



Comparing appropriateness and equivalence of email interviews to phone interviews in qualitative research on reproductive decisions



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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite an increasing use of qualitative email interviews by nurse researchers, there is little understanding about the appropriateness and equivalence of email interviews to other qualitative data collection methods, especially on sensitive topics research.

Purpose: The purpose is to describe our procedures for completing asynchronous, email interviews and to evaluate the appropriateness and equivalency of email interviews to phone interviews in two qualitative research studies that examined reproductive decisions.

Methods: Content analysis guided the methodological appraisal of appropriateness and equivalency of in-depth, asynchronous email interviews to single phone interviews. Appropriateness was determined by: (a) participants' willingness to engage in email or phone interviews, (b) completing data collection in a timely period, and (c) participants' satisfaction with the interview. Equivalency was evaluated by: (a) completeness of the interview data, and (b) insight obtained from the data.

Results: Of the combined sample in the two studies ($N = 71$), 31% of participants chose to participate via an email interview over a phone interview. The time needed to complete the email interviews averaged 27 to 28 days and the number of investigator probe-participant response interchanges was 4 to 5 cycles on average. In contrast, the phone interviews averaged 59 to 61 min in duration. Most participants in both the email and phone interviews reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to express their true feelings throughout the interview. Regarding equivalence, 100% of the email and phone interviews provided insight into decision processes. Although insightful, two of the email and one phone interview had short answers or, at times, underdeveloped responses. Participants' quotes and behaviors cited within four published articles, a novel evaluation of equivalency, revealed that 20% to 37.5% of the citations about decision processes were from email participants, which is consistent with the percent of email participants.

Conclusions: In-depth, asynchronous email interviews were appropriate and garnered rich, insightful data that augmented the phone interviews. Awareness of the procedures, appropriateness, and nuances when carrying out email interviews on sensitive topics may provide nurse researchers with the ability to obtain thick, rich data that can best advance clinical practice and direct future research.

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Nurse and social science investigators are increasingly using email interviews to collect qualitative data (Nehls, 2013). Yet, the literature on understanding procedures for carrying out qualitative email interviews and comparing email interviews for appropriateness and equivalence to other more established qualitative interviews methods such as phone interviews remains limited, especially on sensitive topics research. In order to contribute to understanding about email interview intricacies and prepare for future research, we examined procedures

and data collected from our qualitative research studies to ascertain how our email interviews compared to our phone interviews in appropriateness and equivalency. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe our procedures for completing asynchronous, email interviews and to evaluate the appropriateness and equivalence of email interviews to phone interviews in two qualitative studies that examined reproductive treatment decisions.

1. Background

As nurses and other investigators increasingly turn toward qualitative email interviews to examine a variety of phenomena and processes, the advantages (e.g., low cost, automatic transcription, increased access

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to geographically dispersed or hidden populations) and disadvantages (e.g., effort and willingness to write on behalf of participants, loss of sensory and emotional cues, increased possibility of dropout or discontinuous responses by participants) have begun to emerge (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Burns, 2010; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; Hunt & McHale, 2007; James & Busher, 2006; Meho, 2006; Nehls, 2013). What remains an important consideration for nurses and is yet to be fully understood, especially in sensitive research, is understanding the quality of the data obtained and the procedures and contexts for using email interviews. Several researchers have sought to address these concerns and have carried-out the sparse methodological analyses comparing qualitative email interviews with other methods of qualitative data collection and the findings are inconsistent. For example, in a seminal paper, Curasi (2001) led a team of senior students who set out to examine Internet shopping behaviors and compared 24 in-depth interviews collected face-to-face with 24 interviews collected via email. During data collection, Curasi's students sent follow-up emails to obtain further information from some participants after reviewing the initial email responses. Curasi found data collected from the email interviews contained some very short and very precise responses to the questions posed and at times, provided more in-depth data than some of the face-to-face interview responses. Cook (2012) described the merit of qualitative email interviews completed with 26 women to understand the meaning of sexually transmitted infections in women's lives. In this methodological report, Cook found the quality of the email responses high as participants provided rich data that included sensitive disclosures about sexual abuse, rape, abusive ex-partners, and problematic interactions with clinicians. However, Cook's report was unable to provide information about comparative data quality as the participants completed all interviews by asynchronous email.

In a sensitive topics study that contained both face-to-face and email interviews, Ratislavová and Ratislav (2014) interviewed 18 Czech women (12 via face-to-face and 6 via asynchronous email) to understand grieving processes following perinatal loss. The researchers reported the quality of the email interviews was "slightly poorer" than the face-to-face interviews because the women's email responses were "more structured and did not involve as much [data] repetition" compared to the face-to-face interviews (p. 455). Adding to the concern that email interviews may provide less insight, Kazmer and Xie (2008) reported that asynchronous email interviews are limited because participants' responses did not seem to provide adequate insight into detailed thought processes compared to synchronous (e.g., phone, face-to-face) interviews when conducting research about Internet use. Other investigators found that email interviews provided less unique ideas than phone or instant messaging responses when examining electronic game-playing practices (Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Pelc, & Bruckman, 2012).

1.1. Our two qualitative research studies

After receiving Institutional Review Board approvals and obtaining informed consent from all participants, we completed two qualitative research projects using a grounded theory approach. In Study 1, we examined decision processes of 22 genetically at-risk, heterosexual couples (44 individual partners) who were deciding whether to use preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to prevent the transmission of known genetic disorders to their future children (Drazba, Kelley, & Hershberger, 2014; Hershberger et al., 2012). In Study 2, we examined decision processes of 27 young adult women with cancer, who were deciding whether to undergo fertility preservation treatment (egg and embryo freezing) prior to their cancer therapy (Hershberger, Finnegan, Altfeld, Lake, & Hirshfeld-Cytron, 2013; Hershberger, Finnegan, Pierce, & Scoccia, 2013). In both studies, eligible participants were given the choice of completing the in-depth interview by phone (one interview, digitally recorded) or by email (asynchronous interchanges). Regardless of interview method (i.e., email or phone) chosen,

all of the interviews were completed by the Principal Investigator (PI; first author) and used a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guides for Study 1 and 2 contained only slight deviations in language for the email and phone interviews (e.g., when requesting participants to "state" responses for phone interviews versus "write" responses for email interviews). Prior to the onset of the two Studies, the PI had completed multiple qualitative face-to-face interviews, 2 qualitative phone interviews and no email interviews. Of note, couple dyads in Study 1 were interviewed separately from their respective partner. Once the participant chose the interview method, rapport was established through an introductory email or through a phone conversation. Participants were encouraged to ask the PI questions about the study and procedures, which were clarified accordingly. Then, the PI either spoke or emailed the primary research question to the participant, depending on the interview method and allowed the participant to respond. Once the participant responded, they were asked additional follow-up questions and probes per the interview guide. For the email interviews, a series of asynchronous, *investigator probe-participant response* interchanges took place between the PI and the participants to carry out the asynchronous interviews. Details of our multifaceted strategies and lessons learned were reported earlier (Hershberger et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2013).

To obtain participants' perceptions about satisfaction with the phone and email interviewing, we embedded open-ended methodological appraisal questions into the end of the interview guide, after the participant responded to all the decision-making process questions and probes. The methodological appraisal questions were: "What determined your choice to participate by phone or email?" and, "Describe your level of satisfaction with your ability to express your true thoughts and feelings by participating in the way you did."

2. Methods

Content analysis as described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) guided the methodological analyses. Appropriateness was determined by: (a) participants' willingness to engage in email or phone interviews, (b) completing data collection in a timely period, and (c) participants' satisfaction with the interview. Equivalency was evaluated by: (a) completeness of the interview data, and (b) insight obtained from the data. For appropriateness, we compared the number of participants who choose to complete email interviews versus phone interviews and determined the time needed for completion of data collection per interview method. Additionally, the participants' responses to the methodological appraisal questions about choice and satisfaction with the interview method were identified, coded, and categorized. For equivalency, the participants' responses to interview questions about reproductive decisions were analyzed for completeness of the interview data (e.g., responses to interview questions) and insight provided into decision-making processes. As an additional indicator of insight, we compared the number of participants' quotes and behaviors that were cited in four of our published articles (2 from each study) where key decision process findings were reported.

3. Results

For both studies combined, the majority of the participants (69%) opted to complete the qualitative interviews by phone. However, the couples in Study 1 chose phone slightly less often than the young women in Study 2. Within the couple dyads in Study 1, all but 4 of the couples chose the same method of interview (e.g., both partners chose email or both partners chose phone). In these 4 couples, the male partners typically opted for an email interview ($n = 3$) whereas the females typically opted for a phone interview. In one of these couples, a male partner who chose email also completed a short phone interview to respond to the final round of research questions. See Table 1 for details about the participants' choices for interview method.

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