

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING OF OLDER ADULTS: OFFLINE VERSUS ONLINE METHODS

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Abstract

The current paper is based on a study of 45 Australian older adults (aged 60 – 92 years) and their offline and online romantic relationships. It discusses the four different interview methods that were used to collect the data: (i) face-to-face, (ii) telephone, (iii) instant messaging and (iv) email. It is argued that with increasing numbers of older adults making use of the Internet, online interviewing provides researchers in ageing a further means of access to segments of this population. Online interviewing has many benefits, not least of which are that it is both cost effective and efficient. Furthermore, if the nature of the research topic is of a potentially sensitive nature, as in the project reported here (love, sex and intimacy), the use of online interviewing can help alleviate potentially embarrassing and confrontational moments which can occur for both researcher and participants with more traditional face-to-face and telephone interviewing methods.

Introduction

Late-life romance, both on- and offline, is a much neglected area of research, primarily because of ageist views and stereotypes that portray older adults as both asexual (Schlesinger 1996) and technologically incompetent (Philbeck 1997). The research which this paper is based on looked at older adults and their romantic relationships, those that began through F2F means and those that were mediated by technology, that is, via the Internet. Two groups of older adults were interviewed and were differentiated by their mode of relationship initiation: the F2F Romance group, who met in person (13 interviews: 8 females, 5 males, 63 – 92 years, mean age 72 years) and the Online Romance group, who met online (32 interviews: 16 females, 16 males, 60 – 76 years, mean age 66 years). The results presented herein pertain to the interview methods employed; therefore discussion of the study itself is limited to details relevant only to the methodology (see Malta 2008 for a fuller discussion of the project).

Qualitative interviews

Four different semi-structured qualitative interview methods were used in obtaining the data: (i) face-to-face, (ii) telephone, and online via (iii) synchronous computer-mediated-communication (variously known as instant messaging, IM or private ‘chat’) and (iv) by asynchronous electronic mail (email) correspondence. It is acknowledged that F2F interviewing is usually the preferred method of interviewing older adults in qualitative studies (Shuy 2001: 552). This paper compares the different types of interviews, arguing that online interviews can be effective for research with older adults.

Allowing participants to decide the interview medium they prefer can increase retention rates and rapport (Kazmer & Xie 2008: 273), and this was precisely why participants were asked to select their preferred mode of interview. Consequently, the interview mode that participants chose did not always reflect which relationship group they belonged to. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the interview modes and how they correspond to the two different relationship groups.

Table 1. Interview Method by Relationship Group (n)

Interview Method	Online Romance Group	F2F Romance Group	Totals N (%)
Face to Face	1	9	10 (22%)
Telephone	5		5 (11%)
Online : IM	23	3	26 (58%)
Online : Email	3	1	4 (9%)
Totals	32	13	45 (100%)

Each of the interview methods had their own advantages and disadvantages, but it is argued that the online interviews (both IM and email) were the easiest to set up and use, were the most cost effective and enabled access to a population of older adults that would have been hard to reach under normal circumstances. Some researchers have argued that online interviewing negatively affects the quality of the data produced, but this was not found in the current study. Each of these methods will be discussed in turn in the following sections.

Face-to-Face interviews

The interview approach taken was characteristic of the recursive interviewing model described by Minichiello and Aroni (1995: 80-81; 88-92), which allows for interviews to follow a conversational format. This method was chosen because of its informal nature, which was seen to be the best way to help put older adults 'at ease'. The quality of the data obtained by this method was rich and informative and visual cues (such as body language) allowed the researcher to interpret nuances that may have been lacking in other non-F2F methods. The F2F interviews did have their problems however, as they were hard to schedule and involved much time and effort, as well as financial costs, to both participants and researcher, particularly in terms of travel. Sometimes it could be difficult for the researcher to establish rapport with the participant as the nature of the questions asked involved embarrassing or, at times, confrontational topics – such as love, sex, intimacy and infidelity – making for awkward and uncomfortable moments for both the interviewer and interviewee. Nevertheless, all respondents said they welcomed the opportunity to speak about late-life romance.

Transcribing the interviews was extremely time-consuming and could also be costly, but allowed the researcher to become re-engaged with the data, especially if there had been a gap in time between the interview itself and the transcription period.

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews were recorded via a device attached to the telephone, which saved the interviews as voice files onto a digital recorder. These files were later downloaded to a computer and transcribed.

In qualitative research, telephone interviews have historically been seen as an inappropriate technique for semi-structured and in-depth interviews (for discussion see Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 108). The literature comparing F2F and telephone interviewing showed differing results in the quality of data obtained from these two modes, suggesting that telephone interviews were less than ideal (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 110). Other studies, however, concluded that there were no significant differences in responses between the two different techniques, with Miller concluding that telephone interviews could not be classed as either "better or worse" than F2F interviews (1995: 37). Furthermore, some researchers argue that telephone interviews have important advantages over F2F interviews; in particular, allowing access to participants who may be geographically distant, being able to cover sensitive topics with more perceived anonymity, cost savings in terms of time and travel and interviewer safety (Stephens 2007: 209; Sturges & Hanrahan 2004: 109).

In the current study, similar difficulties to those of the F2F interviews were encountered, such as problems with scheduling and sometimes building connection between parties. The absence of visual and bodily cues did mean, on occasion, that extra clarification was required on both the part of the researcher and the participants, and some questions needed to be repeated. Although the literature states that sensitive topics are more easily covered over the telephone, it was found that they were sometimes difficult to broach in this medium but, once rapport was established, initial embarrassment was overcome. Certainly participants who were interstate were more easily accessed using this interviewing mode.

Online interviews

When this research project was first mooted, sceptics argued that older adults would be difficult to reach online. This initial scepticism was proved unfounded, however, and respondents were easily found via dating websites and senior-specific websites. Countering the stereotype that older adults are technophobic, a total of 30 older adults (67%) chose to be interviewed online, either by IM or email, indicating a high degree of familiarity and trust in the technology.

Instant messaging interviews

Hamman (1997: 3) suggests that interviewing respondents online allows researchers to observe people in their own environment; whilst Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 150) argue that it "is the best strategy"

because participants are comfortable and relaxed in their own familiar surroundings. Couch and Liamputtong recommend interviewing online daters by IM because it is in common usage amongst online daters and, therefore, offers a “mode of communication [which is both] relevant and appropriate” (2008: 270).

IM interviews were conducted using standard, open-source, proprietary software, such as *Yahoo*[®] or *Hotmail*[®] Chat. Of those who chose this method, four were unfamiliar with the technology but asked for some guidance in setting it up. All four participants were pleased to have learnt a new skill and three commented that they would now be able to chat online with their grandchildren.

The benefits of online interviewing are many: geographical flexibility (researchers and respondents can be located anywhere); automatically-generated transcripts (less time-consuming and costly for the researcher; see Herbert 2001); respondents may feel less inhibited by the relative anonymity of the online environment (which may enable greater disclosure and participants may be less affected by social desirability factors, see Couch & Liamputtong 2008 and Tatano Beck 2005); and furthermore, an absence of interviewer/interviewee effects, such as power dynamics inherent in traditional research methods, which may allow the researched to feel on a more equal footing with the researcher (see Fox, Morris & Rumsey 2007:544-545; Meho 2006: 1292). These benefits were evident in this project.

Online interviewing is not without its detractors, however. There are two major problems associated with conducting online interviews. Firstly, it is often difficult to categorize the demographics of the sample, as it is possible that respondents lie about this information. However, this is an issue relevant to all non F2F questionnaires or surveys, whether they are online or by pen and paper. Besides, the alert researcher can check for discrepancies whilst the interview is in progress, or later via follow-up emails. Secondly, questions (and, for that matter, answers) can be open to misinterpretation and, therefore, misunderstanding, due to the absence of F2F cues. According to Herbert, “body language and visually/verbally expressed nuance of face-to-face interaction associated with conventional qualitative research is lost online” (2001: 3). However, Suler argues that, in reality, people do not misconstrue one another online all that often, despite the lack of visual and auditory cues (1997: 4). The current project found that those who regularly communicated online appreciated that this might happen and were always willing to reiterate and restate what was said in an effort to facilitate understanding.

The IM interviews in the present study were relatively easy to set up and administer and, compared to the F2F and telephone modes, were less constrained by time. Participants were located throughout Australia, however, geographical distance was not an issue when using this method, although time differences between States needed to be accounted for. As each IM interview progressed the Chats were copied and pasted into a Word document, providing instant transcripts with no additional transcribing necessary apart from some tidying up and formatting.

In terms of broaching sensitive subjects, this mode was relatively stress-free and less awkward for both the researcher and participants than that experienced in the F2F and telephone interviewing modes, perhaps due to the anonymity of the online environment. Many participants commented on the ease with which the interviews were conducted, and said they were comfortable being interviewed in their own homes, although a small number were located at business premises.

Email interviews

The participants who chose to be interviewed by email did not wish to be interviewed by IM, F2F or telephone, or were prevented from doing so by reasons of illness or geographical location. Interviewing by email is achieved asynchronously and is therefore not subjected to the vagaries of scheduling that can accompany other methods (Meho 2006: 1292). Curasi (2001) has cautioned, however, that email interviewing can be more susceptible to participant attrition than F2F interviewing because of the time lag between participant acceptance and receipt of interview questions. The current study supports these findings and highlights that this attrition needs to be factored in at the beginning of study.

Initially there appeared to be a difference between interviews conducted by IM and those conducted by email. Answers received during the IM interviews tended to be in-depth and rich in qualifications, whereas primary responses to the email interviews were much shorter and succinct. It is argued that this difference is due to the interactive nature of the IM contact – contact that mirrors a real-life telephone or F2F conversation, albeit

in text – whereas the asynchronous nature of email interviews allowed the conversational ebb and flow to be lost. However, Meho contends that email interviews allow participants the time to be more reflective of their replies and provide the opportunity for editing of responses, making for more focused answers (2006: 1291). This project found that, although email interviews were relatively shorter than their IM counterparts, the data obtained was just as rich and valuable as IM interviews.

Discussion and Conclusion

The perception that older adults are technophobic has often precluded their inclusion in studies of Internet-based research. It is clear from the current study that many older adults are familiar with and have trust in the technology, as evidenced by their willingness to be interviewed via online methods such as email and IM. Online interviewing has many benefits for researchers in ageing: it provides an effective means to access older adult populations, it is easily achievable and is both time- and cost-effective, and it also allows for the discussion of topics which at times may be embarrassing or confrontational in F2F and telephone interviews. A potential downside to online interviews is that the group of older adults who are online are not necessarily representative of older adults in general. Nevertheless, online interviews provide an important tool for ageing researchers, particularly those studying potentially sensitive topics such as sexuality.

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