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The Influence of Power Shifts in Data Collection and Analysis Stages : A Focus on Qualitative Research Interview

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee in the qualitative research interview methodology. The paper sets out to grapple with the extent to which the dynamisms in power shifts influence data collection and analysis in the interview methodology. The exploration of power shifts in the qualitative research interview facilitates comprehensive understanding of the nuances of the data by providing more information about the interviewee and the interviewer. This enhances a deeper discerning into the research process, and the topics discussed. This paper also elaborates on how interviewees as well as interviewers display their countermeasures to each other in the course of the interview situation and presents a greater understanding of the power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and interviewee. Power asymmetry seems to be an exasperating circumstance in the interview methodology as pointed out by the discussions in this article. This article also discusses practical recommendations for minimizing the power dynamic s during data analysis in the qualitative research interview.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Interview, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Power Asymmetry

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The Influence of Power Shifts in Data Collection and Analysis Stages: A Focus on Qualitative Research Interview

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This paper analyzes the power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee in the qualitative research interview methodology. The paper sets out to grapple with the extent to which the dynamisms in power shifts influence data collection and analysis in the interview methodology. The exploration of power shifts in the qualitative research interview facilitates comprehensive understanding of the nuances of the data by providing more information about the interviewee and the interviewer. This enhances a deeper discerning into the research process, and the topics discussed. This paper also elaborates on how interviewees as well as interviewers display their countermeasures to each other in the course of the interview situation and presents a greater understanding of the power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and interviewee. Power asymmetry seems to be an exasperating circumstance in the interview methodology as pointed out by the discussions in this article. This article also discusses practical recommendations for minimizing the power dynamics during data analysis in the qualitative research interview.

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Qualitative and quantitative research methods have several differences such as the means of collecting data and the interpretation of collected data. While qualitative research prioritizes depth and quality of data collected, quantitative research maintains premium on the number and volume of data collected. For instance, quantitative research methods are interested in numerical expressions of data and qualitative researches are interested in non-numerical expressions of data. However numerical and non-numerical data are not mutually exclusive (Richards, 2005), since qualitative data and quantitative data can be combined for use and also that qualitative data can sometimes be transformed into codes and numbers which are then interpreted quantitatively. As Richards (2005) argued, it seems appropriate that qualitative researchers are not set against numbers, quantifications and descriptions of observations but are cautious of quantifying complex and context bound observations.

Qualitative researches attempt to go beyond descriptions to provide a researcher with an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, unlike quantitative researches which are usually concerned with investigating and describing a phenomenon to a certain level (Hagen, 1992) in terms of numbers, quantities, figures, amounts, incidences etc. Richards (2005) describes qualitative data as comprising complex records of observations, descriptions and narratives which are context bound and may be irreducible to numbers.

Interview is a highly used method of collecting data in qualitative social research methods (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Nunkoosing, 2005). Kvale (1983), described the purpose of interview as a method of data collection in social research as "...to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 174). Nunkoosing (2005) emphasized on the importance of interview as a method of data collection enabling individuals to think and to talk about their predicaments, needs, expectations, experiences, and understandings.

Within the theory of science, for social and behavioral sciences, the qualitative research interview appears unscientific to the positivist view on science. This is because the scientific method should give forth objective data which is reproducible and which can also be numbered, quantified or measured (Kvale, 1983). Nonetheless, Kvale (1996) rejected the positivist view and stated that the qualitative research interview can be objective by “letting the investigated object speak” in expressing the real nature of the object of discussion (p. 1). As such, Kvale (1996) argued that the qualitative research interview is neither an objective nor a subjective method since its essence is the interplay of subjective interactions and “objectivity in itself is a rather subjective notion” (p. 1). This paper draws on the constructivist approach of epistemology, where emphasis is put on the construction of knowledge as involving an active process by the researcher rather than a capture of social reality by the researcher (Willig, 2001).

For the humanistic interviewer, the interview situation described as a dialogue should suggest an egalitarian status for both the interviewer and the interviewee. However, this may not reflect the case because of the power imbalances in the interview methodology. The qualitative interview research as described by Kvale (2006) is not open but assumes ascendancy in dialogue between uneven and classless partners in a hierarchical form of conversation. The qualitative research interview is considered to have a lopsided power distribution between the interviewer and the interviewee; a tool which reflects an indirect conversation with a monopoly of interpretation by the interviewer (Kvale, 2006). To the extent that an interviewer may assume a unidirectional approach in the interview, interviewees may also have countermeasures. Consequently, the description of interview as dialogue may be inappropriate. For purposes of discussions in this article, countermeasures shall involve deliberate attempts or actions taken to counter or offset another’s approach to questions posed in an interview situation.

This article outlines and discusses the variations and dynamisms in power asymmetry as observed in the data collection and analysis stages when interview has been used as the method of data collection. Considering the importance of using interviews by organizations and other individual researchers, it is necessary to ascertain and comprehend the processes that determine the outcome and the variables involved. Further discussions in this paper would be interspersed with relevant research evidences to support the influence of power asymmetry in the qualitative research interview.

Conceptualization and Typologies of Power in the Interview Methodology

Power in discourse is constantly negotiated and constructed between participants (Thornborrow, 2002). Fairclough (1989) defined power as controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants in discourse by powerful participants. Within the interview methodology power has several features including, controlling and constraining others’ views and achieving one’s goal by enforcing one’s will on the other’s opinion (Wang, 2006). Power in the interview can be built up and determined by socioeconomic status, educational or professional background, and gender or ethnic identity of the parties involved.

According to Lukes (1974) power shifts could be covert or overt. In the exercise of power, one can coerce another person in a manner contrary to the person’s interest, and this coercion could be applied covertly or overtly. Lukes (1974) intimated three dimensions of power. The first dimension involves power shifts of uneven direct confrontations between parties where control is explicitly displayed and power is open. For instance, an interviewee’s attempt to discontinue the interview session or reluctance to respond to a question posed exemplifies the first dimension of power. The second dimension involves an indirect contest of power between parties. This second dimension also comprises commanding, controlling,

setting and influencing rules of the situation, dissuading actions and agenda setting. The second dimension of power has two forms. The first form is agenda setting power, where the interviewer's lines of questions restrain the interviewee to bring up a story which the interviewee desires to share. The second form of the second dimension of power involves a situation where for a particular category of questions, the interviewee rebuffs the interviewer severally, and consequently the interviewer is unable to pose questions of that category. This is what Lukes referred to as deterrence power. Finally, the third dimension encompasses control and influence over what the less powerful party thinks and in what s/he understands of the world and his or her interests. This dimension builds on the effects of culturally patterned behavior shaping and determining the less powerful party's wants.

Power is multifaceted in the interview context and sometimes difficult to assess in gathering qualitative data. The interviewer may "deliberately take a less powerful role or abandon some of his or her power" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 321). Regardless the interviewer's deliberate attempt to shed off power to appear less powerful, the interviewee may perceive the interviewer as possessing a greater power.

The Author's Case

I shall introduce instances of my research experience to provide practical illustrations of power dynamics to support the presentations in this article. I did a research to study the gender differences in sick role behavior of essential hypertension patients and the implications for intervention (see Anyan, 2012). Six (6) essential hypertension patients were selected as the sample size for the study. I interviewed 3 women and 3 men separately from each other. I maintained a gender balanced ratio in the sample size to facilitate and substantiate the appreciation of the outcome of the gender differences in the theme of the study. The time frame at my disposal and other practical issues also demanded a handy sample size of respondents who were readily accessible. I used individual semi-structured interview as the method of data collection. The individual semi-structured interview method offered a flexible medium of communicating freely about the topics of interest in the study between the respondents and me. On a face-to-face interview format, respondents were encouraged to speak candidly.

In one of the interview sessions an interviewee prompted that "...the recording [was] too much..." almost expressing a sense of reluctance to continue. This could be seen on her face and the sluggishness in her voice. I quickly explained to the interviewee that I only needed the recording to enable transcription and assured the interviewee that I shall strictly adhere to the regulations in the consent form and delete the recording and also destroy the transcription upon submission of the study report. On one hand, the respondent's open display of exhaustion and the want to discontinue could be characteristic of the first dimension of power as described by Lukes (1974). This episode demonstrated the power the interviewee wielded to have discontinued the interview session. On the other hand, there was an indirect contest of power to influence and control the situation which I as the interviewer could not make open—an example of the second dimension of power. To be able to achieve my agenda I needed to sustain the interview situation by influencing the interviewee to stay and respond to my lines of question. Specifically, this demonstrates the first form of the second dimension of power—agenda setting power. As required of interviewers, I had built a healthy rapport with the interviewees and so after explaining to the interviewee why I needed the recording, the interviewee agreed to continue. Importantly for me was the fact that the interviewees for the study were convalescents. Therefore it was important not to pressurize or coerce them during the interview for disclosure of sensitive information. As much as possible I endeavored to enhance the rapport by discussing my academic background before each interview. This not

only served to ease the tension which might have built up between us but also re-echoed the position that I was only a student researcher and not a medical officer. The interviewees were also given the chance to have a conversation with the acting head of the Polyclinic to serve as a means of relieving any sense of emotional insecurity after the interviews.

The Influence of Asymmetrical Power Distribution

According to Kvale (1996, 2006) the interview cannot be one sided. This is because interviewees and interviewers have countermeasures to each other. Therefore, given the presence of such transactional power dynamics in the qualitative research interview, descriptions such as the structured and semi structured become unsuitable (Nunkoosing, 2005). This is also because the exercise of power in interview is characteristic of both parties in the interview situation. It can be seen from the author's case that, in spite of the interviewee's power to have discontinued the interview, I as the interviewer, also had some power to influence and control the interview situation. This transactional power dynamics was not a reserve for only one of the parties but a reservation which either party could possess. Haworth (2006) asserted that, interviews may have a disguised built-in discourse asymmetry between participants as a result of their prescribed roles in the discourse of the interview. With regards to the asymmetric distribution of power in the interview created by the prescribed roles of the interviewer and the interviewee, the former seem to have a direct power over the latter. This is because the interviewer sets the stage, controls the setting, controls the script and initiates the questionings in accordance with his or her research interest (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005). Nevertheless, Brinkman and Kvale admitted that the interviewee also has a crucial power which is very influential on the outcome of the interview. The interviewer apparently may have more power than the interviewee but the interviewees have control over what they say and that is the most crucial part of the conversation. Not only do the interviewees have power over what they say, but also how they say what they say. For instance, in the author's case, it can be noted that the interviewee sluggishly responded to the question posed. This could have different interpretations by different researchers. Consequently, how the interviewees say what they say also signifies a power relation since the interviewer cannot hurry the interviewee (Nunkoosing, 2005) which demonstrates some form of power relation.

The interview situation is characterized by different forms and degrees of power. This power shifts back and forth with regards to the interviewer and the interviewee. One feature about the interview is that both the interviewer and the interviewee may use their respective powers to negotiate the level of information provided about the study. This is because the interviewer possesses the information about the study and the interviewee owns the knowledge and experience for the study (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). Nunkoosing (2005) argued that this is the distinguishing feature of the qualitative research interview from other forms of verbal exchanges. In the qualitative research interview "both the interviewer and the interviewee are constantly seeking to (dis)equalize their respective authorities" (Nunkoosing, 2005. p. 699).

The Power Dynamics in Data Collection

During data collection, power shifts back and forth between interviewers and interviewees hence the asymmetrical power relation of the interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005). Interviewers are however expected to learn to be able to control the shift of power during data collection. At the stage of data collection, ownership seems to be in the hands of the interviewee and the interviewer seems to be entirely dependent on the interviewee for his

or her knowledge of the research topic (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). That is why in the author's case, I as the interviewer had to offer plausible explanations for the interviewee to relinquish the attempt at discontinuing the interview session so that I could get the needed data. Consequently, it is evident that interviewees also determine the level of cooperation, the progression and the success or failure of the interview.

During data collection, interviewees can use various enigmatic interviewee behaviors such as social desirability and can also shift the focus of the interview (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1992). According to Hutchinson and Wilson, the most disturbing behavior of the interviewee during data collection is the interviewee's power to decide to terminate the interview which is an example of first dimensional power by Lukes (1974). Haworth (2006) argued that during data collection the interviewer by setting the topical agenda leaves the interviewee in a curtailed position regarding the discourse in the interview. This is where the interviewer displays the agenda setting power according to Lukes (1974). Haworth (2006) further argued that by virtue of position (of the interviewer) in asking questions and moderating the interview session, power seems to be in the control of the interviewer. However, Kvale (2006) asserted that during data collection interviewees may also merely talk about what the interviewer wants to hear or talk about something other than what the interviewer asks for. Interviewees may restrict themselves during data collection by the interviewer, and may not reveal everything about them. In spite of the interviewee's restrictions and reluctance to provide information, the interviewer cannot hurry the interview or compel the interviewee to tell what the interviewee doesn't want to tell or is ignorant of (Nunkoosing, 2005). Nunkoosing (2005) suggested that the interviewee's nescience of something in the topic of discussion in the data collection should not cause a problem for the interviewer. The interview situation may become problematic in a case where the interviewee stops the conversation or starts to pose questions to the interviewer. The interviewee's attempt at posing questions to the interviewer could be a challenge to the interviewer, which exemplifies the first dimension of power.

Wang (2006) found out that by comparison, Yes/No questions exercise more power and control over the interviewee than Wh-questions, which are information seeking and interrogative in nature such as which, where, who, when, why, etc. However, as argued by Clayman and Heritage (2002), Yes/No questions do not provide a basis for distinguishing between styles of questioning as they present preferences which are ineluctable. This is because, Pomerantz (1988) argued that for example, "are you going to the store" prefers "yes" rather than "no" answer, on the grounds that it nominates that proposition for confirmation rather than its alternatives, "are you staying home." On the other hand, posing a question like "can you tell me what you think about going to the film show?" does not present preferences which are ineluctable and does not also nominate propositions for confirmation or disconfirmation.

To control for the power shifts during data collection, astute interviewers may use elusive techniques to get beyond the interviewees defenses (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005). Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) asserted that to gain access to the interviewee's intimate and private experiences, the interviewer must court the interviewee, enhance the sense of rapport between them and build a sympathetic relationship and a sense of mutual trust in the research interview.

The Power Dynamics in Data Analysis

In spite of the power shifts during the data collection stage of the qualitative research interview, interviewers may be able to successfully analyze the data collected. The research interview is a tool or an instrument which provides the researcher with descriptions,

narratives, and texts of the life world of the interviewee which the researcher interprets and reports according to his or her research interests (Kvale, 2006).

The data analysis stage is where power seems to return to the interviewer. Here the interviewer recast the story into a new historical and socio-cultural context (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The willingness to share the data analysis process with the interviewee or letting them join the final stages of writing is in the hands of the interviewer. The interviewer maintains an infrangible privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant, taking into account the interviewee options for counter control such as eluding or not answering some of the questions (Kvale, 2006).

Here in the data analysis, the inclusion of the interviewee in the analysis articulates some power the interviewee has in the analysis stage of the qualitative interview research. However, the decision to share varies according to the researcher's world view, qualitative research paradigm, and the nature of the research content (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). The interviewer may decide to include the interviewee by also asking what additional knowledge would be gained from involving the interviewee in the analysis. Few interviewers afford their interviewees the opportunity to have the final say on what to report and what interpretations to present in their studies (Kvale, 2006). This is a result of the interviewers need to ensure that his or her intellectual pursuits meet the requirements of the research community rather than meeting the expectations and agreements of the interviewee (Nunokoosing, 2005). In practice, some interviewers may want to give back the interpretations to the interviewee for validation as an attempt to obtain consensual knowledge; however it may be problematic due to emotional barriers for the interviewee to accept critical interpretations of what they have told the interviewer (Kvale, 2006).

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) suggested that interviewees add to meaning construction rather than contaminating the meaning construction, therefore interviewers need to be circumspect when reporting their studies. Further, De Garay (1999) asserted that the interview is a reflection of the interviewee's "vision of the world formed within the hegemony of his or her culture or in opposition to his or her culture" and therefore in reporting the interviewee's "reflections" it is prudent that interviewers consider the life world of the interviewee (p. 4). This is what makes social scientists (such as anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists) differ from other social scientists who use the interview but with less importance attached to the socio-cultural context or the lived world of the interviewee.

Conclusions

Drawing on a wide range of interview and qualitative experiences, Smith (2005) concluded that the asymmetrical power relationships in interview research do not make the interview research an erroneous tool. Oakley (1981) acknowledged that the goal of a perfect and equal relationship in the prospects of the qualitative research interview seem unrealistic.

From the discussions presented above it appears that the interview assumes ascendancy in dialogue between uneven partners in a specific hierarchical form of conversation where the interviewer sets the rules of the game. Generally the interviewer uses his scientific competence to define the interview situation by initiating the interview, deciding and posing the questions, and following up on the answers and finally closing the conversation (Kvale, 2006). However, interviewees may use perplexing behaviors and may also shift the focus of the interview and even decide to terminate the interview. Both the interviewer's scientific competence and the interviewee's behavior are examples of power manifestations in the qualitative interview research. In the analysis stage, the interviewer maintains an exclusive privilege to report what the interviewee meant. The interviewee can distort and pervert the theme of the research, or distort the interviewer's research interest in

the data analysis stage. This happens when the interviewer seeks to ensure validation and obtain consensual knowledge by giving back the interpretations to the interviewee who may debunk the critical interpretations as a result of emotional barriers. In as much as both the interviewer and interviewee possess their respective powers in the qualitative research interview, they do not share an egalitarian status. The interviewer-interviewee power relations are not equal, they both possess asymmetrical powers.

To control for the power imbalances in data collection and analysis, an interviewer may systematically study the research process to uncover the maneuverings of power. During the analysis, the interviewer may look at the interview situation from several perspectives to reflect on his or her own dynamisms within the circumstances of the interview. These practices help to minimize experiences of power problems because it unveils the interviewer's awareness of how knowledge is/was created (Hammarstrom & Alex, 2007), which is referred to as practicing reflexivity.

Future Implications

Further researches are encouraged to look at the interviewee's as well as the interviewer's perception of social, cultural and personal differences and how these differences influence the power relation in the qualitative research interview. It can be noted from the epistemological position of this article and the discussions of power dynamics that follow, that people's perception of their personal, social, and cultural backgrounds affect the way people behave and experience. Consequently, it is possible to find different versions of power relations and experiences by focusing on how people's personal, social and cultural backgrounds are implicated in the qualitative research interview. This is also because according to social constructivism, there are different versions of behavior and experiences in different socio-cultural milieus which are a result of the ways in which different cultural and discursive resources are used and constructed.

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