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Holistic Experiences and Strategies for Conducting Research with Couples

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Abstract

In this article we outline methodological considerations for conducting research interviews with couples. We draw from two qualitative men's health studies, both developed to explore social interactions between men and their partners of either sex in relation to their health practices. We utilized a combination of separate interviews and joint couple interviews. From these studies we offer insight into our experiences of using both types of interview styles, addressing four key areas which span elements across the research project journey: (a) choosing a mode of interview; (b) ethical concerns in couple research; (c) the interview as a platform for disclosure; and (d) analyzing data from couple research.

Keywords

relationships, research; interviews, semistructured; relationships, health care; relationships, primary partner; men's health; health and well-being; same-sex couples; health seeking; illness and disease; gays and lesbians; interpretive methods; research, qualitative

Interviews are an informative and popular qualitative research method (Silverman, 2013) but present difficult choices, when researching couples, in deciding who should be present in interviews. Couples research is becoming established within the social sciences, in part because particular research questions require interview approaches with both partners. Couples' experiences are intersubjective; gaining in-depth understanding can therefore require reflection on multiple versions of the same event. Hertz (1995) highlights how couples' stories "are woven out of many different and occasionally conflicting accounts" (p. 446), and exploring the similarities and contradictions within such accounts can be key to an investigation. For researchers, the need to explore multiple narratives has to be managed alongside other practical issues, including ethical challenges, theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches.

A growing body of literature addresses these complexities in both same-sex and opposite-sex couple research. Most work has considered the configurations of couple research interviews, and the advantages and disadvantages, of interviewing partners together or apart (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008; Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014; Morris, 2001). Some ventured into considerations such as ethics (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014; Forbat & Henderson, 2003, 2005). Rarely, authors grappled with analytical and conceptual approaches to couple interview research (Beitin, 2008; Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014; Hertz, 1995). For example, Eisikovits and Koren (2010) explained their approach to combining individual interviews and dyadic analysis, which enabled them to study "the partners' individual perceptions and understandings, while taking into account the context of their joint life to understand the essence of their experience" (p. 1645). Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2012) offer additional insights by exploring the corresponding switch between scripting 'the couple' and scripting a 'relational self' (p. 63).

These contributions are helpful, but how these different dimensions interact

throughout the research project remains relatively unaddressed. This article aims to outline our approaches and experiences of planning, conducting and analyzing couple research within two separate projects. It focuses on four salient issues: (1) choosing a mode of interview (individual or joint) (2) ethical concerns (3) the interview as platform for disclosure, and (4) the complexities of analyzing data from couple research. Although power dynamics (including gender) were also revealed, they have been excluded for brevity.

Methods and Samples

Data and memos from two qualitative projects, both utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews are drawn on for this article. Both were conducted out of Leeds Beckett University after receiving institutional ethics approval.

In Study 1 Debbie Braybrook (DB) explored the influence of gay men on their same-sex partners' health-related practices using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). How and why partners attempted to influence one another's health, and personal health practices, health histories, relationship history and influence attempts were the focus. Participants were recruited from locations across England through LGBT organizations, personal contacts, following public presentations, and snowball sampling. Overall, 27 English-speaking men, aged between 21 and 71, took part in interviews between June 2012 and December 2013. Couples chose to take part in either an interview conducted individually or jointly as a couple. A total of 18 men (i.e. 9 couples) were interviewed with their partner, 6 men (i.e. 3 couples) were interviewed individually, and in 3 instances men were interviewed alone because partners chose not to take part in the study. Interviews lasted between 55 minutes and 3 hours, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In Study 2 Lawrence Mróz (LM) explored how opposite-sex partner relationships helped shape the dietary understandings and practices of men diagnosed with prostate cancer (Mróz and Robertson, 2015) using interpretive descriptive methods (Thorne, Kirkham &

MacDonald-Emes, 1997). Participants from the United Kingdom were recruited through the national Prostate Cancer UK newsletter and snowball sampling. Men diagnosed with prostate cancer at least 6 months and up to 5 years previously were invited to complete week-long food journals which were then used to customize interview questions. Partners were invited to participate in interviews and recruitment was restricted to couples where both the man and his partner agreed to participate. Men chose whether to be interviewed separately, or jointly. Five couples were interviewed jointly and nine were interviewed individually. Interviews were conducted between December 2012 and July 2013, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

This article emerged from the authors' common interests in methodological options and resulting implications for couple interview studies. Both had research questions best addressed through couple research and shared social constructivist epistemologies, viewing interviews as reciprocal processes producing (co-)constructed accounts rather than descriptive reflections of an uncontested reality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In Study 1, participants are referred to as P1 and P2 (i.e. Partner 1 and Partner 2), and in Study 2, M and W (i.e. Man and Woman) in illustrative quotes.

Findings: Key Areas for Consideration

I. Choosing a Mode of Interview

The interview possibilities in couple research include (a) individual interviews conducted at different times; (b) individual interviews conducted by different researchers at the same time; (c) joint interviews; (d) a purposive combination of individual and joint interviews with the same participants; and (e) individual interviews with some participants and joint interviews with others. Eisikovits and Koren (2010) highlighted the benefits and drawbacks of each configuration, and the suitability of each to different topics, but other authors have overlooked the complications involved in deciding on research interview configuration (e.g.

Mellor, Slaymaker, & Cleland, 2013). We offer insights by presenting our accounts of how we made these decisions.

Some researchers do not offer participants a choice of interview configuration because of the topic studied. For example, individual interviews might be necessary where research topics, such as domestic violence, might put participants in danger. Specifying interview styles simplifies other processes in a project by, for example, facilitating standardized approaches to analysis. Having considered our research topics carefully, both studies decided a mix of separate and joint interviews would be best, because it allowed participants choice in their preferred interview method. Participants in Study 1 were also able to decide whether both couple members were involved. This practice might make it easier to recruit participants to a study and help build rapport. Although not all potential participants are interested in partaking in research, the likelihood of both partners being enthusiastic about participating presents more challenges. Although there was a minority of couples in Study 1 where only one partner was interviewed (often justified as their significant other not having time), there were examples of individuals who were clearly not open to being involved:

P1: [W]hen I go home tonight and speak to [P2], (DB: Yeah) 'cause although he's like "Oh no, I don't wanna do that! That would be my worst nightmare! You go and talk about whatever you want, but no, it'd be my worst nightmare!" (DB: Yeah) he'd probably be quite interested to see how it went.

Although research aims should remain the primary driver in choosing interview modes, offering the choice of individual or couple interviews allows interviewers to experience the benefits (and drawbacks) of both modes. In Study 1, a joint interview showed how partners might end up questioning one another, momentarily positioning the researcher as an engaged observer.

P1: You were moaning about your toe when it turned out to be gout. You wouldn't go.

P2: No, I didn't moan about that.

P1: You did.

P2: No.

P1: [laughs] So you disagree with me.

P2: Yes. [talking to DB] You're used to, you're used to these exchanges that come up (DB: Yep [laughs]).

Even in these spontaneous conversations, couples are often talking for the researcher. They are discussing topics initiated by the researcher, whose presence is undoubtedly felt and accounted for as demonstrated by P2's final comment.

Concealment was possible in both studies. In Study 2, previous research indicated that men's private food practices might be criticized by partners, and therefore might be concealed in joint interviews. Participants might have preferred individual interviews to avoid conflict with their partner and allow freedom to speak frankly. Furthermore, a participant in Study 1 discussed his partner's repeated attempts to discourage his use of prescribed medication, and in doing so suggested that this account might not have been offered were his partner in the interview:

There came a point I had to start [using medication] . . . He didn't want me to do that. . . . And, then I said to him "No," I said "We are not talking about that any more, (DB: Okay.) because this is my body . . . I'm doing things the way I feel I need to do it, (DB: Yeah.) if you've got a problem that is your problem and you must sort that out." . . . Each time I'd go to the [practitioner] and I'd come back again with the prescription, he'd start again. . . . I said to him "Discussion closed, as from now." . . .

And, I know that he's not happy with it, but I, (DB: Yeah.) I can't take it away.

In Study 2, when discussing family food provision, men sometimes deferred to partners for details, often citing her comparatively richer food-related skills or knowledge as justification. For this reason, men might prefer joint interviews and downplay their food-related interest in separate interviews. For example, one man interviewed separately justified his lack of food involvement saying, "it's a bit of a male thing probably. I would probably not want to obsess with it. You know, but she really looks into it." Individual interviewing here would encourage men to speak without relying on partners. Later this man admitted his involvement in nutrition information seeking; "she found books, well she read them first and passed them on to me and I read them." However she reported he was not very involved; "he won't read about it, no, he leaves it all for me." This contradiction suggests an exaggeration of his nutrition information seeking, or her lacking awareness/downplaying of his engagement, and of the importance of her role in his health. Contradictions in individual interviews are challenging because researchers face various interpretations.

Alternatively, a joint interview might clarify each partner's practices. In a joint interview in Study 2 a man remarked how they both contributed to his food diary: "It's kind of a combined effort, but you actually just did the transcribing really." His partner quickly replied: "Except that I actually wrote it!" Her clarification on her food leadership might ensure a 'truer' account of their food practices, or it could potentially 'shut down' his narrative.

Aside from a 'common-sense' assessment of what is best for participants and the topic, researchers cannot assume knowledge of what topics mean to participants. One partner/couple might take a very matter-of-fact outlook on a particular issue, whereas another might find it sensitive. Although we offered a choice of interview mode, some couples chose

to defer the decision to the researcher's preference.

2. Ethical Concerns in Couple Research

Ethical issues surrounding couple research has been given limited attention. One of the first interactions requiring ethical consideration is how participants are recruited. Focusing on couples means that even if only one partner is interviewed the effect on the relationship must be considered. Both studies gave couples time to consider if both wished to participate, what might be discussed, and to jointly decide on their involvement thus hopefully ameliorating relationship strain.

Despite these efforts, undercurrents of power within relationships might influence choice. Taylor and de Vocht (2011) highlight that even where one partner would rather be interviewed separately they might not voice this because it implies they wish to withhold something from their partner. For example, power relations might have been at work in Study 1 where one couple was interviewed separately. P1 was interviewed first, and on arriving at the couple's home to interview P2, P1 drew attention to P2's anxiety about being interviewed, which suggested he had been convinced to take part and was uncomfortable. Throughout the interview P2 made a number of comments that implicitly suggested his nervousness. When asked if the interview had caused him to "think of anything that you hadn't reflected on before?" he responded:

I'd say I don't do an awful lot of reflection [laughs], I mean other than my parents or, I I've never really spoken about P1 [laughs] (DB: Mmhuh.) in the past you know [laughs]. (DB: Yeah.) Ummm. So that, that's quite a new. . . . These are personal questions so [laughs], (DB: Yeah.) ummm.

The personal nature of this interview might have made P2 uneasy, but his partner's involvement and/or encouragement might have urged him to participate. However, following

the interview P2 noted, via email, “Contrary to my initial apprehensions about being interviewed it was a good experience, it has given me opportunity to reflect on what continues to be a wonderful relationship.” It is recommended that couples researchers are particularly diligent in ensuring partners are comfortable participating, and informed of potential research dissemination.

Certain topics might create tensions between couples, reigniting old disagreements or sparking new issues. Disagreements arose in both projects. For example, a Study 1 participant ended with “Anyway, we’ll have to disagree on this one” and, rather than pushing for more detail, DB responded “okay that’s fine. We’ll leave that one alone” and moved on to the next topic. Trying to reach a definitive account of ‘actual’ events alludes to a positivist epistemology, whereby ‘the truth’ is considered accessible through research, whereas we recognized multiple viewpoints. Explicit verbalization was not always apparent, reminding researchers to watch for subtle signs of disagreement, including body language (rolling eyes, shaking heads), and brief/quiet utterances. For example, while his partner described his health practice, a man from Study 1 muttered “I don’t know about that” and DB followed up with “You look like you want to respond?” giving him chance to elaborate. Taylor and de Vocht (2011) support this neutral approach to addressing subtle disagreement, and suggest no additional probing if the participant declines.

Conducting individual interviews generates other issues. Participants might worry they are being tested against their partner’s account, or presenting a united front (Valentine, 1999). Researchers might be questioned about what a partner divulged. Although this did not happen explicitly during these two studies, allusions were made to ‘what partners mentioned’, and interviewer discretion was important. While discussing introducing his partner to a particular sport, a Study 1 participant seemed to be seeking some level of reassurance in one account:

I think he's en*, he enjoys it now I think [chuckles] (DB: Yeah.) I hope! [laughs] [DB laughs] Ummm.

Conscientiousness was required to avoid offering reassurance that would break research confidences. Had this been a conversation with a friend, comforting words might have been offered, but the interviewer role differs. What if advice was given that, when acted on, had a detrimental effect on the relationship? Although we concur with feminist principles of openness and re-distribution of power through interviews (e.g. Yost & Chmielewski, 2013), interviewers should be wary of inadvertently developing a counseling-type relationship. Advising or sharing confidential information with partners presents ethical issues. In Study 1 some participants e-mailed after reviewing their transcripts to ensure certain details would not be published.

An ethical consideration specific to Study 2 was the use of previously completed food journals in interviews, and the potential loss of privacy. In individual interviews LM only used journals in the man's interview, and so they remained private unless he discussed it with his partner. In joint interviews, however, journal contents were discussed in the presence of partners, thus privacy was lost. This was discussed with men before interviews, but because women were mostly involved in completing or reading the journal, men were content to share. Data capture methods other than food diaries, such as photo-voice (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007), might also threaten privacy if used in conjunction with joint interviews.

Ethical concerns continue after the interviews. Data presentation is important, because individual accounts, although anonymized, might remain recognizable, and potentially contentious, to a partner (Peters, Jackson, & Rudge, 2008, p. 377). A Study 1 participant drew attention to such an occurrence when he referred to something he revealed

about his partner and then stated “Don’t tell him I said that [laughing]. You’ll be causing a divorce.” Despite laughter, such statements should be taken seriously by researchers.

Anonymized and out of context, this comment remains harmless, but in revealing what the participant requested remain confidential, the situation becomes complicated. In an attempt to avoid unwelcome revelations, transcripts were sent to all participants in Study 1 for checking and some participants removed large chunks of data. This process possibly shifts power, providing participants with greater sense of ownership over their data. Forbat and Henderson (2005) note the practice of sending transcripts back to participants (or not) is often inadequately addressed and handling transcripts warrants ethical consideration. Neglecting the significance of transcripts could have magnified implications in research that might disrupt partnerships.

Ethical considerations also arise during research. For example, in Study 1, DB initially proposed a single interview but it became clear that follow-up questions would benefit the project. However, one couple had separated since their interview reaffirming the ethical dilemmas researchers face when they retain the power to reveal data that might disrupt ongoing relationships, or upset individuals involved in those that have since ended.

3. The Interview as Platform for Disclosure

Feminist researchers note that being involved in interviews can be positive because “participant couples are given the opportunity to tell their stories to an attentive audience and be part of a study that has the potential to improve care and generate new knowledge and understandings about the human condition” (Peters et al., 2008, p. 376). Thus, although intended to benefit research, participants might also ‘use’ the interview.

Participants often used interviews to communicate misgivings to ourselves, but also to their partners. Individual interviews offer an outlet for rarely discussed issues, and joint interviews do the same with the partner’s presence providing opportunity to articulate

specific points to each other. Although unusual that an issue would be discussed which a couple has never previously shared, interviews could provide a ‘safe’ place to raise unresolved issues. In Study 1, men’s references to their partner’s weight and their desire for partners to increase exercise or improve dietary habits was an example of this.

Interviews also provide individuals opportunities to enact and establish their identities with a new, attentive listener, while reaffirming identities to their partner. Previous studies have shown how interviews can be used as a way of communicating power (e.g. Valentine, 1999). This was demonstrated in the current studies, as evidenced in a Study 1 interview:

P1: I am known in the field. And so I do a lot of media work and all that, and he calls it the P1 show. And, I can totally relate to that. I’m, tough, I’m a tough act to follow. And so, you know it’s, P1 has got the new book out, P1 is on the TV here, P1 this, P1 that, and then it, and then P2 is sort of like “What about me?” And he’s not doing poor by any standards But, compared to me, and I think that part of that, comes out in him in the home sphere where he, he can, he can try to rule the roost.

Participants might also use interviews to offload concerns. One woman from Study 2 spent 15 minutes outlining her distress about her partner’s prostate cancer diagnosis, but in his separate interview he dismissed her concerns “fatalistically”. Joint interviews might facilitate discussion of couple disagreements. For example, one man stated “she regulates not just the food, but a lot of things in the relationship,” but she argued it was necessary regulation:

M: If we’re in a restaurant together and I order a steak

W: Oh I’ll look at you!

M: I’ll get the [rolls his eyes exaggeratedly]!

W: Yeah I do, I go “Umph” [stares at M exaggeratedly]!

M: I'll get the look you know? "Should you be eating that?" look, you know?

W: Well you shouldn't really, should you?

Despite justifying her "look", he argued "if I'm going to enjoy a steak every now and again, I would rather enjoy it and not feel guilty." Here the interview offered a platform to discuss food control issues in the presence of an interested third party and both partners used the opportunity to attempt to gain support for their own position. It is clear that couples interviews can provide participant opportunities to demonstrate power, to reassert messages they want to make to their partner in front of an interested third party, and to utilize the interview to safely discuss difficult issues.

4. Analyzing Data from Couple Interview Research

One challenge that couple researchers will likely face during analysis is differing accounts. Attempting to get a 'complete' story from couples can be challenging for joint and individual interviews. Individual interviews offered space to share personal experiences without censure from partners (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008; Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2012), but discussing similar topics with two participants separately often generated different accounts in both studies. Participants also discussed issues their partner did not mention. When a single 'truth' is not what researchers seek then such differing accounts are valuable in themselves. Couple members' viewpoints, whether they clash or converge, are vital for nuanced understandings. Disagreements between participants suggested interesting points of tension, but also demonstrated couple dynamics in meaning making. For example, one man in Study 2 seemingly dismissed his high blood cholesterol as unimportant by casually remarking: "I don't check it regularly." In contrast, in her separate account, his partner described his cholesterol as an important health issue for them both, possibly demonstrating her role in managing his health: "we'll talk about it and I'll remind him [about his cholesterol check]."

Although complete disagreements might be confusing, researchers can benefit from exploring the way couples negotiate disagreements and what this might say about relationship power differentials.

Where both partners seem to construct similar stories in separate interviews, or agree on the same story in a joint interview, researchers should be wary of being “seduced into a realist epistemology through the convergence of accounts” (Warin, Solomon, & Lewis, 2007, p. 131). As researchers before (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003, p. 16; Warin et al., 2007, p. 132), we sought to resist this by critically examining converging accounts. Looking beyond the topic of discussion and exploring the dynamics at play can offer broader insight. For example, the desire to enact a particular identity might lay beneath couple’s interactions, as suggested in a Study 1 interview:

P1: when P2’s poorly, I want to look after him.

P2: I don’t wanna be looked after.

P1: He doesn’t want to be looked after. When I’m poorly I really want to be nursed and (P2: And I’m like.) looked after, and P2’s a [P2 laughs] heartless bastard [laughs]

As well as epistemological considerations around analysis there are practical issues. Although Morgan, Ataie, Carder and Hoffman (2013, p. 7) advise taking heed in reading “one person’s persistent comments for a shared interest on the part of both participants”, this raises a larger question: in couple research, does frequency amount to importance? Frequently mentioned topics imply a logical path comfortably rooted in the natural sciences (i.e. more instances = more reliability). However, in couple research it might be topics mentioned infrequently that are particularly poignant, as they are not ‘safe territory’. Less frequently mentioned topics might signify points of tension between partners and thus might offer more nuanced insights. In Study 1, a man referred to his partner’s nationality and

religion to explain his stoic approach to health:

P1: I think he still does have, a bit of, quite a bit of stoicism, and I think it's partly his Scottish Calvinism coming through . . . where it's like "Oh well it's just a bit of, just a bit of illness, you know it's alright" [laughs] (P2: Oh I don't know about that.)

This was P1's only mention of P2's religious upbringing, and though P2 seemed unsure of his partner's interpretation, it informed a broader interpretation of how P1 understood his partner's health-related practices, which fed into health influence processes within their relationship.

Conclusion

Interview research with couples presents exciting opportunities that are often underutilized, and we offer our considerations and expectations for those contemplating such work. Based on our experiences with couple research this article offers an overview of issues we faced and thereby transferable lessons potentially useful to others.

As outlined, offering choice in interview configurations was convenient for both studies because it aided recruitment and gave a wider range of interview products to broaden our understanding of the underlying social processes. We argued that couples interviewing does not have to be done either jointly or as individual interviews, but that introducing choice in configuration can help participants feel more in control. Being aware of and mitigating concerns, particularly around confidentiality, were difficult yet important considerations in how interviews were approached and conducted. Couples interviews can create opportunities for one partner to express concerns to the other in what they might consider a safe or even semi-public setting and this needs careful management by interviewers. Researchers should bear in mind that every choice made could direct their research to varying extents.

Additionally, during analysis the weaving together of often conflicting accounts (noted in

previous couples work, Hertz, 1995) constructed in couples interviews, although challenging, provides a fruitful avenue for critical exploration of research topics. In sum, we have demonstrated that when thinking about research interviews with couples, consideration should extend beyond the interview itself; it needs to incorporate all areas of the research process, including ethics and analysis, to maximize the benefits of such interviews.

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