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Interviews and Qualitative Research

Standalone Interviews Do Not Equal Qualitative Research

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Knowledge development flying under the flag of science is extremely widespread (Eisner, 1981). Nurse scientists, whether engaged in quantitative or qualitative studies, commit to systematic and rigorous research methodologies (Eisner, 1981). Observance of well-defined and orderly scientific methodologies limits the possibility of bias influencing a study's outcomes (Pannucci & Wilkens, 2006). In addition, adherence to sound scientific methodologies restricts the likelihood of "non-science" creeping into the realm of credible science.

Recently, nursing journal editors have detected a trend in submitted manuscripts in which authors are equating information from non-scientific work with knowledge

developed from scientific work. The trend has been particularly noticeable when *non-research interviews* are considered scientifically comparable to *qualitative research*. Consider the following examples:

Example 1: Authors submitted a manuscript in which they described provision of a stress reduction intervention (mindfulness meditation) for people whose spouses have Huntington's chorea. Following the intervention, quantitative data were collected. Three months later the authors contacted the spouses to conduct an interview to determine what they thought of the mindfulness intervention (e.g., Was it effective in reducing stress? Were they still meditating?). In the manuscript, the authors presented the spousal interview as qualitative research. The interview, in this case, was not a qualitative research interview but instead was a specific *evaluation* of a clinical intervention.

Example 2: Faculty in a Bachelor of Science in nursing program decided to implement a "flipped classroom" approach to teaching medical-surgical nursing. Six months post-graduation, the faculty contacted the cohort of 23 students for a follow-up interview about their satisfaction with the flipped classroom experience. In the resulting manuscript, the faculty couched the interview findings in qualitative research language by stating that *themes* of "satisfaction" emerged and *data saturation* was achieved. The claim of qualitative research themes emerging is dubious because participants were asked direct questions about flipped classroom "satisfaction." In addition, even if saturation was not achieved, the authors had no option but to end the interviews because there were no more participants to sample. Again, this is not an example of a qualitative research interview but rather, a course evaluation interview.

The authors, in both examples, are to be commended for continuing evaluation efforts related to each project. Too often, nursing interventions are implemented without long-term evaluation of outcomes. Well-developed and meaningful *non-*

research questions provide important information about specific interventions and other topics.

Comparing non-research interviews with qualitative studies is somewhat understandable because interviews are often integral components of qualitative studies (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). However, a stand-alone non-research interview does not constitute a qualitative study. Interviews, which are not part of a well-developed qualitative research design, are typically stylized engagements aimed at eliciting evaluative information about an identified topic. Contrariwise, qualitative interviews are comprehensive and rigorous research endeavors designed to identify participants' perceptions about a specific phenomenon and enlighten readers about opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding the phenomenon.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Non-research interviews are independent of qualitative research traditions and are intentionally designed to proffer limited amounts of information. Non-research interviews require a clearly defined purpose to elicit specific responses of interest about the interview's topic. Interview purposes include: 1) identifying intervention improvement opportunities, 2) assessing participant satisfaction with an intervention, 3) collecting specific information about participants, such as demographic or clinical variables, and 4) assessing participant change in specified attitudes or abilities.

In addition to a clear purpose, non-research interviews, similar to scientific questions, require thoughtful development and must be carefully worded (Patton, 2015). It is important that questions developed for non-research interviews are standardized so that each interviewee receives the same questions, in the same way, and in the same order. Interview standardization is particularly important if

the interviewers are novices, students, or others with limited experience. Standardizing the interview questions helps ensure that responses can be aggregated with consistency and that reasonable comparisons can be made among the responses of participants.

Even though non-research interviews may not fit under the domain of either quantitative or qualitative research, the institutional review board (IRB) for protection of human subjects still needs to be consulted regarding review the interview protocol. IRB approval is especially important if the topic of inquiry is controversial or highly sensitive (e.g., remission from opioid drug addiction). In addition, IRB approval must be sought if you plan to present or publish the interview results. Even if the IRB determines that the interview protocol is exempt, keep in mind that this is never your, or the project leader's determination; it is always in the purview of the IRB.

Many non-research interviews, designed for the purpose of gathering straightforward evaluative information, require a short, fixed time period (e.g., 10 minutes) for administration. Therefore, it is wise to develop highly focused questions to establish interview priorities (Patton, 2015). For example, if you want to know about the timeliness of an intervention, avoid an open-ended question such as, "Tell me about how timely the intervention was given your busy schedule." Instead, you may want to ask for a rank ordering response such as, "On a scale from 0 to 5 with 0 being the least and 5 being the most, how timely was the intervention?"

Writing the interview questions in advance of the interview and writing questions precisely the way they are to be asked in the interview (i.e., standardized) allows you to construct a credible interview form. Editors and other stakeholders, such as peer reviewers, may ask to review the interview form as a means to assess legitimacy of the interview findings. Standardized interviews are frequently used to

gather data in *quantitative* research. Importantly, unless you have rigorously designed the project as a credible quantitative study, the standardized interview alone does not constitute a research study.

In review, there are four primary areas to consider when writing non-research interview questions:

1. The exact interview form must be available for review by editors, publishers, IRB, or other key stakeholders.
2. Standardization of the interview is critical, especially if there is variation among the interviewers.
3. The interview form should be focused and direct to promote maximum efficiency.
4. Standardization of the interview form is necessary to enable comparisons among participant responses.

Non-research interviews are used to evaluate interventions or programs that have similar outcomes for all participants. Non-scientific interviews are useful for measuring predetermined effects of an intervention on participants and play an important role in evaluation and other efforts to assess outcomes.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Qualitative research traditions originated in the social and behavioral sciences including sociology, anthropology, and psychology and have been used to optimum effect in nursing science (Alasuutari, 2010; Miller, 2010). Qualitative research is the study of the world from the viewpoint of the person(s) under study. Qualitative research is pluralistic and consists of a variety of credible traditions

including *phenomenology, history, ethnography, grounded theory* and *case studies* (Patton, 2015).

Qualitative research interviews differ from non-research interviews in important ways. Table 1 lists types of interview questions that are often seen in qualitative research. Qualitative research enables the use of diverse research paradigms. Interview protocols associated with qualitative studies provide in-depth information about the participants' lived experiences and viewpoints associated with a particular phenomenon. Conducting an in-depth qualitative interview requires specialized interview skillsets, knowledge, and experience.

Table 1. Types of Qualitative Interviews

Type of Interview	Definition	Example
Semi-structured	An interview in which participants are asked to respond to a list of topics to be covered in the interview as compared with a predetermined arrangement of structured questions. Often an interview guide is used with a list of topics to be covered but the interview may follow various trajectories stemming from the designated topics.	"What is your perception of the concept of compassion?"
Unstructured	An interview without the use of an interview guide. Instead the interviewer builds rapport and trust with the participant who then provides free expression of thought about a topic.	"Describe what your pain experience was like prior to using the intervention."
Informal	Interviewer talks to participants in the field (i.e., observing people in their usual roles) without a formal interview guide.	"How is working with the Habitat for Humanity team different from working with other teams?"

Notably, qualitative research interviews, regardless of their tradition (e.g., phenomenology, history, ethnography, grounded theory, case study) are highly rigorous scientific endeavors. The rigor of qualitative interviews is directly related to the qualitative study's *trustworthiness*. Trustworthiness establishes the worth of a qualitative study by demonstrating that study procedures are appropriate, evidence is sound, and findings are neutral and unbiased. Strategies to ensure

qualitative interview trustworthiness are addressed by using criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1991):

- **Credibility:** demonstration of confidence in the truth of the study's findings
- **Transferability:** reasonable submission that study findings may be applicable in other contexts
- **Dependability:** Demonstration that findings are consistent and amenable to replication
- **Confirmability:** The degree of study neutrality as it is shaped by the study's participants and not the author's bias, impetus, or personal interest.

A summary of the four strategies to assist in establishing interview trustworthiness are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Establishing Trustworthiness of Qualitative Interviews (adapted from Lincoln & Guba, 1991)

Strategy	Criteria	Example
Credibility	Prolonged engagement	Extended time is required to develop and sustain rapport and trust with respondents prior to and during the interview
	Persistent observation	Persistent observation applies if the interview is conducted in a relevant environment to assess characteristics within the interview context that are germane to the interview topic. Prolonged engagement provides scope and depth to the interview
	Triangulation	Triangulation in the interview involves using data sources to produce a better understating of the interviewee's experiences. Using structured interview questions may provide qualitative data while non-structured interview questions provide qualitative data.
	Peer Debriefing	Peer debriefing is a session with a disinterested peer to review and explore the interview. The role of the peer debriefing is to help the author uncover unrecognized bias, assumptions, and perspectives related to the interview.
	Member Checking	Checking with participants to determine if interview data were captured accurately and reflect the participant's interpretation of the interview.
Transferability	Thick description	Thick description aims to achieve external validity when an author captures sufficient detail in the interview and surrounding context to assist readers in making reasonable conclusions from the interviews and possibly transfer interview findings to other settings.
Dependability	Inquiry Audit	An inquiry audit provides an expert outsider access to the study's interview in order to question the interview's process or findings
Confirmability	Audit Trail	An audit trail is a description of the interview research steps taken. Raw interview data are an example of an audit trail.
	Reflexivity	Maintaining a reflexive journal with regular entries enables the author to record methodological decision (e.g., type of interview, interview questions, interviewee selection) and the rationale for the decisions. The researcher's perspectives on interview methodology helps the researcher detect unwarranted bias or perspectives toward the interview process and interviewees.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research is complex and requires thoughtful and meaningful development of interview methodologies. Straightforward standardized interview questions are not reflective of the rigorous and systematic processes required to create qualitative research questions. Standardized questions are generally excellent for retrieving specific sets of information about a particular topic.

Incontestably, standalone standardized questions do not constitute qualitative research endeavors and should not be disguised as qualitative research in submitted manuscripts.

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