

Qualitative research methods: interviewing as a way of learning and knowing

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Abstract

This paper is based on the keynote talk that I gave on the EAHIL+ICAHIS+ICLC 2015 Workshop in Edinburgh. A starting point for the talk was the theme for the Workshop: "Research-minded: supporting, understanding, conducting research". Some features of qualitative research are presented and a number of methods are mentioned before zooming in on interviewing, discussing some aspects of that method with examples from my own work. As a conclusion the importance of understanding the limitations of research both for researchers and those taking part of the results is emphasised.

Key words: qualitative research; reproductive health; contraceptives; information literacy; information seeking behaviour

Introduction

In this paper I will sketch some of the features of qualitative research and mention a number of methods before I move on and zoom in on interviewing, discussing some aspects of that method and present examples from my own work. I will conclude by emphasising the importance of understanding the limitations of research both for researchers and those taking part of the results. I will start by telling you how I became interested in research.

I worked as a librarian in an upper secondary school in Malmö, a city in southern Sweden. We librarians held a series of learning activities for pupils to attend during their 3 years at the school, activities with the aim of strengthening their information literacy. It struck us, it struck me very much, that many of them were not interested in the possibilities that we offered to deepen their knowledge and skills in information seeking and use. How come that the pupils were not interested to learn more about these, as I saw it, very important issues? I had this question on my mind and I could not find any research addressing it.

I was also interested in looking into information literacy in an area outside the educational and workplace settings since studies of it in everyday life were and still are scarce.

These were the starting points for my decision to enter a PhD program. I believe that being open to reflect about one's work is a fruitful starting point for research; to be willing to question routines and everyday behaviour as well as changes that you experience in those routines and practices, asking questions about them and wanting to learn more.

I set up a number of requirements that I wanted the project to meet. Taken together, I found that sexual health and more specifically how information sources are evaluated before young women choose a contraceptive met those requirements. And in order to know more about young people's own perspective I chose ethnographic methods in my project.

Methodology

Whenever referring to methodology a commonly made division is the one behind this talk: that of distinguishing qualitative from quantitative methods.

This is in many cases an unhappy separation as it gives the impression of two approaches in opposition. But these approaches may as well complement each other. What method you use depends on the aim and the questions you have set up, for the knowledge obtained with each method differ. A combination of both qualitative and

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quantitative methods can be a very useful design for a project. I have recently been part of a study of staff-less libraries in Southern Sweden, in which a web-survey was combined with semi-structured interviews. The web-survey was sent to all staff working at staff-less libraries in the region; four of them were also contacted and asked to take part in individual interviews. In these interviews understandings of more depth than in the survey were possible (1). But more often the approach is either quantitative or qualitative in a research project.

Qualitative methods are chosen when a project is set out to explore an issue in depth and to know more about meanings and understandings of a topic for people (2). Qualitative methods include interviews, focus groups, observations, observant participation, shadowing, and when material is obtained in online-environments: netnography, diaries, analysis of texts in documents of various kinds and analysis of images and more (3, 4).

The theoretical starting point and how knowledge is viewed within that theoretical perspective often influence the vocabulary used to describe the process. Consider the wording used to describe the process of obtaining empirical material for a project. You can talk about gathering or harvesting material. This brings with it a view about the material as if it is out there in the real world and the researcher is someone who collects or harvests it. In that view the researcher may be replaced without the material being changed in any major way. Another way of phrasing it is to talk about how the material is produced or generated in a process in which the researcher is involved in a project that leads her/him to interact with the surrounding world in certain ways. These interactions shape the material that is produced, the researcher having an impact on that production. If the researcher is replaced the material will inevitably change too. I join this latter view of how a researcher engages in knowledge production when the empirical material is generated.

Interviews

Interviews are perhaps the most used method under the qualitative method umbrella. There are several forms of interviews from

structured interview to life-historical conversations (5). A common form is the semi-structured interview in which the researcher uses an interview-guide during the interview. The guide is often divided into themes that the interviewer is interested to cover during the interview, but the sequence in which the themes and questions are asked is not fixed. The interviewer allows the interview to develop as a conversation and introduces new themes once any one theme is covered.

There are different understandings of the interview, and the roles that the interviewer as well as the interviewee have during the interview. Steinar Kvale has presented two useful metaphors for thinking about different approaches to interviewing (5). He talks about the interviewer as a miner or as a traveller. The metaphors relate to the distinction I made earlier between harvesting and producing empirical material and circle around the questions of what knowledge is and how it is possible to gain knowledge. The miner sets out to find the truth that is somewhere out there, hidden precious metals deep down in the ground. So it takes a lot of effort to know where to dig. The traveller is on a journey and as in this quote: “wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with people he or she encounters” (5, p. 48).

Discussions about what kind of knowledge is possible to gain from interviewing have led to criticism towards the method. Today many researchers point to the importance of acknowledging the context. What is said during an interview is to a high degree shaped by being formulated in the interview situation. So what does that specific conversation say about other situations, about the situations that are the topic of the interview? Is it at all possible to get to know how something is outside the interview situation? Roger Säljö (6) has pointed out the difference between thinking and talking. We do not necessarily say what we think, but in everyday way of talking and also in research this distinction is often neglected. It is what people say that we can study. Consequently the distinction between thinking and communicating is important. It is communication that is possible to research (6).

So what we can call the standard practice of interviewing has been debated and criticised. And I believe that there are important questions to solve

if you want to use interviews. The only feasible way, both ethically and practically, for me to study how young women evaluated information sources about contraceptives was to interview them. I have presented elsewhere in detail how I designed my project to meet the criticism raised towards the method (7).

Narrative research interviews

The narrative research interview methodology presented by Elliot Mishler's provided an important basis both theoretically and practically (8). Mishler acknowledges that interviewing is problematic but instead of rejecting the method he presents several aspects to bear in mind when interviewing.

Mishler's narrative research interview focuses on the interview as a form of discourse (8, p. 35-36). Nowadays interviews are recorded. Afterwards, the researcher listens to the recording and writes it down as text, a transcript is created. Mishler defines the act of transcribing as an interpretation (8, p. 48), that is an analytical act. Once the transcript is created the analysis continues. With an understanding of interviews from a narrative point of view, interview questions are not viewed as stimuli that trigger typical behaviours of the respondents (8, p. 54). Instead, the interview is understood as a joint construction by interviewer and interviewee (8, p. 117). The questions asked and the answers given are negotiated during the interaction. The transcript allows the researcher to follow how the understanding evolves during the interview.

The interviewer has the power to steer the conversation and also to decide over the analysis afterwards. Mishler acknowledges this imbalance in power and proposes that the interviewer should invite the interviewee to participate in the interview and take active part in creating the outcome of the conversation (8, p. 117). In my study I included three kinds of visual tools to enhance the participation of the interviewees: the creation of a map (9), a deck of cards with information sources and an information source horizon (10, 11). Conducting the interview as proposed opens up a potential for the interview to become empowering for the interviewees and to create opportunities for learning (8, p. 117); a situation in which interviewer and interviewee together learn more about the topic of the conversation. In my project, the interviews

made it possible for me to learn more about how the young women I met reason around use of contraceptives and the role information had in that reasoning.

The analytical gaze

The doings of qualitative research do also involve the analytical process of making sense of it as research: how the empirical material tells you something about the question you asked when starting your research endeavour. This means that the analytical gaze you use has an effect on what kind of knowledge that is gained in the research project. Theoretical starting points and tools are often described with the use of visual metaphors as different theoretical perspectives. We can go along with that metaphor and talk about theories as presenting certain lenses that you use and, depending on the lens chosen, the picture or pictures that are developed during the research project will differ: some things will be clearly developed while other things will be blurred into the background. This is part of doing research.

Understanding and supporting research

I do think that this is important to have in mind when considering the aspects of understanding and supporting research: research have always limitations, the world that we live in is a complex place and to be able to conduct research at all you have to make choices: choices of what questions to ask, what population to investigate, what theoretical tools to use and what methods to adopt: All these choices mould the produced knowledge. To be able to grasp the complexity of the world in its whole is not the aim of any single research project. Yet each project adds another piece to the large, ever changing picture that we have. But if we expect research to give complete and definitive answers for everything we will be disappointed. Instead, I argue that researchers should be transparent about the choices that they make while conducting their research to allow for anyone who wants to take part of the results to get their expectations at the right level.

When working with research results as many of you do I hope that these insights into the doings of research and my reasons for choosing specific tools and methods may be useful for understanding and

supporting qualitative research endeavours that are perhaps not the mainstream ones within the medical field today.

Conclusions

I have mentioned a number of qualitative methods but mainly focussed on interviewing and pointed at some benefits as well as weaknesses of the method, giving you examples from my research to show you how I designed a study that allowed me to keep the interview format while recognizing its drawbacks. I have concluded by returning to qualitative methods and research in general and how the limitations of research are important to bear in mind for researchers and those taking part of the research. My understanding of the aim for us all, working within the library and information studies field, be it as researchers, information specialists, librarians or in other roles, is to help people do the things they need and want to do. And within this understanding, I think that research conducted with qualitative methods has a lot of valuable knowledge to offer for us all to learn from, for making us better equipped in our different roles. So let us all be open-minded to questions in our daily lives that needs attention and let us engage in them!

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