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Sensitive Interviewing

Sensitive interviewing

- Interviews which cover emotionally difficult topics
- But also deeply private, vulnerable communities, consequences
- How do people experience being interviewed?
- How does interviewing impact upon researchers (including supervisors, transcribers etc)

Advice from interviewees

- Campbell et al (2009): survivors of rape
- Need to be aware of the impact of rape
- Need to be practiced and patient
- Rape can happen to any woman, impact varies on each individual, researcher should not be surprised
- Recovery is a long, slow process, need to be prepared to talk to women at different stages of this process
- Appreciate empathy, but researchers cannot fully appreciate survivors' lived experiences.
- Gap between academic knowledge and personal experience
- Researchers need to be comfortable so that survivors can openly talk

Goodrum and Keys (2007)

- Relatives of murder victims, women who have had abortions
- Women at different stages of grief process, reactions highly individualised
- Not possible to predict which topics might cause distress
- Interviewees responded to interviewers' discomfort by changing topic, or feel interviewer has stopped listening
- Importance of piloting: terms such as 'closure' should be avoided
- Avoid emotional questions early on

Recruitment material

- Needs to be sensitive
- Stress that researchers are interested in experiences that are often silenced or stigmatised
- Provide information about topics, initial order of questions, length of interview

“Emotional work” (Hochschild 1983)

- Interviewing can be emotional work (Dickson-Swift et al 2009)
- Can leave interviewers feeling as if the interviewee is “living inside our heads” (Kleinman and Copp 1993:8)
- Can carry the emotions of an interview long after the research has finished
- Can feel isolated and emotionally overload (Beale et al 2004)

Impact on researchers (Dickson-Swift et al 2007)

- Researcher feel uneasy at level of disclosure
- Although others feel that they are respecting interviewees' stories, interviewees welcome the opportunity to talk
- Feeling desensitised, or feeling vulnerable, heightened sense of own mortality
- Feel the need to give something back
- Can be life-changing

Further advice

- Clear boundaries about what, as a researcher, you can do to help (refer, contact list)
- Do background reading before interviewing
- Do practice exercises to develop interviewing skills
- Hold regular meetings to review the research
- Share interview techniques
- Emotionally debrief

Debriefing: Beale (et al 2004)

- Express emotions
- Make sense of what might seem to be inexplicable
- Reflect and compare interviewees' experiences against your own life
- Keep a journal or diary
- Talk to research mentors
- Egalitarian working models

Impact on other participants

- Transcribers: transcriptions involves capturing not only the words, but also the intent
- Supervisors: need for good listening skills, provide opportunities to debrief, but also may need to debrief themselves
- Readers: may see 'echos' in their own lives. Assess publications for the impact (negative or positive)

Deeper issues with interviewing

- Power relationships between interviewee and interviewer
- Interviews can expose very private aspects of someone's life – consent, publication
- Level of disclosure can be difficult (guilt):
 - “Had I, by appearing to have greater respect for and equality with the participants when seeking their consent and when playing the part of a researcher, been exploiting them in a deeper sense?” (Darra 2008:257).

Our research

- Experiences of clinical negligence claimants: England and Scotland
- 4 previous studies, including just the one in the UK
- All previous work used surveys
- Used in-depth qualitative interviews

...then he just sat up and he looked like, you know the Scream Edvard Munch's picture? And just this massive, massive spurt of blood came out, and he was just like this... and then he died.


And they still wouldn't let me in the ambulance, they left me on the road, then they let me in the ambulance, and he'd died. And I said I think you ought to close his eyes, he's passed away. And they started giving him CPR, and there wasn't anything of him, it would have broken all his ribs, they were just being so rough... They wouldn't close his eyes, they wouldn't, they wouldn't stop doing that on his chest, and they did that all the way to the hospital. And I begged them not to, just to leave him in peace and then they wouldn't even cover his face when he went through A and E and all these people were just looking at him, and he'd died. And I thought it was just so cruel, I just thought that was so cruel and undignified.

Gaining consent

- Accessed claimants via solicitors
- Solicitors did not contact some claimants who were felt to be too upset (gatekeeping)
- Written information and consent form sent to claimants
- Did not do a follow up

Doing the interviews

- Getting the most appropriate interview style (very open ended, following)
- Needed to find an experienced research assistant
- Time: some interviews were very long, need time to emotionally recover
- Setting up the interviews: some people wanted someone else with them; others wanted time alone

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- Contact sheet
 - Developing rapport with telephone interviews
 - ‘Retold’ stories
 - We cannot make a difference to an individuals’ case – boundary setting
 - Being sceptical