

ASYNCHRONOUS EMAIL INTERVIEW AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD IN THE HUMANITIES

KATEŘINA RATISLAVOVÁ & JAKUB RATISLAV

Abstract: The article focuses on a method for collecting qualitative data. The method is the asynchronous email interview. The authors assess the advantages, challenges and best practices of the asynchronous email interview method. They base their assessment on the academic literature and their own experiences using this data collection method in qualitative research on women who had experienced perinatal loss. The asynchronous email interview will never fully replace traditional face-to-face interviews, but it could gain a solid position as a qualitative research method thanks to its unique benefits.

Key words: asynchronous email interview; qualitative research; data collection.

Introduction

Qualitative research has become essential to the humanities over the past twenty years. During that time, researchers have identified weaknesses in the qualitative approach, such as the fact that it is very time consuming, difficult to access, and expensive. The Internet is being used increasingly as a medium across the world (the number of internet users rose by 676.3% between 2000 and 2013, according to Internet World Stats¹) and makes new methods of data collection available to qualitative researchers. Synchronous and asynchronous interviews and virtual focus groups are the most common methods (Meho, 2006; Mann, 2000).

The asynchronous email interview is a qualitative research method where information is repeatedly exchanged online between researcher and participant within a particular time-frame. The data are not shared with other participants as is often the case in virtual focus groups. This paper looks at the advantages, challenges and best practices of the asynchronous email interview method. We provide guidance and suggest that other researchers use this useful method of gathering qualitative data.

We gained experience of asynchronous email interviews while conducting research on the grieving process in Czech women following perinatal loss (the death of a child before,

¹ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

during or shortly after birth). It was originally envisaged that all the interviews with women who had experienced perinatal loss would be performed face-to-face. During our research, however, it transpired that some of the women “did not have the courage” to participate in face-to-face interview and suggested that an email interview might be a good compromise. They preferred the anonymity and intimacy of their home environment. Other women claimed to prefer an email interview for reasons of spatial distance or job workload—which may have been a rationalizing ego defense mechanism in some cases. Since the topic was highly sensitive and emotionally demanding, our priority was the safety and comfort of the participants. That is why we chose to collect our data using the asynchronous email method. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were held (twelve face-to-face interviews and six asynchronous email interviews).

In each section of this article, we first present the recommendations described in the academic literature and then describe our own experiences with the asynchronous email interview method.

Benefits of asynchronous email interviewing

Cost and efficiency

The literature indicates that email interviewing is of benefit in qualitative research since it is cost efficient and reduces the time required, but in-depth information can still be obtained. Email interviews are arguably less expensive than phone interviews or face-to-face interviews. The Internet can be used where geographical distance is an issue, which might otherwise require an international phone call. The email interviews can easily be transcribed, copied and pasted compared to other types of interview. The researcher is not bound by place nor even by a single conversation at a time—email enables the researcher to interview multiple participants at the same time, saving time and money (East et al., 2008; Meho, 2006; Selwyn & Robson, 1998).

Since we engaged in both face-to-face and asynchronous email interview methods during our research, we can verify that the financial savings and reduced time required are important advantages of the asynchronous email interview method. The women involved in our research lived in different parts of the Czech Republic and the cost of traveling was significant. It was sometimes difficult to agree on a date and time for interview convenient to both the interviewer and the participant. Transcribing one or two-hour long audio files of the interviews took a great deal of time. During our asynchronous email interviews, we always tried to reply to our participants’ emails as soon as possible, but no significant time-planning was required. However, where timing is important in research, some researchers might consider it a weakness that participants do not always reply as soon as possible to their emails and that the whole interview is unlikely to happen in a matter of hours, as can be the case with the face-to-face method. Transcribing the interviews was much easier using the asynchronous email interview method. We created a file for each participant and then copied all the email content and the attachments into it, creating a chronological interview transcript. Later, we analyzed them together with the face-to-face transcripts using ATLAS.ti.

Overcoming personal and political distance

Traditional interviewing methods are not always ideal when addressing spatially dispersed subject groups—an issue easily solved by email interviewing. It is now easier to conduct research with participants from very distant locations or areas that are hard to access, e.g. zones of political instability, war zones, etc. (Mann, 2000). The email method is also suitable for research in closed or restricted communities, e.g. religious communities, prisons, the military, and cults (Opdenakker, 2006). Email interviews can be advantageous where participants are shy or do not or cannot express themselves when talking as they do in writing, e.g. for psychological or medical reasons, or because of a language barrier or for religious reasons (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; East et al., 2008). Kim et al. (2003, in Meho, 2006) state that email protects people who reveal sensitive personal experiences and events without them “losing face”.

Our research confirmed many of these factors. We performed face-to-face interviews primarily with women who had suffered perinatal loss. The interviews were conducted via a self-help group for parents with similar experiences (Dlouhá cesta, Long Journey). Therefore, the women were accustomed to talking about the loss of their baby with other parents, or people around them. Email interviews were mostly preferred by women we contacted individually. These women were often more reserved and concerned about meeting face to face. At the same time, they were an important resource of information, because they perceived many aspects of the grieving process in different ways.

Data quality

The richness and quality of the data obtained via asynchronous email interviews is considered very similar to that in face-to-face interviews. Participants are generally more focused during email interviews. The nature of the response, however, varies—it is often denser, more structured and more explicit compared to face-to-face interviews. Participants have more time to think and consider their answers and can review their responses and reflect on them, which helps them engage in more careful communication. The key to obtaining rich data is to provide additional follow-up questions (Meho, 2006). The fact that the researcher has more time to formulate these questions benefits the clarity and depth of the interview (East et al., 2008).

The internet allows for more personal data to be gathered, such as information about health or political opinions, which would not be conveyed through other media. The participant is in control of the flow of the interview and is able to respond in a way they are comfortable with. Meho (2006) also recommends setting the deadline for answers. He suggests sending participants a timeline of the research and not sending more than two reminders, since that might be seen as pressure to continue participating.

In a wide range of cases, email interviews mean the researcher can obtain richer and more personal data (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004). Some participants also simply prefer to express themselves in writing rather than having to improvise when speaking. Some are better able to describe their feelings and express themselves better in writing.

During our research, the women worked very well with us and we received email responses from 1060 to 2176 words in length (median=1528 words). Compared to face-to-face interviews, the data gathered were slightly poorer. The participants' answers were more structured and did not involve as much repetition as in the face-to-face interviews. We received answers to all our questions; however, we were more careful in how we formulated them and we sometimes accepted partial answers. This was because of the sensitivity of the topic and the potential vulnerability of the participants. We lacked information about the psychological state of the participants, which we would otherwise have received during the face-to-face interviews.

Anonymity

The perceived anonymity the internet offers may affect people's willingness to participate in email interviews. The participant gains greater anonymity when writing and is not directly observed by the researcher. Kralik et al. (2005), who studied experiences of women with chronic illnesses, say that anonymity may be the reason some people tended to stop participating, and failed to respond in a timely fashion or were less friendly. We, however, did not have this experience. All the women who agreed to partake in the email interviews completed the data collection part of the research. Our participants were in the acute phase of grieving. In most cases, the interviews took part within one year of perinatal loss. It is possible that this might have led to increased motivation on the part of the participants than was the case in the research by Kralik et al.

Therapy-effect

The asynchronous email interview method may additionally have a therapeutic effect. This effect was described by Beck (2005) in her internet Study on Birth Trauma. The participants felt they were being cared for when they were acknowledged and listened to. The participants' written responses helped them make sense of their situation and writing their thoughts down may have helped them achieve closure and let go of the past. Some participants felt empowered once they could name and formulate their situation. Participants also appreciated being given a voice (helping others and raising awareness) by being included in the study (Beck, 2005).

In our research, many women were grateful that they could describe their experience. They confessed having difficulties sharing the events in their close social circles and did not want to bother their relatives with their suffering. For example:

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to write things down...there is so much more I would like to say, but nobody at home listens to me. (Zora, age 38)

A lot of people do not want to hear the story, they act as if nothing happened, when the conversation about our baby begins, they change the subject – they act as if it never existed... So I am very glad that I can express myself at least this way... (Jarka, age 33)

Challenges

Relationships and communication

The relationship between the researcher and the participant based on trust and friendship is an important factor in qualitative research. It encourages openness in communication and enables the researcher to get closer to the experiences of the participant. The relationship between the researcher and the participant can be built even without personal contact. The relationship is based on mutual respect and openness. It is recommended that the researcher is open, and willing to provide the participant with detailed information about himself and the research (Moon, 2000).

Our participants were initially informed about the subject, goals and importance of our research via a motivation letter. The subject line of the email said "Interview". We supplied information about the researchers and provided a link to the interviewer's website, along with information about the work we were doing and the point of the interview. We were aware of the responsibility of building a relationship with every participant. Our asynchronous email interviews were conducted using empathetic, attentive and sensitive communication. We focused on changes in the email dialogue, breaks in the text and used our knowledge of communication in an online environment.

Sample recruitment

There are several ways of obtaining participants for email interview based qualitative research. Written information about the research can be handed over at a personal meeting or via email contacts, public announcements on online discussion forums, websites etc. However, there will always be some respondents who are restricted in accessing the internet, in their ability to use the internet and in communicating via email. Meho (2006) states that participants fail to read research invitations, making it difficult to approach them via email. This may be because of information overload on the internet, but cannot be generalized given the low number of studies. Other reasons may be loss or change of email address. Qualitative research generally seeks to understand rather than obtain a representative sample and it is therefore feasible to invite additional participants over the course of the research. Also the use of reminders may come in handy, since it raises the response rate five times on average (Meho, 2006).

Our empirical research began when we started working with the Dlouhá Cesta [Long Journey] self-help group, which provides support to parents who have experienced the loss of a child, and which became our gatekeeper to a group of women suffering perinatal loss. We sent emails via the organization's channels to women in the Czech Republic who had experienced perinatal loss, inviting them to take part in our qualitative research via interview. Additionally, we were able to contact other women who had experienced perinatal loss through contacts our midwife colleagues had. Most of them declined to meet in person, but agreed to an email interview.

Informed consent and confidentiality

As with other research methods, it is essential to provide participants with detailed information about the research and then obtain a letter of consent or other proof that the participant has been informed and agrees to participate in the research. This presents a complication for internet communication but it can be solved by other means. Usually the letter of consent is sent by regular post, but there are also electronic certificates and other forms of online identification for more advanced users (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002).

East et al. (2008) identify a potential ethical issue in situations where the participant experiences distress when recounting their experience. The researcher is generally unable to pick up on visual cues of distress. It is recommended that researchers send a list of free counselling services and/or online support groups that can help to minimize harm.

In our research, we sent the women a letter of informed consent by email attachment which they could sign, scan and send back via email. An email response stating that they had read the letter of consent and that they agreed to take part in the research was also considered sufficient. All participants in our research gave their name, which was subsequently altered for research presentation purposes. Any other information identifying particular individuals was deleted. All participants were informed that the research was strictly voluntary and that they could stop participating at any time.

Medium and technology limitations

The use of email interviews is limited by the participant's and researcher's ability to use a computer and access the internet and whether they have the general technical skills to use email and the internet. In terms of media richness, the ability of email interview to foster interaction and feedback, enabling people to communicate using multiple cues and various senses, is somewhat limited compared to the other methods.

Face-to-face interviews provide visual cues and are considered richer than phone interviews, since they include nonverbal cues, such as voice tones and volume, and are therefore still considered a richer medium than email interviews. A problem might arise for interviewees who are less able to explain themselves in writing than in speech. As a substitute for nonverbal cues, emoticons and acronyms can be used. Interviewees should be encouraged to use them if they are familiar with them—it will lessen the loss of nonverbal cues and will add depth to the data (Meho, 2006). Also Kralik et al. (2006) stated that it is customary to use emoticons or abbreviations to embellish emotional messages. The researcher should, however, be careful when using emoticons and adjust the communication to the style of the participant (Opdenakker, 2006).

The women rarely used emoticons during our research. However, they were more likely to repeat vowels as if imitating rising intonation, such as “soooooo”, or they used several question marks and exclamation marks, when trying to stress the meaning of a statement or question. We deemed these important and took them into account during qualitative data analysis.

Questions, phrasing, asynchronicity

Meho (2006) states that it is considered better to include the questions in the body of the email, rather than in an attachment. That way the response rate improves significantly. The questions should be self-explanatory, since there is very little room for clarification. Otherwise there is a risk of miscommunication due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Additional information might narrow the interpretations of the interviewee and hence reduce the richness of the data and constrain the participants' responses. The researcher should limit ambiguity and be specific when creating the questions, but avoid constraining participants in their responses.

The asynchronicity of the email interview has several effects. The breaks in the conversation might span a few seconds to minutes or days. The participant is not required to answer immediately. The advantage is that there is no need to find a time when both researcher and participant are ready and available for the interview, nor to ensure that the participant has enough time to think their answer through. The participants can describe their experiences in the comfort of their home environment, whenever they feel ready. The researcher also benefits from having more time to prepare their response to the participant (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

However when the breaks in the interview are too long, the conversation might lose spontaneity. It is recommended that questions are asked in sequence rather than all at once (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). It is important to confirm that the participant understood the questions.

The women in our research were first asked a few questions for identification purposes and then they were asked to describe their personal experience and the grieving process after perinatal loss. No specific deadline was set to avoid making the participants feel pressured. The response time from asking the question to receiving the answer varied between 2 to 59 days. Some women described their experience in the space of an evening, others wrote continuously for multiple shorter periods. The descriptions of their experiences were sent in the body of the email or in an attachment. Once their response had been received, several follow-up questions were asked in the body of an email and all the women responded to these. The contact was personal and warm, even assuming the medium limitations, but it was more difficult for the researchers. During a face-to-face interview on such a sensitive topic as perinatal loss, we often use nonverbal cues to support participants, and this was not possible via email. Therefore, it was essential to thoughtfully choose the right words. It was difficult to identify whether our support was effective without visual feedback.

Conclusion

The basis of an efficient face-to-face interview is the human contact that enables nonverbal communication and active listening. The fact that the email interview lacks nonverbal and paralinguistic cues is undeniable and is one of the main disadvantages of this method. It is an important limitation that suggests that email interviews should be used for qualitative research only in justified cases and not only as a cheap alternative to face-to-face interviews.

The asynchronous email interview method produced data we would probably never have been able to get in our research. This method was used by a specific group of respondents who chose it over the face-to-face interview method. The women who chose this method were coping with the perinatal loss alone, without the help of a dedicated group and would have felt more “vulnerable” at a personal encounter than they would in an email interview. Conducting the interviews via email was more complicated and difficult for the researchers than the face-to-face interviews, because the nonverbal and paralinguistic cues were unavailable. If we had received feedback about how the women felt during our research, we would probably have asked additional follow-up questions. Otherwise, we feared that our questions might be viewed as inadequate or harmful. Furthermore, we considered whether our participants also lacked non-verbal and paralinguistic cues. It was easier for us to express understanding and respect for the painful life situations of our participants nonverbally than in writing and maintain genuine emotion. Feedback from the participants, however, suggests that sharing information about their perinatal loss had a therapeutic effect (feedback from the face-to-face interview participants also showed this). The women considered the opportunity to express their feelings and tell their story in a safe environment beneficial to their mental state.

Altogether, the asynchronous email interview method has its uses for a wide variety of reasons. However, thus far it has remained the best feasible choice for certain niche situations that fit the following criteria: The researcher does not require social interaction for the research. The research is constrained by a tight budget for travelling. The researcher needs to address a social group that is closed or difficult to access. The research topic is personally sensitive. Standardization of the interview is not important. Anonymity is beneficial. The researcher and the participants are competent computer and internet users (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Opdenakker, 2006). The asynchronous email interview will never fully replace traditional face-to-face interviews, but it is capable of gaining a solid position as a qualitative research method thanks to its unique benefits.

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Faculty of Health Care Studies,
University of West Bohemia,
nám.Odboje 18,
32600 Plzeň,
Czech Republic
E-mail: ratislav@kos.zcu.cz

Faculty of Business Administration
University of Economics, Prague,
nám. W. Churchilla 4
130 67 Praha 3,
Czech Republic
E-mail: jakub.ratislav@cemsmail.org