



Qualitative Interviewing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Part 1: The Literature on Telephone Interviews

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It is frequently assumed that telephone interviews are inferior to face-to-face interviews, particularly for qualitative research. This In Brief suggests that rather than dismissing telephone interviews altogether, researchers may consider their use, possibly in conjunction with other data collection methods, while weighing the strengths and weaknesses of each method. In Part 2 of this series, Elise Howard describes her experiences conducting interviews with people in the Pacific region. It is hoped that these papers will be of use to those contemplating how to conduct research in the context of social distancing requirements, border closures and travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Note that this paper exclusively discusses telephone interviews, while Part 2 refers to both telephone interviews and interviews using video technology.

While face-to-face interviews are commonly used in research projects, telephone interviewing has been used extensively for collecting quantitative data in developed countries, 'where the density of telephones is high' (Rao 2012:224). By contrast, research methods texts 'have traditionally advised that the telephone mode is not well-suited to the task of qualitative interviewing' (Irvine et al. 2012:87). There are five main reasons for this view that will be interrogated in turn in this paper: 1. lack of rapport; 2. inappropriateness for sensitive topics; 3. likelihood of misunderstandings; 4. insufficient detail in the collected material; and 5. exclusion of non-telephone owners. This paper suggests that the first three supposed weaknesses of telephone interviewing may not be as insurmountable as typically assumed. Further, the fourth apparent weakness may in fact signal an unexpected strength of telephone interviewing, while the fifth weakness is important for researchers to bear in mind.

1. Lack of rapport

The logic underlying this assertion is that the absence of face-to-face contact restricts the development of rapport (Irvine et al. 2012:89–90) and thus the resulting data may not be as rich as it would be from a face-to-face setting. However, some researchers have reported

the successful establishment of rapport using the telephone interview technique in qualitative research. For example, during a research project with women in the United States of America, respondents indicated that they were relaxed using telephones, 'possibly because they were somewhat anonymous and stayed in settings that were comfortable for them' (Trier-Bieniek 2012:635), and the researcher gained in-depth and personal reflections.

2. Sensitive topics

It is frequently posited that telephone interviews are not suitable for sensitive topics. Trier-Bieniek (*ibid.*) contended that her participants 'felt at ease sharing sensitive information over the phone'. This reflection suggests that, at least with regard to Trier-Bieniek's research topic, participants were able to discuss sensitive matters during telephone interviews.

3. Misunderstandings

The third assertion is that telephone interviews are likely to result in misunderstandings (Irvine et al. 2012:90). In face-to-face interactions, hand gestures, body language and facial expressions help to convey meaning (*ibid.*:89). As telephone interviewers cannot see their interviewees, they may miss 'signs of puzzlement or unease on the faces of respondents when they are asked a question' (Bryman and Bell 2008:216; see also Irvine et al. 2012:91). When using telephone interviews for qualitative research, one student researcher found that 'there was a need for a clearer articulation of the questions than that necessary in face-to-face communication' (Stephens 2007:210). In addition, interviewees are more likely to seek clarification: one study that compared face-to-face and telephone interviews found that 'interviewee requests for clarification were slightly more common in telephone interviews' (Irvine et al. 2012:100). Nonetheless, the telephone interview method 'did not appear to lead to increased difficulties in substantive understanding' (*ibid.*:101).

4. Insufficient detail

Another assertion is that qualitative interviewing through telephones is not worthwhile because the data generated is likely to be limited (Irvine et al. 2012:91–92). On the other hand, because the interviewer cannot see the participant's context (home, street and so on), the interviewee may be more likely to describe the context in detail. As Holt reflected after completing telephone interviews with people about whom she knew nothing apart from their first name and telephone number, 'unlike in face-to-face interactions, *everything* had to be articulated' (2010:116; italics in original). Holt's assessment was that this detailed articulation generated 'a much richer text' (ibid.) than would have resulted from a series of face-to-face interviews with the same cohort. As is also discussed in Part 2, telephone interviewees experience a desire to verbalise information they may not have thought to share if the researcher was in situ. This could be an unanticipated benefit of using telephone interviews.

5. Exclusion of those without a telephone

A genuine concern about telephone interviews is that they exclude the participation of non-telephone owners (Bryman and Bell 2008:215; Kaski et al. 2014:139–42; Rao 2012:225). Thus, the technique can unfairly disadvantage groups who are less likely to own or have access to telephones compared to other groups. Benson (2019:6) looked at this question in the Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea and determined that households with high educational attainment levels are more likely to own mobile telephones than those with limited educational backgrounds. Further, households that are more likely to own mobile telephones tend to have more assets than their neighbours and are more likely to have access to a form of power, for example through ownership of a solar panel or diesel generator (ibid.). Thus, telephone interviews in Papua New Guinea are likely to garner a disproportionately high number of responses from educated and relatively wealthy people with access to electricity. Similarly, in a telephone interview study in Liberia, Africa, the sample was 'biased toward male, educated respondents from urban areas' (Maffioli 2020:1242). A research project that solely relies on the telephone interview method could generate a sample that is biased against certain groups.

This In Brief has outlined five concerns presented in research methods literature as evidence that telephone interviewing is a poor alternative to face-to-face interviewing in qualitative research. There is evidence to suggest that the first three supposed weaknesses have been managed in certain research projects. The literature suggests that the telephone interview technique does not prohibit researchers from developing a deep understanding of their topics. The

fourth presumed weakness may in fact be linked to an unexpected strength of telephone interviewing, as is further described in Part 2. The fifth weakness is important to note, especially in societies where mobile telephones are not ubiquitous.

Social distancing, border closures and travel restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have forced researchers to rethink how to conduct research. Telephone interviews may not be suitable for all research projects, and it is understood that many researchers may prefer to resume face-to-face interviews as the pandemic eases. Nonetheless, this In Brief encourages researchers to consider their options carefully before assuming that telephone interviewing is substandard and unsuitable for all qualitative research. Part 2 of this series outlines the experiences of a researcher based in Australia and conducting telephone interviews with participants in the Pacific region.

Author notes

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