The interview is by far the most common method of qualitative data collection. Interviewing is a paradox. From a distance, it appears deceptively simple. Some studies, such as surveys, do require fairly basic skills. Yet scholarly qualitative nursing research often explores profound human experiences. Performing sensitive, focused, method-specific interviews is a skill requiring considerable knowledge and practice. In this article, the basics of successful research interviewing will be presented.

Foundations for the Interview Question

The purpose of all qualitative research is understanding some part of the human experience. Within this broad paradigm of understanding, research questions guide the researcher to particular methods. In a previous article in this series, the relationship between method and questions was presented (Donalek, 2004). As examples, phenomenologic methods are used for questions such as “What was it like to…? How did you feel when…?” Ethnographic methods explore “What are the traditions of…? How does the group handle…?” Grounded theory, case study, history, and the numerous other qualitative methods are used to answer specific kinds of research questions. Care must be taken in selecting a research method appropriate to the question. The researcher should be thoroughly familiar with the method and its underlying beliefs and rationale. Specific interview questions then correspond to the method selected (Price, 2002).

Interview Questions

Interview questions are semistructured or unstructured, depending on the purpose of the study. As an example, a semistructured interview might be used to elicit participant experiences in managing Type 1 diabetes, for example. “How do you know when you are beginning to have low blood glucose?” or “Tell me about caring for your feet.” In the semistructured interview, the researcher has planned a series of open-ended questions focusing on different parts of the particular research issue. In contrast, an unstructured interview would simply begin with a single opening question, for example, “How has your diagnosis affected your life?” The rest of the interview would then focus on helping the participant to fully explore the experience. Questions should be brief and unambiguous and, at the same time, sensitive to the feelings of participants.

Developing Interviewing Skills

A qualitative research interview is a shared journey. The resulting description is not simply the participant’s elicited recall of past experiences but a co-created work emerging from the interaction of researcher and participant. It can be an intense experience for both partners (Kvale, 1996). It is important that the novice interviewer practice the method repeatedly, preferably under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher. Practice interviews should be recorded and transcribed for ease in evaluation. With repeated practice, the novice interviewer can become more comfortable, a better listener, and more attuned to themes that emerge in the course of the interview.

Anticipating Practical Problems Before They Occur

All experienced researchers have stories of nightmare interviews. Careful planning can reduce their frequency. Plan to record the interview using reliable equipment. It is worthwhile to invest in a high-quality recorder that also allows for ease in transcription. Be comfortable with the equipment long before starting data collection. Bring extra tapes and batteries. Know the location of the interview and estimate time required to get there, potential parking problems, etc. Being late can rattle even an experienced researcher. Plan for a truly quiet place in which to do the interview. If childcare is necessary during the interview, have it arranged. Let par-
Participants know ahead of time how much time will be involved in the interview and give the participant a sense of what will occur. Describe the interview process. Decide whether written consent to be interviewed and a separate consent to have the interview recorded will be obtained prior to the time of the interview or at that time. Finally, really consider rescheduling the interview if multiple problems emerge. It is far better to start over under calmer circumstances than to attempt to plow through a chaotic interview (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000).

Sensitivity and Ethical Issues

Because research interviews so often involve exploration of sensitive material, the researcher is obligated to be particularly aware of ethical issues. Written consent to participate must clearly include the participant’s right to refuse to answer a question, to stop the interview at any time and reschedule, or to withdraw from the study without consequence. Confidentiality can be a complex issue in some forms of qualitative research. The identity of participants can be hidden using most qualitative methods. Potential participants in life history or case study research, however, should understand that it may not be possible to completely disguise their stories. Consent to participate must include clear explanation of these issues (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

Distribution of power between the researcher and participant is a subject of much discussion. Corbin and Morse (2003) believe that participants retain considerable power to control the amount they disclose and the degree to which they choose to explore painful material. In contrast, in this author’s research on first incest disclosure, she was acutely aware that, as someone seen as “expert,” she had the potential to symbolically revictimize participants (Donalek, 2001). As such, she repeatedly supported participant’s power in the interview process. Price (2002) has described a method he calls “laddering” to control the intensity of the interview. Price classifies questions from least to most stressful as questions about action (“What did you do? What happened?”), about knowledge (“Why was it done that way?”), and about philosophy, such as beliefs, values, and feelings (“How did it feel? What do you think caused you to do that?”). In the course of the interview, participants are assessed for verbal and nonverbal cues indicating level of comfort. A researcher might choose to move to more difficult questions when the participant indicates comfort by open body language and lengthy, relaxed responses to the previous question or two. Conversely, the interviewer may choose to pause and provide support or to move to a less anxiety provoking part of the interview in response to expressions of intense affect.

Participants often see participation in research as having a number of benefits, among them having the opportunity to tell their story to an unbiased listener. Participants often express that, by participating in the research, they are helping others and thus deriving some good from a sometimes painful experience. In exchange, the participant may seek information and/or counseling. The interviewer should be careful to differentiate a research interview from a therapeutic one. This does not mean that the interviewer can’t give support, guidance, information and referrals at the end of the interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

This researcher most often ends interviews with the question, “Is there anything more you would like to tell me?” When the interview is over, time is allotted for both the participant and the interviewer to wind down. This is a time for more social conversation. The participant might offer the researcher a snack or express the desire to show the researcher family pictures. It is crucial that the researcher be comfortable in staying through this seemingly less important phase of the interview. Abruptly leaving at the end of the formal interview can leave the participant with the feeling of having been used (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

Finally, researchers doing interviews on sensitive topics need to care for themselves. This researcher found that talking to incest survivors sometimes elicited intense feelings of sadness and anger. Researchers should pace the number of stressful interviews done over a period of time and make conscious choices to engage in enjoyable activities far removed from the research process.

Conclusion

Doing qualitative research is an extremely satisfying process. It allows the researcher to come to deeply know and be present to other human beings. To successfully interview is to connect with another person on a very profound level. The giving of one’s story is a deeply valued gift. The researcher has a responsibility to care for and respect that gift and to use it as it was intended, that others may benefit from the participant’s story.

References


