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Using qualitative interviews in CAM research: A guide to study design, data collection and data analysis

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Summary Qualitative methods, such as the in-depth interview, offer a potentially powerful means of uncovering the complex experiences of patients, carers and clinicians within treatment and decision-making processes. In the context of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), qualitative interview-based projects allow for subjectivity and complexity within human experience, making them a powerful tool for increasing our knowledge of important processes within CAM. However, qualitative interview-based projects are often poorly designed, carried out and analysed. This article provides a guide for CAM researchers on how to use qualitative interviews to produce meaningful, and methodologically sound, research findings.

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Introduction

Some set great value on method, while others pride themselves on dispensing with method. To be without method is deplorable, but to depend on method entirely is worse. You must first learn to observe the rules faithfully; afterwards, modify them according to your intelligence and capacity. (Lu Ch'ai, *The Tao of Painting*, 1701, cited in Sze and Wang)¹

Qualitative interviews offer a potentially powerful means of exploring the intricacies of complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs). They offer a means of exploring the subjective and complex experiences of patients, carers and therapists within treatment and decision-making processes. While the cost per interview can be high,

overall sample sizes are smaller, meaning research projects can be done without a huge research budget. However, qualitative interview-based projects are often poorly designed, carried out and analysed. Data analysis is often a virtual 'data-dump' where interview excerpts are presented uncritically and with little or no conceptual sophistication. In part this is due to a paucity of guidance as to how to go about designing an interview-based project, how to run an effective interview, and how to analyse the data produced. It also relates to the tendency of inexperienced researchers and clinicians to approach interviewing as a 'common-sense practice' that 'anyone can do'. Furthermore, clinically trained researchers may lack the kind of education in social science required to extract the full meaning from the data collected. Qualitative interviewing and data analysis is as difficult to learn as any other research method² and therefore training from experienced qualitative researchers is

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essential before you should even consider designing and carrying out a qualitative study. In this article I outline how to use qualitative in-depth interviews in CAM research, with discussion of the methodological roots of qualitative interviewing, the basic steps involved in designing and carrying out a qualitative interview-based project, and finally, how to go about analysing qualitative interview data.

Types of qualitative interview

There are a number of interview styles you could use to do CAM research. Although the distinction between interview styles may be blurred in practice (particularly between semi-structured and unstructured styles), it is useful to be aware of the range of interview types available. As seen in Table 1, interview-based studies can be qualitative or quantitative in nature.

In this article I focus on qualitative interviews rather than structured quantitative designs. As you can see from Table 1, the terms *semi-structured* and *in-depth* are generally used to refer to an interview style that is guided by an interview schedule, but also retains a high degree of flexibility according to the participant's experiences.³ On the other hand, *unstructured* is used to refer to a more informal style of interviewing characterised by a participant-directed conversation. Although categories such as *semi-structured* or *unstructured* can be useful, remember that they are merely typologies, and in practice, distinctions between different qualitative interview styles can become blurred (hence the discrepancies between different methodology text-books regarding classification). In this paper I use the term *in-depth qualitative interview* as I think this reflects the nature of the interview, but also, it allows for movement

between unstructured and more semi-structured approaches within a qualitative project.

Methodological roots of qualitative interviews

Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews emerged from what we call the interpretive (rather than the positivist) traditions in the social sciences. Some of the better known traditions which have contributed to what we now call the interpretive tradition are grounded theory, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology approaches, and more recently, poststructuralism and postmodernism. This broadly defined interpretivist or constructivist tradition is associated with such authors as Glaser and Strauss, Berger and Luckman, Geertz, Lofland and Lofland, Charmaz, and Rubin and Rubin⁴⁻⁹ to name just a few. This interpretive tradition was a particularly important movement in the social sciences as it challenged the dominance of the positivists (i.e. those seeking to measure and categorise, and ultimately create abstract models of, human behaviour and experience), and placed certain individuals and institutions within the social sciences on a very different trajectory than that of the natural sciences (which still maintains a positivist view of the world today). Originating at the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s, and gathering momentum in the late 1960s, factions within the social sciences were beginning to diverge from the positivist and deterministic approaches of the classical social scientists, refocusing social science on the ways in which meanings are constructed, negotiated and managed by different individuals and groups within different social and historical contexts. Before this movement in the social sciences, research methods were largely quantitative (if sys-

Table 1 Interview styles (Bryman: 107, 314).³

Qualitative

Semi-structured or in-depth: The researcher has an interview schedule with a list of themes and potential questions to ask the interviewee. This interview style is flexible, allowing for an open dialogue that can extend beyond the parameters set by the interview schedule.

Unstructured: An interview style where the researcher has a brief topic guide, allowing considerable freedom within the interview. The interview takes the form of a conversation rather than a more structured question-answer session.

Quantitative

Structured: Sometimes called a standardised interview, a structured interview involves the researcher asking each interviewee the exact same questions. Questions will generally offer the interviewee a fixed range of answers (typical of survey research), followed by a statistical analysis of the results.

tematic methods were used at all). The emerging interpretive tradition precipitated the development of the tools we now know as qualitative methods, including qualitative interviews.

Coming from this interpretative tradition, a qualitative interview-based study seeks to establish an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the respondents and the meanings within their accounts of a particular action, process or event.¹⁰ Rather than seeking to measure or categorise behaviour or attitudes (typical of more positivistic survey/questionnaire based approaches), a qualitative approach focuses on the interpretations of the respondents (e.g. of being a CAM user or cancer patient), pursuing an analysis which maintains what we call a constructivist ontological position that individuals actively negotiate meaning. As ontology refers to the study of the nature of reality, a constructivist ontological view is that reality is in fact constructed rather than 'set in stone' or objectively measurable, and furthermore, that individuals construct their reality by associating 'meaning' with certain events or actions (Bryman: 264).³ By approaching an issue from this perspective, the qualitative researcher can establish patterns and irregularities in the meanings associated with particular events (e.g. the chance of cure), uncover agreements and conflicts over understandings of things (e.g. the origin of an illness or condition), and reflect on the implications of such understandings for particular individuals or groups. As Rubin and Rubin (1995: 35)⁹ suggest, interpretive social research is about figuring out what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and around them. It is this complexity and subjectivity that should underpin qualitative interview-based research projects (Ezzy: 54).¹¹

Designing a qualitative project

A qualitative project does not seek to prove or disprove a hypothesis or a number of hypotheses. Being an inductive methodological approach (see the introduction to this series), a qualitative project aims to explore a *central research question* rather than prove or disprove a preconceived idea. Whereas a hypothesis is constructed from a preconceived idea about the way things might work (to be proven correct or incorrect in the study), the central research question in a qualitative study functions to set the parameters of the project, focusing the study in on one particular 'problem' to be investigated. It is hoped that by taking this approach, as researchers, we will be able to allow

the field (i.e. our participants' accounts) to drive the direction of the project, rather than restrict it to our preconceived ideas about what might be occurring. This openness and flexibility inherent in a qualitative project makes such methodological approaches particularly powerful and important for those individuals and groups whose experiences and understandings have been largely excluded from the public sphere (Ezzy: 46),¹¹ or alternatively, when little is known about an area (Gilbert: 138).¹²

It is vital that you *only* employ a qualitative methodology if this is the appropriate study design for the issue/phenomena that you want to investigate. It is not acceptable (and the data will not have validity) to use a qualitative design because you prefer this methodological approach or because you want to try it out. For example, if you wanted to investigate how popular aromatherapy was with NHS cancer patients, and the main benefits they receive pre and postsurgical treatment, it would not make any sense to do in-depth interviews with 50 NHS cancer patients. A national representative survey (a quantitative design) would be more appropriate to answer this question. On the other hand, if you wanted to gain a better understanding of patients' experiences of the client/therapist relationship or an aromatherapist's sense of integration with other hospital staff (i.e. issues of professional conflict), in-depth interviews may provide valuable insight into such dynamics. The key is to select the right method to answer the specific question you want to ask. If you think up a good question and select the right method, then you are half way there. But what makes a good research question in a qualitative study?

Developing a research question and setting the study's parameters

Although a qualitative project should minimise the imposition of a priori assumptions on the field, inevitably you need to review relevant literature to make sure the study has not been done before,² and secondly, as a method of sensitising yourself to issues that will need to be examined in your project (Ezzy: 12).¹¹ The key here is to make sure that you do not merely impose these on the field, and that you leave yourself open to new things that you may not have expected and that are not in the literature.

You may have a general idea about what you want to research (e.g. patients' experiences of acupuncture during chemotherapy treatment), but, an important first step is to establish a *central research question*. Firstly, it is important that this

Table 2 Example of an interview theme and sub-questions.

Theme: Patients' perspectives on the benefits of CAM in cancer care, i.e. symptom relief/therapeutic relationship?
 Potential interview questions:

- What do you experience as the benefits/limitations of CAM therapies?
- What do you view as the most valuable aspects of the CAM therapies you have used?
- Could you talk about your relationships with your CAM practitioners and your doctors?
- How did you experience interactions with the different practitioners you have been involved with, and how important have these been for your experience of having cancer?
- Has this changed over the course of your illness/treatment program?
- Could you talk about the CAM therapies you have used in terms of what each specific therapy or practitioner provide for you?

question allows sufficient 'flex' so that the project can generate data that is surprising (rather than merely reinforcing what you already thought) and thus the project can produce meaningful and useful results. The methodological strength of a qualitative project depends on the ability of your study design, including your research question, to generate new questions and produce unexpected findings. An example of a central research question might be: what is the nature of end-stage cancer patients' experiences of Reiki within the hospice setting? Here we have a specific research question, but we have not suggested an answer, as this will hopefully emerge from the interviews within the participants. An example of an inappropriate question for a qualitative project would be: how do women with end-stage cancer experience Reiki differently than men within the hospice setting? Implicit in this question is that there is a gender difference in experiences of Reiki—therefore I would already be imposing my hypothesis on the field. The key is to develop a question that has sufficient flexibility but is also focused in on a manageable and important issue.

Once a central research question which outlines the parameters and scope of the study has been established it is useful to develop a set of secondary questions. For example, given the central question outlined above, secondary questions might be: what influence does the individual practitioner have on hospice patients' experiences of Reiki; does gender influence experiences of Reiki, and if so, in what ways; or, how do religious/spiritual beliefs shape patients' experiences of, and preferences for, Reiki? The key thing to ask yourself here is: what specific questions do I need to ask in this project to find the necessary answers to fully address all the complexities of the central research question? It is vital that you spend considerable time deciding the most important themes you want to explore as these will set the initial parameters of the project. These secondary questions are particularly important as they will be used to inform the interview schedule. Although an interview schedule is

designed to be flexible according to the experience of the individual interviewee, it is important that you have put significant thought into potentially important themes that can be used to provide a platform for further discussion.

Designing an interview schedule for an in-depth interview

To develop an interview schedule, create a list of questions (see Table 2) that will facilitate an exploration into each theme you have developed, focusing on creating questions that are as open as possible, rather than closed questions that restrict the interviewee to one or a number of possible answers. The interview schedule should be used to create an open environment in which the interviewee can reflect on issues you introduce through the interview schedule within the context of their own experience (see Ezzy: 11).¹¹

A systematic review of the literature should provide some guidance in terms of some important issues for investigation. Other themes will develop from your own experiences of the phenomena you are studying—what Lofland and Lofland⁷ call 'puzzlements'—the things one finds initially interesting or problematic about the topic under study. The interview schedule will not be perfect first time. Thus, you should test a draft schedule out on friends or colleagues long before you enter the field. If possible, do a couple of pilot interviews which will show you whether particular questions will actually retrieve the data you need. You must record each step of the process of designing the project as these records will be invaluable when you come to write up the project.

Doing an in-depth qualitative interview

On a practical level, you should begin the interview by introducing yourself, providing a written

Table 3 Probing.¹⁵

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Andrew | The advantage of the online support group is that the people who do the moderating are really only just checking that nobody is liable and this sort of thing. And, they have been known to ban people from the site because they keep making libellous comments about people. |
| Interviewer AB | What sort of comments? |
| Andrew | One rather well-known personality got banned from the site because they kept making libellous statements about certain medical practitioners. |
| Interviewer AB | Are you not allowed to mention names? |
| Andrew | You're allowed to, that's OK. I mean lots of people say go to so and so, I was treated by so and so. But when it became that they were making negative comments about a practitioner ... |
| Interviewer AB | Why would they not be able to make negative comments? |
| Andrew | There's a difference between saying my surgeon did this and it was terrible which is your own personal experience and saying, Doctor 'Smith' is no good, you wouldn't send a dog to him, in public ... Every now and then you find a caution comes on ... 'just be careful'. |
| Interviewer AB | What sort of things would warrant a caution? |
| Andrew | Saying, 'The only person to see is ...' Whereas you can say 'I can highly recommend ...' It's very grey isn't it ...? |

summary of the project (and giving them time to read it), and making sure they fully understand the project that they are participating in. The last thing you should do is rush through this stage as this is probably the most crucial point for beginning to develop rapport with the interviewee. Sometimes taking 15 min to chat and get comfortable is crucial to a successful interview. After answering any questions they have you can then ask them to read and sign a consent form which outlines their rights in writing.

I find it useful to begin an interview by asking the participant to talk about relatively straight forward things (e.g. when they were diagnosed and treated), as a strategy of initiating a dialogue (see Charmaz: 1167).⁸ The details emerging from such questions invariably provide a platform for exploring your research questions without 'hitting' the interviewee with directive or confrontational ques-

tions de Laine (1997: 174).¹³ Make sure you keep all the demographic questions till the end of the interview. You will find participants will be much more comfortable with giving details like household income if you ask them at the end of the interview.

Your interview schedule will provide *possible* lines of inquiry for the interviews. However, you should not impose these issues on the interviewee (Charmaz: 1167),⁸ but rather, you should work through their experiences, reflecting on how these themes and others are pertinent to their experience. The aim is to facilitate what we call a 'guided conversation' rather than produce answers to a series of restrictive questions (Fielding: 144).¹⁴ Although there are many different styles in qualitative interviewing, I tend not ask the interviewee questions in the exact form seen in the interview schedule, but rather, I ask versions of them as the respondent's account touches on related issues.

Table 4 The impact of the researcher on the interview data.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Question 1 | Research into CAM and cancer |
| Interviewer AB | How has your treatment impacted on your life thus far? |
| Gloria | Well, I used to have long blonde hair ... I used to be slim and used to feel attractive and sexual [looks down at the floor] ... but since I've had chemotherapy I feel like a freak, I had, I was having my hair cut shorter and shorter erm [long pause], I hate having short hair, I just hate it, and erm the treatment and everything that's been involved with it has made me bloat and just put on all this weight ... the healing sessions helped me through. It just kept me slightly ... you know, that bit calmer ... (breast cancer/mid 30s). |
| Question 2 | Research into prostate cancer and sexuality |
| Interviewer AB | How has prostate cancer impacted on your relationships? |
| Grant | My sexual performance is very important [looks at me earnestly], even to an older bloke like me, but so many people miss the point, that it's so much part of the male psyche; you take his manhood away from him and if it's been a thing that's important to him, and I have a whole long record of it being very important to me, if you take that away from the male, you change that male and that's not always understood—you change him entirely (prostate cancer/mid 60s). |

This might involve asking, for example, “could you tell me more about your interaction with this healer”, once a related event had been brought up by the interviewee. Although this still entails ‘guided conversation’ (Fielding: 140),¹⁴ it allows the participant to tell their story rather than merely respond to specific questions. This encourages a more natural transition to the topic, and ultimately, better data. Probing further, such as, “can you tell me more about that?” or “how did you respond when you were told that?”, will precipitate further reflection on their experience. This is illustrated in the excerpt presented in Table 3 where I am probing the interviewee regarding his use of an online (Internet) support group. The aim of *probing* is to encourage the interviewee to talk about an issue or event, without actually directing him/her to any particular conclusion (Fielding, 1993: 140).

As Fielding suggests (1996: 141),¹⁴ probing may involve an expectant glance, an “mm” or “yes”, or perhaps an understanding smile. In other cases it might involve asking a series of follow-up questions as seen in Table 3. The ability to probe effectively, without disrupting the flow of the dialogue, is probably the most important skill to have in a qualitative interview.

Another strategy I use is to ask a question in several different ways or come back to a question later in the interview when the person is more willing to engage with it. Do not push the interviewee to talk about an issue (‘first do no harm’ is a rule all researchers should remember), but also, do not give up just because they don’t respond to it the first time. It may be a case that the timing is not right or that you have asked it in such a way that it does not resonate with the interviewee’s experience. It can also be useful to use indirect questioning (e.g. “how do you think other men experience spiritual healing?”) as people may feel more prepared to reveal negative feelings if they attribute them to other people.

Ultimately the themes that form your interview schedule will be important for some interviewees and not for others. This is why it is so important to maintain an inductive approach. The themes you develop before interviewing will be useful, but inevitably, will be incapable of capturing the ‘whole story’. I generally follow the principals of in-depth interviewing outlined by such authors as Rice and Ezzy and Minichiello,^{16,17} maintaining a flexible approach, adapting, as seems appropriate in each interview, to the particular respondent. The whole story often emerges as the interviewee directs the interview outside the realms of your own preconceptions, complicating and at times contradicting these. As such, it is also vital to continually re-

visit the interview schedule, adapting it to emerging themes, removing things that no longer seem of central relevance to the project. If there are multiple interviewers, make sure you meet regularly and discuss how the interviews are going and your thoughts on the successfulness of the interview schedule. Again, make sure you document these processes as you will need to include such details in your final report.

It is important to remember that each participant is different and the key to being a good interviewer is to realise that there is no ‘right way’ of doing an interview. It is also useful to remember that people participate in research for a variety of complex reasons and their personal motivations can influence the interview as much as anything else. A good interviewer picks up on what is motivating a person and seeks to address both the needs of the participant and the objectives of the project itself. For example, you will get some participants who passionately want to tell their story; some who want to be listened to; others who purely want company, and those who have been pushed into participating by somebody else. A good qualitative researcher will be able to work with different motivations, adapting to the needs to the participant, and maximising the quality of the data that the interview produces.

In some cases, the entire interview may involve the interviewee telling you their story, with virtually no input from you other than body language and verbal prompts to assure them that you are listening and interested. Some researchers may suggest that this does not constitute an in-depth interview but rather an unstructured interview. In my view, as suggested earlier, this is largely semantics, and the important point is that some participants do not want, or do not require, much input from the researcher. In such interviews the interviewer can take more of a ‘back seat’, allowing the interviewee to outline her/his experience and letting important issues emerge as naturally as possible. Being impromptu and flexible is part of being a good interviewer so do not be scared of ‘going with the flow’.

It is probable that at some point in a qualitative study a participant will get emotional. Emotion is natural, particularly when discussing difficult issues such as cancer or acute pain, and can be an important part of the person’s story. Thus, sometimes you will need to provide some comforting words to a participant or just listen while they talk about their difficulties, regardless of their relevance to the overall project. In-depth interviewing is about giving and receiving, and although your role is not

to be a counsellor, you need to be prepared to be supportive and understanding. For this reason it is useful to have telephone numbers of support lines (e.g. cancer support services), and names of potentially useful organisations, on hand. Lastly, this is a very good reason why inexperienced researchers should not be expected to do potentially difficult interviews.

Analysing the interview data

The process of qualitative data analysis is a difficult skill to develop. It is a skill that comes from rigorous, high quality social science training and experience. Clinicians and postgraduates often ask me the formula for doing qualitative analysis. My response is that there is no formula. There are good pointers, which I will outline below, but ultimately the 'black box' of qualitative analysis is just that. It is an elusive, contextual, ambiguous and nuanced process that one cannot replicate in a computer program or outline fully in a textbook. In my view making sense of qualitative data is a combination of having a sophisticated knowledge of social science theory; a good eye for important real-life process and dynamics; and, a willingness to look beyond what is obvious or self-evident in the accounts you are being given. It is about being able to be completely absorbed in one person's account of a particular event, whilst at the same time, placing this account within wider social relations and ultimately relevant conceptual debates. However, as I outline below, there are some useful techniques that you should be aware of if you are considering doing qualitative data analysis.

Within a qualitative, interview-based project the process of analysis inevitably begins during data collection. The process of analysing 'as you go' inevitably shapes the ongoing data collection which is a crucial element of producing high quality qualitative data.^{8,11} Labelled by some as sequential analysis,¹⁸ analysing data as it is collected allows the researcher to go back and refine questions, develop hypotheses, and pursue emerging avenues of inquiry in further depth.¹⁹ This approach is invaluable within the data collection process, providing an opportunity to establish initial themes, and importantly, to then look for deviant or negative cases, complicating the initial observations and retaining the complexity of the data. The 'groundedness' of such an approach to analysis means the researcher is open both to unforeseen patterns, and also to cases which run counter to these patterns.^{8,19}

On a practical level, I would suggest initially approaching data analysis by systematically reading through each transcript several times, writing notes, discussing ideas with colleagues and noting emerging patterns within the data collected. It is useful at this stage to use the margins of the page to record anything seemingly interesting or significant—a process Ezzy (2002: 89)¹¹ refers to as 'open coding' (see also Murphy et al.: 134).²⁰ It is within this process whereby the data starts to be broken down, conceptualised and categorised, allowing the identification of concepts and the formation of patterns by grouping together similar incidences, claims, and discursive practices.²¹ Within this process it is important to retain the complexity of the respondents' experiences by documenting atypical cases, conflicts and contradictions within the data.

Following this initial analysis, look back through your notes in the margins of the interviews to establish themes emerging across the interviews. Labelled by some as 'axial coding' (Ezzy: 91; Strauss and Corbin),^{11,21} this is the process of moving beyond reading and writing notes to sorting one's observations.^{#1} Within this process, once you have identified a theme, you should search through the interviews for other related comments, employing 'constant comparison' (Ezzy: 90)¹¹ to further develop or complicate these themes. This process means that events that you initially may have viewed as unrelated can be grouped together as their interconnectedness becomes apparent.

The next process is called 'selective coding',²¹ involving further refining the data, bringing together the patterns, consistencies, categories and constructions, and creating meta-themes. This involves combining and cataloguing related patterns into sub-themes, thereby complicated the meta-themes, piecing together the respondents' accounts, giving voice to the atypical cases and the subtleties in experiences, to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experiences.

The final step involves revisiting the literature,²² and seeking out conceptual tools that could be used to make sense of the patterns which have emerged from the data. The key to qualitative analysis is to remain inclusive, allowing emerging categories to become increasingly complicated, reflecting the nuances in the data, rather than reducing it to

^{#1} It is at this stage in the analysis that some researchers use qualitative analysis packages (e.g. QSR NVivo). Qualitative software packages have received a mixed reception amongst qualitative researchers and it is useful to bear in mind that you may come across qualitative researchers who are not particularly supportive of such practices.

oversimplified typologies of behaviour (Pope et al.: 114).¹⁹ Inevitably this approach to analysis relies partially on hunches and intuition, or creativity, nuance and detail.^{8,23} Its intuitive and flexible nature is both its strength and its weakness; the ability to reinterpret, confuse, and change over the course of the analysis leads to new ways of understanding as new ideas are put together and participants' interpretations are seen in a fresh light.

Positioning the researcher

The position of the researcher invariably has a major impact on any research project, shaping its methodological and theoretical foundations, and, as a result, the final analysis. According to Fielding (1996: 139),¹⁴ a study is only useful if the researcher is reflexive regarding his/her influence. I argue, as Ezzy suggests (2002: 56),¹¹ that research that claims to be objective and uninfluenced by the researcher is deceptive. The reality of research is that a position cannot be deliberately occupied; the researcher enters the field with a particular agenda, with, at times, a particular statement to make about the subject being studied. This cannot be avoided. In fact, it can contribute to the worth of the study if this position is acknowledged, thus becoming part of the understanding of how the research itself functions to reify particular categories, reconstruct and contest others. Interview data is ultimately co-constructed—it reflects things about you (the researcher) as it does about the person being interviewed. Take for example me asking quite similar questions to two very different interviewees (see Table 4).

The first excerpt shows me asking a female interviewee about the impact of chemotherapy on her sense of femininity, whereas the second shows me asking an older male patient about his experience of prostatic disease and sexual potency. Their responses are inevitably shaped by my biography (a young, white male) and may have been quite different had I been a female interviewer. For example, in the first excerpt, the woman I am interviewing lowers her head slightly when she answers the question and looks embarrassed. However, in the second excerpt, the male interviewee talks openly about his sexual dysfunction, giving no sign that he is uncomfortable in any way. Of course, there are many other factors that could also have influenced their accounts such as their age or the fact that the first interviewee was interviewed in-hospital whereas the second was interviewed in his home. It is thus very important that you

constantly reflect on the impact of your own background on the data produced, and that your findings are presented as co-constructions (i.e. produced through a dialogue between two participants), rather than objective accounts of particular events.

Methodological strengths and weaknesses

Overall the advantage of flexible, descriptive, qualitative analysis is that one is not as likely to get stuck in conventional ways of thinking. In the tradition of grounded theory,^{8,11,21} one can produce observations that demand the creation of new ideas and categories that might not emerge in more structured analyses. In an analysis such as this, it is possible to adjust one's approach in response to data which may contradict one's initial assumptions or theories. By giving attention to those cases that do not fit, to those strategies that do not at first make sense, to those incongruities so often bypassed by quantitative methods, we see the complexity of social processes.²⁴

A qualitative approach allows acknowledgement of conflict, ongoing struggle, tension and subjectivity, as well as the situated and co-produced nature of the accounts. Qualitative research is about subjectivity and complexity; it seeks not to count or reduce, but to represent rich, subjective experience in such a way as to reflect on consistencies and parallels, but to also retain the nuanced nature of the data.

Hence, as Ezzy suggests (2002: 57),¹¹ qualitative research is biased to a degree, but then again, all research is inherently political and thus contains a degree of bias. To suggest that something *can* be biased is to by default suggest that there is an unbiased 'truth' that we could access. This is simply not true. All research is driven by political interests and theoretical models, and qualitative research is no different.¹¹

As suggested earlier, qualitative researchers tend to espouse a constructivist ontological view of the world. As a result they are focused less on generalisability (or external validity) and more on reliability (the degree to which the data accurately represents the population being studied). Rather than establishing universal truths about the world, a qualitative study is about gaining an understanding of how some differently positioned actors talk about their experiences and the meanings they associate with particular events, actions and claims. This is a valuable approach because so often the

cost of attempting to generalise is that we do not see and investigate those aspects of a process that do fit our image of a particular category (Becker: 87).²⁵

Conclusion

Given the fact that very little research has been done on CAM, qualitative methodologies are potentially very useful for exploring the complexities and subjective elements of delivery of care and patient experiences of treatment processes. Although useful in their own right, quantitative methodologies, such as clinical trials or surveys, may not be capable of capturing the subtle and complex processes involved in the delivery of CAMs. In-depth interviews, however, provide a way of entering into the patient's world, exploring their understandings of illness and care, and gaining insight into how meaning is constructed and negotiated within the context of complementary and alternative medicine.

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