



## Original article

# “It's just more personal”: Using multiple methods of qualitative data collection to facilitate participation in research focusing on sensitive subjects<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Often researchers use only one interview method within a single study. However, it is increasingly common for a variety of interview methods to be employed within a project. Providing choice to participants may facilitate recruitment, particularly when research focuses on a sensitive subject.

**Aim:** This paper aims to explore participants' reasons for their choice of interview method in qualitative research focusing on a sensitive subject.

**Methods:** Qualitative data was collected from 12 participants regarding their choice of interview method (face-to-face, Skype, telephone or email) in a wider study investigating parents' experiences following their child's burn-injury. Interview data was transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was used to analyse responses.

**Results:** Participants most frequently chose to take part in an interview by telephone (n = 5), followed by email (n = 4), then Skype (n = 2), and face-to-face (n = 1). Four themes emerged suggesting that participants' decisions to participate via a particular method were determined by personal convenience, their belief in their ability to be open with the researcher despite potential upset caused by the topic, their ability to get a “feel” for the researcher, and concern about giving adequate depth in responses.

**Conclusions:** Flexibility regarding the ways in which participants can take part in qualitative research may improve participant access to research, recruitment, and response-rate. Although, the depth and quantity of data gathered using different methods can vary. It is important that researchers consider the procedures and appropriateness of using different methods of interviewing and what impact such methods might have upon themselves and their participants.

## 1. Introduction

When research focuses on a sensitive topic – topics which potentially pose a threat to those who are, or have been, involved in them (Lee, 1993) - the method through which information is collected can be particularly important to participants. Personal data is most likely to be disclosed when assurances of privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude are provided (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell, 2000). Issues of privacy and personal choice regarding how to disclose information may be particularly relevant when the focus of research is considered private, stressful, or sacred, where disclosure might cause stigmatisation or fear, or where there is the presence of a political threat (Lee, 1993). Such issues might be particularly relevant to nurse researchers and other healthcare professionals who play vital roles in

recruiting people into studies (Bartlett, Milne, & Croucher, 2018).

A key underpinning of qualitative research into sensitive topics is the establishment of rapport (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009), requiring researchers to take steps to make participants feel relaxed and comfortable enough to share their experiences (Liamputtong, 2007). Clark (2008) suggested that a lack of understanding about the research methods used might promote indifference or resistance in participants. Therefore, transparency throughout the research process is important, ensuring that participants can appreciate the true purpose of the research and understand why the research is being conducted in the way that it is (McQuaid, Barton, & Campbell, 2003).

Qualitative research typically utilises one interview method in isolation. However, there are growing numbers of options available for

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researchers wishing to conduct interviews. Face-to-face interviews are seen as the gold standard (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). They have several key strengths; flexibility, spontaneous personal and observable interaction, and more control over the interview environment than would be possible during remote methods of interviewing. There are also disadvantages with face-to-face interviews, such as the high cost per participant, geographical and time constraints associated with travelling.

Online interviews, such as those conducted over Skype, are often presented as a second choice or alternative when face-to-face interviewing is not possible (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). They allow face-to-face communication with the opportunity to appreciate some body language and other non-verbal communication, which telephone interviews cannot. However, they also rely on the participants having good internet access and some participants might not be comfortable “on-camera”, not presenting as they would in a person-to-person situation (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010).

Another alternative, email interviews, are being increasingly used by nurse researchers (Hershberger & Kavanaugh, 2017). Email interviews have a number of strengths. They offer low cost interaction without the need to travel, do not require researcher or participant presence at the same pre-specified time, and are potentially more acceptable to those who might decline or be unable to participate in spoken interviews but willing to answer questions posted on their computer screens (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005). Online data collection has been found to improve access to hard-to-reach groups and participation from ethnic minorities (Joseph et al., 2013), particularly those who are geographically diverse (Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bockting, & Rosser, 2014). Duffy et al. (2005) also found that online respondents might be less susceptible to social desirability bias because of the lack of researcher presence.

Knapp and Kirk (2003) argue that different modes of data collection will result in equivalent results among technologically savvy groups, although this assumes no connectivity problems or transmission delays that can hinder online data collection, whether it be via Skype or email (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007). Couper (2011) also noted that relying on online data collection methods risks selective sampling, leading to nonresponse bias from those without access to the internet, for example those of low socioeconomic status or older participants.

The telephone interview is another option, but this is often viewed as a less attractive alternative to the face-to-face interview (Novick, 2008). Notable strengths include good geographical coverage, personal interaction, and low cost compared to face-to-face interviewing. However, disadvantages include a lower response rate compared to face-to-face communication, and the inability to observe the participant (Groves, 1990). Groves (1979) found that respondents expressed more discomfort about discussing sensitive topics over the telephone than face-to-face, with most reporting that they would have preferred to be interviewed face-to-face rather than by telephone. More recent studies have disagreed with Groves' claim, finding that interviewees feel comfortable with telephone interviews when discussing intimate, sensitive, and personal issues in an open and honest manner, and are less concerned about humiliation than when speaking face-to-face, perhaps due to increased familiarity with telephones (Chapple, 1999).

With multiple options for interviewing available to researchers, when planning a study, it is important that public involvement (PI) is utilised. PI can help to inform researchers how best to engage potential participants, advising on factors such as the appropriateness of research questions, study information, and the data collection format (Brett et al., 2014). Clark (2008) highlighted the importance of this, describing how research engagement is not necessarily interesting for everyone, and that different methodological techniques will appeal differently to those who do engage. Therefore, researchers themselves have an important role in ensuring that participants have an optimal research experience (Bartlett et al., 2018).

As different techniques of data collection with appeal to different

people, it is increasingly likely that more than one type of interview will be employed in a single study; such as Skype and face-to-face (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), or a combination of face-to-face, telephone, and email interviews (Dures, Morris, Gleeson, & Rumsey, 2011). This flexibility may improve participant access to research and is discussed in this paper in relation to research on a sensitive topic: parents' experiences of having a child suffer a burn-injury.

Burns research in general can be sensitive, focusing on an event that is often very stressful. When parents are the focus of research following their child's injury, participation might be perceived as threatening due to feelings of guilt, perceptions of failure, and the upset caused by recalling events (Heath, Williamson, Williams, & Harcourt, 2018). There may also be fear of judgment or stigmatisation from the researcher, and/or concerns about the anonymity of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Pyer & Campbell, 2012). This issue is particularly pertinent in this population; McQuaid et al. (2003) found that parents of burn-injured children can be wary of research of their or their child's experiences, sometimes suspecting an alliance between researchers and social services. As such, this is an under-researched area despite the fact that 58,000 children attend Accident and Emergency departments due to burn-injuries every year in the UK (National Burn Care Review, 2001).

Centralisation of healthcare means that patients can live long distances from hospitals and some may find it difficult to travel (Jo, 2007). For this reason, multiple methods of interviewing are increasingly required to access the necessary participant group, as important data may be gleaned from those based in a range of geographical locations, with diverse socioeconomic statuses, ages, and/or backgrounds (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Recruitment can also be difficult for other reasons. For example, burn injuries can have a significant impact on appearance (Lawrence, Mason, Schomer, & Klein, 2012) and the experience of living with an unusual appearance is another sensitive area of research. When studies focus on appearance or disability, some options for participation may be more practical than others. The option to participate without having to physically meet strangers or attend an unfamiliar location may be particularly appealing to those with a visible difference (Fox et al., 2007). Therefore, researchers need to be mindful not to exclude certain groups, for example, by only including those with internet access or within reasonable travelling distance.

PI was utilised in the study described within this paper, aiming to ensure the appropriateness of all aspects of the research, including the interview schedule and data collection methods, to allow parents to discuss fully their experiences of their child's injury and subsequent support. As a result, potential participants were given a choice about how they took part in a semi-structured interview (either face-to-face, by Skype, email, or by telephone). This paper describes reasons participants gave for their chosen method of participation in a qualitative study focusing on their experiences of having a child suffer a burn-injury (Heath et al., 2018). The aim of this being to explore the reasons behind participants' preference for particular interview methods to help future researchers consider how offering choice might facilitate greater participation in research, particularly in that which focuses on a sensitive subject.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences at the University of the West of England. For inclusion in the study, parents had to be English speaking, aged at least 18 years, with a child who suffered but survived a burn injury before the age of 18 years requiring hospital treatment. Exclusion criteria were non-accidental injury and when the child had died because of their injury.

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