. Henceforth, participants in this section will be referred to as informants.

The ethnographic interview incorporates a particular style, using a free-flowing approach in which the interviewer is responsive to the information and cues provided by the informant (Hughes 1992). Spradley (1979) identifies three stylistic elements appropriate to ethnographic interviews. These stylistic elements are explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations and ethnographic questioning. The interviewer uses these elements to help informants to categorize and organize their perceptions of reality.

Explicit purpose

The interviewer must make the purpose of the interview/investigation clear for the informant through initial informal conversations. At each meeting, the interviewer is responsible for reminding the informant of the purpose. As the interview or interviews progress, the interviewer takes more control of the process and questioning becomes more explicit. Timing and sensitivity to the informant are important to this development. The interviewer must continue to explain the explicit purpose of the interview in the light of the changing dynamics of the interview process.

Ethnographic explanations

The second element of the interview is the ethnographic explanations to the informant. These may first include general explanations, such as 'I am interested in hearing about the writing experiences you had in English composition', and later more specific explanations, such as 'I want to know how you approached your writing assignments'. Explanations may relate to the recording of data, such as taking notes or tape recording. The interview may also include 'native language explanations', such as encouraging informants to share how they talk to others within their cultural scene, for example, 'If you were talking to another student about your writing assignment, what would you say?'

As the interview progresses from informal conversations to tighter structure, the interviewer explains this change in process. For example, when asking the informant to sort cards to help identify types of writing assignments, explanation helps the informant to understand this formal process.

Ethnographic questioning

The third and main element of the interview involves ethnographic questions. The careful development of these questions provides the researcher with essential data with which to complete an ethnographic data analysis. As the interview progresses, it is important to explain to the informant the importance of the different types of questions.

There are three major types of ethnographic questions, descriptive, structural and contrast. Descriptive questions are usually open-ended and are the easiest to ask. These are referred to as 'grand tour' questions, as they give the interviewer a general view of the informant's perspective on the culture. An example is 'Could you describe what the writing experience was like for you this semester?'

Other types of 'grand tour' questions may be more specific or may guide the informant through a specific description, for example, 'Would you describe how you wrote a critique of a journal paper this semester?'

Structural questions provide more specific cultural information and are frequently asked concurrently with the descriptive questions. An example is 'Could you tell me all the kinds of writing assignments that you completed in your English class this semester?' Structural questions can also be used to ask for explanations or to verify data already collected. For example, one might ask, 'Is a critique a kind of writing assignment?' or one might use a substitution-type question and ask the informant to complete a sentence, such as ' ... is a characteristic of me as a writer.'

In general, asking structural questions serves to tell the interviewer how the informant organizes his or her cultural knowledge.

Contrast questions help the interviewer discover the meanings of words that informants use to describe their
culture, by finding similarities and differences in how they see the words. Contrasts can be elicited by asking informants to differentiate between and among two to three terms, or by asking them to sort similar items into contrasting sets. For example, the informant may be asked to sort all the kinds of writing assignments into two piles, one pile includes writing assignments which require analysis and another pile contains writing assignments which do not require analysis.

Sequence of questions

A unique characteristic of the ethnographic interview is that the three types of questions are introduced in sequence, beginning with descriptive questions, and adding structural questions. Descriptive and structural questions are then used concurrently. The interview ends with contrast questions to uncover specifics about the cultural meanings in the data. Ongoing data analysis is essential. Frequently, as data are analysed after the interview additional questions arise, so that it is important to build follow-up interviews into the initial contract with the informant.

We have found that this approach to the ethnographic interview provides the data necessary to conduct analysis using established ethnographic procedures of domain, taxonomies, components and themes. When using a phenomenological research approach, however, we incorporate a different purpose and style into the interview format.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS

Purpose

Although phenomenological interviews provide a framework for many types of qualitative studies, this discussion focuses on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach which evolved from the philosophical tradition of Heidegger. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with interpreting concealed meanings in phenomena. These common meanings are embedded in cultures which incorporate shared language, practices and important practical knowledge about common day-to-day experiences. For example, students learn how to manage the pressure of succeeding in varied writing assignments amidst conflicting personal and professional responsibilities by developing practical knowledge through day-to-day experiences with these responsibilities.

The purpose of the phenomenological interview is not to explain, predict or generate theory, but to understand shared meanings by drawing from the respondent a vivid picture of the lived experience, complete with the richness of detail and context that shape the experience. This phenomenological approach to interviewing blends listening and narratives. The interviewer attempts to gain insight into an 'inside-out' experience of the respondent through an engaged, profound approach to listening. This active listening shapes the interviewee's interpretation of what is happening during the interview.

The narrative, or story, is an important source of data. Heidegger believed that we dwell in the narrative as self-interpreting beings, living a life is listening to each other's stories (Heidegger 1993). The phenomenological interviewer uses the narrative structure to evoke practical knowledge from the respondent, preserving the contextual integrity of the data (Drew 1993).

Style

In a phenomenological interview, the interviewer shapes the interview but is also shaped by the process. Thus phenomenological interviews are not 'conducted' but rather they are 'participated in' by both the interviewer and the respondent. Both may experience a 'healing' or catharsis from the storytelling, as they are empowered through awareness of new meanings in lived experiences.

Because the respondents' stories structure the interview, it is often helpful to provide introductory material to respondents before the interview so that they can come prepared with meaningful narratives. This 'call' can be incorporated into the informed consent form, but a separate guide sheet addressed directly to the respondent may be more helpful in establishing the specific focus of the interview and in facilitating rapport.

The careful framing of an opening question for the interview is critical for gathering data to answer specific research questions. After establishing rapport, the interviewer encourages the respondent to describe his or her unique perspective of an experience which the researcher is studying. Often this description will take on a narrative structure. Examples of opening questions for a study of students' experiences with writing might be 'Tell me about an incident in your student role, one you'll never forget, related to writing in the nursing programme.' 'When you think back on your experiences as a student writer, can you think of an incident that stands out in your mind because it symbolized the concerns of a student writer?' 'What does it mean to you to be a "nurse writer"?'

Structure

The interview is structured by asking 'inside-out' questions, such as 'What does this mean to you?' Unstructured conversations that encourage respondents to share their stories and to uncover common meanings in their experiences are most helpful. The interviewer wants the respondent to describe the experience, rather than interpret it. In this way, the researcher can gain a holistic understanding of the experience that forms an important part of the respondent's day-to-day existence.
It is generally better to ask ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ questions. Labels and ‘psychologisms’ should also be avoided. The interviewer wants to evoke responses that are natural aspects of the individual respondent’s experience, rather than have the respondent fit responses to preconceived categories or interpretations. Sometimes the most difficult respondents to interview with this approach are the most educated, who may want to fit their responses to already-known criteria.

When the opening question is in the ‘right region’, it elicits a narrative directly related to an important experience of the respondent, who then becomes engrossed in the unfolding narrative, as the vividness of the original experience returns. In this situation, it is often unnecessary for the interviewer to use much prompting during the interview. Verbal or non-verbal probes may be used, however, to enhance the respondent’s description of a lived experience when the response does not seem clear, complete or relevant (Patton 1980).

Thoughtful probes by the interviewer can help the respondent to bring forth contextual details important to meanings embedded in the narrative. Questions such as the following can help the respondent reflect on the experience of interest (Van Manen 1990): ‘How were you feeling at that time?’ ‘What else was going on then?’ ‘Tell me more about that.’

Probes
Two types of probes may be especially useful in the interview: the recapitulation probe and the silent probe (Gordon 1980). Recapitulation is used to take the respondent back to the beginning of the experience described during the interview. When respondents are asked to retell parts of stories by returning to the beginning they often add new details the second time around. Periods of silence can be used to establish a comfortable pace during the interview, encouraging respondents to follow their own path of associations by telling the story their own way. Van Manen (1990) describes an ‘epistemological silence’, which he defines as ‘the silence we are confronted with when we face the unspeakable’. Some ideas or feelings of the respondent cannot be captured in words, it is important for the interviewer to be comfortable with silence in order to listen to the powerful silence that may speak more than words.

Although many phenomenological interviews are carried out between only the interviewer and respondent, some are implemented with the interviewer and small groups of respondents. If the interview involves a group of respondents, it is helpful to have each respondent tell his or her narrative as a self-contained story, with minimal interruptions. Other members of the group can add valuable perspectives as the story unfolds, probing for more information, and adding their own insights related to shared meanings.

SUMMARY
In the description here of two different types of interview methods for ethnographic and phenomenological research approaches, it can be seen that a specific research approach requires individualization of the interview format. Each method sets up a different type of qualitative data analysis and is appropriate to different types of research questions.

For our collaborative study, exploration of these two different methodologies led us to conclude that an ethnographic approach to interviewing was most appropriate to answer our research questions related to cultural knowledge of student writers. Nurses’ attention to the need for careful structuring of an interview format to accommodate the purpose and style of these and other research approaches will help to yield rich descriptive data for qualitative analysis.

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