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## Ethical and Methodological Issues Resulting from Recording Lapses in Qualitative Research

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## Ethical and Methodological Issues Resulting from Recording Lapses in Qualitative Research

### Abstract

Technological difficulties, such as recording lapses and dropped calls, during interviews for qualitative research lead to important ethical and methodological considerations. Using case examples from our own experiences with recording lapses, we walk through some of the questions to consider, including relational ethics and how changes in the data affect the validity of our findings. We argue that how ethical and methodological issues raised by recording lapses are to be handled largely depends on the paradigm in which each study is situated, ranging from postpositivist to constructivist to critical theory. However, we recommend that: (a) participants should be informed about the lost data and play a part in the decision on how to move forward, (b) decisions made due to technological difficulties should be discussed in the findings, and (c) researchers should take precautionary measures to avoid technological difficulties.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Recording Lapses, Technological Difficulties, Research Ethics, Validity

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## Ethical and Methodological Issues Resulting from Recording Lapses in Qualitative Research

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*Technological difficulties, such as recording lapses and dropped calls, during interviews for qualitative research lead to important ethical and methodological considerations. Using case examples from our own experiences with recording lapses, we walk through some of the questions to consider, including relational ethics and how changes in the data affect the validity of our findings. We argue that how ethical and methodological issues raised by recording lapses are to be handled largely depends on the paradigm in which each study is situated, ranging from postpositivist to constructivist to critical theory. However, we recommend that: (a) participants should be informed about the lost data and play a part in the decision on how to move forward, (b) decisions made due to technological difficulties should be discussed in the findings, and (c) researchers should take precautionary measures to avoid technological difficulties. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Recording Lapses, Technological Difficulties, Research Ethics, Validity*

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In recent decades, qualitative research aligned with constructivist-interpretivist and critical theory paradigms has gained popularity and relevancy within psychology and the social sciences. A shift in the way data is collected has accompanied this methodological paradigm shift. The in-depth interview is the most common form of data collection for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Prior to advancements in technology, qualitative data was collected through face-to-face interviews, and in many ways, this continues to be the preferred method of data collection (Cater, 2011). However, through advancements in technology over the past two decades, participant interviews are no longer restricted by geographic location or financial constraints (Hooley, Wellens, & Marriott, 2012). Video chat platforms (e.g., Skype, FaceTime, Video calls through Gmail) have allowed for an experience similar to face-to-face interviews, previously only available in person. Applications on cell phones, tablets, and computers have modernized the recording of audio and video, largely improving the quality of the audio/video file and making the storage and transcription process more convenient (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014).

Technology-related complications have developed in tandem with these technological advancements, leading to additional ethical and methodological issues to consider when confronted with these obstacles. These include dropped calls and inaudible segments (see Seitz, 2016). In this brief report, we outline some common technology-related ethical and methodological challenges of the qualitative researcher through case examples and offer our thoughts about how such challenges impact us as researchers, our participants, and our research process and product. We shift our rhetorical structure to the first person.

### Case Example: Researcher One

I (first author) began my first qualitative research project exploring the experience of transracial Korean adoptees and their sense of identity and belonging. My data collection entailed conducting in-depth interviews with Korean adoptees. The in-person interviews were

recorded using my iPhone 4s and the recording application iTalk. Forty minutes into my fourth interview, my phone battery died without my knowing. My heart sank when I realized I had lost 50 minutes of the 90-minute interview. Not only was I not prepared for this, as it was my first qualitative research study, but I also had no idea what the most appropriate and ethically sound steps were. Should I share this with the participant, who had just shared her life and adoption story, filled with many moments of pain and loss? How would she react? Would this data no longer be useful? Should I ask her if she would be willing to meet with me again to redo the parts of the interview that had been lost? Would the interview be the same the second time around given that we had already gone through the participant's adoption story? Would we be able to pick up right where we left off?

I ultimately decided to inform the participant what had happened shortly after our interview concluded. She seemed sad to hear the news but graciously offered to meet with me again to redo the portion of the interview that we had lost. We ended up meeting again two days later. I was cognizant of the possibility that the interview could veer off in other directions and was unsure of what that would mean for the analysis and the quality of my study.

The content of the second interview was nearly identical. For many adoptees, sharing their life story may be a new experience. For this participant, however, it was clear that this was a narrative she had shared before and put significant time and effort into constructing. She was able to pick up almost exactly where we had left off.

The second time I experienced technological difficulties and the accompanying ethical issues was during the interview with my eleventh participant. I received a phone call at the very beginning of our interview and had forgotten to place the phone in airplane mode. Although I did not answer, the phone call caused the phone application to stop recording. It was about 40 minutes into the interview that I realized my phone had not been recording the interview. Unsure of what to do, I recorded the remaining 50 minutes of the 90-minute interview.

Because the material that was lost was the beginning portion of the interview, handling this situation was a little more complicated than the first. I notified the participant, who was very understanding and open to meeting again. However, she had plans to be away for the next few weeks, and then I was to be abroad for about five weeks. The participant offered to answer questions via email, since we would be unable to meet again for a couple of months. I was hesitant about this option, but I wanted to respect the participant's request and time. However, much of the content, as well as the emotional and affective responses, was lost in the email narrative. So, I asked if the participant would be willing to meet a second time. The participant agreed to meet again, and our second interview was conducted approximately two months after the initial interview.

The follow-up interview, which followed a similar direction of questions, ended up being significantly different from the first. New thoughts and feelings about the participant's adoption story were discussed, which speaks to the power of the in-depth, co-constructed interview. The participant reflected at various points during the follow-up interview that the topics discussed during our first interview together had spurred new thoughts about her adoption, birth family, identity, possible trips to Korea, and played a part in her decision to search for her birth family. She also acknowledged she had taken a summer class that had stimulated exploration and growth around her adoption story and identity. It was clear that this interview unfolded in a very different way from her first interview. From a personal standpoint, I was delighted to hear that our initial discussion had such a powerful impact on the participant. However, from a researcher's standpoint, it was clear that the data had been altered.

After reflecting on what happened during both of these interviews, there were several ethical and methodological issues to be considered. In regard to the former example, the follow-up interview did not significantly deviate from the original. Although at the time, the participant and I worked to recreate the material that was lost during the first interview, in

hindsight, this was not necessary. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, in which my study was situated, is iterative in nature, and allows for changes to the protocol. In the latter example, the follow-up interview ended up being significantly different from the original; yet, this change was an organic result of changes in the subject's life, which was in part due to the impact of the original interview and the co-construction that had occurred. In fact, having follow-up interviews with all of my participants may have been helpful in illuminating other parts of their adoption and identity development process, particularly for individuals who had not previously spoken in depth about their adoption experience.

These technological and methodological issues were not reported in the published journal article. Unfortunately, I had not been exposed to much of the literature on technological concerns related to qualitative research at the time the study was conducted in 2011 to 2013 (Janghorban et al., 2014; Seitz, 2016), nor was I aware of the importance of discussing these concerns in the manuscript (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suarez-Orozco, 2018; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016). Given the opportunity, I would have discussed these technological challenges explicitly in my findings, especially in light of the recent literature on the importance of being fully transparent about the qualitative inquiry process in an effort to promote methodological integrity and trustworthiness (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). It would have been helpful to share in the manuscript why I chose to inform the participants about the lost data and include them in the decision based on the research paradigm of the study. This level of transparency in qualitative inquiry would strengthen the methodological rigor of the study and demonstrate intentionality behind sharing the research findings (Tuval-Mashiach, 2016).

### **Case Example: Researcher Two**

While conducting a study on East Asian bicultural therapists' experiences of working with clients from their ethnic culture-of-origin, I (second author) experienced technological difficulties about 40 minutes into my Skype interview with my fifth participant. In the midst of the confusion of ending and restarting the Skype call, I failed to check my recording application, Evaer, and only realized about 10 minutes prior to the end of the 90-minute interview that I had not recorded the latter half of the interview. There were several considerations in handling this technological lapse: (a) my ethical obligation to inform this participant about what had happened, regardless of what I was going to do with the data I had (i.e., use what I have, throw it out entirely, or ask if she would be willing to re-do the interview); (b) the potential impact on my relationship with my participant, who was not only my research participant but also a professional colleague, who had taken 90 minutes out of her busy schedule to participate in my research; (c) the ethics and implications for the quality of my study given that the responses the participant had given in the unrecorded portion were directly related to my research questions; (d) the ethics of simply throwing out the data entirely, given the time commitment the participant had made; (e) the impact on the analysis of re-doing the portion of the interview that was lost, given that the data would be different the second time around and most likely influenced by many factors, including her memory of answering the questions the first time around; (f) consideration of how to handle the situation in the way that would be least compromising to the overall results; and (g) how to write up the technological difficulties I experienced with this participant in the final manuscript, if at all.

After consulting with a colleague—the first author—and reviewing my options, I ultimately decided to inform the participant of what had happened and ask her permission to re-do the portion of the interview that had been lost by the technological lapse. She graciously agreed to do so, and about a week later, we Skyped again, starting where we had left off prior to our technological difficulties. I was acutely aware of asking the same questions and her

responses being different, albeit related to her previous responses, and consequently my prompts and follow-up questions were also slightly different, leading to further variation of the first rendition.

Despite the awareness of the changes the second time around, I had no way of knowing the extent to which re-doing that portion of the interview impacted the results of my analysis. Thus, this uncertainty itself guided my decision-making around whether to include in the final manuscript the technological lapse and having re-conducted a portion of the interview. That is, lack of transparency about what had happened would compromise the trustworthiness and credibility of my findings. I needed to report what had happened and, to the best of my ability, report on some of the potential differences in the data, so that the reader could ultimately judge the impact on the final results. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) for this study, from a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, meant that the construction of meaning was inevitably influenced by the particular local context of the participant and researcher. The technological difficulties we experienced together were a part of our research context and had to be acknowledged and incorporated into the understanding of our co-construction.

After re-doing the portion of the interview that had been lost, I realized that the first half of the interview that had not been lost had another technological error: although my participant's side of the interview had been recorded, my side of the interview had no audio. Again, I wrestled with the dilemma of whether to re-do this part of the interview or to try to glean my side of the interview, based on my interview guide. In this case, I chose to keep the original data because it felt like the more relationally ethical thing to do. I did not want to impose on my participant once again. Yet, I could not avoid the embarrassment of acknowledging what had happened when I sent her my transcription for her review, a standard part of the member-checking process. It was clear to her that my side of the interview had not been transcribed. I am left wondering if my initial reaction to operate from an ethics of care had been correct, or whether allowing her the opportunity to re-do the entire interview would have been the more relationally ethical course to take, given that she had a difficult time reading the transcript due to it missing my side of the interview. I am currently in the process of writing up the manuscript of this study for publication. In the manuscript, I am planning to be transparent about how the technological challenges, associated ethical concerns, and additional data collection may have affected my analysis and findings from the interviews (Levitt et al., 2018; Tuval-Mashiach, 2016).

### **Considerations for Research Ethics and Research Quality**

Recording lapses lead to questions related to both research ethics and quality of research. In regard to research ethics, recording lapses most closely relate to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) termed "ethics in practice" (p. 264) and relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). What is our duty to our participants when we make a mistake, whether due to technological or human error? Separate from the issue of how the loss of data may affect the research, relational ethics may dictate that we inform our participants of the error.

At the same time, the ethical issue involved here is closely tied to research integrity because the impact of the recording loss may differ depending on the methodology and research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Although many qualitative researchers use verbatim transcripts as their data, some researchers may take meticulous notes and use the notes as their primary research data, with recordings as only a backup. In the latter case, the recording lapse may be less problematic; consequently, the relational harm is minimized because the researcher has not "lost" what both parties have agreed the participant is providing.

When the research data consists primarily of verbatim transcripts, the loss of recording inevitably affects the data and analysis. Regardless of whether a second interview is conducted to make up for the loss, the data has been changed. As such, the loss of data has to be addressed as part of addressing the validity or quality of the research. How the loss is addressed will largely depend on the paradigm that frames the research. From a postpositivist paradigm, the dependability of the research has been compromised, and may be dealt with by doing away with the data or trying to duplicate the interview as closely as possible. From a constructivist paradigm, the researcher may be less focused on duplicating the interview exactly and instead acknowledge the change in the data and incorporate the change into the data analysis and reflexivity. For a researcher from a critical paradigm, it may be especially important to include the participant in the decision around how to deal with the lost data. The inclusion of the participant in the decision-making process would simultaneously address the integrity of the study and relational ethics.

### Conclusion

Mistakes made in qualitative research are rarely talked about within published studies, making it difficult to know how common mistakes such as technological failures materialize. Both research ethics and research validity dictate that technological failures impacting the data be addressed sensitively and with integrity. As with many issues related to research ethics and methodological integrity, there are no easy answers. Particularly within qualitative research, in which relational ethics and methodological integrity may require differing resolutions of the problem depending on the paradigmatic framework, careful considerations of the impact of the technological failure are needed. Regardless of the research paradigm, consulting with a colleague or mentor about the mistake or recording error and how best to proceed in an ethically sound manner, speaking honestly with the participant about the error and how the participant would like to proceed, and being transparent about the mistake in the results and discussion sections of a manuscript are recommended to maximize the ethics, validity, and integrity of the qualitative inquiry process.

We recommend that qualitative researchers give themselves adequate time to prepare for each interview and take efforts to ensure that the recording device is working properly ahead of time (i.e., test the recorder right before the interview). In addition, we suggest that batteries are fully charged or devices are plugged into power sources, mobile phones are placed in airplane mode when used as recording devices, and a second recording device is used as backup. Both authors now use a second recording device for each qualitative interview to safeguard against lost data in the event there is an error with the first device. Finally, we recommend that researchers review the data directly following the interview to verify that the interview was recorded successfully. If there is lost data or a lapse in the recording, knowing sooner rather than later is helpful to both the researcher as well as the participant so that the researcher may take ethically appropriate steps to address the concern.

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