

Laddered questions and qualitative data research interviews

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Background. Nurse researchers frequently make use of open interviews in their studies, hoping to understand the private world of respondents, and in particular the ways in which thought and behaviour are connected to each other. Unfortunately, there is scant guidance on how to translate such goals into the specifics of interview technique, particularly the use of probing questions. The success of such interviews rests on working ethically and understanding the respondents needs during interview.

Aims. This paper explains a technique designed to direct the use of probing in interviews, and argues that its selective use might provide richer data than other *ad hoc* approaches employed by neophyte researchers.

Conclusion. It is argued that the technique increases the awareness of the researcher to ethical concerns and enables her or him to respond more sensitively. Laddered question technique is evaluated with reference to my own research into the negotiation of student support amongst nurse distance learners.

Keywords: open interviews, nurse education research, ethical interviewing, probing grounded theory

Introduction

In qualitative nursing research, open or unstructured interviews figure amongst the most common data gathering techniques. Interviewing appeals to many nurse researchers, not only because the process of interviewing is familiar from clinical work, but also because it offers the potential to enter the world of patients and their health or illness experiences. Nurses appreciate the need to work with the perceptions of patients, and so it seems logical when researching, to adopt a method that gives considerable opportunity for individuals to tell their own stories. Having understood such accounts, the researcher might then be in a position to interpret what this means for ways of conceptualizing nursing care.

Collecting research data by interview is, however, by no means simple (see Table 1). Not only must researchers use dialogue for an inquisitive purpose, but they must also legitimize their questions, helping respondents to evaluate the place of the research and their part in it (Wimpenny & Gass 2000). Mishler (1986) makes the point well. Research

interviews are quite unlike social dialogue, and involve issues of power. The researcher has power over respondents, shaping the opening agenda for the interview, and possibly drawing respondents back to the focus of the interview if they stray. Appropriately briefed respondents have power over the level of responses they decide to offer. The management of intrusive questions is key to successful interviewing. The way in which information is shared in a research interview is quite different to that encountered with ordinary social discourse. In the latter, individuals typically share secrets, express their incremental thoughts equally about the subject in hand and permit the discourse to go where it will. In research interviews the interviewer becomes a detective, searching for important information (Fontana & Frey 2000).

Interviewing is also problematic because of the different research paradigms that influence the research design. Lincoln and Guba (2000) and Schwandt (2000) review the development of research paradigms since the middle of the last century and observe that in the postmodern world there is now a plethora of different assumptions about the nature

Table 1 Challenges of open question research interviewing

Securing access	Data are influenced by interview location (comfort–discomfort) and by the range of fields/topics that it is agreed will be covered
Managing power	Who decides the interview agenda – length, focus, dimensions? Researcher responses to answers can seem a reward or judgement?
Managing ‘space’	Deciding when and where to probe – considering respondent privacy/comfort against the goal of obtaining rich data
Managing communication	Judging level and complexity of language, in order to facilitate flow of information. Forming questions and responses which encourage respondents to talk about the phenomena. Talking vs. listening, deciding where and how to use silence
Making sensitive records	Using audiotape and/or notebook to record verbal and nonverbal details. Protecting the identity of respondents
Managing the sequelae	Dealing with the revelations/discomforts or realization that may emerge through interview. Debriefing respondents and attending to their concerns either personally or by referral

of being (ontology) and the best means of revealing that (epistemology). Because grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography and critical theory (all commonly adopted perspectives in nursing research) shape the focus of research, and the ways in which the researcher operates, interviewing is profoundly influenced by research philosophy (Geanellos 1999). Arguably the research paradigm employed by the researcher is at least as important as the contextual difficulties of conducting interviews in the field, in shaping interview practice (see Table 2).

Practicalities of open interview technique

This paper briefly reviews the practicalities of open interview techniques before describing a particular interview technique designed as part of a doctoral research project to obtain

richer data in a nurse education context. The purpose of the paper is not to proclaim a technique applicable to all interview situations. Instead, I argue that it represents an artful technique that offers assistance to less experienced interviewers and in studies where the goal is to understand the ways in which respondents’ thoughts, beliefs and actions correspond with each other. As such, the ladder question technique of research interviewing has a contribution to make in grounded theory research, and in studies conducted using an ethnographic or phenomenological perspective.

Laddered question technique was developed in response to difficulties I encountered while examining the ways in which distance learning nurse students secured and then maintained supportive relationships. Whilst the support arrangements offered by tutors were well understood, I was curious how students sought help from lay sources, and

Table 2 Research philosophy and open interviews

Interviews are influenced by the following philosophical considerations:

Ontology	To what extent does the researcher believe that an objective reality exists beyond that constructed by individuals involved? Concerns about interview methods are directed by premises about whether what is being collected equates with reality or is in some sense a construction of reality
Epistemology	To what extent does the researcher believe that reality can be captured through a data-gathering exercise such as interviewing? For example, is interview data representative of respondents beliefs and values or is it a construct of what the respondent believes the researcher should hear?
Inquiry	What is the role of the researcher – to gather data dispassionately or to engage with the respondent in constructing an account of the phenomena (etic or emic inquiry)?
Deduction or induction	Is the role of research to test or to create theories? Inductive interviews, open in style may be used to ‘map’ the phenomenon, whilst deductive interviews, partially structured may be used to assess the significance or volume of phenomena
Data gathering–data analysis	Interviews may be guided by an incremental analysis of data from previous interviews or conducted with no prior review of past transcript data. Interview data may be seen as an outcome (a result) or as a resource (fuelling future inquiries)

thereafter how formal and informal educational support might interact to help sustain part-time students in their distance learning studies. The study was conducted using the grounded theory approach, and specifically the social realist stance advocated by Glaser (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Glaser 1978, 1992). In this approach the researcher accepts that the data gathered through interview represents an incomplete but working account of social reality. In short, although social encounters such as teaching or counselling are individually interpreted, there is sufficient common agreement about what is happening for participants to treat their shared perceptions of phenomena as though they are real. Indeed, it is accepted that, were this not to be case, social discourse would always be open to confusion and conflict, whilst in fact much social interaction appears to work precisely because of shared interpretations. The researcher tries to avoid 'forcing the data', prematurely interpreting what is encountered, or shaping it through frameworks that typify the dimensions of social interaction (see Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1994 for a contrasting constructivist view).

Assumptions that open questions about study and support experiences would lead to a flood of interesting data early on in the interview programme proved premature. Interviews conducted with a minimum of steering often resulted in relatively superficial accounts of what the student did in a module of study (see MacHaffie 1988, and Sque 2000 for related challenges). There was, for instance, no reflection on motives or interpretations of study or help-seeking activities, and little evaluation of how different strategies worked. There was therefore a need to devise ways of probing in the interview, that minimized my shaping of what support consisted of, but which did enable me to understand the symbolic nature of the social process. I needed to understand the interplay of ideas, thoughts and actions in the context of various support relationships.

Classic issues in open interview technique

Previous accounts of open interview techniques have sometimes treated the philosophical framework of research as unproblematic (Mason 1996). Russell Bernard (2000) for instance concerns himself with interviewing as a technique, irrespective of whether interviews are structured, unstructured or semi-structured. Mishler (1986), Fontana and Frey (2000), and Lee (1993), however, all treat the interview as philosophically complex, contextually influenced and ethically difficult. Three classic concerns feature strongly with regard to the practicalities of the research interview literature. The first of these focuses on the power of the researcher to

direct, lead or shape the interview (Kavanagh & Ayres 1998). It is argued that the ways in which the interview is introduced and questions formulated all serve to place more power in the hands of the researcher than the respondent (Mishler 1986). For example, whilst the researcher might wish to minimize agenda-setting in the interview, respondents frequently seek to please the researcher with answers that are believed to be 'what the study requires'. However much the researcher assures respondents that there are no preset ideas about what should emerge, many respondents (and perhaps particularly students) feel flattered that they have been asked about their experiences, and do seek to please. Researchers are then faced with the dilemma of how to manage their responsibilities. Qualitative data collection requires a degree of probing into the private thoughts if not the lives of the respondent (Gordon 1997/98; MacDougal 2000). The question arises of how the researcher can probe in an ethical manner.

The second concern focuses on sustaining the interview. Researchers face a dilemma in that, left with an open question, respondents might only answer for a limited time. They become anxious that what they are saying is not relevant or may be unclear. It follows that researchers must decide when and how to intervene, encouraging the respondent to continue, to divert to a new subject or to elaborate on the current one (Patton 1990). If the researcher is using a research approach that portrays interviewing in a more constructivist sense, where both researcher and respondent create the narrative, the former is still left with the dilemma of what ideas to share in order to help sustain the interview. Researchers often report difficulties in thinking on their feet, gathering information, responding and making mental notes about where to ask further questions. For instance, once a dialogue is up and running, a respondent may switch from offering few interesting points to a whole surge of them in one short passage. Open interviews are therefore uneven, involving variable amounts of information for the researcher to process, and a range of possible directions that the dialogue could take. Researchers thinking on their feet debate about whether following a new lead on a different aspect of the phenomenon might help the respondent keep going, or will prompt the respondent to 'dry up'. Asking additional questions on the current topic might signify a compliment to the respondent (you're saying interesting things) or represent a threat (I want to find out more).

Because the research interview is not a social dialogue, the third and pressing concern of researchers concerns how to interrogate the topic without making the respondent feel that they have been personally interrogated (Reed & Stimson 1985). This is a significant challenge for even the most accomplished researcher because a seam of interesting new

Table 3 Probe questions (after Russell Bernard 2000)

Silent probe	Remaining silent and allowing the respondent to 'muse aloud'
Echo probe	Consists of repeating the respondent's last point and inviting them to continue or develop that further
Uh-huh probe	Respondents encouraged to continue with their account by periodic and noncommittal indications of researcher interest in what is being said. Phrases such as 'Yes, OK' or 'Yes...I see' might be substituted
Tell me more	Explicit invitation to the probe respondent, asking them to tell the researcher more about a phenomenon (without echoing). May indicate the nature of additional information sought, for example, 'can you tell me precisely why you felt like that?'
Long question probe	Asking a longer question which hints that a full answer is sought. For example, 'What is it <i>like</i> telling a tutor that you don't understand part of the materials?'
Probing by leading	Offering provocative questions that encourage a respondent to take a stance, argue their case. For example, 'Don't you think that the old adage, if you don't ask, you don't get, applies reasonably enough when it comes to assignment guidance?'
Baiting	The researcher implies they already know something in order to prompt the respondent to reveal even more. For example, 'I know that students avoid putting questions to tutors that indicate their lack of comprehension, so who do they turn to with these sorts of questions?'

data can prompt over-zealous questioning. Russell Bernard (2000) describes seven kinds of probe, each of which may lead to respondents sharing more information (see Table 3). Many of these probes are part of the classical advice to researchers. Probes, such as the leading probe, are used to deepen or expand on a point and are typically employed in the later stages of data gathering.

Practical guidance in research methods texts, however, offers an incomplete answer to a commonly experienced question asked by many neophyte researchers. How do I think on my feet fast enough to select questions, and decide how far to probe, when the interview is underway and the respondent perhaps has limited time to offer? It was my experience that many open interviews were inherently unsatisfying, ineffective and by no means as sophisticated as the textbooks led us to believe that they could be. Instead of a typology of probing questions, I felt I needed a simpler working framework that could be remembered in the field during interviews. I needed a means of deciding to what points offered by the respondent I would return.

Laddered questions

The technique here described as 'laddered questions' was developed after the first five of the open interviews conducted in my study with distance learning students, and was employed in 48 more. Over the course of these interviews it was necessary to refine several aspects of the technique. For example, I spent some time learning how to read the body language of respondent, quickly with limited available infor-

mation before posing my next question or sharing a reaction of my own. I also learned to judge whether a respondent's answer indicated interest or discomfort in the developing narrative. Laddered questions, therefore are not a quick fix to the challenges of open interview inquiry, but they do represent a technique that can be learned and developed over the course of a research programme.

The technique makes some assumptions about what sorts of questions are likely to seem most invasive, and these worked well in the education setting. It is open to question whether the assumptions will stand up to scrutiny in all other contexts, for instance where questions associated with the description of actions might register as more invasive in some clinical settings (see below).

Laddered questions are a technique for selecting the most appropriate level of question or researcher response to respondent dialogue, based on the premise that we share a common notion of what is likely to seem most intrusive during discourse. Clearly, respondents are individuals, and we cannot predict precisely how they, as strangers, might receive specific questions. The researcher does not know their life history or their personal experience of the phenomena in question. However, in the absence of a framework for anticipating discomfort, the researcher is left to fumble through, responding and questioning as best they can. I have conjectured that in social discourse individuals use the notion of levels of inquiry, much as is described below, to order every day social inquiries. We learn to arrange our questions in an order that starts with the least invasive and proceeds to deeper matters if the other signals their readiness. We share a convention that inquiries about action/behaviour ('What have

you been doing lately?') are less invasive than those about knowledge ('What made you do that/think that?') and that both are less invasive than questions about feelings, beliefs and values ('What do you believe should happen then?').

Laddered question levels

Laddered questions are therefore conceived as operating at one of three levels (see Figure 1). Those inviting description of action are usually considered least invasive and typically used in greater quantity at the start and end of an interview. Their purpose is to set the scene, collect contextual information, and help the respondent feel assured that the researcher is interested in what they have been doing. Questions are posed simply and clearly on one level. For example, at the start of an interview it is better to ask, 'How have you been organizing your study?' (an action question) than to inquire 'What principles have you used to organize your study?' (a mixed action and knowledge question). The latter implies that a framework of knowledge is being used to shape action and the respondent may not have been aware of using one.

Knowledge questions

More invasive questions are employed later in the interview, and only when the respondent has shown signs of relaxing

with and perhaps engaging deeply in the developing narrative. Knowledge questions (What do you know? What do you think? What prompted you to...?) are now used. For example, in my own interviews respondents frequently reported their study practices and I needed to connect these to support processes. I needed to understand the ways in which help might facilitate study. Consequently I needed to ask about the knowledge that students' were using, before I could understand where they were directing their help-seeking. In the following transcript excerpt my opening question concerns action, but confident through observation of body language and verbal responses that the student was comfortable, I then begin to 'ladder up' towards more invasive 'knowledge questions':

BP (researcher): 'So what did you do when you received the tutor's comments on your draft essay?' (action description question).

Anna (student, name changed to protect identity): 'I had to read it twice! Because I thought that I understood transformational leadership and the tutor seemed to think that I didn't'.

BP (researcher): 'You read the feedback twice in disbelief. What was so disturbing about the tutor's comments then?' (a knowledge question – what information did you use to interpret the tutor's feedback? How did you interpret the tutor's response?).

Anna (student): 'I think it was that she challenged me on my summary of transformational leadership. It's wasn't just the way I had put things, she was saying that I didn't understand some of the theory. She was saying... you don't know, you don't understand this...'

Knowledge questions often challenged the respondent to review how they reasoned and to deconstruct this, assisting us to pursue several lines of enquiry about where they got help for particular sorts of problems. Knowledge questions are more invasive because they risk respondents discovering, during interview, that they did not know something that they felt that they should have known. Personal construct theory offers some credence to this argument, because these theorists report that individuals develop constructs to help them explain and cope with social events (Kelly 1955, Bannister & Fransella 1980). Where the personal construct operates as part of a descriptive behaviour account (I prepared a draft essay early), it is not usually difficult to expose such constructs to analysis. Where, however, constructs involve complex elements of knowledge (I arranged it to try and demonstrate that I could take a critical perspective) or where feelings and values are involved (I wasn't entirely sure whether there was a 'best' position to take in this essay), they are much more difficult to expose.

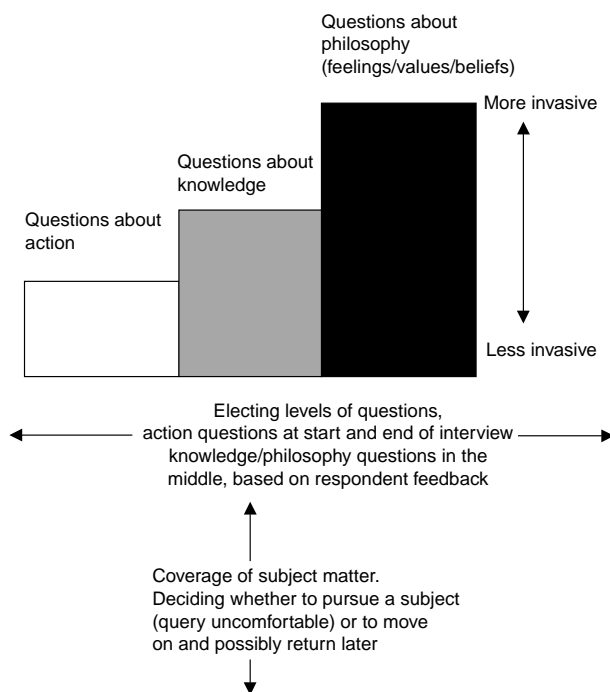


Figure 1 Laddered questions.

Questions of personal philosophy

The most invasive questions concern beliefs, values and deep-seated feelings, which are felt to be core to the respondent's personal identity. Asking questions at this level is akin to asking 'Who are you?' and may leave the respondent feeling that the researcher is judging them. In my own study, for example, I needed to understand the motives and values of students who elected to make little or no contact with their tutors, but who sought extensive support from relatives. This was a difficult area of enquiry because students could infer that my questions represented disapproval of patterns of lay support-seeking. Questions relating to such philosophical matters are not abstract; they are about the respondent's personal philosophy. As such, they are posed only when the respondent signals comfort, and usually towards the end of an already successful interview. Here is an excerpt from another transcript with dialogue working at the philosophical level:

BP (researcher): 'OK, so you reach a point where the module materials seem much more complex. You've asked your informal helper, Julie, for advice before, rather than the tutor, and then you go to her again with another anxiety. How does that make you feel?'

Katie (student, name changed as before): 'Stupid, ashamed, as though I wasn't coping. Something inside me said that I should be able to manage this but I couldn't. I was also asking myself why I just didn't own up my confusion to the tutor.'

Laddered question technique does not assume that all data are gathered in one interview. Indeed, philosophical questions might only be used after trust has been established over several contacts and the researcher seeks specific answers during the later stages of coding.

Reading responses

There is insufficient space here to discuss evaluation of body language and verbal responses in depth, but some principles as employed in my own research will serve to explain judgements of whether to probe more or less, using the above levels of questions. The first of these concerned the volume of response that the respondent offered to my last two or three questions. The more they talked, and included positive emotions (for instance laughing at the situation or themselves), the more confident I felt about risking a more searching question. In some instances the respondent took the initiative and themselves moved to a more philosophical evaluation of events. In these instances I had to adjust quickly, following their account, whilst trying to convey respect for the intimacies of thought that they shared. During these moments the most convincing way to demonstrate my own respect for their reflections was to

offer a reflection of my own. Such reflections had to be more than the classic and noncommittal 'uh huh', but they were still designed not to direct unduly the respondent's thinking. Therefore I sometimes reflected on one of my past experiences of study. This is not classic, social realist research interview technique, but it did prove critical in sustaining respondent reflections, sometimes on a phenomenon that would not be obtainable in any other way. For example, a spouse described how she deflected family and social responsibilities away from the student during the coursework assessment week. Such support work had an emotional cost, which students often repaid after the assignment had been submitted. I needed to understand the emotional complexity of the support work, however – as a gift or traded service – and to this end probed consistently at the philosophical level.

Nurses are well versed in reading the more obvious body language indicators of tension or relaxation. An open body stance, consistent eye contact and showing of hands, together with a relaxed posture (for instance, absence of foot tapping or drumming of fingers) proved reasonably reliable indicators of respondent comfort. Beyond this, however, there were other contextual indicators which regularly signalled the respondent's readiness to accept further intrusive questions. These included invitations to me to carry on with the interview even when they paused to make coffee. Experiences were often described in a very animated way, and suggested that I was accepted as a trustworthy individual who could be confided in regarding the educational system, tutors and students' help-seeking tactics.

Significantly it took me a little while to learn to respond at different levels (behaviour–knowledge–philosophy). The Glaserian grounded theory approach offered sparse guidance on how to interview, but the edict not to 'force the data' seemed to mandate only a limited sharing of the interviewer's thoughts. Nevertheless, I learned that even these modest responses could be understood in terms of levels of revelation. Just as a description of behaviour might invite little response from the respondent, so a revelation of knowledge would appear to invite more. It was important, however, to remember that an extensive response, especially at the philosophical level might or might not prompt more information from the respondent. A substantial and philosophical revelation could be difficult for the respondent to match. In these terms any notions that a research interview involved exchanging of secrets, as in a social dialogue, were quickly squashed.

Steering or tracking?

During the open coding stage of data gathering and analysis, many researchers work hard to avoid directing where the

interview proceeds. This said, there is still a need to capture important leads offered in the interview, including those that are buried in a flood of information from the respondent. Just how many of these leads might usefully be followed in any one interview is debatable. Laddered question technique involves the use of a notebook (as well as the standard audiotape recorder) to capture possible leads that might be followed later in the interview or on a subsequent occasion. The practice can be illustrated with reference to an interview in which a tutor was explaining her handling of student help-seeking inquiries. Her account described how these came in and her efforts to respond quickly to them. As an aside, however, she hinted that she also employed a way of categorizing such inquiries, depending on the student's perceived motives. In my notebook I entered the briefest reminder of this alternative avenue of questions by simply writing 'categ. motives'. Whilst this is not standard shorthand, it did serve to remind me later to ask her about how she perceived the different help-seeking motives of students. By writing the lead down in the notebook, I gathered precious moments to contemplate whether this would involve more invasive questioning. At that stage dialogue was operating at the action level, and seemed quite descriptive. I concluded that the new lead would quickly become philosophical and quite threatening because it was about her attitude towards students. Nevertheless, it was critical, so I chose to develop my questions through the knowledge level, by asking her what special knowledge or skills she thought the students' perceived her to have. I was later able to translate this further into a question about what help she gave to whom, based on her understanding of what students sought.

Using a notebook

Using a notebook and the briefest of remarks it is possible therefore to plan new lines of possible inquiry, and to return to these later at an opportune moment in the interview. How the rest of the interview has gone and whether the new lead could be counted as a more or less invasive influence whether an opportune moment is actually seized. There were occasions when notebook remarks offered lines of inquiry which significantly reduced the level of intrusion, and which therefore were especially valuable towards the end of an interview, when I hoped to end discussion on a 'lighter note'. A new lead could prove an escape route for researcher and respondent alike. Where questions had been posed at more intrusive levels for a while, respondent discomfort can increase. They might offer several alternative leads in an answer, or perhaps acknowledge that this aspect of the discussion was tiring or difficult. These are warnings for researchers precisely because

they indicate that questions have been posed insensitively or too persistently. At this point an escape route is needed. One option is simply to offer a break, to apologise for tiring the respondent and perhaps close the interview. The alternative is to use the notebook, checking for leads that bring the level of dialogue down to action discourse as smoothly as possible. By using leads in this way, respondents find that their embarrassment (at not being able to 'help' the researcher) is significantly reduced. The additional (less invasive) questions signal the researcher's continued interest, but at a more comfortable level.

Discussion

Laddered question technique appears to have a number of merits for researchers, especially those venturing into fieldwork for the first time, or where the phenomenon under study combines actions, motives and meanings. It is a framework which describes probing in relatively simple ways that are easy to remember during interviews and seem to be consonant with wider social ways of understanding the etiquette of inquiry. Instead of typifying probing in terms of different sorts of questions, it suggests that it is better understood in terms of different levels of inquiry. My own experience of using this technique is that it enables the researcher to manage the ethics of inquiry sensitively. By understanding the premises of what is likely to be uncomfortable, observing closely, and using a notebook and alternative questions to manage the level of intrusion, it seems possible to conduct an interview without leaving the respondent feeling unduly invaded or incompetent as a interviewee.

Learning to form questions according to level of anticipated intrusion, and then to increase or decrease probing using this technique, can be learned relatively quickly. There are few specific rules that the researcher needs to learn about formulating questions, except that mixed level questions (including actions and beliefs for instance) need to be avoided. Indeed, learning such interview question techniques is possible through groupwork, video practice and pilot stage development – and reduces the need to consider a structured interview format. What takes longer to learn, and might be handled most expertly by individuals with keenly attuned communication skills, is how to use new leads to ease the pressure of probing. Skilfully handled, moving to a new and less intrusive lead enables the respondent to relax again, so that more difficult issues can be discussed later in the interview. Handled sensitively, the combination of laddering questions and mixing leads (possibly returning to some) can provide dense, rich interview transcripts and

respondent reports of how intriguing the topic of discussion was.

Laddered question merits

Laddered question technique interviews enriched my own research data in a number of ways. Firstly, it provided information on the connections between actions, meanings and beliefs that seemed important to any study of student support. It also helped me to formulate additional questions that could be pursued at a later stage in the study. Comparing the first five interviews with subsequent transcripts, critical readers advised me that the laddered question ones were considerably richer in data. They offered more data and often candid insights that we did not anticipate would be shared in educational research. That the respondents used humour, offered examples from personal experience and demonstrated a willingness to ask questions of the researcher in return all suggested that obtaining increased depth of data need not be at the expense of respondent comfort.

Laddered question challenges

The amount of work involved in conducting laddered question interviews is, however, considerable. Whilst the pressures associated with the selection of questions is reduced (at least regarding probing), the need to observe respondent reactions and make fleeting notes mean that the researcher can only conduct interviews when extremely alert. Many such interviews lengthen, at least when the respondent becomes engaged in the narrative, and can extend to 60–90 minutes. Sustaining attention during these periods of time requires significant concentration. In practice a maximum of one such interview per day, conducted during a weekend or other break (rather than after work), proved all that was practicable. I learned to expect that such interviews would involve extensive debriefing time with the respondent. Respondents reported being surprised at how much the interview had covered, and being concerned to hear how their contribution seemed to me. I realized that questions at the philosophical level prompted a modest ‘after-shock’ as respondents contemplated what they believed or thought (perhaps for the first time) and then wondered how this appeared to others. It was then important to listen to their concerns and help them resolve difficulties regarding their studies (perhaps by contacting the university), and for them to hear that other respondents had their own views, and that none were intrinsically right, best or more scholarly.

Conclusion

Qualitative data obtained through open interviews need not be an *ad hoc* affair, where ethical and procedural issues are left to the intuition of researchers and the tolerance of respondents. Neither do they need to be so bound up with specific sorts of questions, difficult to remember and deploy in the field. Laddered questions offer a middle way, which seems accessible to new researchers, and ethical to nurses who wish to learn more about others’ experiences and actions. This technique has certainly been helpful in a research study that encourages the researcher not to engage strongly in the creation of a joint narrative. But it offers prospects for other researchers too. Researchers who share more of their own thoughts and perspectives during interview are still faced with concerns about how best to handle levels of intrusion and revelation. Laddered questions can help them select questions and responses designed to promote the flow of interesting data, whilst respecting the needs of respondents.

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