Title: **Using storyboards in participatory research**

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Abstract

Aim

To draw on the authors' experience of using storyboards in focus groups conducted with vulnerable young women.

Background

Creative methods are increasingly used in qualitative research as a means of generating richer data and of promoting more meaningful participation. This paper presents an argument for using storyboards in focus group discussions and draws on real life research with young women by way of illustration.

Review Methods

This is a methodology paper

Discussion

This paper discussed the authors' experiences of using storyboards in participatory research. This approach has a number of advantages such as promoting participation and engagement, empowering participants and, enabling them to take more control over the research process.   The theoretical and philosophical position of the authors is outlined –

namely a feminist approach to research. The data collection method is then described in detail outlining each stage of the process step by step.

Conclusion

Using creative techniques within more traditional qualitative approaches may lead to further in-depth data as well as increased participation. Such approaches could be of value in nursing research in which patients, clients and service user perspectives are often vitally important.

Introduction

This paper outlines the use of storyboards in qualitative research drawing on the authors' experiences of using this approach in research with vulnerable young women. The authors' argue that such innovative approaches open up opportunities for dialogue that might otherwise be missed in standard group interviews or focus group discussions. This results in deeper, richer data and, we would argue, a more meaningful experience for the 'researched'. The paper begins by outlining our theoretical and philosophical position as researchers within which our choice of methodology and methods are located. It then describes the method we have used in some detail drawing on real life experience of conducting focus groups using the 'storyboard' approach and, where appropriate, giving examples. Finally it outlines the key arguments, as we see them, for using more creative and innovative ways of engaging people in qualitative methods and relevance of these to nursing research.

Feminist approaches to data generation

It is important, from the outset, to specify our positions as qualitative researchers and the theoretical/philosophical perspectives we are located within. We recognise the value of using feminist approaches to data generation and these have underpinned our choice, and the execution, of data collection methods. Feminist approaches to research are characterised by a number of different factors. Feminist researchers focus more on the power relations implicit in the process of a researcher eliciting information from a participant and how such 'data' are used and interpreted (Abell and Myers, 2008). Subjective realities and lived experiences are priviliged in feminist research and it seeks to give voice to those whose voices are less 'heard' or whose experiences are less visible.

Feminist researchers have long held that the research process, rather than being objective and benign, is permeated by issues of power (Phoenix, 2010; Fine, 2012). Freire (1973) writes of powerlessness as being when an individual is acted upon as an object rather than being an active subject. The power imbalance between researcher and researched is inescapable. Humphries et al (2000) therefore suggest that researchers should be explicit about tensions which may exist and be aware of the mechanisms of oppression within the research process and how these might impact on the people taking part. In feminist approaches to research the relationship between the researcher and the researched is viewed as co-dependent; both parties are complicit in the production of data through 'dialogic communication' (Blaikie, 2007:201). As will be seen, we were therefore positioned as co-researchers alongside the participants in the co-production of knowledge.

The data collection process

The nature of the enquiry in our research with vulnerable young women pointed to approaches that seek to examine subjective experience and opinion, namely qualitative methods. There are many different ways to collect data in qualitative research. One to one interviews were rejected in this case as we believed that talking in a bigger group would be less threatening to the young women and would enable those who wanted to, to remain relatively 'invisible'. We therefore chose to conduct focus groups. The focus groups were viewed as social constructions themselves, whereby meaning was co-constructed through conversation and dialogue between the researchers and the participants (Wilkinson et al, 2004). The focus group was therefore seen as a social encounter and an interactional event.

A focus group might be highly structured and take a survey-like approach whereby participant questioning adheres to a more rigid and standardised formula. In contrast, in

some narrative approaches, a researcher may begin by making a statement such as 'tell me about your life' and then respond to the narrative in a minimal way – just enough to encourage the participant to continue with their stories (Rapport, 2004). Anything between these two positions may be referred to as a 'semi-structured'. Less structure encourages participants to speak at length and with less interaction with the person asking the questions (Carter and Henderson, 2006). With semi-structured cases a set of questions is derived from the overall research questions or aim/objectives and used as a starting point to generate a discussion.

The general aim of our research was to explore the impact that a specific project had had on the young women. We wanted to investigate how, and in what ways, the project had made a difference to the young women who had been involved in it. Given the aim of the research we adopted a semi-structured approach. This offers a degree of flexibility whereby the discussion may evolve allowing the participants to expand on ideas and the researcher to prompt and direct the interaction with some degree of freedom within overall aim of the research (Denscombe, 2007).

The semi-structured schedule may be based on a few typically broad questions but prompts and probes are used to enable expansion of certain ideas within the focus group itself. In addition, the order of the questions themselves may vary depending on the direction in which the conversation goes (Wilkinson, 2004). Generally, however, the same sorts of question tend to be posed so that each conversation develops in a similar direction (Wisker, 2001). Our focus was on exploring the impact the project had had on the young women. Specifically we sought to facilitate reflection on where the young women were before they engage with the project, where they were at the point we were talking to them and where

they hoped to be in the future. They were asked to consider three positions – 'where I was' (reflecting on the past), 'where I am now' (reflecting on the present) and finally, 'where I want to be' (aspirations for the future).

Gray (2004) argues that a well-conducted interview can be a powerful way of generating rich data about people's lives, opinions and experiences. As such there are different types, and levels, of guidance with regards to how interviewing may take place across which there are many similarities – every interview or focus group discussion has a beginning, middle (the main part) and an end. In this case the focus groups were planned and carried out using the three stage framework advocated by Carter and Henderson (2006).

With the consent of the young women, the focus groups were audio-recorded from start to finish including during the time that they were working on their storyboards. The purpose of this was to capture any comments they made whilst they were creating their stories. In addition, one of the research team made field notes as an impressionistic aide memoir whilst the focus groups were in progress. Importantly, in keeping with our theoretical position, the two researchers joined in with the activity and made their own storyboards alongside the young women.

The focus groups began with a preamble and an icebreaker which aimed to put the young women. This first stage, which is also referred to by Gray (2004) as the 'preliminary' stage, was designed to put the young women at their ease as much as was possible. The purpose was to explain the nature of the focus group, what it would entail and how the resulting information would be used. It involved introductions from the research team and the young women as well as ensuring that everyone was fully conversant with the purpose and format of the focus group discussion. At this stage, consent to participate was confirmed and the

information in the Participant Information Sheet was also reviewed giving them an opportunity to ask any questions. An effort was made to ensure that this took place as informally as possible so as to try to emphasize that the purpose was to have a conversation and explore issues together. This was done in an attempt to even-out the potential hierarchical relationship (between 'researchers' and 'participants') and avoid, as much as possible, putting the young women into a 'subordinate position' (Punch, 2005:173). It was necessary to try to build rapport and develop a relaxed environment.

The next stage was the main part of the focus group. At this point the young women were invited to work on their own storyboards. Each of them were given a big sheet of card (A3 size) that they were invited to divide into three equal sections. Section one represented where they were before engaging with the project, section two where they are now (at the point the focus group took place) and section three where they hoped to be. A range of materials were provided in order for the young women to create their storyboards (for example pens, pencils, stickers, and magazines/newspapers to cut words and pictures out of). Some young women chose to write on their storyboards instead of drawing or sticking images on it. Once everyone had finished they were then invited to talk through what they had done with the rest of the group. The researchers led the discussion by presenting their own storyboards first. Further details about the young women's experiences were elicited by gentle questioning, prompting and probing by the two researchers (Bowling, 2002; Gray, 2004). During the course of the conversation the young women were encouraged to expand on what they were saying by using questions such as 'can you tell me more about that?' Using open-ended questions allowed for them to articulate their experience and opinions. Not every young woman who took part chose to speak about what they had

done. However, all of them consented to having their storyboards photographed and used as data. Some of them chose to take their storyboards away with them.

Every effort was made to fully engage the young women in the process, the purpose being to generate a group conversation rather than produce a more formal 'question and answer' type of interaction.   In order to promote a relaxed atmosphere that encourages participation, a degree of trust and rapport needs to be fostered. May (2002) argues that this is of central importance in terms of understanding (or trying to understand) the participants' perspectives and experiences. It could be argued, however, that true understanding can never actually be achieved since each person's experience and perspective is unique to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless maximising trust and building rapport is especially important when taking a feminist approach to interviewing. Rather than replicate a more paternalistic and hierarchical interview process (Punch, 2005) every effort was made to try to 'flatten out' the hierarchy between ourselves and the young women in order to create a more equal relationship. The limits of this are appreciated however it is hoped that, as Graham et al. (2006) suggest, the researchers and the participants were co-creators of the data and that greater openness and richer data resulted.

The final stage of the process was to bring the group to a satisfactory close for everyone (Gray, 2004). At this stage the researchers indicated that there were only one or two questions left signalling that the process was coming to an end. Finally the young women were asked if they had any questions of their own or anything else that they would like to add but which they hadn't yet had the opportunity to do so.   They were also thanked for their time and participation.

Kvale offers two different positions on in-depth interviewing which are useful here – 'the miner metaphor' and the 'traveller metaphor'. The 'miner metaphor' assumes the existence of knowledge (or truth) waiting to be uncovered, the interviewer unearths this through the process of interviewing. The 'traveller' metaphor draws on constructivist understandings whereby knowledge is 'created and negotiated' (cited in Legard *et al.*, 2003:139) and is much more in line with the participatory focus group approach we have outlined here. The researcher is the traveller, interpreting the meanings of the stories they encounter through the process. The researcher and participants travel together on a journey through the process and so the researcher becomes a key player in the production of data. The storyboards themselves are also an important part of the data in this approach. As the saying goes, a picture can speak a thousand words and the images/words that the young women used to represent their journeys and aspirations were very powerful in their own right (please see the two examples provided in Figure 1). The storyboards served as a mechanism for the young women to convey complex personal and emotional journeys in a safer, less threatening way. The young women were able to draw, write or create images that represented experiences or feelings which they might otherwise have found hard to describe. In order to promote a less formal and more relaxed atmosphere the young women could come and go throughout the focus group as they liked. Refreshments were also provided throughout the focus group and the group all ate together as well.

Lawthom *et al.* (2012) point to a creative turn in the social sciences which is impacting on more 'traditional' qualitative research methods. A range of creative methods are increasing used to illicit subjective, lived experiences. This results in different ways of working as well

as different types of data. We have presented one example of how creative methods might be used within focus group discussions.

Conclusion

Drawing on real research, we have argued in this paper for the potential of using innovative, creative approaches in group interviews or focus group research. We believe that the data generated in this way can be deepened and made richer by using creative processes and that such methods promote more meaningful participation in the research process. In summary, this approach has a number of advantages such as promoting participation and engagement, empowering participants and, enabling them to take more control over the research process. Such approaches could be of value in nursing research in which patients, clients and service user perspectives are often vitally important.
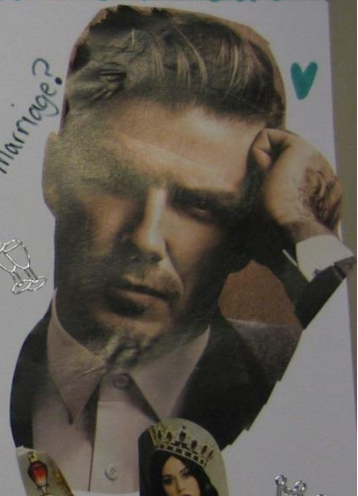
Figure 1

Where I were ...

Problems?

Hospitals

GY

Worried.

LOW!

HX

Tired...

RD

Depressed...

Self-harm !!

Where I am now...

me

new house,
town, people.

FULL!!!

Where I want to be

marriage?

Become Queen?

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