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Qualitative telephone interviews: Strategies for success

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Abstract

The use of the telephone in qualitative interviews is discouraged by traditionalists who view it as an inferior data collection instrument. However these claims have not been supported by empirical evidence and qualitative researchers who have used and compared the telephone to the face-to-face mode of interviewing present a different story. This study attempts to build on the limited existing research comparing the issues involved and the data collected using the telephone and face-to-face interview modes. The study evaluates the criticisms of traditionalists in the light of existing research. The study then presents the observations of the researcher based on a research project that involved 43 telephone, 1 Skype and 6 face-to-face interviews. These observations as well as the limited prior research are used to develop strategies for the effective use telephone interviews in qualitative research. The study concludes that for certain studies the telephone if used with the strategies recommended here provides qualitative researchers with a sound data collection instrument.

1 Introduction

Major sources of data in qualitative research include interviews, field observations and document analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2006). Of these the interview has become established as a pillar in qualitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2008; Hermanowicz, 2002; Qu & Dumay, 2011). However interviews vary significantly in their structure (Bryman, 2001) and not all interviews are designed for qualitative research. The level of structure given to an interview conversation (Hermanowicz, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) reflects the level of control exercised by the interviewer. This control is exercised through the number, type, and order of the questions asked by the interviewer (Rowley, 2012). In this way interviews can be broadly classified as structured, semi structured and unstructured (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

At one extreme is the structured interview in which the interviewer exercises a relatively high level of control over the interview conversation (Rowley, 2012). Structured interviews use a relatively large of relatively specific or closed ended questions, posed to all interviewees in the same order. Structured interviews are similar to a questionnaire and can involve providing

interviewees with options from which to select their answer. Thus the data collected is often quantitatively analyzed making structured interviews more suitable for quantitative research.

In contrast unstructured interviews feature a relatively low level of control over the interview conversation (Rowley, 2012). Interviewees are asked one or two broad open ended questions and provide the interviewee considerable room to freely express their perspectives and experiences on a certain topic or theme. The data obtained is rich and in-depth. However the analysis and interpretation of this data can be challenging.

Within these two extremes falls the semi-structured interview with significant variation (Rowley, 2012). Here the interviewer will ask multiple 'main' questions focusing on one or a multiple of closely related themes or topics. The questions are open end and ordered according to the flow of the conversation (Bryman, 2001). These main questions are then supported by a number of probes and prompts designed to dig deeper and extract rich and more in-depth data. Consequently interviews in qualitative research are either semi-structured or unstructured in nature (Bryman, 2001; Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Traditionally qualitative interviews have been conducted on a face-to-face basis (Novick, 2008). Scholars have argued that this 'natural encounter' is necessary for the interviewer to build and maintain rapport with interviewees (Gillham, 2005). This creates a relaxed and friendly environment for the interview that is critical in stimulating interviewees to speak freely and openly about the topic at hand. This is viewed as essential in gathering rich in-depth data (Hermanowicz, 2002; Shuy, 2003). Face-to-face interviews also allow the use of body language as a key communication tool that ensures that messages are correctly understood. Finally, face-to-face interviews provide visual access to the interviewee's environment allowing the researcher to collect key contextual data.

A telephone interview allows interpersonal communication without a face-to-face meeting (Carr & Worth, 2001) and is a cost effective alternative. However telephone interviews, with its lack of visual contact between interviewer and interviewee, is shunned by traditionalists and is regarded as inferior (Gillham, 2005; Hermanowicz, 2002).

However, these criticisms against the use of the telephone are only now being subjected to academic investigation (Holt, 2010; Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2011; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). In a review of the literature from 1988 to 2007, Novick (2008) found only 8 articles dealing specifically with the use of the telephone in qualitative interviews. Similarly, qualitative research texts either discussed the use of the telephone for quantitative interviews or move the discussion forward to exploring the use of the internet in qualitative research. Novick (2008) concludes that the lack of scholarly work in the field points to a clear and unsubstantiated bias against the use of the telephone in qualitative research. However, qualitative researchers who have used the telephone or compared the telephone with face-to-face interview mode do not support these arguments (Shuy, 2003; Stephens, 2007; Vogl, 2013; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012).

While these studies provide valuable insights into the use of the telephone in qualitative research they suffer from certain limitations. The study by Stephens (2007) provides observations from just five telephone interviews. Furthermore these interviews were held with university professors who have no experience of using the telephone in qualitative interviews. Vogl's (2013) study compares 56 telephone interviews with 56 face-to-face ones. However the interview participants in the study were 5 to 11 year old children as opposed to professionals who are the target of business schools. Tucker & Parker (2014) in their study provide the views and perceptions of a sample of qualitative researchers who have not used the telephone in qualitative research in social science research.

Other mode comparison studies have relied on data collected for research aimed at understanding personal experiences of a sensitive nature. For example the study by Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) explores the experiences of individuals visiting family members in jail. Glogowska et al, (2011) use data gathered in a study exploring reasons for students drop out from college and university. Similarly studies by Irvine et al, (2012), Trier-Bieniek (2012), Holt (2010), Chapple (1999), Carr & Worth (2001) explore mental health and employment, abuse and violence, parenting children with alleged criminal offences, experience of purchasing over-the-counter drugs and medicines from pharmacies and mental health following surgery.

Opdenakker (2006) explores the dynamics of virtual teams. However the study does not provide details of how many telephone interviews were conducted stating that the interviews were conducted primarily face-to-face.

This study aims to overcome the above identified limitations in three ways. First, the study relies on observations gained from a research project where Interview participants are managers and the area of interest is their work done as managers. Second, interview participants relied heavily on the use of the telephone as part of their daily work and thus were comfortable with this technology as a mode of communication. Third, the observations are developed from 43 telephone, 1 Skype and 6 face-to-face interviews of an average lasting 63 minutes. In this way the study builds on the limited research on the use of the telephone in qualitative interviews.

The paper is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, the second section is a review of the literature on the use of the telephone in qualitative interviewing. The third section provides the research method used in this study. Section four presents the reflections of the researcher in undertaking qualitative telephone interviews. Section five, provides a conclusion to the paper.

2 Literature review

Traditionalists hold three main reservations against the use of the telephone in qualitative interviewing. These centre around; claims that using the telephone the researcher will be unable to create and maintain rapport with interviews; the use of the telephone negatively impacts the communication process resulting in misunderstandings and confusion; the telephone does not provide the researcher with visual access to the interviewees natural environment.

2.1 Inability to create & maintain rapport

Traditionalists argue that the lack of visual cues affects the interviewer's ability to build and maintain rapport during the course of the interview (Shuy, 2003). Rapport is considered to be a key ingredient to creating a comfortable environment which encourages the interviewee to

speak openly and freely. This results in the interviewee sharing rich and in-depth data during the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Furthermore a face-to-face interview allows the researcher to meet the interviewee in person. This provides the researcher with an opportunity to conduct rapport building exercises prior to the commencement of the interview. These include engaging interviewees in small talk, jokes, politeness routines (Shuy, 2003) and offering friendship gestures such as a cup of coffee or a sandwich (Chapple, 1999). These acts help to break the ice and create a friendly environment conducive to a free flowing conversation.

Thus without a visual interaction the telephone interview will suffer from a lower level of rapport leading to interviewees feeling more hesitant and reluctant in speaking freely and openly with the interviewer. This would potentially lead to shorter interviews durations with the researcher acquiring only superfluous data. In short the level of rapport achieved by the researcher affects the interview process and ultimately the quantity and quality of data the researcher is able to extract from the interviewee (Sweet, 2002).

2.1.1 Findings of studies comparing interview modes

In a study aimed at understanding the experiences of individuals visiting family members in jail, Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) compared data acquired through 21 qualitative face-to-face interviews with 22 qualitative telephone ones. The study found no difference in the number of responses to questions asked. Nor did the study observe any differences in the nature and depth of these responses across interview modes. They conclude that the telephone provides data of comparable quantity and quality to face-to-face interviews.

Trier-Bieniek, (2012) in her study of US women who suffered abuse, violence or assault states that her interviews were a success. She states that she was able to build rapport with study participants who were comfortable discussing traumatizing personal and sensitive experiences. Importantly she points out that there is never a guarantee of a researcher being able to build rapport in a face-to-face interview.

In a mode comparison study, Vogl (2013) compares 56 face-to-face interviews against 56 telephone ones. The study found that there was no significant difference in the duration of the conversation, the total number of words spoken, the proportion of words spoken by interviewees, the number of responses, the number of pauses, or the need for clarification across either mode. The study concludes that there was no difference in the motivation and level of rapport achieved through either mode. Importantly, the study attributes differences in responses to sensitive questions not to the interview mode but rather to the personality of the interviewee.

Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer (2011) in their interview of students who dropped out of university report none of their participants showing any signs of discomfort with the duration of the interview nor did any participant end the interview before the allotted time of 20 minutes. Instead most of the interviews in their study had an average duration of more than 30 minutes. These studies provide evidence to support the argument that the use of the telephone in qualitative interviewing does not negatively impact the ability of researcher to create rapport with interviewees.

Reflecting on his experiences of conducting Elite and Ultra Elite interviews of university professors in the US, Stephens (2007) argues that these interviews were a success as he was able to build rapport and gather insightful data from the telephone interviews comparable to the face-to-face ones. Chapple (1999) concludes that data from telephone interviews was rich and in-depth with participants freely sharing their personal views and experiences. Holt (2010) states that their study participants reported that the telephone interview was not only a positive experience but was similar to chatting with a friend or receiving a counseling session. Deakin & Wakefield (2014) in their study share their experience of conducting Skype and face-to-face interviews. They argue that they faced no difficulty building rapport with their study participants and that the level of rapport achieved was comparable to their face-to-face interviews.

2.1.2 Power balance and interviewer bias

Telephone interviews, as opposed to face-to-face encounters, create a more balanced distribution of power between interview participants (Volg, 2013). The telephone gives greater control over the conversation to the interviewee. This not only encourages the interviewee to talk openly and freely but importantly allows more control to the interviewee who can direct the conversation to areas that they perceive as being important.

Furthermore while the interviewer can train him/herself to avoid being biased and stereotyping interviewees based on visual traits and behavior the same cannot be said of the interviewee (Volg, 2013). Indeed the interviewee has no personal commitment in the research and may very well be biased by the age, status, gender, physical appearance, and behavior of the interviewer. Thus by removing these visual distractions from the conversation the telephone eliminates interview bias from the interview.

2.1.3 Is there such a thing as too much rapport?

The face-to-face interview mode acts like a double edged sword (Tucker & Parker, 2014). Qualitative researchers reflecting on their experience of interviewing find that the face-to-face mode may encourage “too much rapport”. Getting too close to the interviewee may result in the discussion drifting away and losing its focus. The qualitative researchers in the study agreed with the need to maintain a degree of distance and formality in the interview. They warn against getting too close to the interviewee. Thus the telephone provides a sound solution to this problem.

2.1.4 A participant centred approach

Qualitative researchers should consider the needs of participants which may be better met through the use of the telephone. Studies have shown that interview participants when given the option of face-to-face and telephone interviews have voluntarily selected the telephone as their preferred interview mode (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Holt, 2010).

Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) at the conclusion of each interview requested participants to provide feedback on their interview experience. All interviewees responded positively stating that they were satisfied with the telephone interview and expressed appreciation over being

given the option of selecting their preferred method of interview. Similar results were highlighted by Holt (2010), who also obtained feedback from participants on their experience of the telephone interview process.

There are three reasons for this. First, as Trier-Bieniek (2012) points out that many people upon hearing about the study expressed a strong desire to participate in the interviews. Had the interviews been organized on a face-to-face basis, the time and cost involved in travelling to the interviewer, would not have allowed them to do so. The telephone however overcomes this challenge and allows these people to participate in studies and share their views and experiences.

Second, the telephone provides a greater perceived level of anonymity and privacy than a face-to-face encounter (Carr & Worth, 2001; Holt A., 2010; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Vogl, 2013). This coupled with the researchers promise to ensure data confidentiality can encourage people to talk freely and openly. For research that explores experiences of an intimate and personal nature, the loss of face is reduced and interviewees are more comfortable discussing in an open and honest manner personally sensitive issues at hand (Chapple, 1999; Opdenakker, 2006; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Third, many people are shy and are not comfortable with a face-to-face interaction (Tucker & Parker, 2014). Not everyone is a social animal and many prefer the telephone interview mode which acts as a shield. a telephone interview can decrease social pressure for the interviewee and help to increase rapport between interview participants (Vogl, 2013). Thus the researcher needs to consider the personality of the interviewee and what they are more comfortable with.

2.2 Negatively impacts the communication process

Traditionalists argue that facial expressions and body language are an integral part of the communication process (Gillham, 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Rowley, 2012). These visual cues are used by both the interviewer and the interviewee in communicating between each other and also as a means of interpreting what is being communicated. Thus visual cues form an important additional layer of communication (Gillham, 2005) which is potentially lost during a telephone encounter (Opdenakker, 2006). Thus traditionalists argue that the lack of visual

cues will create challenges in the communication process for both the interviewer and the interviewee. This creates a risk of misunderstandings which may ultimately lead to a breakdown in the communication process (Hermanowicz, 2002).

Second, lack of visual access inherent in qualitative telephone interviews results in a loss of key non-verbal visual data (Novick, 2008). Traditionalists argue that this additional detail gives richness to the data collected and is missing in qualitative telephone interviews (Opdenakker, 2006).

Third, the researcher is unable to use body language as a natural tool for probing and seeking clarifications or elaborations to answers given (Stephens, 2007). This hampers the ability of the researcher to dig deeper and explore issues in-depth. The inability to use visual probes affects the interviewer ability to control the direction and flow of the interview conversation (Hermanowicz, 2002). This then affects the quality of the data collected during the interview process.

Fourth, interviewers cannot rely on visual cues to assess the interviewee's level of interest. Visual signs such as frequently checking of the time inform the researcher when there is a need to motivate and stimulate the interest of interviewees (Irvine et al, 2012). As a result qualitative telephone interviews will require greater concentration and energy on the part of the interviewer in keeping the interviewee engaged and maintaining a natural flow in the conversation. Inability to successfully do this will result the interview duration will be shorter leading once again to a lower quantity of data collected. However qualitative researchers argue that the lack of visual data in the communication process does not create an insurmountable challenge. A number of strategies can be used in combination to overcome these challenges. Four such strategies are discussed below:

2.2.1 Sharpen your listening skills

The lack of visual cues forces the interviewer and the interviewee to listen carefully to what is being said (Opdenakker, 2006). Carefully listening to what interviewees are saying is a key ingredient for successful interviewing (Hermanowicz, 2002; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Careful or effective listening can be used by the researcher to overcome two challenges. First, carefully

listening to and picking up on verbal cues such as pauses, hurried answers, tones etc allows the researcher to assess if interviewees are confused, hesitating, or experiencing frustration (Chapple, 1999; Carr & Worth, 2001; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). This allows the researcher to take necessary counter measures to address the issue.

Second, by carefully listening to what the interviewee is saying the interviewer can assess if the interviewee has understood and answered the question that was asked of them (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This allows the interviewer to either rephrase the question or use probes and prompts in an effort to extract more in-depth data. Carefully listening to what the interviewee is saying and directing the flow of the conversation with appropriate probes and prompts is a key ingredient for a successful interview (Hermanowicz, 2002; Qu & Dumay, 2011).

2.2.2 How to controlling the flow of the conversation

Stephens (2005) narrates that he was reluctant in interrupting the interviewees in fear of breaking the natural flow of the conversation. On occasions when he did interrupt the interviewees, these interruptions although not perceived as being rude, were either ignored or unheard. As a solution Stephen (2007) recommends that researchers write down questions while interviewees speak. Interviewees should be allowed to complete what they are saying without interruption. Once they have completed what they were saying the interviewer should then ask questions that were written down. Second, interviewers should make an effort to clearly articulate questions asked to interviews. Indeed clearly articulating questions is a pre-requisite for a 'great' interview (Hermanowicz, 2002). Again the telephone forces interview participants to focus on careful listening and clearly articulating what they are saying.

2.2.3 Communicating presence

Silence on the part of the interviewer can create the impression of interviewer absence. This was the case in Holt's (2010) study, with interviewee feedback highlighting that they would have liked greater participation in the interview by the researcher. The challenge for the researcher then is how to communicate to the interviewee that they are present and listening to conversation without interrupting the interviewee and the flow of the conversation (Stephens, 2007).

Holt (2010) states that an interviewer can communicate their presence to the interviewee by carefully using umm's and ah's in the conversation. This is supported by Irvine et al, (2012) who find that, acknowledgement tokens in the form of 'yeah', 'okay', 'right', given by the interviewer to the interviewee as an indication of being present and understanding what the interviewee was saying was found to be more frequent than face-to-face interviews.

2.2.4 Interpreting body language

First, Irvine et. al., (2013) find that there was no significant difference in the need for seeking clarification across interview modes. This suggests that the lack of visual cues does not result in a breakdown in the conversation or misunderstanding in messages communicated in telephone interviews as is argued by traditionalists.

Second, supporters of qualitative telephone interviews argue that interpreting or attempting to interpret body language can be a difficult and challenging task (Bernard, 2002; Chapple, 1999; Novick, 2008). Attempting to understand; what someone is saying; trying to say; what they are saying but do not mean to say represents a slippery slope that is best left to psychologists. More importantly it assumes that the interviewees are incapable of articulating their message and/or they may intentionally or unintentionally be misleading the interviewer.

2.2.5 Focusing on speaking and listening

The lack of visual cues forces both the interviewer and interviewee to articulate clearly the messages they wish to communicate (Stephens, 2007). Similarly the telephone forces both parties to carefully listen to what is being said (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This has two benefits. First, it improves the quality of the communication process resulting in fewer misunderstandings. Second, the transcribed interview contains a more rich text than compared to face-to-face interviews (Holt, 2010). Thus, far from being a weakness the lack of visual cues may actually be an advantage especially for qualitative studies that rely primarily on transcripts need to focus more on listening and speaking (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

2.2.6 Allows note taking without distracting interviewees

The challenge with Stephens approach however is that all possible questions in a semi-structured interview cannot be foreseen. On the contrary, relevant sub-questions/probes can

only be developed during the interview by carefully listening to the interviewee (Hermanowicz, 2002). Here the telephone provides an advantage over the face-to-face interview mode. The lack of visual contact allows the interviewer to write down questions (including taking written notes) whilst the interviewee is speaking. Once the interviewee has finished speaking the interviewer can follow up using probes (as well as pre written prompts). In comparison note taking in face-to-face interviews can distract, influence, or otherwise make interviewees feel uncomfortable and needs to be carefully practiced (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Thus the telephone, by encouraging carefully listening whilst simultaneously allowing the researcher to write down probes and sub-questions without distracting and influencing the interviewee.

2.2.7 Changing communication norms

The growing reliance on the telephone for interpersonal communications is well documented (Carr & Worth, 2001). Communication norms are changing with more and more people preferring to communicate through telephone and online modes. As Carr & Worth (2001) point out that a ringing telephone is always picked up and it's rare to experience long periods of silence in telephone conversations. As people become increasingly dependent on the use of the telephone and internet for communication their dependency will result in them being more comfortable communicating through this mode (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This is evident from her study as women were comfortable discussing a highly sensitive subject over the telephone with a stranger. As Volg (2013) points out that with age and experience, the confidence of children in using the telephone as a mode of communication grows (Glogowska et al, 2011). As a result the quantity and quality of data obtained through telephone interviews from older children is higher (Vogl, 2013).

Peoples comfort in communicating through telephone is highlighted by studies which have shown it possible to build rapport over the telephone with interviewees who are appear more than comfortable with using the telephone as a communication medium (Holt, 2010; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Indeed with younger age groups the telephone may be the preferred mode of interviewing. Similarly older age groups may not be as familiar with using technologies such as telephone and Skype for communicating (Chapple, 1999; Tucker & Parker, 2014)

2.3 Lack access to participants natural environment

Traditionalists argue that face-to-face interviews allow the researcher to visually access the participant's natural environment (Gillham, 2005; Qu & Dumay, 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This allows the researcher to collect key contextual data necessary for qualitative research. This data takes the form of field notes that are commonly maintained by qualitative researchers. In contrast telephone interviews suffer from a lack of visual access which prevents the researcher from collecting key contextual data.

Second, the interviewee may be distracted by elements in their environment which the researcher is unable to observe (Glogowska et al, 2011). Thus the interviewer may be unable to take action to rectify confusion, misunderstanding, or discomfort. Finally, the interviewer is unable to assess if the interviewee is comfortable in their environment. The interviewer is unable to create a good interview ambience (Opdenakker, 2006).

2.3.1 Ethnographic studies

Proponents of the qualitative telephone interviews counter by two lines of argument. First they state that these researchers counter by arguing that the statements of finds its root in ethnographic studies which require the researcher to build a good understanding of the participant's natural environment (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). For example research that involves studying tribal culture or life in the ghettos benefits from the researcher being physically present in these locations as it adds to the investigators understanding of culture and related issues.

However this type of contextual data is not necessary for non-ethnographic studies. Here the telephone provides a reliable substitute for face-to-face interviewing (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Thus the selection of a particular interview mode is dependent on the objectives of the research (Tucker & Parker, 2014). For research that aims to collect factual descriptive information which is of non-personal low sensitivity nature the telephone provides a sound interviewing instrument.

2.3.2 Avoid environment noise & distraction

Face-to-face interviewing of participants in their natural environment may not be ideal as Sturges & Hanrahan (2004) highlight in their study, interviewing participants in jail waiting rooms suffers from two limitations. First it presents a noisy and distractive environment, not ideal for conducting an interview. Second, many study participants did not want to be interviewed in the presence of the jail guards out of fear of retaliatory behavior on family members in prison. Both of these challenges were avoided by conducting a telephone interview with the participant based in their work place or home.

2.3.3 Telephone interviews require less space

In comparison by keeping both parties in their respective locations and thus requires less space to conduct (Sweet, 2002). This is an important factor when interviewing people working in small office spaces as is often the case in large cities or SMEs that lack. Furthermore by keeping both parties on their turf it allows both parties to remain comfortable during the interview process. This is especially a benefit for the researcher who does need to visit potentially unsafe locations (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

2.3.4 Time and cost of face-toface interviewing

Perhaps the most commonly cited advantage of using the telephone is the reduction in both time and cost that it provides to researchers (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Stephens, 2007). First, this allows the qualitative researcher to interview a greater number of people using a smaller budget and shorter time frame. Second, the telephone allows geographically dispersed people to participate in studies which they may not have been able to participate in had the interview been face-to-face (Glogowska et al, 2011). In comparison face-to-face interviewing of globally dispersed interviewees may be impossible for one interviewer (Opdenakker, 2006).

In their mode comparison study, Tucker & Parker (2014) interviewed leading accounting academics to gather their perspectives on the use of the telephone in qualitative research. They point towards increasingly globalized nature of accounting research. This necessitates interviewing participants located in dispersed locations across the globe. This is not possible given the restricted funding available to researchers. In this situation the use of the telephone

“comes into its own”. More importantly as one academic states that he/she would much rather interview over the telephone than not interview at all.

Third, telephone interviews allow the researcher to gain access to individuals based in locations which are closed to the researcher e.g. religious sites, religious communities, cults and military bases (Opdenakker, 2006). Some of these locations are dangerous and thus a telephone interview is a safer option (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Finally, the telephone allow researchers who are physically disabled or caring for children to undertake a study that may otherwise involve travelling great distances to interview participants (Glogowska et al, 2011).

2.3.4 Easy rescheduling benefits all

The research must realize that most interview participants lead very busy lives. This statement applies equally to busy professionals scheduling an interview during office hours and parents taking care of children at home (Holt, 2010). As a result interviews often need to be canceled and rescheduled. Cancelling an interview is considerably easier for both parties if the interview is conducted over the telephone (Chapple, 1999). There is no loss of face or embarrassment from rescheduling as the interviewer has not travelled a significant distance (incurring time and cost) to get to the interviewee. The ability to reschedule interviews is a strong attraction to participate in qualitative research especially if the interviewer wishes for the interviewee to kick back, relax, and talk for an hour or more. As Deakin & Wakefield (2014) narrate their experience of Skype interviews, they observed that some interviewees stated they did not have enough time to undertake a face-to-face interview but were willing to participate when the Skype option was offered. Table 1 provides a summary of the criticisms of traditionalists and the counter arguments of proponents of the telephone.

Table 1: Criticisms and counter arguments against the use of the telephone in qualitative interviewing

SR #	THE TELEPHONE IMPACTS	COUNTER ARGUMENTS OF PROPONENTS OF QUALITATIVE TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS
1	Ability to create & maintain rapport	Empirical evidence does not support this assertion
		Power balance & interviewer bias
		Too much rapport
		A participant-centered approach
2	The communication process	Focus on careful listening and clearly articulating
		The flow of the conversation can easily be controlling by letting the interviewee speak, while you write down questions to ask once they have finished
		Communicate presence using yeah, right, ahan, hmm etc.
		Interpretation of body language is a tricky business best left to the psychologists
		Changing communication norms
		Allows note taking without distracting the interviewee
3	Visual access to the interviewees natural environment	Is it an ethnographic study that you are undertaking? Do you need to see the participant's environment? Would it really add valuable additional data?
		Avoid environment noise & distractions
		Telephone interviews require less space
		Easier to reschedule
		Time & cost lower

3 Research method

The study adopts a qualitative methodology (Bryman, 2001) aimed at reflecting on the researcher's experience of conducting semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews. These interviews were conducted as part of a research project aimed at understanding how sustainability reports are prepared and assured in New Zealand and Australia context. The interviewer conducted a total of 50 interviews of which 43 were undertaken using the telephone mode, 1 was a Skype call, and 6 utilized the face-to-face mode. The interviews took place between February and August 2014 with an average time of 63 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured and adopted a conversation style approach (Rowley, 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Interview participants comprised of 35 managers responsible for preparing sustainability reports in organizations based in New Zealand and Australia. These organizations comprised a diverse mix of organizations including large MNCs and smaller local operators, private and public entities, listed and non-listed enterprises. The remaining 15 interviewees were sustainability assurance practitioners that were engaged to provide assurance over sustainability reports. Again assurance practitioners from both New Zealand and Australia were covered in the study.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed. Follow up questions were emailed to the participants. Additionally a summary of the analysis was sent back to participants for review and feedback. Furthermore research participants sent through internal documents that would provide additional insights relating to the sustainability reporting and sustainability assurance process. These provided an additional layer of data that helped build understanding of the phenomena.

4 Analysis and findings

This section discusses the strategies used by the researcher in conducting the telephone interviews in an effective manner.

4.1.1 Building rapport

Rapport building strategies were used both before and during the course of the interview. These are discussed below:

How to build rapport before the actual interview

During the process of recruiting interviewees, the interviewer had the opportunity to converse over the telephone with potential study participants (Hermanowicz, 2002). This allows the researcher to achieve four key objectives. First, the conversation provides an opportunity for the researcher to explain the nature and purpose of the study, the background of the researcher and the interview as a mode of data collection. Although this information had been provided in summary form in an email, it is possible that people may not have had the time to read it. Furthermore a telephone conversation allows the researcher to immediately address any misunderstandings or reservations that the participant may have. Once these cognitive barriers are removed interviewees are more willing and ready to share their views and experiences with the interviewer. The conversation is open and free flowing which is the aim of building rapport.

Second, the researcher attempted to converse with participants in a friendly yet professional manner. The careful use of tone and wordings allowed the researcher to build rapport with interviewees. Third, the researcher attempted to present the subject/topic of research as interesting and exciting. The topic of investigation was for the interview participants their bread and butter. It represented a phenomenon that they were engaged in and facing challenges and difficulties with. Many felt passionately about the topic of investigation. The researcher simply had to leverage this interest by explaining to them that the academic community is interested in learning about what is going on and what you “guys” are doing. Thus participation was encouraged by informing participants how their contribution to the research can be beneficial for society (Chapple, 1999). Furthermore participants were informed that the findings of the research would be shared with them. Thus participation and sharing of insights and knowledge would be benefit all.

Fourth, the interview was presented as a conversation in which the interviewee shares his or her experiences and views. The researcher attempted to overcome any misconceptions or

stereotypical views about interviews. The researcher wished to distinguish, in a subtle and indirect manner, the research and the interview from both a boring and stressful laboratory experiment on the one hand and an intrusive newspaper or magazine interview on the other.

Given the benefits of this pre-interview telephone conversation the researcher strongly encourages that it be undertaken. This can take place when contact is first made with the participant. Alternatively participants who have been invited to participate via email can be encouraged to further discuss the study over the telephone before the interview itself (Hermanowicz, 2002).

However it is encouraged to undertake this discussion before the interview itself where it will eat up the scheduled interview time. This does not however mean that the interviewer should refuse to answer questions or queries that participants may have at the start or during the interview. If an interviewee has a question it is advisable to answer it immediately as opposed to replying that this will be answered at the end of the interview. The aim is to address any reservations at the start of the interview. Importantly the researcher observes that these four objectives can be met without a face-to-face meeting. However it is difficult to execute and gauge the success of these four objectives if done through email.

Building rapport during the interview itself

The researcher adopted the following approach to start the conversation off:

1. Hello/hi, how are you?
2. Let me start off by saying, thank you again, for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this study! It's greatly appreciated!
3. We in the academic community rely on the support of the business community to learn and find out what's going on!
4. So if you're ready can we start?

This was the standard approach adopted by the researcher and it offers an effective way to kick start the conversation. The approach combines formal and informal words and is polite, respectful and conveys the researcher interest in hearing what the interviewee has to say

(Hermanowicz, 2002). Following this the first question in the interview was kept simple and easy to answer. The objective was to get the interviewee talking. “So if we can start off with a bit about yourself, your background and role in the organization, and we’ll take it from there”? The interview would conclude with:

1. Well I’ve run out of questions to ask ... is there anything else ... any point that you feel is important that I missed that you think should be included in the research?
2. Thank you, this was really helpful. I’ve got some good points here.

4.1.2 Creating & maintaining participant interest

First, interview participants consented voluntarily to participating in the study. The fact that participants were willing to take time on average of 60 minutes (discussed in greater detail below) out of their busy work schedules for the interview indicates their interest in the topic of investigation. Furthermore for the research participants the topic of investigation was their bread and butter. Thus participants showed interest in participating in research that would promote learning and development in their field.

Second, interviewees were incentivized by offering to share the findings of the research with them. This encouraged them to participate in the research in order to be able to benefit later on from knowledge sharing. Third, many interviewees wished to participate in the research for the purpose of supporting academic research that was perceived as a social good. Thus creating participant interest in the study was not a challenge.

During the course of the study many new interview participants were introduced by existing ones through a process of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). This indicates that participants found the interview interesting and were comfortable referring the researchers to other potential interview participants. Furthermore, research participants were also requested to provide internal documents that could shed further light on the internal workings, processes and activities that were the subject of investigation. This represented an important additional data source used in the course of the interview. Again this provides evidence of interview participants showing interest in the study and the building of a friendly relationship that supports rapport.

4.1.3 Interview environment

Qualitative interviews are not conducted in the sterile environment of a laboratory (Burke & Miller, 2001). Field interviews, whether conducted face-to-face or over the telephone, may suffer from some environmental noise and distraction. Reflecting on the interview experience, the researcher notes that two interviews out of fifty interviews suffered from environmental noise. In one of these face-to-face interviews the participant suggested having the interview conducted in a cafe over a cup of coffee. Whilst the relaxed environment of the cafe provided an excellent environment to build rapport the transcription of the interview was a different story. Interview participants were being drowned out in the background noise making the transcription a slow and painful process. A similar challenge was encountered in the other interview which was conducted using the telephone mode with the participant was based in a busy office environment.

It is important to note that in all three cases the location was selected by the interviewee and thus represents locations where they were comfortable undertaking the interview. While transcription was difficult the interview process itself was not affected by environment noise as interview participants were able to clearly hear each other during the interview itself. The impact of the noise was on the interview recording and subsequent transcription.

4.1.4 Probes, prompts & note taking

The use of an interview guide is recommended for qualitative interviewing. This contains main questions and sub-questions/probes and prompts. Scholars observe that during the course of the interview the researcher will identify new probes and prompts and will also refine and improve existing ones. Additionally, some scholars argue that they did not need to excessively rely on prompts and probes and simply allowed the participant to talk freely (Carr & Worth, 2001). Reflecting on the experience the researcher reduced his reliance on note taking and writing 'probing' questions during the course of the interview. The researcher observed that note taking was a distraction which causes the interviewer to focus more on writing down what is being said rather than understanding what was said. Thus the focus should be on the conversation with minimal distractions. However, the researcher also accepts that every interviewer will have their own style and some may prefer note as it helps them focus or

identify probes and prompts. Thus the approach adopted here will depend upon the personal preference of the interviewer.

4.1.5 Communicating presence

In regards to the use of 'umm' and 'ah' as a method of communicating presence and listening the interviewee found that these need to be used carefully. Some participants are comfortable with these and they're judicious use gives the conversation a more natural flow. In other cases participants, although not uncomfortable with these, may misinterpret them as an interruption. These interviewees would either stop talking or quickly conclude on what they were saying in order to give the interviewer a chance to speak.

The researcher recommends a strategy of starting the conversation off with a few short questions that are relatively easy to answer. This gets the conversation going and both interviewer and interviewee get a chance to adjust to each other's communicational styles. During this phase of the interview the use of 'umm' and 'ah' can be used to assess the interviews comfort and understanding of them.

However, the researcher also recommends that it is important to keep silent while the interviewee is speaking so as to provide them a full time in which to complete what they are saying. The researcher should not hurry the interviewee and ensure that they feel that their views and opinions have been listened to and were important and valuable (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2011).

4.1.6 Using Skype versus using the telephone

One interview was conducted using Skype. However after the interview experience it was decided not to use this mode of interviewing for subsequent interviews. There are two reasons for this. First, only 1 interviewee selected Skype over the telephone as their preferred mode of interviewing. This suggests that the Skype mode was not a popular selection amongst interviewees who preferred to communicate over the telephone than through Skype. More importantly interviewee preferred not to use Skype video and simply engaged in a Skype audio call/interview.

The experience of this one Skype call was that the quality of the internet connection fluctuates during the call. As a result in the one Skype interview that was conducted the quality of the audio fluctuated albeit momentarily. However the Skype fluctuations did not cause a loss in communication nor was the connection not lost during the interview. In this case both interviewer and interviewee were based in countries (New Zealand and Australia) that have a reliable internet connection. Researchers based in countries with weak internet infrastructures or high occurrences of power failures must carefully consider the use of Skype and other similar technologies for interviewing purposes. Poor internet connections will create frequent fluctuations in the line quality resulting in interruptions that in extreme circumstances may require canceling and rescheduling the interview.

If a Skype video is not used or if during the Skype video call the video must be turned off as the internet speed has dropped then this mode effectively becomes a telephone call albeit of a lower quality (Tucker & Parker, 2014). Thus the Skype option is only a better option if it involves using its video call feature and in situations with reliable internet connections that support a video calls.

A Skype interview may provide a cheaper alternative to telephone calls made to interviewees that request to be called on a mobile as opposed to land line telephone number (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Whereas international calls made to mobile numbers are expensive. The Skype software is downloadable free of cost and enjoys global recognition which means more people are familiar with it than other alternative software. The software allows calls to be made to landline and mobile numbers (albeit at a cost) and with the option of video conferencing provides an added advantage over the telephone.

4.1.7 Interviewees comfort with different technologies

Reflecting on his experience the researcher notes that interviewees relied heavily on the telephone as part of their day to day work routine. For example sustainability reporting managers made frequent use of the telephone to contact internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include employees and managers, some who the interviewee knew while others they had never personally/physically interacted with.

Many of these managers worked in large organizations and internal and external stakeholders were spread across a wide geographical area (both nationally and internationally). Furthermore, sustainability reporting managers were also frequently using Skype calls to communicate with stakeholders based in other stakeholders as part of their work routine. Thus interview participants were experienced and comfortable using telephone and Skype as a mode of communication and furthermore were regularly using it to communicate with strangers for the purpose of their work.

These observations are consistent with Tucker & Parker (2014) study in which academics have stated that they would rather not use the Telephone and Skype for interviewing purposes simply because they are unfamiliar with and have not used these technologies frequently as part of their day to day lives. They accept that if they used Skype more frequently they may develop a familiarity and comfort with the technology.

Interestingly the same counter argument can also be given in support of the telephone over the face-to-face mode. When interviewing younger age groups that are now more dependent on communicating using technologies as opposed to older generations that have relied more on face-to-face interactions, the better interviewing tool would be the telephone/Skype/MSN Messenger/Facebook etc. and not face-to-face interviews (Opdenakker, 2006).

4.1.8 Reflexivity

At the conclusion of the interview, interviewers are encouraged to reflect on the conversation (Hermanowicz, 2002). There are two objectives of this exercise. First, as highlighted by Hermanowitz, an interviewer should recall what key issues were identified through the conversation and what further questions and probes should be asked in the future interviews. Second, the researcher recommends that interviewers reflect on the conversation itself. Interviewers need to consider the flow and naturalness of the conversation they have had and how it can be improved. The interviewer needs to consider the order in which questions were presented and if this needs to be improved. The interviewer should also identify better ways of asking question including the tone of voice, use of formal and informal language and the pace

of the interview. Table 2 below provides a summary of the strategies qualitative researcher may adopt in order to make their telephone interviews a success.

SR #	STRATEGY	DISCUSSION
1	Building rapport	<p>Before the interview: Call up your interviewees and have a friendly but professional conversation about the research. Put their minds at ease and show that you're eager to find out what they're doing. Assure interviewees of anonymity and confidentiality of data acquired.</p> <p>During the interview: Start off by thanking interviewees again for taking time out to participate in the study. Start off with simple ease questions and build up towards more difficult ones. End the interview conversation by allowing the interviewee to add anything that you may not have asked during the course of the interview. Conclude again with a thank you.</p>
2	Creating & maintaining participant interest	<p>Offer to share the findings of the study. This provides an incentive to participate and share their knowledge with others.</p> <p>Highlight how their participation will positively contribute towards academic research leading to the betterment of society.</p>
3	Interview environment	<p>It is advised to let interviewees select their preferred interview venue. This is where they are comfortable and relaxed. Any environment noise impacts the audio recording and will occur in both telephone and face-to-face interviews.</p>
4	Probes, prompts & note taking	<p>Use an interview guide with main questions, probes, and prompts. This guide should be revised after each successive interview. During the interview itself, let interviewees talk freely without interruption. Any new question you think of, write it down, and ask only when the interviewee has finished speaking.</p> <p>Note taking is a lot easier in telephone as opposed to face-to-face interviewing as it does not distract, pressurize or confuse the interviewee. However the personal style of the interviewer is important. Some may find note taking a distraction from careful listening while others may find it an effective thought stimulating exercise. Select what suits you best.</p>
5	Communicating presence	<p>"Ahan", "yeah", "right" are helpful in communicating</p>

		your presence. The trick is to use them in a judicious manner that achieves a balance between communicating presence on the one hand and an interruption on the other. You can assess this balance at the start of the interview by assessing what the interviewee is comfortable with.
6	Skype vs. telephone interviewing	A telephone call is a more reliable and clearer communication mode than Skype. On the other hand if the internet speed is reliable and strong at both ends a Skype video interview is preferred over a telephone interview.
7	Interviewees comfort with different technologies	Communication norms are changing. People are more comfortable communicating over the telephone. However researchers should assess if their target interview group is comfortable with using the telephone for communication purposes.
8	Reflexivity	After each interview recall/replay the conversation and assess how future interviews can be improved.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to firstly review the existing literature evaluating the use of the telephone in qualitative research. The review highlights that the arguments of traditionalists represent an unsubstantiated bias (Novick, 2008). These arguments often come from scholars who have had no personal experience in using or testing the telephone in qualitative interviewing. When asked if they perceived any difference in the quality of their research if it had been conducted using a telephone rather than on a face-to-face basis they replied that there would be “no real difference whatsoever” and that “data collected through the telephone would have been largely the same (Tucker & Parker, 2014). Thus decisions on the selection of an interview mode are not being made on a rational basis. Instead this study observes that the telephone provides numerous advantages over face-to-face interviewing.

Secondly the study provides the authors reflections and recommendations based on the telephone interviews conducted for a research project in accounting as well as limited prior research. The study provides recommendations on (1) how to build rapport, (2) how to create & maintain participant interest, (3) let the interviewee select their preferred interview venue, (4) how to use probes, prompts and note taking effectively, (5) how to communicate presence

without disrupting the interviewee, (6) let participants decide whether they would prefer a telephone or a Skype interview (7) assess if target interviewees are experienced and comfortable using and (8) at the conclusion of each interview reflect on the conversation and assess how future interviews can be improved.

In conclusion the telephone should not be treated as a second best option to conducting qualitative telephone interviews. The telephone offers the qualitative researcher a versatile tool with tremendous potential (Carr & Worth, 2001). A researcher would often not be able to undertake interview-based research if the telephone interview was not an option. First, the time and cost involved in travelling across New Zealand and Australia would have been exorbitant. Second, other work commitments may preclude multiple trips to conduct interviews. Third, international travel can be costly and complicated for individuals with developing nation passports often requiring the arrangement of visas.

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