
Using Written Accounts in Qualitative Research



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Abstract

This article discusses the methodological implications of using written accounts as the primary source of data in qualitative research. Data from a pilot study into family relationships in two families with an anorexic child is presented to illustrate the ways in which this strategy can facilitate the interpretation of different family members' perspectives. Written accounts are shown to be a time-efficient means of gathering good-quality, descriptively rich data. Differences between oral and written modes of communication mean that participants' written accounts are more highly focused and reflective than transcripts from oral interviews, facilitating data analysis and interpretation. Relationships between researchers and researched are more circumscribed than in face-to-face interviewing, which may limit opportunities to explore emergent issues or make informal observations during the interview process. However, the more circumscribed contact between researchers and respondents may also make it easier to manage the complex social dynamics that can emerge when researching families. Whilst written accounts cannot be used as a direct substitute for oral interviews their strengths appear to be undervalued in qualitative research in psychology.

Introduction

This article discusses the authors' experiences of using semi-structured written accounts as the primary source of qualitative data. Whilst qualitative techniques are gaining increasing currency within psychological research the range of techniques in use is surprisingly limited, centering mainly on some form of verbal interview. As Nygren and Blom (2001) point out, many qualitative researchers seem to make an almost automatic assumption that the best quality data will be obtained from oral interviews with open-ended questions and good researcher/respondent rapport. Within psychology, the emphasis on oral interviews may be partially due to a backlash against the written questionnaire research that still dominates the discipline. Other social science disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology have made more extensive use of written materials such as diaries, letters and archival data. However, such data have seldom been generated specifically for the purposes of research and can therefore give rise to an assortment of methodological problems ranging from simple failure to cover areas the researcher is interested in to more complex interpretive problems concerning authenticity, distortion or meaning (Robinson, 2001).

Given that most qualitative social science research involves verbal interviewing it seems relevant to examine the major similarities and differences between oral and written forms of data collection. The relationship between the spoken and the written word has been discussed by many linguists, philosophers and social scientists; with a wide range of views being expressed. Atkinson (1997) argues that neither verbal nor written data can be automatically accepted as accurate and unproblematic accounts of actual events in respondents' lives. Data are constructed within social contexts and respondents' accounts will therefore be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by a wide range of other factors such as social norms concerning the way feelings and behaviour should be portrayed, the desire to present themselves in a particular light, reluctance to reveal some types of information, type of question asked by the researcher and level of rapport with the researcher, to name but a few. These factors therefore need to be considered when both oral and written data are analysed.

Although both oral and written accounts involve an element of self-consciousness and self-interpretation this effect is likely to be greater when dealing with the written word. Ong (1982) suggests that the relative permanency of the written word means that written accounts can have a greater degree of temporal ordering, coherence and self-reflection than oral accounts. Both speech and short-term memory are transitory mediums and respondents may well forget earlier responses, lose their train of thought or be unprepared for, and therefore unable to answer, verbal questions. In contrast, written questions can be considered before being answered, responses can be referred back to and answers can be written at a time and pace of the respondent's own choosing. Written accounts are therefore likely to be more self-consciously ordered and more reflective than verbal accounts. Since a large part of qualitative research involves transcribing verbal interviews into written text and then abstracting key themes from these texts, written accounts may sometimes produce data which is easier to engage with and analyse than verbal interviews (Letherby & Zdrowski, 1995).

The relationship between respondents and researchers is probably more circumscribed when using written accounts and this may, on occasion, limit the data. A skilled and empathic interviewer may get respondents to elaborate issues they would otherwise gloss over, explore inconsistencies in their accounts and clarify confusing statements. Whilst the opportunity of returning to respondents to discuss written accounts exists, the interactive elements of the data collection process are more limited. However, in some instances, more limited communication may help resolve tensions within research relationships and encourage participation by reluctant respondents. For example, Letherby and Zdrowski (1995) report that several respondents in their study of women with eating disorders were willing to provide detailed written accounts of their experiences but expressed unwillingness to talk about them in face-to-face interviews.

In summary, this article argues that written accounts can provide a valuable alternative to in-depth verbal interviews and are currently a neglected resource within the lexicon of qualitative research techniques. The rest of the article illustrates the research potential of written accounts by describing the ways in which this strategy helped resolve some of the problems which arose when designing a pilot study into family dynamics in families with an anorexic child.

Background to the Research

The empirical research described in this article was designed as part of the pilot study for a larger project investigating family relationships in anorexia nervosa. There is a considerable research literature examining this area, however it is mainly written from within a biological/medical model, tends to rely heavily on quantitative methods and is often critical of

families, aiming to show that relationships within such families are somehow less functional than relationships within other families (e.g. Gowers & North, 1999; Svrakic et al., 2002; Webster & Palmer, 2000). There is an alternative research tradition within the field of family therapy which often involves therapists giving descriptive case study accounts of family functioning (e.g. Dalzell, 2000; Fishel, 1999; O'Halloran, 1999). However, once again the emphasis tends to be on illustrating dysfunctional family dynamics rather than allowing families to voice their own experiences.

Qualitative research that allows respondents to describe their own experiences does exist; however, most of this research focuses on the accounts of anorexics whilst neglecting the experiences of their families (e.g. Garrett, 1997; Matoff & Matoff, 2001; Shelley, 1997). Such research often tends to privilege the account of the anorexic family member, implicitly assuming that their perspective is somehow more salient than the perspectives of other family members. One way in which this research sought to move beyond the individualised accounts of anorexia that dominate the literature was by juxtaposing the stories of different family members. The aim was to interview all family members in order to examine the under-researched perspectives of parents and siblings and see how different family members' experiences interwove throughout the lifespan of the disorder. This research design immediately created a fairly complex social situation in which family members' current relationships with each other and past relationships with psychologists and psychiatrists had quite a strong effect on our interactions with participants. Under these circumstances, the use of written accounts became a strategy for solving some of the dilemmas created by our research design.

Families were contacted through a self-help support group for parents of eating disordered children. Two mothers with adult daughters who had recovered from anorexia immediately volunteered their families. The original plan was to conduct separate, face-to-face, verbal interviews with all consenting family members. However, it quickly became apparent that this strategy was problematic. Firstly, family members were scattered across New Zealand and abroad making it physically impossible to conduct face-to-face interviews with all family members. Secondly, different family members had very different perceptions of the research. The two mothers were keen to relate their experiences in the hope of helping other parents. The two daughters were also willing to take part but both had concerns about the confidentiality of data. The three male siblings were neutral about the research whilst both fathers were initially reluctant to take part, one because he felt issues within his family were resolved, the other because his past experiences with the mental health services had been highly aversive.

It was therefore clear from the outset that the research entailed us entering into a social situation where different family members had varied feelings about the project. This led us to reflect on how our own characteristics as two female researchers, one of a similar age to the two daughters, the other of a similar age to the mothers, would influence the interview process. Faced with these issues we started to rethink our data collection strategy and decided to send all family members a written list of issues and themes we would like them to write about. We stressed that each family member's responses would remain confidential and that whilst we would provide feedback on key issues common to both families, we would not reveal any details. We hoped that this strategy would give respondents a greater feeling of control and minimize some of the social issues that would clearly arise in face to face interviewing by making our own relationships with respondents less personal. Initially, we were somewhat skeptical about the quality of the data we would obtain and saw the technique as a poor cousin to face-to-face interviewing. To our surprise, the data was not only easy to

obtain, but also better suited to our purposes in some respects since the replies were tightly focused on the research questions and already in written form. The documents also had a strong and distinctive emotional “tone” which not only differentiated the various respondents but furnished many insights into past and current dynamics within the different families.

Method

The two families who took part in the pilot study both had daughters in their mid-twenties who had become anorexic as teenagers and recovered approximately three years before the research took place. **Family A** consisted of two parents, a daughter and a younger son in his early twenties. **Family B** consisted of two parents, two male siblings in their thirties, and a daughter. All offspring lived away from home, in various parts of New Zealand or overseas.

All family members were sent a set of open-ended research questions plus a stamped A4 envelope in which to post replies. The written questions simply indicated the content areas we wanted them to write about and were almost identical to guidelines we would have used to structure verbal interviews. All respondents were asked to consider the same issues, although the wording of questions was altered to accommodate each respondent’s role within the family. Respondents were encouraged to write as briefly or fully as they wished and to ignore or add topic areas.

The questions covered areas such as the effects of anorexia on the respondent/other family members, ways the respondent/other family members tried to deal with the anorexia, effects of professional intervention on the respondent/the family, advice they would give to other anorexics and their families and ongoing effects on the respondent/other family members.

All family members responded. Parents and daughters gave lengthy replies averaging 12 closely handwritten pages. Sibling responses were shortest, averaging six pages. The documents were individually read the two authors, who then compared their first impressions of the two families. The data were then analysed more systematically by each author, using a grounded theory approach to data analysis, to elucidate key themes within each account.

Results

Four qualities of the written accounts stood out during our preliminary readings. First, the written data conveyed respondents’ emotions with great clarity and immediacy. Second, the various accounts gave differing but complementary versions of family history that coalesced into a lucid picture of past family relationships. Third, the documents from the two families had a very different “feel” to them, suggesting that family relationships were different for each group. Finally, despite clear differences within and between the two families there were many common aspects to their experiences, particularly in their dealings with health professionals.

These points can be illustrated by examining the differing accounts that **Family A** gave of family relationships during one of the worst episodes of anorexia.

The daughter writes bitterly, commenting that this episode:

“Marked the end of a period of trust with Mum and Dad. They were very concerned about my health and undertook the job of re-feeding me with a great deal of seriousness ... They

were so determined to get me to eat they tried nearly every dirty emotional trick available ... Looking back now, I realise they were being even more deceitful than I was ... ”

Her parents independently highlight this episode as a highly traumatic period in the family history. Her mother writes in a gentler, somewhat bewildered tone that:

“The whole family was put under tremendous stress ... it divided the family, everyone would get cross and go off, do their own thing ... I found it hard to discuss with my husband how I felt, he didn’t seem to understand.”

She adds, rather plaintively:

“I think we did our best to understand and did what we thought was right.”

The father takes a rather more sententious approach, writing that the episode:

“Placed the spotlight on (daughter), who seemed to almost enjoy being the centre of attention. We probably neglected her brother.”

The daughter corroborates this, writing that

“The family dynamic was obsessively focused on me. My brother was probably very isolated and concerned about both me and himself.”

Her brother wrote that at this time he withdrew from the family, turning to friends and, unbeknown to his parents, alcohol and cannabis, to cope. He added:

“Words cannot really convey the horror of that period. Life for me lost direction. I couldn’t focus on the future and felt emotionally drained.”

These accounts highlight the strain anorexia places on family relationships. They also show that respondents’ experiences of the same period are both heterogeneous and interlinked and are strongly influenced by their role in the family. If these responses are compared with those of the second family various similarities emerge. Although the language used by the second family is less emotionally charged and the “feel” of family relationships is different, it is still clear that position within the family plays a crucial role in the way events are experienced. For example, both mothers write movingly of the pain of seeing their daughters’ childhoods destroyed, both daughters write of the horrors of incarceration and forced feeding, all siblings write of their feelings of isolation and despair and all respondents write angrily of the insensitivity of some mental health professionals to their families’ pain. The written data thus provides insights into these families’ experiences that are easily equivalent in richness and complexity to the knowledge we would have hoped to gain through in-depth verbal interviews.

Discussion

Our experiences suggest that this data collection strategy has advantages and drawbacks for both researchers and respondents. These will be discussed in relation to the issues of data collection, quality and analysis of data and relationships between researchers and participants.

The written data was, in some respects, easier to analyse than transcripts from verbal interviews because it was highly focused and obviously self-reflective. This may have occurred because all participants were well educated and comfortable using written language to express themselves. It may also show that narrative or life history research is particularly suited to the written medium, as it requires both self-reflection and chronological ordering of data. Whilst respondents' replies were sometimes slightly unclear in relation to chronology they were surprisingly well ordered and detailed. Several replies contained appended comments in which respondents noted that the research had provided a valued opportunity to reconsider and order past events within the family. The high level of self-contemplation elicited through using a written medium may be valuable in research such as this where respondents were specifically asked to describe and interpret a difficult part of their family history.

Our relationship with respondents was obviously influenced by the fact that we were corresponding with them or speaking by telephone rather than meeting them personally. In some ways, this may have made it easier for all parties to manage the relationship. As many qualitative researchers have noted, there is a continuous need to manage the presentation of self during interviews (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Silverman, 2001). Differences in age, status, beliefs or inappropriate responses by researchers may all contribute to making both researcher and respondent feel uneasy. Where interaction is limited to telephone conversations and letters then the need for both parties to manage the presentation of self is diminished.

The more limited personal contact may also make it easier for respondents to communicate sensitive information. Face to face interviews usually take place at a pre-determined time and location and often involve giving extemporaneous answers to highly personal questions. In contrast, written accounts can be completed when the respondent chooses and the content of responses can be more easily controlled. This heightened control may actually make respondents less guarded and more willing to reveal information. Several of our respondents noted that they found it easier to write frankly about some family issues than communicate them verbally.

The 'time-neutral' act of gathering written data as opposed to the sequential ordering of face-to-face interviews was also important to some respondents. During the initial phases of setting up this research, when we were still contemplating face to face oral interviews, it became apparent that some respondents were worried we might inadvertently reveal confidential information to other family members in later interviews, whilst other respondents were concerned that we might form opinions on the basis of early interviews and give less credence to later meetings. Although all respondents returned their replies individually and in their own time, their sense of having to deal with other family members' contributions seemed to be diminished by the use of written communication. From our perspective as researchers delaying analysis until all responses were returned also meant that we could compare family members' narratives on a virtually simultaneous basis.

Nevertheless, the process of writing was initially difficult for some respondents, which highlights one of the ethical issues associated with the lack of personal contact. The mother in **Family B**, who was highly committed to the research throughout, appended a note to her account saying:

"Sorry for the delay – there was a reluctance to get into it because of all the bad memories it brought to the surface. Even after all these years it has the power to upset us ..."

Within a face-to-face interview we might have realised the mother's ambivalence at an earlier stage. It is difficult to be as sensitive to respondents' feelings when visual and verbal cues are missing. It is therefore important, particularly if using this strategy to research sensitive topics, to be aware that respondents may find participation difficult and may want to opt out or to talk through their feelings with a researcher or counsellor either before or after taking part in the research.

Although the relationship between researcher and respondent is more distanced than in traditional qualitative interviews, there is a greater degree of communication than in questionnaire research. As researchers, we found that the detail and intimacy of the information, coupled with the respondents' use of their own words, gave us a greater sense of knowing respondents than is possible with questionnaire research. For their part, our respondents clearly committed both time and emotional energy to the research and expressed interest in receiving feedback on the research findings. This created various dilemmas for us as researchers. The return of the original documents was relatively straightforward although the highly confidential nature of some information meant we needed to be certain that the return addresses were seen as appropriate by respondents. Providing feedback on the research was more problematic. Given that this was part of a pilot study, it was clearly unreasonable to expect participants to wait until the research was completed before receiving feedback. However, the small number of participants and the close relationships between them meant we had to be careful not to reveal confidential data. Our solution was to talk in terms of themes emerging from all accounts and structure a short feedback letter around areas such as participants' feelings of being out of control of events, all participants' sadness at lost opportunities, the aversive nature of participants' interactions with some health professionals, positive self-help strategies suggested by participants and positive outcomes on individual coping and family dynamics.

In conclusion, the methods used in any research should obviously be chosen to suit the research question. If the population that is being studied is literate and able to reflect upon their personal experiences, written accounts may overcome some of the problems commonly associated with traditional, in-depth, oral interviewing. At its simplest, this approach can help circumvent practical problems such as the expense and time involved in interviewing large or geographically scattered samples. This may be particularly relevant in countries like New Zealand where family members often travel and work abroad for substantial periods of time. It may also be useful in applied settings where it is difficult to contact family members directly. As clinicians we have often felt that it would help us understand family dynamics if we could speak to other family members. This technique provides one method of achieving this in situations where it is not possible to meet family members personally. This approach may also help overcome some of the issues arising from the often-neglected fact that psychological research is inevitably embedded in various social contexts of different degrees of complexity. Within this research the fact that we were interviewing all family members raised many issues for respondents such as the confidentiality of sensitive information, possibilities of researcher bias for or against particular respondents, possibility that some accounts would be privileged over others, etc. When the researchers' age, gender and profession were added to this mix, the social context in which the research was located clearly became quite convoluted. The use of written accounts helped simplify some of these issues for both respondents and researchers, whilst still generating high-quality data that provided many insights into the research question. In some cases, written data will obviously be an unsatisfactory substitute for face-to-face verbal interviews. However, the many strengths of written accounts suggest that they merit greater consideration as a qualitative research technique.

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