

Upholding Informed Consent: Experiences of Note –Taking without Audio Recording of in-Depth Individual Interviews in a Qualitative Study on the Implementation of the Pregnancy Re-Entry Policy in Zambia



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ABSTRACT: The context of the research study needs to determine the data recording method to be used in order to ensure that no harm is done to the participants. In-depth individual Interviews (IDIs) is one of the main data collecting strategy used in qualitative research on sensitive topics such as teenage pregnancy. Audio recording in capturing data during IDIs is a common practice. However, audio recording of IDIs should be done in the context of informed consent. The objective of this paper is to elaborate on how note-taking was used to capture data within the context of informed consent. The research design was multiple cohort Case studies involving Chongwe district plus national stakeholders of the Pregnancy Re-entry policy in Zambia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with hundred (100) participants from different cohorts of stakeholders using note-taking to capture the data. Ninety percent (90%) of the interviews involved physical note-taking with 10 % being electronic notes. The results are that note-taking increased the interview time but it afforded the interviewer the opportunity to probe further as the data was being collected. The major disadvantage with note –taking is that it reduces the pace of data collection as time has to be dedicated to consolidating the notes and memory recall of information shared. The conclusion drawn is that upholding informed consent in research is key, therefore the capturing of data during IDIs should be guided by what best upholds the rights of the participants. Therefore, note-taking offers an alternative to audio recording.

KEYWORDS: research ethics, in-depth individual interviews, audio recording, note-taking,

INTRODUCTION

This study on the implementation of the Pregnancy Re-entry policy was rated as medium risk by the University of Witwatersrand institutional review board (IRB), for Human research ethics Committee (HREC non-medical). This implied that it had the potential to cause harm to participants if ethical values were not upheld. (Council for International (CIOMS) and WHO, (2016) stress that a study of a risky nature has to be scientifically conducted taking into consideration its 'social value.' This ensures that human dignity of persons participating in the study is upheld as per Belmont report recommendations (Barrow, Brannan, & Khandhar, 2024; Belmont Report, 1979).

Research ethics are key in ensuring that participants are not harmed during and after partaking in a study. Research ethics imply to guidelines to protect participants from harm by upholding their dignity, respecting them and avoiding any physical or psychosocial harm. It is important to note that ethics are not rules per say but a framework to safe guard participants in research studies. This is by way of upholding internationally set standards as well as locally by being culturally sensitive (World Health Organisation , 2009). Four keys principles of research ethics obtain in the realm of research involving human participants; autonomy of self-determination with reference to decisions of whether and how to participate, that is, informed consent; non – maleficence implying to not harming human beings when conducting research. Beneficence advocates for the study to be beneficial by helping to inform problem-solving. In other words, the benefits should outweigh the risks. Justice in terms of fairness in 'distributing benefits and burdens' (World Health Organisation, 2009; Owonikoko, 2013; Varkey, 2021; Barrow, Brannan, & Khandhar, 2024).

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Upholding research ethics entails the adoption of what is referred to as a ‘participant-centred approach’ responsive to the context for the safety of the research participants (Hill et al., 2022). The Belmont report emphasizes on informed consent when conducting research on human subjects which should be influenced by information, comprehension of the information and voluntariness (World Health Organisation, 2009). Therefore, the data collection medium used is influenced by the informed consent of participants. Informed consent is meant to ensure that participants are respected, treated in a dignified way and their autonomy upheld through voluntariness without undue influence (CIOMS & WHO, 2016). Punjwan, (2015) points out five domains of informed consent; competence and capacity, disclosure, understanding, voluntariness and consent or refusal. The Belmont report of 1979 points out that informed consent is based on two moral requirements of recognizing that there is need to respect the autonomy of individuals and protect vulnerable individuals (Belmont Report, 1979).

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were the main data collecting tool used in the study. This means that some questions were developed which were in line with the research question accommodating further exploration. Al-Yateem (2012) points out that interviews are ideal for collecting narrative data. Therefore, interviews are affected by the researcher, participants question format (Al-Yateem, 2012) and method used in capturing the data (Hill et al., 2022; Rutakumwa et al., 2019). The interviews were conducted in two ways; face-to-face, and electronic based on convenience on the part of the participants. For the teenage mothers and their parents, the schools organized for the venues at the respective schools. Most of the key informants were interviewed at their workplaces. However, some were too busy to be physically present thus were given the option of electronic communication via electronic mails which were more convenient because of their busy schedules. Also outbreaks of COVID 19 like influenza symptoms was another reason for conducting electronic interviews with key informants.

Challenge of audio recording interviews in the digital age encountered in the study

The plan was to audio record the interviews. Audio recording of interviews in qualitative research data collection is perceived to be a salient golden rule (Rutakumwa & et al, 2019). However, this needs a critical analysis in the context of dealing with vulnerable groups such as poor people in developing countries (Punjwan, 2015) to avoid being coerced into being recorded or secretly recording them. There are several advantages of audio-recording in qualitative data collection. First, it can be replayed to enhance understanding of what was being communicated in order to dispel doubts. Secondly, the researcher focuses on listening to the participant during the interview thus can shorten the interview whilst gathering a lot of data and production of verbatim. Furthermore, recorded information can be replayed (Rutakumwa et al., 2019).

One of the disadvantages of recording of interviews is that it tends to affect the ease of participants thus formalizing the way they respond (Al-Yateem, 2012). This concurs with the assertion by Hill et al., (2022) that recording tends to unsettle participants making them ‘feel nervous and inhibited.’ Moreover, recording of interviews tends to reduce openness in sharing of information about sensitive information leading to either withholding or exaggeration of information causing ‘social desirability bias’ (Al-Yateem, 2012).

This paper argues that despite the advantages of audio recording of interviews, the participants should be respected in terms of whether they give consent or not based on the knowledge shared about the study. As the main data collecting agent, I read out the participation sheet to the potential participants’ cohorts of teenage mothers and their parents due to low literacy levels. I also verbally translated the content of the participation sheet in the local language as I explained. This is in line with the argument by (Nnebue, 2010) that the information about the study should be transmitted in the language well understood by the participants. This is supported by Punjwan, (2015) that low education levels in developing countries necessitate the usage of the local languages to help potential participants to understand the study before giving consent.

I noticed the discomfort through body language and verbal concerns of the first five potential participants when it came to the request to record the interviews. When asked about recording, the general discomfort was that there has been a tendency of leaking audio recordings on social media platforms such as Facebook, and WhatsApp groups thus revealing sensitive personal information. Similar discomfort was also observed with the first two key informants with one saying that recording was like ‘talking with a gun held against one’s head.’ This notion is situated in the social and political cultures obtaining in Zambia in relation to what Rutakumwa et al., (2019) point out that recording devices have cultural and political implications. This borders on confidentiality guarantees (Singh & Chauhan, 2012). I critically looked at the aspect of audio recording in the context of voluntary participation for the remaining interviews. I decided to remove the recording aspect from the data collecting procedure by removing it from the participate information sheets and the consent forms. I did not want to torment the potential participants by asking them because despite upholding their right, it can still somehow create doubt of participants thinking that they are being

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secretly recorded. This is affirmed by Rutakumwa et al., (2019) that the intention and the existence of a recording tool can unsettle participants even after being guaranteed that they are not being recorded.

Sensitivity of research topics such as sex related subjects need to uphold confidentiality. A typical example is that of an HIV related study conducted by Rutakumwa et al., (2019) which had been ongoing for several years with trust being built overtime but had to respect the participants wish not to be recorded or photographed. I resorted to note-taking which is considered to be an alternative to audio recording in qualitative data collection. Phillippi and Lauderdale, (2018) explain that note-taking has been traditionally used in ethnographic qualitative studies with laid out procedures.

Usage of note –taking in case study interviews takes the context to shape what information is captured in line with the research question. In this context, note –taking in a qualitative research interview refers to a process of jotting down of the information shared by the participant by the researcher as the participant is talking. It is considered to be an outside memory source to facilitate comprehension and reflection of information (Couch, 2022) to help remember what was discussed (Muswazi & Nhamo, 2013) thus the need to complement it with memory recall afterwards as way of consolidating information.

The process used in note-taking was as follows;

Step 1: coding of interview guides

Ensuring that the cohort semi-structured interview guides were coded as per cohort, and also as identity codes for each participant.

Step 2: formatting of the interview guides

The interview guides were formatted in such a way that there was enough space between questions for note –taking for the respective questions plus any other which would be added during the interviews.

Step 3: printing of the interview guides

The semi –structured interview guides were then printed out. Hard copies were used in note taking considering that the researcher was faster in note-taking as compared to typing. Moreover, in some cases, the study was being undertaken in rural areas without electricity thus using a laptop computer would be risky. Even in offices, load shedding was a risk.

Step 4: Note –taking during interviews

I jotted down what the participants were saying on the hard copy interview guides. Some notes were recorded in short form in the interest of time.

Step 5: data consolidation of the notes taken and memory to make notes

After the interviews, the researcher took time in some cases days to type the scripts and at the same time incorporate memory information to make the notes.

From the experience, the researcher observed that note –taking during face-to -face interviews has the advantage of making the researcher to be more attentive to what is being said as the note taking is being done. This helped the research to reflect on what was said thus encouraging iterative questioning and probing. This concurs with the conclusion drawn by Muswazi and Nhamo, (2013) that note taking enhances analysis process of the data. The researcher also observed that participants had time to also reflect on their responses as the researcher was jotting down notes thus they could add more information or ask questions. It also made the participants to be relaxed and open up as the interview progressed.

The major disadvantage with note-taking during interviews is that the interviews were longer than expected in most cases. It was also a bit costly due to the printing of the interview guides. On the other hand, it was difficult to probe key informants who opted to respond to the semi-structured interview guides electronically because even getting the first responses was a challenge needing a number of reminders to be sent to them.

CONCLUSION

Do no harm to participants should be taken as a serious ethical issue in research. The researcher needs to respond to what makes the participants comfortable to participate voluntarily. One such context is that of considering the confidentiality of audio recording in the digital age as information can easily be shared thus putting participants in harm's way. Note –taking though seemingly tedious is an alternative to audio recording which has the advantage of gaining more insight through reflections as the notes are being taken.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

This study was undertaken for a PhD program.

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FUNDING

This is a self-funded program.

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