

Critical qualitative inquiry and methodological awareness: The effectiveness of face-to-face interviews in changing/enhancing participants' beliefs and practices

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Abstract

This article reports on how to achieve the effectiveness of using face-to-face, in person semi-structured interviews in changing and/or enhancing the beliefs and practices of participants in all research, educational research in particular. Interviewers need first to upgrade their key research goals to include the most critical one: the development of 'self-awareness' of making an immediate change or enhancement in participants' beliefs and practices. With this in mind and in practice, the critical qualitative inquirers fulfill an ultimate research goal that neither conferences nor publications can, as many participants in the world do not have access to such events or documents.

Keywords: qualitative research; qualitative inquiry; semi-structured interviews; beliefs and practices; research goals

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1. Introduction

The outset of 2009 marked the author's critical qualitative inquiries about different life issues, particularly academic matters! Without prior knowledge of the 'philosophical fieldnotes' (Bridges-Rhoads, 2018), the author took down field notes with attempts to connect them (Cleave, 2018) together as well. The beginning of publication of scholarly articles in 2011 encouraged the author to keep analyzing published research, consequently increasing the inquiries. One critical inquiry concerned the use of interviews. This was at the time when the author was trying to find logical reasons behind the use of interviews for data collection for a master thesis. Conducting interviews is not an easy activity, which demands sound knowledge about sound interview practices. Reading different articles and books, particularly the book by Seidman (2005), was very helpful but also led to noting down some critical inquiries that kept resonating in the author's mind. The author kept on triangulating data (observations, interviews, and documents/content) to strengthen the data and the findings. However, the main question regarding the use of interviews remained unanswered. Why do researchers use interviews? The author also recently posed this question on the web platform ResearchGate. The answers he received all conveyed a similar idea that, it is to collect sufficient data, which assist researchers in answering their main research questions. 'Using interviews in critical qualitative inquiry is not merely for collecting sufficient data': this was/is the author's thought.

Critical qualitative inquiry serves many purposes, among which the understanding of social phenomena is a priority. Such inquiry focuses on exploring and providing insights concerning poverty, social injustice, inequality, and human oppression issues, to name a few. Critical qualitative inquiry is widely used in educational research (e.g. Kandiko, 2012; Muthanna & Sang, 2018b). In this critical qualitative inquiry, researchers can employ a variety of techniques to collect data. The most prominent data collection tools are observations and interviews. Interviews are an effective critical qualitative technique for studying institutions' educational policies and their implementation processes, research activities, and learning and teaching practices through exploring the lived experiences of affiliates (administrators, teachers, and students). Researchers of different academic disciplines can employ interviewing for various academic purposes (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Differently put, interviews are employed by researchers in conducting phenomenological, grounded theory, feminism, case studies, etc. During the interviewing interaction, respondents' communication of their experiences, thoughts and beliefs departs from their stream of consciousness that informs the 'reality' ultimately sought after by researchers (Seidman, 2006).

Some researchers might argue that this is the mission of action research. Of course, action research urges self-reflections but this first depends on researchers' collaboration and reflections towards addressing research objectives (International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research [ICPHR], 2013; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000 as cited in Cordeiro, Soares, & Rittenmeyer, 2017). Further, action research publications do not reach every teacher, student or administrator. In addition to action research, researchers also use interviews in conducting feminist, phenomenological, hermeneutic, or ethnographic studies. The main purpose of conducting such interviews is to collect sufficient data, or to develop knowledge through an 'epistemic interview' according to Brinkmann (2007). The development of a strong methodological self-consciousness is important for qualitative researchers in collecting and analyzing the sources and quality of data (Charmaz, 2017).

In addition to the methodological self-consciousness (Charmaz, 2017), this article intends to raise a strong critical, methodological 'self-awareness' ('awareness-raising interview') among critical qualitative inquirers towards making a change in or enhancing participants' beliefs and practices. This methodological 'self-awareness' of making a change in participants' beliefs and practices (during the interview(s)) critically needs to be established as a very critical goal of every educational research. Instead of merely collecting data

from participants, educational researchers need to leave positive impressions on their participants, and through interview discussions, interviewees can elicit or learn some significant points/solutions about their present and/or future challenges or problems. Not only can educational researchers learn from their participants, but participants can also learn from their interviewers. With this in mind and in practice, this mutual interaction will eventually have a very positive impact on interviewers and interviewees, leading to a positive reform in the overall educational processes. Therefore, interviewing can be an effective and immediate methodological technique for changing the behaviors and attitudes of teachers, students, administrators, and many others.

Educational researchers working as instructors also need to instill this important methodological awareness in the hearts and minds of their student researchers to gain the quickest impact of their studies. In other words, assisting participants in positively changing their educational/teaching beliefs and practices, or enhancing and advancing them should be the first goal of any educational research- adopting the approach of critical qualitative inquiry and the face-to-face in-depth interviews. Further, interviewing has a quick influence on reforming some educational policies, or their implementation. For example, when researchers ask interviewees about a particular law or strategy that does not exist at their own institution, this may encourage interviewees to stipulate or formulate and implement such a law or strategy at their institution, or at least suggest its presence at the institution. Further, when researchers interview teachers about, for example, their teaching philosophy statements (which they do not have), the interviewers can provide several examples of teaching philosophy statements, highlighting the importance of developing one for every teacher educator and teacher student. By so doing, the interviewees will consciously learn to develop their own teaching philosophies and this is an immediate change leading to a positive change in teaching practices.

2. Research Design

This article follows a critical qualitative design, reflecting the author's experience in conducting qualitative studies. Reflecting upon one's experience is critically important in the development of research methods and their application. The author also made use of some of the formal and informal interviews he had with many participants. Using the participants' quotes in supporting the argument is valuable in enhancing the truth after which researchers are seeking in all research fields. Below is a brief reflection of the interview types according to applicability and structure.

2.1 Interview Types: Applicability and Structure

The interviewing type differs according to its 'applicability' and 'structure'. For applicability, telephone calls, social media programs (e.g. Skype, IMO, Facebook, etc.), face-to-face individual or group, audio-recorded interaction, and/or self-administered or emailed questionnaire are types of interview. Concerning the structure and the depth of exploration, an interview can be 'structured', 'unstructured' or 'semi-structured'. Structured interviews contain standardized questions with no intention to collect in-depth data. Unstructured interviews are open-ended, general questions with a possible emergence of specific questions (probes). In these two types, the participants are asked the same questions and in the same order. On the contrary, semi-structured interviews include questions seeking in-depth details, and several specific questions arise based on the participants' responses (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The questions of any interview type are preferred to be in the form of Wh-question.

Regardless of the different approaches under the umbrella of the qualitative tradition, and the different types of interviews based on structure and applicability, this article focuses on the use of face to face, in person semi-structured interviews. Researchers use semi-structured interviews with the main purpose of collecting sufficient data to answer their research questions or to test their research hypotheses. By realizing the reality of the participants' self-reflections on their interview questions later, and the occurrence of true conversations with their souls and minds, many researchers conduct second and third interviews with the same participants and with the same purpose of collecting more data that can help saturate their inquiries.

3. Critical points (findings) and discussion

Below is a brief discussion of the critical points (findings) to be considered by researchers while conducting semi-structured, in person interviews.

3.1 Conducting a semi-structured interview: Critical points

Researchers need to develop critical questions that do not harm the participants psychologically or irritate them in any way. Having good knowledge of interview construction (asking good questions), and some training is essential for interviewers (Yin, 2009). In the phenomenological approach, Schuman (1982) reported on the presence of three interview series: first interview establishes the context of participants' experience; second allows respondents to reconstruct their experience; and third urges them to reflect on the meaning of their experience (Schuman, 1982, as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The author argues that these interview series relate to the way of structuring the interview questions; the number of interviews depends on the agreement between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the scope of the interview topic. Researchers can ask all these questions within one interview session, though.

After piloting one's interview questions, selecting participants, getting their consent, deciding on time and place (mostly by participants), the interviewer needs to strengthen his or her rapport with their participants. This strengthening may take several informal meetings prior to conducting the face-to-face, in person semi-structured interview. Such meetings are designed to gain the interviewee's trust, to enhance data quality, validity and reliability (Punch, 2005) and to ease the process of interaction. Checking the audio-recording tools ahead of time and ensuring that all is well is essential for interviewing. Possessing good listening and note-taking skills is also significant as they lead to understanding and inquiring about any clarification of certain expressions/thoughts, or asking further questions (See Seidman, 2006 for details of other roles). Seidman (2006) advises interviewers to avoid reinforcing the participants' responses. The author argues that this is applicable in some contexts but not all. In other words, this actually depends on the participants' culture. In some cultures, nodding one's head or moving one's eyes is a sign for the participant to continue their discourse regardless whether it is right or not. In some other culture, some silence should prevail after one's talk. We are aiming to engage with participants to collect sufficient data so we need to relate to the participants in all ways possible. Otherwise, the interviewees might feel they are not being followed and/or that their expressions are of less value. Using such techniques, however, does not prevent the researcher from inquiring or asking for clarifications when appropriate.

Researchers need to not only aim at collecting as much data as possible but also focus on building full understanding of the issues discussed. This is important for both researchers and participants. When an issue has been clarified, and both researchers and participants understand it well, they consciously or unconsciously help raise self-awareness and reflections that come into practice sooner than later. Below is a living experience example of how such an interview helps change participants' beliefs and practices:

Why do you teach only one course of 'English Language Teaching' in the undergraduate English Program? - Interviewer.

Well, our program focuses on teaching English literature and linguistics but recently, the program developers have thought it is better to teach undergraduates such a course that gives students some information on the process of teaching. Such a course is taught in the second semester of the fourth year. I think one is better than nothing, right? What do you think? - Department Chairperson.

I agree that teaching such a course is a good idea but I am afraid that one course is not sufficient at all. Teaching knowledge is very wide and teaching its basics needs to be taught in several courses. For example, in level three, there should be at least two courses: the course of 'Introduction to English Language Teaching I' is taught in the first semester of level three, and

the same but advanced one is taught in the second semester. In level four, it is valuable to provide students with two 'practicum' courses; one course in each semester. I think that such planning will help students get some theoretical and practical knowledge about teaching... Otherwise, the students' reflections will be negative, leading to constructing weak teaching identities, ... - Interviewer.

... I value your idea and I think it sounds great to be applied in our program if they want to really help undergraduates gain some theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching. I will put your idea on the table for our next departmental meeting. - Department Chairperson.

The interviewer needed to highlight the idea that initial teacher education program students should be critically reflexive on their immediate situational practices (Smith, 2013), and that when such reflections are positive, they would enhance their identities as good prospective teachers. This notion of critical reflexivity cannot be gained within one course. Therefore, the above discourses show the critical importance of sharing thoughts and providing the interviewees with some logical, appropriate response that raises their immediate self-awareness about the issue under discussion.

3.2 Interview and analysis: Interrelated processes

It is critically important that researchers review previous studies systematically. Among many purposes, the review helps accumulate knowledge, find some literature gap, or/and prepare research interview questions. Experienced interviewers with a firm grasp of the issues under study, and with high flexibility and sensitiveness can easily deal with newly encountered situations or contradictory evidence (Yin, 2009). While constructivists confirmed that going to the field with some preconceptions derived from literature review is inescapable and necessary (e.g. Charmaz, 2014a, 2014b) and reflects that of 'theoretical agnosticism' (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003), objectivists confirmed the opposite (e.g. Glaser, 2013). Instead of using the concept of 'preconceptions', the author of the current article proposes the use of 'accumulative knowledge' that is critical to conducting an effective interview.

Effective interviewers, based on the accumulative knowledge, are critical inquirers who can differentiate between the truths and lies immediately. In other words, this accumulative knowledge of the topic to be studied is essential for preparing the initial interview questions and for immediate self-reflections during and after the interview. This high reflexivity of researchers helps scrutinize their understanding of the issues studied in comparison with previously accumulated knowledge (Harding, 1991). With this in mind and in practice, the author confirms that the analysis process starts from the point of reviewing the literature, preparing the interview questions, and during and after the interview conduction. With the application of these research data collection critical procedures, researchers would gain critical findings and convincing conclusions. Differently put, the processes of interview and analysis are interrelated and support each other. Of course, a deeper analysis strictly follows the conduction of interviews, but this also depends on the development of strong self-reflections researchers have made during and immediately after the interview. For further trustworthiness of the data and findings, researchers can conduct the same interview after some period.

3.3 Evidence of raising participants' self-awareness

Research is conducted for many academic and/or personal purposes, ranging from gaining higher education degrees, receiving financial support, showing deep research interests, securing jobs, to getting academic promotions (e.g. Feng, Gulbahar, & Dawang, 2013; Lee & Lee, 2013). Regardless of these different purposes, all researchers actually go to the field in quest of answers to their research questions. This is normal, as this is the nature of social and educational research. However, with the abundance of publications that might not be read at all (See Završnik, Kokol, del Torso, & Vosner, 2016 for details), researchers critically need to upgrade their research purposes. Critical qualitative inquirers have the opportunity to meet and critically inquire participants

about certain issues. In the end, they report ‘life documents that [for example] speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the dreams, the lives gained, and the lives lost by the people we [they] study’ (Denzin, 2017, p. 15). However, before reporting to the scholarly community, qualitative inquirers face challenges related to the criticality of the issues under study, the approaches for addressing socio-political problems, and the conduction of empirical qualitative research (Flick, 2017).

As a result, qualitative inquirers need to critically think of how to help their participants critically raise self-awareness upon the issues to be discussed. This does not prevent critical qualitative researchers from continuing their research and reporting it to others, though! It, however, helps them achieve one important research purpose immediately; that is raising their methodological awareness and the participants' self-awareness towards appropriate thoughts and practices. They need to aim to help participants think critically and clearly point out to different solutions that might interest the interviewees immediately. Therefore, the researchers' first main aim should be to help change or enhance the beliefs and practices of participants, and at a later stage, the researchers can disseminate their findings to those who (have access) might apply in their similar situations. Said this, the researchers achieve what they actually seek: changing of practices and beliefs or enhancing and advancing them positively.

Meeting with some participants after a long period of conducting face-to-face, in person interviews, the author was glad to learn that the interviews were helpful in changing their beliefs and practices. Following are some of their conversations:

You know, I thank you for that in-depth interview about teaching philosophies. It raised my awareness about the high importance of conceiving a good teaching philosophy, and practicing it as much as possible - Interviewee 1.

Welcome back! ... When I see you, I remember that interview we had. It was effective in making me reflect upon my teaching practices. I learnt a lot from that interview and I feel I am a different teacher now. All thanks are due to you - Interviewee 2.

... Your interview changed my beliefs about many issues including the proper treatment of teachers and administrators. I needed to change some practices that go well with the nature of our institution. I applied that concept of 'reward or punish technique' and it worked well in the institution. With strict application of rules and regulations, as you mentioned in the interview, I am sure that the outcomes are greater - Interviewee 3.

The above quotes clearly refer to the positive impressions the interviewees have conceived about the interviews. They also report the most important point related to changing beliefs and/or practices concerned with their policies and/or practices of teaching, research or administration. It is critical that researchers, critical qualitative inquirers in particular, need to help their participants critically think of how to change a particular belief or practice or enhance it in the quickest, possible ways.

4. Concluding remarks and implications

The world is changing and it is unfortunate that some societies still hold traditional beliefs concerning, for example, teaching and administration activities and/or practices. Scholarly writings are significant and create awareness and responsibility among writers and readers (Smislaert & Jalonen, 2018). Readers (administrators, teachers and students) also need to read as a response to the ‘calls to order’ or ‘useless reading’ (Cleave, 2018). However, the main problem is that not all administrators, teachers and students all over the globe are researchers (or even good writers/readers) or have chances to attend conferences or read publications for the sake of updating their knowledge. Further, many societies suffer from internal and external conflicts that have led to the abundant existence of many socio-political problems, and the power cuts, (e.g. Muthanna & Karaman, 2014; Muthanna & Sang, 2018a) including the unavailability of internet connection to at least surf those journals with

free access.

The consideration of the above-mentioned dilemmas forces researchers to rethink their main mission towards helping such participants (students, teachers, or administrators) who need a change or enhancement. Before studying educational issues and sharing their findings in conferences or journals, researchers, critical qualitative inquirers in particular, need to upgrade their key research purposes to include the notion of having 'methodological self-awareness' that assists in changing or enhancing participants' beliefs and practices. Instead of waiting for the findings to be published in journals to which such participants might not have access, the achievement of such proposed research goal will have an immediate positive impact on both the researchers and participants' beliefs and practices. Having sound knowledge concerning the issues to be studied, and the employment of critical qualitative inquiry using face-to-face, in person semi-structured interviews will lead to better research achievements.

It is imperative that such an ultimate research goal of raising 'methodological self-awareness' in changing or enhancing participants' beliefs and practices demands its inclusion into the educational programs' policies and activities. Developing and implementing this research notion would drive researchers/inquirers to have an immediate impact of their research in actuality. Differently phrased, this would lead to visible activities and practices related to the issues to be investigated. These improvements would strengthen the overall quality of the basic and higher education institutions.

4.1 Research significance

The significance of this article lies in the fact that it addresses the importance of raising 'methodological awareness' among qualitative inquirers of any research field, especially those who would employ face-to-face, in person semi-structured interviews. With this in mind and in practice, the beliefs and/or practices of participants can be changed or enhanced immediately without the need for attending conferences or reading published works as many participants in the world have no access to both conferences and journals! Further, many nations in this world suffer from internal and/or external conflicts, leading to power cuts, and absence of internet connection. This action also prevents researchers or even teachers and students from accessing journals with free access. Therefore, this article motivates all qualitative inquirers to bear in mind that they need to have solid knowledge so that the interaction with their participants becomes of value to their participants. While it is clear that researchers aim to collect data from their participants, it is also important to raise their methodological awareness towards the need for providing their participants with some data (critical suggestions and recommendations) related to the phenomena under study.

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