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Qualitative research, according to Creswell, has an ever-changing definition, which is not always made clear in introductory books. He suggests that "*qualitative research* begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, p. 49) suggest that qualitative research seeks "to discover, explain, and generate ideas/theories about the phenomenon under investigation; [and] to understand and explain social patterns (the 'How' questions)." According to Berg (2007, p. 8), qualitative researchers are "most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth." Through qualitative techniques, Berg (2007, pp. 8-9) suggests, researchers are allowed to "share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives." What all of these have in common, according to Creswell (2007, pp. 37-39), are some common characteristics including: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive data analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, theoretical lens, interpretive inquiry, and a holistic account. There are many ways to collect data, whether it is interviewing individuals, holding a focus group, observing as a participant or non-participant for observations, content analysis, or a combination of various methods. There are also different theoretical lens to begin with and various ways of analyzing the data once you have it.

With the vast options of research methods and the rise of technology over the last 50 years, there are more possibilities than ever to gather data in social research. With new technology and new approaches to data collection, there is the need to establish and validate such methods. One example of this is using communication programs, such as Skype, to conduct research in place of face-to-face interactions. These programs could be used for qualitative research to conduct interviews with individuals as well as groups, to hold small focus groups, and much more. With the rise of technology over the last few decades, communication over distance has become much easier and convenient with almost no end in sight. People can now communication in real-time with others pretty much anywhere on the planet not only hearing each other but also seeing one another through the use of computers and smart phones. Videoconferencing is just one way to take advantage of this. Although videoconferencing in its early years left a lot to be desired, these programs have improved immensely and will only continue to do so.

Below is a review of literature relevant to the use of videoconferencing as a method of data collection where face-to-face interviews might have been previously used. I suggest that these interactions have the potential to mirror face-to-face interactions for those that are geographically dispersed. With virtually no research done on the use of communication programs as a method of data collection in qualitative research and very little discussion on the topic, to establish the validity of this method, there is a blending of research on virtual

communities, video recording, telephone verse face-to-face interviews, and the presentation of an authentic self. Placed in contrast to traditional face-to-face interviews, what follows is a comparison and contradiction of communication program interviews with a mode of data collection that is widely used in qualitative research in hopes of showing that this up-and-coming technology might be a viable option for interviewing.

In the only mention found on Internet interviewing, Berg (2007, pp. 112-113) discusses what he calls web-based in-depth interviews as taking place in two arenas:

> *Synchronous environments* which include real-time chat rooms, instant messenger protocols, and real-time threaded communications, [where] such environments provide the researcher and respondent an experience similar to face-to-face interaction insofar as they provide a mechanism for a back-and-forth exchange of questions and answers in what is almost real time, [and]

> *Asynchronous environments* [which] include the use of e-mail, message boards, and privately hosted bulletin posting areas, [which]… are commonly used by investigators undertaking survey-based research.

Here the first environment is of concern to this paper. Berg further suggests that synchronous environments (or videoconferencing in this case), although not identical to face-to-face interviews, are definitely similar to it, especially in regards to unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Fontana and Frey (2008, p. 151) warn that with virtual interviewing (or in Berg's terms interviewing in asynchronous environments) "establishing an interviewer-interviewee 'relationship' and 'living the moment' while gathering information (Hertz, 1997) is difficult if not impossible," although they contend that this could possibly change in the future with technological advances. For quantitative research, some researchers have found that conducting surveys online have actually yielded similar response rates to paper surveys and have achieved better quality data in the process (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998).

Below is a discussion of issues in social research particularly pertaining to qualitative interviews, and by extension, videoconferencing interviews. These are not only issues for communication program interviews but also for face-to-face interviews, including authenticity, sampling, ethical concerns, validity, and reliability. This is followed by a discussion of the overall benefits and drawbacks of using this type of technology in place of face-to-face interactions for certain research projects.

Authenticity

Presentation of self and authenticity are discussed frequently in the literature on video recording and virtual communities. For Goffman, the presentation of self is the way that a person strategically conveys an impression of his or her self that is beneficial for that person. This involves impression-management of behaviors which regulates the expressions both given and given off. With face-to-face interactions, researchers are constantly participating in impression-management, showing various impressions to various individuals. In qualitative research, researchers are sometimes confronted with the question of whether or not an individual is presenting an authentic self, similarly with videoconferencing. Goffman (1959, p. 70) discusses this dichotomous relationship between a real and contrived performance:

> We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual's unselfconscious response to the facts in his situation. And contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behavior could be a direct response.

Goffman (1959, pp. 71-73) further proposes that: "While persons usually are what they appear to be, such appearances could still have been managed… The legitimate performances of everyday life are not 'acted' or 'put on' in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have." It is

out of instinct that we perform and manage our impressions in everyday interactions, rather than spending our days trying to deceive others, although that does happen.

As Peterson (2005) points out, authenticity is socially constructed and therefore changing all of the time. He continues: "Issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt" (2005, p. 1083). 'Authenticity work,' according to Peterson (2005, pp. 1086-1089), has various forms including: (1) "Authenticity through Ethnic/Cultural Identity," (2) "The Elasticity of Group Membership," (3) "Authenticity through Status Identity," (4) "Seeking Authentic Experience," (5) "Technologically Mediated Authenticity," and (6) "Authenticity to Constructed Self." Important here are technologically mediated authenticity, where individuals spend a good bit of time 'weeding out inauthentic participants' on the Internet versus face-to-face interactions where authenticity is maintained through a sense of cohesion and identity, and authenticity to constructed self which involves Goffman's presentation of self and Taylor's idea of self-reflexivity. This 'weeding out' process in authenticity is repeated in the research on virtual communities where presenting an unauthentic self is quite possible, but as Bargh, et al. (2002; Ellison, et al., 2006, p. 418) suggest:

> In comparison to face-to-face interactions, Internet interactions allow individuals to better express aspects of their true selves— aspects of themselves that they wanted to express but felt unable to. The relative anonymity of online interactions and the lack of a shared social network online may allow for individuals to reveal potentially negative aspects of the self online.

Hamman (2004) echoes this idea when discussing virtual text-based environments. These are places where individuals can present various identities, some that are misconceptions. Some authors suggest that Internet interactions can in fact be accurate portrayals of the self, while others suggest that it is a place for a fabricated self.

The presentation of an authentic self or an accurate presentation of self are both difficult to gauge in both face-to-face and online interactions. Although the above is in relation to face-to-face interactions and those in virtual communities, it is argued that using a communication program like Skype mimics face-to-face interactions, including the presentation of self in an authentic way, almost as well as those face-to-face exchanges. There is no sure way to judge (which we really shouldn't be doing anyways in the author's opinion) whether or not a person is being truthful about the information they are sharing regardless of the method of data collection.

With videoconferencing and face-to-face interviews and because the researcher and interviewee are participating in an exchange relationship that is visible either through the use of video recording or one's own eyes, gestures, shrugs, winks, smiles, frowns, and verbal cues are all a visible part of the process allowing for impression-management and, in Goffman's eyes, a successful interaction to take place. In addition, with modern society's dependence on technology today, especially with the younger generations, so much of our time is spent on the web that presentations of self online are potentially more accurate than they were 20 years ago. Much of society has access to recorders, computers, webcams, cellphones, and Facebook accounts. With social life being so viral, the need to fabricate an online self any more than one would fabricate an in-person self is debatable. Regardless of the environment, online or in-person, there will always be 'posers.'

Sample

The sample in qualitative research is generally a chief concern when beginning a research project. What type of sampling frame to use, how many participants are appropriate, how will access be gained, and from which theoretical background the research will be coming from are all important questions when making sampling decisions. Lofland, et al. (2006, p. 18) suggest when gathering data from intensive interviewing, participant observation, or

priateness, access, physical and emotional risks, ethics, and personal consequences." Barriers, like gatekeepers and those who shield protected populations (often for very good reasons), are often issues when choosing not only site locations but also those participants that you would like to interview. Distance is also an issue that can arise for economic and other reasons.

What type of sample and at what point has the researcher reached saturation depend not only on personal choice but also theory. For example, Grounded theory suggests that the point of saturation, or theoretical sampling, is reached when no new themes are emerging from the data. This tends to happen more rapidly than with other theoretical perspectives. Morse (1995, pp. 147-149; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p. 73) offers several principles to follow when thinking about sample size:

1. Select a cohesive sample,
2. Saturation will be achieved most quickly if theoretical sampling is used,
3. Sample all variations appearing within the data until each 'negative case' perspective is saturated,
4. Saturated data are rich, full, and complete, [and]
5. The more complete the saturation, the easier it is to develop a comprehensive theoretical model.

In general, most qualitative research projects involve a small and purposive sample. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, p.70) propose, "the goal is to look at a 'process' or the 'meanings' individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations." Researchers are often left with an opportunistic sample or a convenience sample because access and availability are generally a concern. By using videoconferencing with certain populations, access and availability could greatly improve. With technological advances, some individuals in the US are connected not only through their home computers but also on their phones, iPods, laptops, reading devices, Internet cafes, and the list goes on and on.

Because videoconferencing is available almost all over the world, the sampling pool greatly increases with the use of the communication technology. We are able to communicate with geographically dispersed individuals in California, New York, and even Germany, if we would like, not only with real-time conversation but also with the ability to actually see the person on the other end of the technological device, as long as the individual has access to a program such as Skype. For most younger people, this is not a problem, but if you were interested in the elderly, for example, many might not have or want access to such a thing. That is why this method of data collection would only be useful for certain topics and certain populations. Another issue related to sampling that is present for both face-to-face and videoconferencing interviews is how to choose the sample. Will the researcher use purposeful sampling, snowball sampling, or quota sampling? This depends on the research interests and what is available. Convenience is something that is often taken into account, as discussed early. For videoconferencing interviews, the pool of possible participants could increase if, for example, the researcher found individuals who liked a page on Facebook or who belonged to a certain website, in addition to the normal modes of sampling. This, however, could raise ethical issues, depending on the topic, which is discussed next with ethical concerns.

Ethical concerns

In any type of research, there are ethical concerns that need to be faced. Despite what Babbie (1983; Berg, 2007, p. 53) states, "all of us consider ourselves ethical; not perfect perhaps, but more ethical than most of humanity," ethics are subjective. What is an issue for one researcher might not be an issue for others, for example, Roth's (2004) discussion of hired hand research where those who didn't have a stake in the research found it ok over time to 'fudge' the data, regardless of the ethical issues it raised. Ultimately it is up to the researcher and the Institutional Review Board, if one exists at the institution where the research is being

done, to decide if the proposed research is ethical and if the potential benefits outweigh the potential risk and/or harm.

Conducting research over the Internet opens many doors for research possibilities, but with this comes questions of consent. How does a participant give consent online? It might be next to impossible to have someone physically sign a form, and if consent is given via email, it might then be possible to identify the participant in the future. Is verbal consent appropriate? In relation to videoconferencing interviews, the answer is probably yes, but that all depends on the subject matter and what IRB has to say. As Berg (2007, p. 73) states: "Although problems have been identified and various solutions have been offered, concerns about the potential use and misuse of the Internet continue to move scholars toward finding ways to maintain ethical integrity in research when using the Internet as a research tool." As with research on communication program interviewing, there is fairly little information on ethical issues relating to the same idea. Much more has been published on whether or not content on the Internet is fair game, but even that, in the author's opinion, is still ethically up in the air, especially if one is participating in covert research.

While the Internet does offer a sense of freedom and anonymity to the participant and the researcher, this might not actually be the case. Because qualitative researchers generally know who the participants are, anonymity in real-life settings is almost impossible. They are however quite concerned with keeping individual's information confidential including the data. It is important to change names and locations, if necessary, to allow for privacy. As Berg (2007, p. 79) suggests: "Researchers commonly assure subjects that anything discussed between them will be kept in strict confidence, but what exactly does this mean?" Conducting research in general and during interviews on the Internet poses another problem. It is very possible to track conversations, locations, and identities on the Internet. Skype even has the right to record your conversations although they don't make that clear when you sign up. Again, using videoconferencing would only be appropriate for certain topics. It would not be advisable to discuss someone's illegal behavior with the slight chance that someone else is paying attention. To address these types of issues, a researcher could clearly state the possibility of this occurring, and you could also create dummy Skype accounts with dummy email addresses for the participants to use which would make it much more time consuming and difficult for others to track.

> 1. According to Markham (2008, p. 274), controversies and ethical issues often arise as a result of the following circumstances for Internet research:
> 2. Some users perceive publically accessible discourse sites as private,
> 3. Some users have a writing style that is readily identifiable in their online community, so that the researcher's use of a pseudonym does not guarantee anonymity,
> 4. Online discussion sites can be highly transient. Researchers gaining access permission in June may not be studying the same population in July,
> 5. Search engines are often capable of finding statements used in research reports, making anonymity in certain venues almost impossible to guarantee,
> 6. Age is difficult if not impossible to verify in certain online environments,
> 7. Vulnerable persons are difficult to identify in certain online environments, [and]
> 8. Informed consent of the actual participant (the person corresponding to the driver's license) is difficult to attain in writing if the participant desires anonymity from the researcher.

Although many of these problems still pertain to communication program interviews, some are also addressed with the use of video recording. For example, the researcher would be using a space or place that is presumed private, unless Skype officials want to get involved, allowing the participants a sense of security. A researcher is also able to not only verify the individual by sight, but if conducting multiple interviews, they can be sure that they are

talking to the same person. In general, little research has been done on ethics and the Internet as it is still considered a new method of data collection. Even less research has been done on 'face-to-face' through a computer screen interviewing, although more research will show that this is a viable method of data collection that addresses many of the issues raised in Internet research in general thus far.

Technical problems

As mentioned previously, videoconferencing has greatly improved over the last several years. That however does not mean that it is without flaws. There are technical issues associated with using any type of technology, but it is important to take into account when planning and conduct research of any kind. Anyone who has used videoconferencing knows that there can be issues with sound quality, microphones, webcam malfunctions, and probably most common, a lag in the live feed. Things like Internet connection speeds and the quality of the computer also come into play. To conduct this type of research, a person needs to be aware of this and have backup plans prepared in advance. Technical issues, however, are not only an issue for this type of research. Recorders malfunction, batteries run out, researchers forget to hit record, computers won't start, and the list goes on and on. With technology so far, it will only get better and better, creating a space where researchers have greater access to individuals and almost unlimited potential for further research.

Conclusion

As discussed above, our potential for data collection in social research has multiple possibilities with the use of up-and-coming technology, like Skype. As Markham (2008, p. 255) suggests with the use of the Internet for research, "a researcher's reach is potentially global, data collection is economical, and transcribing is no more difficult than cutting and pasting." Although the research for up-and-coming technology is a little slow to the game, this author suggests that the benefits of using Skype and other communication programs as a method of data collection, especially in place of face-to-face interviews, definitely outweigh the drawbacks.

To recap, there will always be concerns of authenticity in interactions. We can never be sure if the self being presented is the genuine thing whether it is face-to-face, over the telephone, in writing, or on the computer. Regardless, I don't believe that we as researchers can or should question the truth in these interactions as we are in search of the meanings that the participants find and assign, aren't we? Just as an interviewee in-person can portray a rosier picture of their life, an Internet interviewee can do the same on the Internet. Again, with our reliance on technology today, Internet interactions are more closely aligned with our in-person interactions than some might believe. The sample used in qualitative research is generally one of purpose and convenience. Through the use of communication programs, our reach is potentially limitless, at least geographically, for interviewing depending on the topic of interest. We are not only able to communicate verbally with those all around the world, but we can actually interact visually using videorecording devices in real-time, allowing for at least a mimicked face-to-face interaction.

Ethical concerns when using something like videoconferencing for interviewing, although increased on some levels, are not too far exceeding that of traditional face-to-face qualitative interviews. With programs like Skype and actually anything a person does on the Internet, people and companies can track where we go, what we say, and much more. This is something that most of us probably don't like to think about but that doesn't make it any less real. Companies like Skype even have the right, according to their user agreements, to record and share what you type, speak, or act while using their programs. Depending on the research topic, this can be a huge issue. For less sensitive types of projects, though, this might not be so important. As suggested previously, there are ways to at least address these types of securi-

rity risks so no one is surprised. There are also ways to make those who track us jobs a little more difficult, although if someone wants to find something bad enough there is probably a way. For the younger generations, whose privacy sometimes doesn't appear to be as important, this might not even be a concern. Essentially, full disclosure on the possibilities of security issues with the little likelihood of it happening is important to clarify and keep in mind.

The potential for videoconferencing as a research tool is almost unlimited. We would be able to interview geographically dispersed populations with a recorded interaction that at least mimics face-to-face interactions. Although there are some drawbacks, the benefits strongly outweigh them. With all of this in mind, further research on the use of videoconferencing as a method of data collection and interviewing in particular is needed. And we should all remember that technology is our friend, most of the time.

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