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Abstract

This article illustrates a reflective exercise undertaken by a novice researcher who committed numerous “interview don’ts” during her first attempt at qualitative interviewing as part of a study. These mistakes occurred despite her attempts to learn qualitative interviewing best practices and develop her craft of interviewing beforehand. To identify and explore these mistakes, unstructured interviews were reflexively analyzed for emerging themes. The analysis found that communicative barriers were constructed between the novice researcher and her participants as a result of her (1) losing track, (2) steering and (3) lack of clarity. These barriers thwarted the researcher’s efforts to capture her participants’ voice because they were drowned out by her own. To minimize and overcome the inevitable mistakes novice researchers will make, this article recommends they are deliberately reflexive in order to further develop their qualitative interviewing skills.

Keywords

Qualitative Interviewing, Researcher Reflection, Novice Researcher

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Reflecting on Novice Qualitative Interviewer Mistakes

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This article illustrates a reflective exercise undertaken by a novice researcher who committed numerous “interview don’ts” during her first attempt at qualitative interviewing as part of a study. These mistakes occurred despite her attempts to learn qualitative interviewing best practices and develop her craft of interviewing beforehand. To identify and explore these mistakes, unstructured interviews were reflexively analyzed for emerging themes. The analysis found that communicative barriers were constructed between the novice researcher and her participants as a result of her (1) losing track, (2) steering and (3) lack of clarity. These barriers thwarted the researcher’s efforts to capture her participants’ voice because they were drowned out by her own. To minimize and overcome the inevitable mistakes novice researchers will make, this article recommends they are deliberately reflexive in order to further develop their qualitative interviewing skills. Keywords: Qualitative Interviewing, Researcher Reflection, Novice Researcher

The literature is replete with advice, techniques and best practices on conducting qualitative in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lillrank, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Myers & Newman, 2007; Tracy, 2010; Turner, 2010). There are also words of caution: advice on how to avoid communicative barriers that are erected from certain interviewer behaviors (Clark & Sharf, 2007; La Pastina, 2006; Mallozzi, 2009; Myers & Newman, 2007). But what if, despite your best intentions, you emerge from the interview only to realize you made mistakes that limited the voice of your participants in favor of your own?

In this article, I identify several “interview don’ts” that arose upon reflection of my initial qualitative interviewing experience. Using this data, I answer the question: *In what ways do qualitative interviewer’s mistakes construct communicative barriers between themselves and their research participants?* That I won’t be focusing on the aspects of the interview process I handled well does not mean I don’t feel they exist. In many instances, my questions were clear and open-ended, and I offered continuous cues to my participants to indicate I was interested and engaged in what they were saying (Mallozzi, 2009). All of the participants thanked me for inviting them to share their experiences and stories. However, in this article, I have chosen to focus on the mistakes I made because I found this analysis much more helpful and insightful to my development as a novice researcher than an analysis of the “do’s” I employed.

The rationale behind this study is based on the importance of reflexive practice as a qualitative researcher, as well as useful tool for other beginners like me who have recently eaten a slice of humble pie. I suspect there are others who made all the right preparations yet emerged from the process wondering how so much could have gone wrong. This article does not seek to offer an explanation for these unexpected results, but rather to highlight the fact that they *do* occur and to present a personal account of the reflexive process I used to identify and learn from them. I offer the lessons learned on the qualitative interview process: before, during and after.

Literature Review

The qualitative interview method is used to elicit data from those with a unique or insightful perspective on the issues we want to learn more about. We design a space in which they can share their stories and experiences. We allow ourselves as researcher to co-construct the meaning that emerges from the qualitative interview, to a certain degree (Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). However, we are careful not to over-insert ourselves into the space we've created for our participants, in a way that would negatively impact our ability to hear their voices. After all that is what we are here to learn about; their voice is the focus, not ours, despite the influence we as the researcher have on the meaning derived from the interview.

Balancing the tension between self and other during qualitative interviews is a craft. There is no checklist that ensures a "good qualitative interview." Mastering the craft comes with personal judgment and practical skill derived through experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Novice qualitative researchers approach the interview method having neither and as a result, make mistakes that negatively impact the data collection process. DeMarrais (2004) describes these mistakes as lengthy questions, yes/no questions, using vague generalizations to form questions, leading the participant and failing to pursue emergent references during the interview. Myers and Newman (2007, p. 12), in presenting the interview as a drama and the interviewer as an actor, describe additional mistakes that can be made in qualitative interviews including to "over-direct the performance" which prevents the interview plot from developing, and talking too much which can "stifle the interviewee and restrict the amount of data disclosed." These novice interviewer mistakes affect the balance we strike between our own voice and that of our participants.

How much we divulge of ourselves to participants can impact our ability to gain access to participants, establish rapport, and collect data (La Pastina, 2006). Though our decision to share or withhold part of ourselves is one we can make prior to the interview, this does not guarantee that in the moment we will follow the plan. Roulston et al. (2003, p. 644) note that in an interview, "one can never be sure what will occur." That interviews do not always go as planned is in part a function of the type of interview instrument employed. An interview schedule is used when questions need to be worded a certain way and asked in a certain order while an interview guide is used when questions can be asked in different ways, order or not at all (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). When an interview guide is used, as was the case in my study, the level of flexibility offered in the interview increases and, as a result, so does the level of unpredictability.

Mastering the craft of interviewing takes experience, but novice researchers do not have this resource to draw upon. In the absence of this resource, Roulston et al. (2003) urge novices to reflect on their early attempts at the process so they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses. However, in working with novice interviewers on their reflections, they noticed that the vast majority of them focused on how their actions and the way in which they posed their questions to participants, affected the outcome of the interview rather than how the interaction was accomplished. They found this focus on the former to be also present in the larger body of literature on interview methods. Focusing on the latter is important they claim because "in failing to recognize features of their own interactional styles...interviewers overlook the implications for the kind of interview data they are likely to co-construct with their participants" (Roulston et al., 2003, p. 660). This study answers the call for novice researchers to reflect on their interview style and its influence on the ability of participant voices to emerge from the process (DeMarrais, 2004).

Methods

The Original Focus

Originally, I was interested in investigating the communicative experiences of students within a large student-run military organization at the university where I attended as a first-year PhD student. I was interested in learning about the particular norms or styles of communication that directed their interaction during organizational activities. My data would be collected through in-depth interviews with the student members themselves, so that I could weave together their personal accounts of organizational life and identity commonalities in the communication styles they employed with each other. My research question was: "What are the communication norms that are used by the organization?" I hoped this research would generate additional research questions concerning the connection between organizational culture and communicative practices, to be explored in future projects.

The New Focus

Due to scheduling constraints, all interviews were held in succession over several days. Therefore, I did not listen to the audio recordings of the interviews until after all had been conducted. When I did, I immediately noticed that my interview style had had a dramatic impact on the data I collected from participants. Yet it was too late to change my interview approach; the interviews were over. I decided to completely switch the focus of my research and chose to analyze my role as interviewer evidenced in the interview transcripts. My new research question became: "In what ways do qualitative interviewer's mistakes construct communicative barriers between themselves and their research participants?"

Study Population

The participants in my study were junior students at a large southwestern university who were also members of a student-run military organization on campus that I wanted to study. At the time of this research project, I was a first-year PhD student at the same university as the participants. This project was my first time conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews as part of a qualitative study. This study was my final project in the Interpretive Qualitative Research Methods course I was taking that semester. I was not affiliated with the organization in any way. However, I had a basic familiarity with military organizations stemming from recent experience interning on a civilian Naval base.

Data Collection

The site of this study was a large university in the southwestern part of the United States, where both participants and I were attending as students. Within this site, the scene of my study was the interaction between interviewer and participant during qualitative in-depth interviews. All interviews took place in a public student lounge area inside the student center at the university.

To gain access into the student military organization, I approached two colleagues teaching a leadership course to college juniors within the organization. With their permission, my research project was introduced to each class and students were invited to provide their email address to be contacted for an interview. I made this introduction myself in only one of the classes; the other class conflicted with my schedule so my colleague presented the research project on my behalf. I followed up with all the students who volunteered to

participate and set up interview times with the seven students who responded. I set up interview times in the order in which students emailed me. This meant that the earliest responders were also the first to be interviewed. No preference was given for order.

At the start of each interview, I repeated my introduction of the research project and explained the consent form. Each student signed the form and was offered a copy for their records. I used the same interview guide for all interviews and began each with the same grand tour question, which is a useful way for understanding how something is usually done (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011): *Describe for me what it's like when you and other members interact with each other.* Each interview took between 30-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a hand held device placed on the table between myself and the student. I conducted the seven interviews over a span of several days. I transcribed my data by hand, using Express Scribe software for slow playback of my audio recordings. The transcriptions totaled 148 single-spaced pages.

Data Analysis

The data was first initially coded and then focused coded. After the initial coding was completed, I completed the focus coding of the transcripts from which the three themes of my data emerged. Finally, I created a codebook that included my initial codes, focus codes, and direct quotations organized thematically. During initial coding of the transcripts, I coded for the behavior I saw in my interaction with the participants. I asked myself, what kind of interviewer rule was I following or breaking when I posed each question or made a comment? How did my question or response flow or fit in with what directly preceded it? The questions I posed were my focus however I used the surrounding context of these questions when necessary. For example, one of my initial codes was *interrupt* and this code was based not only on the question I posed but also on the answer that preceded it so that it was apparent that I had interrupted the participant while they were speaking to ask another question. From the list of initial codes, I organized them into themes, based on my new research question.

Results

The three themes that emerged during data analysis were (1) losing track, (2) steering, and (3) lack of clarity. Losing track referred to my mistake in losing sight of my role as researcher and the purpose of the interview. Steering described my excessive influence on the direction of the conversation between my participants and myself. Finally, lack of clarity emerged as a theme because of my struggle to clearly ask questions of my participants. In the following results section, portions from interview transcripts are presented in block quote format, with my words italicized and the participants' words in normal font. To hide the identity of the organization whose members I interviewed, certain words in the transcripts have been substituted with more generic terms.

Losing Track

One of the main themes that emerged from my analysis of the data is called "losing track." The dialogue between the participants and I flowed more like a conversation where both people contributed equally to the meaning being created in the exchange. I had forgotten that my role in that moment was to create a space where participants could share their stories and descriptions that I could then use to glean useful data for answering my research question. Our conversation was guided by a very specific purpose but I lost track of that

purpose and instead guided the discussion in directions that satisfied my curiosity but strayed from the task of collecting data and being respectful to my participants' voices.

Losing sight of my role was demonstrated by my tendency to interrupt them and seek definitions for organizational jargon at inappropriate times. When I interrupted participants, they were often not able to return later and finish their thoughts. In a conversation with my friends, interrupting them is not a big problem because we are both equally seeking information from each other and we eventually get to say what we want to say. But in the interview, where I was there to better understand my participants' experiences, interruptions jeopardized my ability to gather the richest data possible from the experience. For example, a participant was sharing the following story when I interrupted for more detail:

So the first year most of the method of correction is physical because that's the model it's based on, it's like boot camp...each year is a little bit different. The first year is like that and the second when you're a sophomore, as you progress throughout the organization it gets really less defined and more cultural. So the first year...

Expand on that, what do you mean more cultural?

He had been in the middle of sharing a rich account of his progression through the ranks of the organization when I interrupted him for explanation. My interruption shifted the focus of his response and cut his story short.

In some cases, interrupting a participant did not shift the focus of the response but was a very noticeable faux pas on my part, like in this example when a participant was telling me about the use of formal debriefings in the organization:

It's a once a week on discretion. I don't think it's gonna be this week because we have Good Friday off. So a lot of people are gonna be gone...

But that's just for the senior people

Well I was getting there

Sorry!

No you're good. Anyway once they tell everybody what to expect then we all move out into our hallway...

This was the first time in all the interviews that I realized I had interrupted a participant, and it came near the end of my final interview. Since I transcribed the interviews after all had been conducted, I did not have the ability to recognize this habit early enough to correct it for later interviews.

Seeking definitions for organizational jargon was inappropriately timed as a result of me losing track of my role as an interviewer rather than a member of a casual conversation. The organization to which these participants belonged has its own vocabulary that members used to communicate with one another about organizational related activities. My participants relied heavily on this vocabulary during our interview, using terms I was not familiar with. So, during the interviews, I had a lot of questions about what they meant by certain terms. However, I would not wait for them to finish sharing their thought or story before I sought definitions for these terms. Instead I would interrupt them. These interruptions sidetracked

them, and they would forget the initial story they were trying to share. Consider the following conversation, where a participant was in the middle of describing how rank affected interaction among students differently than interaction between students and active military overseeing the organization:

Um well for me I'm pretty easy going but as far as communication with the higher up, as in [organization] staff or the [commander] to the [organization] staff to everybody else...

Who is the [organization] staff, are those the officers?

No they aren't the officers. [Organization] staff are basically its [members] but they get what the [commander] wants to do and then they plan it and then they pass that information on to all the different outfits and then um...

What's an outfit by the way?

It's Army outfit

That's not Army versus Navy is it?

It is, right.

That's a unit?

Yes ma'am. Like mine is Navy Marine unit.

Ok that's a unit. Is an outfit the same thing?

It's the same thing. We call it outfit, I think that's just a trend they've got here.

Ok

Um, anyway, I'm trying to remember what I was saying anyway...

My repeated request for him to define the organizational terms he was using was problematic because the definitions themselves did not often provide me the information I was looking for to answer my research question. The stories that were now forgotten as a result of my initial interruption and subsequent defining questions were the source of rich and relevant data.

Steering

Another main theme that emerged from the data was that I often over-directed the conversation. This was the most dominant theme that emerged from the data. I came into the interviews with an idea of what I would discover. I would present what I already knew to the participants and seek their validation that my preconceived notions of what was happening among members of the organization were correct. For example I had a hunch that rank played a role in how members communicated with each other, so I presented a story to steer the interview in a direction I thought would prove rank was important:

I heard a rumor that one of the TAs in my department said that they had students in their public speaking class that had to go sign up for the order they wanted to present in and someone from the [organization] went and put his name on the board and then someone else from the [organization], he said "You get moved up, I'm gonna take that spot" and he made him move his name.

[Laughter]

And I thought that was so interesting.

They were both in the [organization]?

They were both in the [organization] but it sounded like one was in a different rank than the other and that got me thinking, I wonder so would they have had to, maybe is there some sort of rule there? Is there more to it maybe?

Um well within the [organization], I suppose you could say the ranks do matter...

In this way, I steered the interview in a direction that would allow me to make assumptions and prove that they were correct. I did a lot of assuming during the interviews and I incorporated these assumptions into my questions, often asking participants yes/no questions that had my assumptions built in. It was then up to my participants to confirm my assumptions or deny them, which presented a very limited space in which they could share their stories. For example, I assumed that the decorations worn on a participant's uniform would have an effect on how they were perceived by other members. So I asked:

So how does that change how a [member] would approach you or communicate with you or give you know...

I mean...

Does it change?

I don't think there's really much of a change.

At the first sign that my assumption was incorrect, I immediately switched to a more open-ended question to challenge what I had assumed to be true. But even with this attempt to correct my approach, I made the participant work to share his experiences interacting with other members and also steered the discussion in an area that I thought was valuable instead of letting him dictate what was important. In another example, I made an assumption and when it seemed to be incorrect, instead of switching my approach to the question, I tried to convince the participant that my assumption was correct:

I heard you guys call him [a nickname] but not to his face. What do you call him?

Oh uh I thought that was a normal thing. I heard [the nickname], I thought that was just normal

Yea well but I'm saying you wouldn't call him [the nickname] would you?"

Uh [commander] maybe

Here, I had been told by a previous participant about an interesting nickname that members of the organization had given for the highest ranking military figure on campus and their most senior commander. However by assuming that everyone referred to him with that nickname, I missed out on the opportunity to discover potential differences in the way members addressed him. Not only that, I suggested doubt in the validity of this participant's experiences within the organization, though I wasn't consciously aware of this in the moment.

Another strategy I used to over-direct my participants voices was finishing their sentences for them. For example, one participant was reflecting on his personal growth as a result of being part of the organization. Here he had an opportunity to reflect on the value of the organization to him personally, and he spoke a bit slower while doing it. I could tell that he was really thinking about his response to me. He said:

I'm a very shy person. I've always, compared to my dad, my dad was shy, so I got it from him. But throughout the years and especially in this, I've always tried to improve myself so in becoming a junior, since you're the direct leader in front of the freshman telling them what to do, I've really gotten...

Had to come out

Come out of my, not really come out of my shell but I'm the kind of person, I'm not always in front of them, I'm kind of on the side and I just watch but if I need to say something or something needs to get done

You'll do it

I can do it and I can do it without hesitation. And that could flow into either the real military or that can flow into a business job.

Later on while reading the transcript, I felt like I had intruded on the participant's time to speak; I had injected my voice into a space where he was in the spotlight. I felt badly about it. It was not my place to add my words to his account. I felt a bit arrogant for having the nerve to re-tell his story in my words, as if I could tell his story as well as he could.

Finishing their sentences was not the only way that I put words into participants' mouths. I went as far as to confirm that they told me something they actually never did. I used this technique while posing questions as if I was switching the direction of the interview based on something that the participant said earlier. In one instance, I used the fact that the participant had no military background before joining the organization, a complete assumption on my part, to develop my next question:

Ok so you come in out of high school, so you didn't have any military background so when you saw these other guys other girls like "Hi! How's it going?" right? But then at some point you went to that stage where you learned, ok this is how I have to address these people

Yes

I got lucky that the assumption was correct, but I limited the insight the participant could have shared about the transition he made adapting to the organizational culture, by presenting him with a yes/no question. Had I been incorrect in my assumption, it would have been up to the participant to correct me, which he might not have done for a variety of reasons including not wanting to appear rude.

Alternatively, I would summarize what the participant had said in my own terms instead of theirs and then ask them to confirm. This is evident in the following excerpt where a participant was telling me about the importance of following orders in the military:

So like the one who's in charge says you go do this. You have to do it and the military has the power to, as long as you're not doing it for a stupid reason and you need to accomplish the mission, you have to listen to who's above you even if it risks your life.

Wow

[laughter]

So it really sounds like the whole respect structure comes down to life and death

Mmm hmm

It sounds like...

Yea when it matters, yea

Yea so it kinda sounds like to me that the respect afforded people that are above you is because you're giving...they have the power to keep you safe

Yea

And to carry out a mission

Oh yea. Yep.

When I retold their story in my words I wasn't usually accurate as I appeared to be above. I would reword what they had said but inevitably I would gloss over some nuances within their story. The participants would try to re-insert these nuances back into the story as I retold it, as this participant did:

And then we tell them what to expect and what to do and then they're done. It's all they're there for. They write down what the training plan is so they know what events are coming up, so they're on the same page as we are

So basically you're giving them information and there's no conversation, this is what we will be doing

Well they can ask questions if they're confused

But it's basically, what you'll be doing

And I didn't give up; I indicated that their nuances were insignificant and that the story as I told it was right; this is suggested by my final response in the excerpt above.

Clarity

The final major theme that emerged from the data is called "clarity." There were many instances where it was not clear what question I was asking participants. This lack of clarity emerged mostly when I was asking initial questions instead of follow up questions. My struggle materialized in several different ways. One way I struggled with asking questions was that I would ask the question multiple times in succession, for no apparent reason:

So I want you to think about your interactions with other [members] ok? I want for you to describe to me, how do you talk to them when you guys all come together? What's that like?"

My use of this repetition created a lot of semantic noise and was not a habit I want to cultivate moving forward. Additionally, it meant that I was talking more than necessary and taking away time from the participant.

In some instances, it was completely unclear what specific question I was trying to ask because it was buried in a large pile of semantics. Here is an example of one such attempt:

"So does it get maintained? Now you're a junior right? And obviously you sound like you know you're following the rules. You must be doing a good job right? They're moving you up the ranks but how does the whole addressing thing, you said it only comes into play now in certain situations where you really have to do the formal thing. How do you think that gets maintained, that culture of "no you actually have to communicate this way it's not like an option." Is there a punishment or are there repercussions? Is there something that you really don't want to have this happen to you because it's like ten miles running at night? So how does it get maintained as "this is how we communicate as the [organization]?"

I posed this to a participant as one question but it was entirely too large for him to make sense of. The actual question I could have asked was "how do these rules get maintained over time?"

There was one instance where a participant actually asked for clarification after I asked an ambiguous question. I said:

Ok tell me more about this. You just said that they're learning the [organization's] values and you know, how to communicate. So how would you describe the [organization's] values? How does the [organization] value communication? How would you describe that?

Well like what do you mean specifically?

Like how would you describe the kind of norms, the kind of ideals for communication that the [organization] is looking for? What's the ideal way?"

Oh, well the ideal way I would say is just double check your information and make sure that everyone is on the same page...

In fact, I was trying to ask the participant to describe how the organization's values affected the way they communicated with each other, yet this did not come through in the question I actually asked. Of the numerous instances where my questions were unclear, this was the only instance that this or any other participant asked for clarification, which suggests to me that there were instances where participants were not sure which direction I was trying to lead our discussion. The lack of clarity in my questions is problematic because they were designed to elicit the kind of data I needed to answer my research questions and relied on clarity to connect with the participants.

In addition to being unclear about the question I wanted to ask or repeating the question several times, I reduced clarity in another crucial way by asking several different questions all at the same time. In this example, each comma indicates a new question being asked, though I strung them together as if they were one question to the participant:

Yea so how'd you learn, so ok when you're a freshman and like your very first day, so fish camp; is that just for cadets or is that for everyone?

The participant responded to the last question I asked however since I had asked three separate questions, he might have been thinking about his response to each previous question and trying to keep up with me as I kept switching my question on him.

Conclusions and Implications

In this article, I have presented my findings that have helped me understand "the ways in which qualitative interviewer's mistakes construct communicative barriers between themselves and their research participants." Next, I will present the barriers I discovered as they relate to each specific stage in the interview process: before, during and after an interview. I conclude by offer some suggestions for what novice researchers can do to prepare for and conduct a qualitative interview.

Before

By entering the interviews with an expectation of what I would discover from my participants, I put a frame around their experiences that really limited the data I collected. This frame allowed in the participants' voices only to the extent that they fit within the frame I had constructed. What it left out were the nuances of their accounts that make for a rich and detailed qualitative study. Interestingly, I thought that when studying different cultural settings, such as a military organization, my previous experiences and understanding would enhance my research in some way. I viewed my work and academic experience with the military as an asset to this research project. But in fact, I found it to be detrimental because I had formed the conclusion that the Corps was very similar to an actual military organization and as a result must value the same norms and ideals I had experienced in the military.

Feeling confident in my insider knowledge of the organizational culture I was about to study, I did not conduct key informant interviews or study the organization's materials that might have alerted me to the unique vocabulary used by members or the clear distinctions

between this organization and the actual military. Understanding the former would have allowed me to learn some of the terms commonly used to describe organizational activities and to avoid the incessant interruptions that took place during the interview. Understanding the latter would have alerted me to my subconscious desire to gather data from my participants that would confirm what I already knew. Clearly, I had mistaken confidence for preparation.

During

Although greater preparation before the interview would have given me the opportunity to define some key terms used by my participants, the reality is that we don't know what we don't know (Becker & Geer, 1957) and we learn a new language when we interview another. It is important to ask participants to define terms and not be afraid to probe deeper into unfamiliar references. There is a tension that must be addressed between not asking participants to elaborate and asking them so many questions that you don't let the participant talk. As I tried to manage this tension, I asked participants to elaborate incessantly and as a result, spent too much time gathering data on the organizational jargon used. This data was helpful but did not constitute the core data I needed to answer my research question. Asking too many of these questions was clearly disruptive and made it difficult for participants to share their insight with me (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Instead, I suggest that researchers go back after the interview and ask the participant to define key terms.

Earlier I discussed the barriers I constructed by assuming too much before the interview. My rampant use of assumptions to guide my research did not stop once the interview began, however. They continued right on through it as well. I had prepared an interview guide with questions that were open-ended, clear and concise and appropriately ambiguous (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, I never looked at my interview guide after asking my grand tour question. As a result, I got so engaged with what the participants were telling me and excited to dig further into emerging references, that I forced myself to craft the questions I wanted to ask in the moment, instead of using my interview guide as a reminder of the way I wanted to pose my questions. Having to craft them spontaneously, with my limited experience, meant that I did not have the luxury of checking for assumptions embedded into my questions.

As the interviewer, my aim was to insert my voice into the experience as little as possible but I sabotaged these efforts by interrupting participants and failing to notice the nuances of the insights they shared. These mistakes were counterproductive to my research because exposing these nuances was the whole point of interviewing members within the organization. If I wanted to learn about the way members were supposed to communicate or the values their communication was supposed to uphold officially, I could have used organizational artifacts or interviewed senior leaders within the organization for this information. But I made a conscious decision to interview the members themselves because I wanted to understand communicative practices that actually occurred at the ground level in the organization. This information could not be found in public statements. Even if I had conducted participant observations to gather my data, I would not have been able to hear participants describe their experiences in their own words; instead, I would have translated what I observed into my own. When I imposed my own words on participants and cut their words short, I severely limited these nuances to shine through.

I defined my interview success by the rapport I perceived between the participants and myself. But once I listened to the transcripts, I realized just how much of a conquest this had been: I had entered the picture with preconceived notions about what was real for these organizational members, what I would find, and how it would inform my conclusions about

military culture of communication. Where their words didn't seem to fit this mold to me in the moment, I reworded their ideas so that they did seem to fit the mold and then asked them to confirm I was right. Or I kept probing them with questions laden with assumptions until I got them to respond to my initial question in the way I expected. These cognitive processes affected the rapport between my participants and me, although I didn't know it in the moment. Again, I thought that our conversational attitude and my obvious interest in the subject would put my participants at ease, develop their trust in me, and set the environment from which their voice could be heard.

Upon reflection, I realized rapport is much deeper than how an interview "looks" (are people smiling, talking). Rapport also refers to the practices of communication within an interview. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe these practices or rules as "the turn taking of question and answer, the right to finish a thought without interruption, and the freedom to use any form of expression" (p. 194). There were a couple times that my participants interrupted me, which I attribute to their observation of all my interruptions on them; I established a rule that interrupting was OK. I still feel that it's good luck for a researcher to find participants so eager to talk that they are interrupting you to finish the question you are about to ask. But the interviewer is second to the participant, and so this rule should not be exercised in reverse. Disregarding these few cases though, for the most part, my participants followed these rules that Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe even though I did not. When I first listened to the transcript of my first interview and I felt bad about my behavior very quickly, it was because I immediately realized that I was not following the same rules that they were and it was my responsibility as a researcher to make sure I did. If anyone should veer away from the rules, it would be the participant, not the researcher.

After

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note "as with any skill we try to master, good outcomes are never guaranteed and mistakes will happen. But mistakes are usually forgiven when they happen despite one's preparation – not in the absence of it" (p. 171). Reflecting on the interview process made me realize while I made a concerted effort to be prepared for the interviews, I still made mistakes that affected my ability to collect data that would answer my research question. Reflexive practice allows qualitative researchers to revel in the role they play in constructing meaning with participants, while also giving them the opportunity to question the extent to which they construct this meaning. Reflecting on my interviewer style enabled me to identify my mistakes and recognize how these mistakes influenced the interview experience for me and my participants. My ability to deeply reflect on my interview style is a true asset. Reflecting for reflection sake does not make the practice worthwhile; rather, it suggests the importance of stressing the use of this practice to both novice and seasoned researchers.

Recommendations

This article closes by offering suggestions for novice researchers in preparing and conducting interviews. In terms of preparation, novices should pay particular attention to approaching the interview with an attitude of curiosity. This is important for ensuring that the interview is approached with an open mind. Remaining open-minded when approaching a participant from a culture you believe you are familiar with is difficult, as I found out firsthand. While a task for researchers seasoned and novice alike, novices need to pay extra preparation to developing an open-minded attitude. This attitude is a clear attempt to remain open to learning new understandings from participants. Spradley (1979) urges researchers

studying a scene that is familiar to them to “unenculturate” (p. 50) themselves so they don’t take anything in the scene for granted. Given their lack of experience with the craft of interviewing, novices need to work to focus on the subjective perspectives of their participants.

While conducting an interview, novice researchers should stay focused on their prepared interview guide. Regarding the interview guide, it is true that the spirit of this tool is to allow the researcher to respond with flexibility to the voices of their participants. Novices should pay particular attention to cultivating good habits in managing this flexibility. Being too flexible, as I learned firsthand, can sidetrack you from collecting data to answer your research question. The suggested practice with the interview guide for a novice researcher to temper flexibility is to regularly check back to the guide and ensure that they are still on the general line of questioned prepared in advance. Such check-ins enable the researcher to gently steer the conversation back on track if it has wandered.

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