



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Being person-centred in qualitative interviews: reflections on a process

Berit Margrethe Sandvik* and Brendan McCormack

*Corresponding author: University of South-Eastern Norway, Porsgrunn, Norway

Email: Berit.Sandvik@usn.no

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Abstract

Background: In this article we reflect on the experience of the first author (Berit Margrethe Sandvik) of conducting seven qualitative research interviews with public health nurses trained in parenting guidance by the International Child Development Programme at the University of South-Eastern Norway. The interviews focused on how the nurses use a particular set of competencies in their daily work at the health centre. A person-centred practice framework was used to reflect on whether person-centred prerequisites and processes could be recognised in the completed interview processes, and how a greater focus on a person-centred approach could improve the quality of data collection. The results of this reflection are presented in this paper.

Aim: To understand how a researcher can use person-centred principles to facilitate qualitative interviews.

Findings: Being reflexive is essential to a person-centred approach in qualitative research interviews. It relates to the researcher's ability to facilitate an engagement that promotes authenticity, self-determination and reciprocity. Knowing oneself without letting conscious or unconscious values and perceptions overshadow the opportunities that arise in gaining an understanding of the participant's values and perceptions is essential. Through being vigilant in all senses, an holistic, mutually respectful dialogue can be created, through which new knowledge and understandings can be generated.

Conclusion: It is important to consider person-centredness in the planning and undertaking of research methods. While there is an increasing evidence base about person-centredness in health and social care practice, there continues to be a dearth of publications that focus on its role in research methods.

Implications for practice:

- Developing the ability to facilitate mutually respectful dialogue in research interviews is important in researcher development programmes
- Facilitating flow and creativity through engaging all senses in the dialogical situation has the potential to create a more person-centred approach to interview practices
- Being open to and aware of the lifeworlds of others, and having the ability to adjust one's own pre-understanding, facilitates an engagement that promotes authenticity, self-determination and reciprocity
- There is a need for more studies to use person-centred principles and practices explicitly in the conduct of research. This article provides a reflexive framework for doing that and suggests principles that can be applied in future research studies

Keywords: Person-centred research, qualitative interviews, person-centred dialogue, authenticity, facilitation, research methods

Introduction

In Norway, national guidelines for children's health services emphasise the importance of effective interaction between children and their parents, underpinned by parental guidance. The quality of this interaction is significant for the child's health and further development. The task of the public health nurse in this context is to guide parents towards health-promoting care for the child, and to identify when care is not good enough (Norwegian Health Directorate, 2017). The quality of the relationship between the public health nurse and parents is crucial in achieving successful guidance. The nurse's ability to interact with the parents, and thus her ability to provide person-centred care, is crucial in this respect (Sollesnes, 2013).

The nurse's guiding skills are underpinned by the International Child Development Programme (ICDP) (Hundeide, 2007). This is an education programme that seeks to improve interaction with children and others by helping nurses develop awareness of their own approach and way of being and how these affect the other, and sensitivity to the other's initiative and needs. To study how public health nurses with ICDP competence guide parents at the public health centre, the first author (BMS) conducted qualitative research interviews with seven public health nurses. The interviews were informed by principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Although the frameworks and prerequisites for person-centred research are complex and context sensitive, and operate at different levels (McCormack et al., 2017), the reflections in this article concentrate on the interview situation – on identifying signs of person-centred principles and approaches in the interview process, and on how BMS engaged in these processes as a researcher focusing on developing person-centred knowledge and skill. The aim of the reflection is to understand how a researcher can explicitly use person-centred principles to facilitate qualitative interviews.

Overview of the qualitative study used as the basis for reflection

The qualitative research reflected on in this article was informed by Husserl's phenomenology of perception of human life as it is experienced by individuals, and the interpretation of texts through the lens of hermeneutics (Thornquist, 2003; Malterud, 2011). In phenomenology the subjective experience of phenomena is emphasised. It assumes that, with the help of experience and knowledge, we draw conclusions about what we witness that go beyond what can be registered in the situation. It is the individual's subjective experience of the world that is perceived, and not the world as it actually is. Husserl says our holistic perception of the world is the world as it manifests and is recognised by the individual subject, when consciousness is directed towards something, and it is intentional (Thornquist, 2003). Therefore, in the context of a research interview, the focus is on understanding someone's personal experience based on professional and personal knowledge, abilities and expertise.

The intention of the interviews was, through a mutual dialogue with the participants, to gain an understanding of their experience of their actions, striving to explore meaning and to develop new knowledge and understanding in collaboration with them. In addition, BMS sought to help them to put words to silent or taken-for-granted knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). It is also important to gain access to the authentic experience and story, because sometimes we tell what we think others want to hear, and sometimes we hope they will understand more than the words. *'Behind the story I tell is the one I don't. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear'* (Allison, 1996, p 39). The intention was to facilitate an equal situation, with respect and recognition for the public health nurses' and BMS's values, self-determination, knowledge, actions and perceptions of reality, while being open to new perspectives and the development of new insights through dialogue. A secondary intention was for the nurses to have a positive experience and outcome of the conversations and feel more empowered, satisfied and conscious of their ability to guide parents to better interaction with their children.

In order for the nurses to express their perceptions authentically, emphasis was placed on creating a conducive atmosphere that included a non-evaluative attitude, approaching participants' reflexivity

and acknowledging their experiences and thoughts as real for them (Schibbye, 2002). This can be a challenge and it is acknowledged that in a research interview there will be an asymmetrical relationship between researcher and participant, when the researcher sets the agenda and is responsible for leading the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Unstructured interviews were planned and the questions were adapted as the interview progressed to facilitate an informal dialogue (Johannessen et al., 2004).

Acting as a person-centred researcher: prerequisites

In their definition of person-centredness, McCormack and McCance (2017) emphasise the importance of healthful relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding between all significant persons:

‘... an approach to practice established through the formation and fostering of healthful relationships between all care providers, service users and others significant to them in their lives. It is underpinned by values of respect for persons (personhood), individual right to self-determination, mutual respect and understanding. It is enabled by cultures of empowerment that foster continuous approaches to practice development’ (McCormack and McCance, 2017, p 3).

Underpinning the person-centred approach are values of respect for persons and personhood as well as individual right to self-determination. This is realised through mutual and reciprocal interaction. A variety of contextual factors can affect the person-centred process: the overall macro context; the quality of the care environment; the physical environment; the organisational systems; and individual prerequisites and characteristics (McCormack and McCance, 2017). A culture of respect, equality, empowerment and opportunity to develop as a person will promote the possibilities of engaging in a person-centred relationship.

The prerequisites for a person-centred approach to care delivery are also relevant to person-centredness in research. McCormack and McCance (2017) identify five prerequisites for person-centred practice: being professionally competent; having developed interpersonal skills; being committed to the job; being clear about one’s own beliefs and values; and knowing self. These apply equally to the practice of research and are reflected in what Titchen et al. (2017) identify as a researcher’s ability to cooperate (developed interpersonal skills), to create an equal relationship (clarity of beliefs and values), and to be aware and conscious of their own ‘understanding horizon’ (knowing self), both as limitations and opportunities in the quest for new knowledge and understanding. Person-centredness is expressed through reciprocity, mutuality and presence in relationships that facilitate and motivate self-determination and development of new insights. The optimal relationship is that of an interaction between two equal persons, where all senses are active in the dialogue without being limited by conscious thoughts, and where both persons communicate on multiple levels. In the ideal dialogue situation, both persons receive new understandings and insights into their values and need for action in their world (Rogers, 1955).

So, how can the researcher interact with research participants in such a way in the interview situation? BMS’s understanding is characterised by theory that supports person-centredness (McCormack and McCance, 2017) woven and braided into her previous understandings of qualitative methodologies and methods. This will be the starting point for reflecting on how she prepared for and carried out the qualitative research interviews.

According to Dewing et al., (2017) we need to adapt a respectful approach to individuals; there is no standard recipe that suits everyone. Referring to Søren Kierkegaard’s well-known postulate, in order to help someone else, we must first find where the other is in his/her life. In addition, we must strive to understand the other as a unique person (Mead and Bower, 2000). Healthcare practitioners must develop their skills in understanding their own values, and develop skills in guiding in a way that

facilitates the self-determination of others in decision-making processes (McCormack et al., 2017). Experience of self-determination can be decisive for the development of our full potential and for human flourishing (McCormack and Titchen, 2014). In the interview situation, self-determination can be realised by 'shared wonderment' rather than question-and-answer turn taking that can often interfere with the process the participants are in when searching for the meanings of experiences they are trying to talk about. Linguistic symbols convey only a small part of the experience (Rønsholdt et al., 2013). As Rogers (1955) points out, the optimal subjective dialogue takes place through all the senses.

Reflections on the interview process

Our reflections on the qualitative research interview experience identify three key considerations for being person-centred in this context:

- Engaging holistically
- Reflexivity
- Self and other

Engaging holistically

Rogers' (1955) contention that the optimal subjective dialogue involves all the senses implies a need for the researcher to be alert to communicating holistically. Through awareness and genuine interest in the lifeworld of participants, the interview process itself can contribute to the development of autonomous functioning (Deci and Ryan, 2008). This links with the concept of connectivity as a key principle in person-centred research or, as van Dulmen et al. (2017) suggest, the difference between research 'with' rather than 'about'. Connectivity means the connection to ourselves, to the other person, and to the context (Jacobs et al., 2017) and is consistent with the prerequisite of 'developed interpersonal skills' set out by McCormack and McCance (2017). According to Jacobs et al. (2017) there are two related pairs of principles: one is attentiveness and dialogue, the other is empowerment and participation. Another principle has been added, critical reflexivity, which is useful when looking back to consider how the first two pairs have been expressed to maintain connectivity (Jacobs et al., 2017). Traces of this principle are illustrated in the following interview extract:

Public health nurse (P): *'I give praise... I praise very much...'*

BMS: *'To the child?'*

P: *'Yes, to the child... but also to the parents... I have a lot of focus on what they are mastering... and what I see is good, because then I feel that they are becoming much more receptive... they open more...'*

BMS: *'What do you think makes them more receptive?'*

P: *'Well, I think that when I show positive feelings towards the child whom they love dearly... and in a way can show that to the parents... they become very proud... I think they can see that I see their child...'*

In this extract, BMS, through her developed interpersonal skills, shows holistic engagement with the public health nurse to help her understand the importance of her holistic engagement with the child and parents. The self-knowing that this generates contributes to a richer understanding of what holistic engagement means in different contexts and situations and, as a consequence, to increased self-understanding.

Reflexivity

There is no shortcut to linking critical reflexivity to critical self-reflexivity in the interview situation and in the interpretation of the data material. Self-reflexivity (or knowing self) is the ability to observe ourselves 'from outside' in contact with the participant, and is important for how we refine ourselves in contact with the other. It makes explicit the need for active self-work between persons with different experiences (Rønsholdt et al., 2013). The quality of the connectivity depends on the ability of the researcher to pay attention to all signals from thoughts, feelings and actions, as well as words. Words

alone are insufficient when experiences are to be described (Rønsholdt et al., 2013). The researcher has to use her/himself as an instrument in the interview dialogue (Xu and Storr, 2012). The dialogue is characterised by the ability of the researcher to achieve connectivity – a relationship characterised by insight, understanding and attachment with self, understanding and compassion for the participant's intentions, statements and experience of the situation, and reflection on the researcher's own approach to the subject and the person. All of this represents both the researcher's unique context and the common context of the situation (Jacobs et al., 2017). The idea of 'researcher-as-instrument' in person-centred research provides an important opportunity for understanding and interpreting data with the backdrop of a unique composition of knowledge, experiences, attitudes and personality (Pezalla et al., 2012). The researcher as instrument is illustrated in the following interview extract:

BMS: *'Mmm... you said you also gave praise to the parents... because they matter... how does the parent respond to it?'*

P: *'Well, they become very... I think very many do not get so much praise... and they like it... I really only experience that they open up more and seem to feel more happy and proud... I'm always looking for something that's good...'*

BMS: *'That's so good... see, I have focused on the "good" too... he he...'*

P: *'It's almost always, right... something good.'*

Reflexivity is critical to the research process if person-centred principles and processes are to be worked with. These principles in particular are never prescribed, but instead need to be given the space to 'surface' in the moment as practices such as one-to-one interviews progress. Reflexivity enables the development of greater expertise (person-centred competence), knowing self and the development of connectivity.

Self and other

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008) use a musical metaphor in suggesting that the researcher must play on all strings to get the most out of the situation and, in doing so reflexively, can create a balanced and harmonious interplay between himself, the other and the situation. One step towards developing our own person-centred research ability is to expand insight into 'who I am' in meeting with the other, and further develop sensitivity for the other person's holistic expressions. This reflection requires seamless change between sensitivity and interpretation of the participant's verbal and non-verbal contributions, as well as the response back to the participant. To achieve a constructive interaction in the dialogue, researchers need the knowledge and experience to be able to adjust their action repertoire, just as jazz musicians improvise their music as they adjust to each other (Schön, 2001). This flexible use of internalised knowledge through reflection-in-action contributes to both knowledge and skill expansion as well as to the development of new understandings, built up in collaboration. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008) emphasise the necessity for breadth in the interpretation repertoire in order for reflection, and thus the construction of new knowledge, to be possible. They also draw attention to the fact that in the interview process there is already a primary interpretation necessary to keep track of all the information that will appear in relevant data. Thus, as we see it, the primary interpretation has something of the same purpose as Schön conveys with his jazz orchestra metaphor. Traces of this principle are illustrated in the following interview extract:

P: *'... and that's how it seems to the kids... So then the parents have the idea of using the two extra minutes to prepare... Because it loosens them up a bit... better prepared... That's part of the development, and then we just have to... that's our task...'*

BMS: *'What you do seems to be that you really help the parents to take the child's perspective then...'*

P: *'Mmm... I try...'*

BMS: *'And to know their own reaction then in such situations, it helps to see how it is for the child... and it's very good...'*

In the reflection below, BMS draws on her experience of cross-country skiing to illustrate how these three issues emerging from our reflection became embodied in her knowing:

On my skiing trip today, I realised that new insights appeared from the depths of myself. Insights that I gained access to because I did not look for it. It just flowed from some layer of sensory impression. Was it a real person-centred approach for me? I first thought that the insight came without words, but it was more than this. I realise that I had a verbal and nonverbal inner dialogue with myself, with my authentic self, while the body's motor functions led me automatically forward on the ski track, pleased with its function, I addressed my appreciation to the fresh cold air, the beautiful sparkling snow, the footprints of a hare close by and the amazing mountain formations in the distance, while the inner dialogue went automatically and I experienced a satisfaction, eagerness and motivation for it to continue. Andersen and Hanssen (2012, p 37) claim in their book on flow in everyday life that it is about 'both having control and letting go'. When I perform an activity that the body has incorporated as part of its action repetition, I can perform the activity while focusing on something else. Creativity is released when the brain's right hemisphere is activated (Spurkeland, 2012). In my case, attention was directed to the experience of inner and outer nature and towards the inner dialogue – a kind of movement between flow and mindfulness (Anderson and Hanssen, 2012). You want me to tell what the new insight was, but I cannot. I have repeatedly tried to retrieve dreams I have had and experienced, but each time it is impossible to find the words to express the memories of the dream. But meet me in the mountains after a wordless walk with an attentive presence to nature outside and within our bodies; as we sit down and focus attention on the beautiful surroundings, I will tell you with fumbling words while our communication takes place between cells and neurons that are out of our control. Perhaps I can convey my newly acquired insight so you understand, in a present moment of mutuality.

We believe it is possible to transfer the same state of openness and unconscious vigilance to the interview situation in a qualitative study. Experiencing flow between two worlds, back and forth in a dialectic dance, leaves the subconscious mind to combine the expressions of the two worlds into new insights and, according to Rogers (1955), brings a preliminary and subjective truth and understanding. Csikszentmihalyi advocated the importance of flow, saying it is possible to facilitate a state of flow by, inter alia, providing the opportunity to experience coping in safe situations and in environments that promote creative thinking, sense communication and space for unfinished thoughts (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Andersen and Hanssen, 2012). To speed up creativity and openness, the facilitation of spontaneity can be liberating, because when we forget ourselves we show who we are (Sandvik, 2007). It is possible that a person-centred approach leads to the researcher's subjective understanding of the phenomenon – and, to a lesser extent, to the knowledge of the participant's understanding, because perhaps the researcher's less-relevant and unwanted unconscious experiences may affect the dialogue in the interview situation (McCance and McCormack, 2017). When a researcher uses his/her entire sensory device in the relationship with the participant, control is lost over the unconscious bodily experiences that govern the encounter (Aakvaag, 2008). Perhaps it is this very letting go of control that is the source of new insights. Although the researcher and participant work together in an equal dialogue to find new knowledge and insight, this 'new' will be different for both stakeholders because they will always be separate persons. But by being person-centred, each contributes to the other's development and knowledge through a holistic exchange of empathy and understanding – or as McCormack and McCance (2017) suggest, creates a healthful culture within which there is increased self-knowing and mutually developed relationships.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the qualitative research interview as a person-centred experience. Reflecting on the experience of undertaking interviews with public health nurses trained in an

ICDP parental guidance programme, we have identified three key considerations in the interview process: engaging holistically, reflexivity, and self and other. These issues are not mutually exclusive – indeed, taken together, they provide a holistic approach to the interview process that is person-centred. Overall, we believe that a researcher’s ability to guide him/herself and the participant in an engagement that promotes authenticity, self-determination and reciprocity, through the use of all the senses, has the potential to develop shared understanding and new knowledge through holistic and mutually respectful dialogue. The person-centred practice framework of McCormack and McCance (2017) has helped us to dialogue the interview process and generate new understandings about how person-centred approaches to research can be generated. We contend that reflexive engagement and critically reflexive dialogue are central to this process.

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Berit Margrethe Sandvik (Master in Health Promotion, Public Health Nurse, RN), Assistant Professor, University of South East-Norway, Faculty of Health and Social Science, Department of Nursing and Health Sciences, Porsgrunn, Norway.

Brendan McCormack (D.Phil Oxon, BSc Hons, FRCN, FEANS, FRCSI, PGCEA, RMN, RGN), Head of the Divisions of Nursing, Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies; Head of the Graduate School; Associate Director, Centre for Person-centred Practice Research, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Professor II, University of South East Norway, Drammen, Norway; Extraordinary Professor, Department of Nursing, University of Pretoria, South Africa; Professor of Nursing, Maribor University, Slovenia; Visiting Professor, Ulster University.