

Elicitation as a Multilayered Process: An Experiment in Reciprocal Peer Interviewing

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Abstract

This article describes a novel approach to reciprocal peer interviewing in which participants interview one another sequentially, allowing each the space of a full interview to articulate her experiences and reflections. This structure of data collection offers a new conceptualization of the way that elicitation functions; not just as a process inside of an interview, but one that is also shaped by factors preceding and outside of the individual interview, a process we call “meta-elicitation.” We argue that this form of reciprocal peer interviewing offers a view of the emic that is both participant-led and uniquely balanced between collective and individual perspectives. However, we also argue that shared authority and rapport are actively, and not always successfully, negotiated in such interviews. To prepare participants for peer interviewing, we hosted a 1-day workshop involving interview training, planning, and the recording of interviews. To maximize quality of such projects, we recommend that external researchers consider carefully (1) the balance of structure and flexibility in designing the workshop and interviews, (2) thorough preparation of participants, and (3) the role of meta-elicitation dynamics during analysis.

Keywords

community-based research, narrative analysis, oral histories, social justice, action research

Elicitation techniques become innovative through the use of new technologies, as has been highlighted recently (de Jager, Fogarty, Tewson, Lenette, & Boydell, 2017), but also through engaging new kinds of people—specifically, nonresearchers—to elicit or “bring forth” data. Research using peer interviewers has long considered the question of what it means to involve new people in the research endeavor. But what happens when this process is further democratized by asking each participant to serve as both an interviewer and an interviewee without the presence of an external researcher, as in the understudied process of reciprocal peer interviewing? In this article, we describe an approach to sequential interviewing in which the first interview itself plays a role in eliciting the concepts and styles of the second interview. This results in a multilayered process in which elicitation takes place not only between individual participants but also across interviews. In our view, this form of meta-elicitation offers a promising approach for centering the voices of participants, particularly marginalized groups, to elicit rich and complex data that professional researchers may otherwise overlook. Our article examines the processes through which meta-elicitation occurs and suggests best practices to ensure the rigor and validity of this technique.

Peer Interviewing and Reciprocal Peer Interviewing

Peer interviewing is the practice of training people who share key characteristics with the population being studied to conduct interviews in place of more traditional researchers (Devotta et al., 2016). The choice to use peer interviewing is frequently an extension of a larger commitment on the part of research collaborators to participatory research models, in which populations of study are invited to collaborate with external researchers to investigate a problem or a topic in order to make change (see Braye & McDonnell, 2013, as an example). Participatory methods may be particularly appropriate when

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populations of interest have limited power and/or are socially marginalized (Maguire, 1987). For this reason, it made sense for our research with home care workers, which seeks to improve workers' health and job quality, to be as participatory as was feasible. In the following paragraphs, we describe the perceived advantages and critiques of participatory peer interview projects, drawing on a wide literature exploring the experiences of homeless adults (Devotta et al., 2016), illicit drug users (Elliott, Watson, & Harries, 2002), young fathers (Braye & McDonnell, 2013), sex workers (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005), nurses caring for an ill family member (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016), people with learning disabilities (Nind, 2017), and medical students (Byrne, Brugha, Clarke, Lavelle, & McGarvey, 2015).

Consistent with a participatory approach, peer interviewing is positioned as offering benefits to both external¹ researchers and populations of research interest, as compared with traditional qualitative interviewing conducted solely by external researchers. For external researchers, the benefits of utilizing peer interviews center on the ability of peer interviewers to help elicit more emic understandings of the research topic. As Devotta and colleagues (2016) write, "Peer-interviewers have the potential to discover knowledge that may otherwise go unnoticed by researchers without lived experience" (p. 665). Specifically, these richer data may result from peer interviewers' use of their knowledge and life experiences to help guide their interviewing. These are said to generate the possibility of increased rapport (Elliott et al., 2002) and participants responding "more genuinely" (Devotta et al., 2016, p. 665). Also a benefit to external researchers, peer interviewers may increase a study's ability to recruit hard-to-reach populations (Devotta et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2002). For populations of research interest, peer interviewing aims to build ownership of the project and "capacity" in the form of research skills among people who often have not been exposed to research processes previously. Along these lines, Devotta and colleagues argue that involvement of peer interviewers renders the project more "inclusive and respectful" (p. 676).

Critiques of peer interviewing stem from questions about what being a "peer" really confers or entails. For instance, does matching an interviewer and interviewee on a single characteristic make them "peers" when they remain distinct individuals with numerous nonmatching characteristics? And how are data shaped when peer interviewers have previous relationships or familiarity with interviewees? (Byrne et al., 2015). Research has also questioned whether the benefits outlined above are automatic or require some special characteristics or training on the part of the peer interviewers. Frankham (2009) argues that in order to play the role of peer interviewer well, a person must have developed some level of understanding of their experience, not just to have lived it, and that simply choosing interviewers based on shared characteristics risks creating "new essentialisms." Others argue that rigorous training and support is the key to producing skilled peer interviewers who can function much as a more highly trained researcher would but with the added benefit of insider knowledge (Benoit et al.,

2005; Devotta et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2002). A key concern is that peer interviewers may take too much for granted and be more likely to assume that they and the interviewee are understanding concepts and experiences in the same way (what Spradley, 1972, has called "abbreviating").

Up for debate are not only the skills peer interviewers need to develop but also the complex roles they must play and the implications of these for the quality of data. Some research compellingly demonstrates ways that peer interviewers may feel torn between their role as a researcher and their affiliation with whatever category they share with their interviewees. Such role conflict may create stress for the interviewer while also reducing the quantity and quality of data, as when peer interviewers try to protect the privacy of their interviewees (Braye & McDonnell, 2013), or "diluted or meager" data when interviewers focus on comforting and providing advice to interviewees (Quinney et al., 2016, p. 6).

Finally, the literature has raised questions about how we view the authenticity and truth value of these data during analysis. Are we less likely to critically interrogate these data? (Devotta et al., 2016; Nind, 2014). Ratcliffe and others (1983) exhort qualitative researchers to not assume that the data can "speak for themselves" (p. 149). Instead, they must be interpreted and analysts must think carefully about the circumstances of elicitation and coproduction. Although these interviews take place between peers, an imbalanced power relationship between interviewers and interviewees may persist.

A small subset of studies involving peer interviewers have used reciprocal peer interviewing specifically, in which each participant takes a turn functioning as interviewer and interviewee (Donaghey, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Porter, Neysmith, Reitsma-Street, & Collins, 2009).² Such approaches may address some of the critiques of standard peer interviewing described above (specifically, those related to power relations between interviewer and interviewee) and have been linked with aspirations toward engaging in "nonhierarchical research" (Porter et al., 2009, p. 292). At the same time, researchers recognize that in practice, nonhierarchical research is impossible, since these projects are created and facilitated by external researchers to varying extents. In reciprocal peer interviewing, there is generally a greater sense that conversation is important and that "advice-giving" and other forms of non-researcher-style participation (prohibited in Devotta and colleagues' peer interviewing, for instance) are allowed and even encouraged (Devotta et al., 2016). As Porter, Neysmith, Reitsma-Street, and Collins (2009) have written, this method "addresses the social locational difference between the researcher and those who are the focus of the research by withdrawing the researcher even further into the background during the data collection phase and giving freer rein to the verbal expression of women participants" (p. 292). However, it is still worth noting where and how external researchers exert influence on the design of research and in the interview (for instance, through their presence, the development of interview guides, etc.). Like Porter and colleagues, Donaghey's work

(2014) champions this loosening of restrictions on types of interaction, viewing flexibility as a route toward the emic, and her project does not appear to attend extensively to the role of the external researcher in shaping interactions (Mulligan, 2013). She writes, “A feature of the semi-structured interview technique is the unpredictability and overall direction of the conversation; the possibility that the lack of prescription can potentially lead to deviation from the suggested topics. This is acknowledged, however, it is counter-balanced by the rich quality of the dialogue and the opportunity for digressions that were as surprising as they were thought-provoking” (2014, p. 102). Reciprocal peer interviewers are thus “in a position to exchange knowledge with one another and to build on that knowledge” (Porter et al., 2009, p. 294).

In this article, we explore the particular dynamics of how these “surprising” and “thought-provoking” exchanges happen and how knowledge gets built upon in a context structured by external researchers. We first describe and contextualize our reciprocal peer interviewing process by comparing it to that of other studies. We then argue that elicitation happens not only through interactions between individuals within an interview but also that the first of two sequential interviews can, in a sense, work to elicit the second interview’s topics and form. Finally, we analyze the implications of this kind of meta-elicitation for the processes and validity of reciprocal peer interviewing as a research method.

Context and Process

Our project used reciprocal peer interviewing to examine home care workers’ experiences with client death. Home care workers’ social and economic circumstances diverge meaningfully from other health-care workers who experience client death as part of their work. Personal care attendants and home health aides (collectively “home care workers” or “aides” in this article) provide the majority of home care services, helping elderly and disabled clients to eat, bathe, and dress. Because of the “one-on-one” home-based nature of this work (Stacey, 2011), home care workers are isolated from their peers and supervisors (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, 2010). Additionally, due to the many intimate aspects of the work and its long-term nature, the emotional job demands are unique and complex (Aronson & Neysmith, 1996; Ayalon, 2012; Delp, Wallace, Geiger-Brown, & Muntaner, 2010; Denton, Zeytinoglu, & Davies, 2002; Geiger-Brown, Muntaner, McPhaul, Lipscomb, & Trinkoff, 2007; Piercy, 2000; Stacey, 2005). In the United States, home care workers are disproportionately women of color, and often immigrants to the United States, who face significant economic disadvantage and job insecurity due to the structure of their work (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, 2017). Because of this social and economic marginalization (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, 2017), their voices are often left out of administrative and policy decisions affecting their work. Our project sought to center the voices of these workers as active participants rather than research subjects, in order to design meaningful training and supports.

Data Gathering and Participant Training

Given workers’ isolation on the job, our research methods for exploring their experiences of client death placed emphasis on creating opportunities for exchange and connection. As researchers interested in the impact of low-wage work on workers’ health and well-being and ways of mitigating these effects, we sought to explore this understudied topic from the perspectives of workers. We began with focus groups, recruiting participants from a gathering of unionized workers at their labor-management education fund. Our focus groups engaged 26 participants in four separate groups of five to seven participants each to discuss the topic of client loss and coping. During the focus groups, we described and discussed the reciprocal peer interviewing process, alongside a second elicitation option, and allowed workers to tell us (via a written form) which activities they were interested in participating in, if any. The vast majority expressed interest in reciprocal peer interviewing, and we successfully recruited seven workers for a peer interviewing workshop and interview sessions. Peer interviewing participants were purposively sampled to prioritize workers with substantial client death experience. We excluded some participants who had “lost” clients to situations other than death such as transitions to nursing homes. Although we inquired during the focus groups about optimal scheduling arrangements, a number of interested workers could not participate because of difficulties in arranging their work schedules. Our workshop was informed both by past documented efforts in reciprocal peer interviewing and popular techniques for teaching oral history interviewing, which solicit in-depth accounts of personal experience and reflections. After a period of introduction and training, participants audio recorded 30- to 45-min interviews in which each aide served once as a storyteller and once as an interviewer. Our stated goals were to hear stories of client loss, as well as reflections on these experiences from which we might draw short audio clips (1–5 min) that could be used in aide training or advocacy work.

The day’s structure is detailed in Table 1. Two key aspects merit further description: the large group conversation led by our research team to develop interview topics and the small group interview planning. In the large group conversation, we began by asking participants to brainstorm the topics they thought would be most important to talk about in their interviews. We followed by asking, “What do you think is most important for other aides to know in preparing for client death and what would help you personally?” Our goal was to generate a participant-led list of topics from which the interviewing groups could choose a subset of the topics most relevant to them. However, rather than leading to a clear listing of topics as we had anticipated, this instead began a detailed discussion of problems that arise when a client dies and strategies that workers use to cope with client death. This discussion strongly reflected themes from earlier focus groups, though included a greater emphasis on the job insecurity caused by patient death (which one participant described vividly). We realize now that asking participants to distill topics from experiences might have been an unrealistic expectation.

Table 1. Reciprocal Peer Interviewing Workshop Schedule.

9:30–10:30 a.m.	Breakfast: plan for the day, introductions, consent process
10:30–11:15 a.m.	Training in peer interviewing (delivered by oral historian): structure of interviews, tips for interviewers (open-ended questions, listening), and interviewees (provide detail, “take your time”); interview practice; reflections on exercise and roles of storyteller/interviewer
11:15–12 p.m.	Group brainstorming to develop interview topics
12–12:45 p.m.	Lunch while planning interview and questions in small groups
12:45–2:45 p.m.	Recording interviews with breaks in between storytellers
2:45–3:45 p.m.	Focus group to discuss interview experiences
3:45–4:15 p.m.	Emotional debrief and tips for self-care (delivered by trained social worker)
4:15–5 p.m.	Wrap-up comments and photos

However, this conversation played a noteworthy role in the process as it allowed participants to warm up to talking about the topic and highlighted key concerns and prompts that some interviewing teams later explored extensively.

We then divided participants into three preassigned small groups (two pairs and one group of three, which took turns in roles as interviewer, interviewee, and observer). Each group was assigned a research team member as a facilitator to help the groups decide how they would approach the interview, prepare lists of questions that could be tailored to individual storytellers, and answer any questions. The three groups prepared in substantially heterogeneous ways. Each group began with the brainstormed prompts and each storyteller discussed what they wanted to be asked in their interview. One pair effectively conducted a dress rehearsal, practicing extensively asking one another about the topics. A second pair continued the large group discussion and had to be more actively guided by their facilitator. Ultimately, this facilitator had each member write down exactly the questions they would ask and practice asking questions in an open-ended way. The final group of three agreed on general topics of interest, jotted notes about what questions they would ask, and did not rehearse.

As this process indicates, our approach sought to balance structure and flexibility. We wanted to provide enough structure (in teaching techniques and topics) that participants felt comfortable knowing what to do and would stay generally on topic, but not so much structure that we would be determining the specific nature of these topics. We encouraged participants to feel comfortable making use of the interviews both as spaces to tell stories about their experiences and as spaces of conversation. As we have learned, the training, structure, and goals of the reciprocal peer interview process shape the kinds of exchange and elicitation that result. Table 2 contextualizes our approach by comparing its key features with those of the two published studies using this method.

Two Interviews, an Ongoing Conversation

In qualitative research, there are debates rooted in epistemological differences about the degree to which data elicited are preexisting or coproduced in the research encounter. As described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), the first position views the interviewer as a miner, and the second as traveler “who walks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world” (p. 48). However, even the “traveler-interviewer” usually aims to facilitate a lopsided exchange, one in which the interviewer’s focus is on the interviewee. In reciprocal peer interviews, the potential for co-construction is more even: Both participants share the experience that they are discussing. Thus, there may be active moments of each participant taking control of the interview (or allowing the other participant to lead) to inscribe their experience into the data more heavily or lightly.

Throughout our data, we saw many examples of participants playing a more traditional interviewer role (i.e., the “miner” or “traveler”), emphasizing the voice and authority of the interviewee, and a space for their storytelling. We might assume that these interviews could be viewed primarily as the expressions of the interviewee (“Sylvia’s interview”). However, several examples from our data show the ways in which the concepts and styles worked with in the first interview may, in a sense, elicit certain concepts and styles in the second interview (in a process we are calling meta-elicitation). The following examples provide a window into the unique layers of elicitation that arise when interviews are reciprocal and sequential, demonstrating how “Sylvia’s interview” can become “Sylvia’s (and Mary’s) interview”.

Relaying Concepts

Our first example shows how certain concepts and topics are relayed across interviews, even if they are not explicitly stated in the interview questions. In the peer interviews discussed below, Mary,³ an aide in her early 60s with extensive experience in hospice care, was interviewed first, by Sylvia, an aide in her 40s who had experienced one client death. Each had worked in home care for 12 years. Mary and Sylvia began with their written questions and had practiced asking open-ended questions in their interview preparation. Mary’s interview began with Sylvia asking, “Do you have an experience of a client dying?” In response, Mary as interviewee told two extended stories of clients who had died. At the end of the second story, she moved seamlessly into a reflection on how she makes sense of death and the role of her religion:

And that was so peaceful, the transition [from life to death for her client], you know? You feel it but my philosophy and my—that’s how I think about death is that when somebody is really suffering and there is no cure that the doctor can give and the person is gone, I grieve, I feel it, but I don’t think I should mourn. Because the person is suffering and I’m a religious person and my faith let me understand that when you are absent from this body, you are

Table 2. Comparison of Key Features of Reciprocal Peer Interviewing Projects.

Feature	Tsui and Franzosa	Porter et al.	Donaghey
Population	Home care workers in New York City	Women involved with a community group in a low-income neighborhood (United States)	Queer women of two different generations (New Zealand)
Interview topic	Experiences of and reflections on client death	Provisioning responsibilities and activities	Development of queer identity (e.g., “memories of childhood and adolescence; early adulthood; education; experiences of family, marriage and parenthood; reflections on friendships; relationships; sexual experiences; identity and appearance”)
Schedule	One day (7.5 hr) with breakfast and lunch included (for further details, see Table 1)	One afternoon/evening beginning with a welcome dinner prepared by the researchers and advisory committee; child care provided Brief training included: description of research purpose and procedures; informed consent process; explanation of interview schedule and clarification questions; demonstration of asking follow-up questions; participants wrote preliminary answers to questions on interview schedule (preparation and priming)	Initial group briefing meeting followed immediately by interviews, or interviews conducted 7–10 days after initial meeting Briefing meeting included: description of research purpose and procedures; distribution of “a short guide to interview techniques”; participants asked to “consider the questions they might pose and the responses they might make.”
Nature of interview guide	Participant-and-researcher-driven questions: group brainstorming of topics, followed by facilitated development of questions to be asked within each team	Researcher-driven questions: semistructured interview guide; six sections of questions; some close-ended sub-questions	Participant-driven oral history interview questions: participants given a “guiding topical protocol” with a wide array of suggested topics
Presence of researcher	Not present in the room during interviewing but assisted with time-keeping	Not present in the room during interviewing but assisted with time-keeping	Present as “observer” and “facilitator”
Interview characteristics	Sequential interviews (of 30–45 min each) within each team; audio recorded; teams assigned by researchers; participants chose who would play interviewer and interviewee roles first	“It had been suggested that [participants] ask each other the same question before going on to the next one. Most did proceed in this fashion; a few alternately interviewed each other with one subset of the questions at a time, or, in one case, the entire interview schedule.” Interviewing pairs chosen by participants. Pairs averaged 1.5 hours of interviewing	Not discussed extensively; video recorded; interviews lasted 2–2.5 hr

present in another body. So you’re just being relieved from your suffering and you now have peace out of suffering. (Mary)

Throughout the interview, Mary interwove the topic of her faith and how her religious beliefs help her to process client death. At one point, Sylvia asked, “What did you do for yourself to feel better about the patient and the passing of the patient?” Mary began with a detailed narrative of the work that she does to ease clients’ suffering but later articulated that her faith both makes her better prepared for client death (“my faith has a lot to do with me. And also in my thinking, I think that we’re not here to stay.”) and better able to cope (“Because of my faith, I’m able to cope, you know? As I said, I tell myself the person is gone but the person is in a better place.”).

When Mary took over as interviewer, she began with a broader question than we saw in any of the other interviews: “How do you deal with death?” Sylvia replied:

How do I feel about death? Death is a must. And I—from a religion perspective I’ve come to terms with it that no matter what you do or where you go or what you say, you’re gonna die. So—and you’re gonna be in a better world. So I have accepted it and I try to move on where death is concerned. (Sylvia)

Sylvia thus immediately presented in her own words the core idea of religious solace from Mary’s interview. At Mary’s prompting, Sylvia then moved into a description of her sole experience with a client dying. Mary’s questions reflect her own sense of what is

important in these situations (as conveyed in her own peer interview). She asked whether Sylvia was present when the client died, whether she was able to go to the funeral, and finally, “How did you bring closure to that death?” Sylvia replied:

I had put it before me in the beginning knowing that somehow she might go sooner or later because she was very ill and very depressed and keep on asking for death to come, and had secretly shared with me that if she knew a way, she would have done it to stop the suffering. And even when I spoke religiously with her and encourage her to get to understand death from a religion point of view, she would tell me that she already spoken to, you know, priest or people who could have explained it to her and she was ready for that. So her accepting it makes it easier for me to accept it, you know. (Sylvia)

In this passage, Sylvia introduced the idea that this client wanted to die, so that made the death easier to accept. In the excerpt above, the core ideas could be conveyed very similarly without mentioning religion explicitly, but Sylvia did mention religion several times. We thus see in Sylvia’s interview an echo of the integral role of religion in Mary’s story.

Mary’s belief that death can function as a delivery from suffering (as expressed in her own interview) appeared to animate her next question:

- Mary: Yes, okay. So you watched her suffer for a long time. And so when death came you came to grips with it?
- Sylvia: Yes I came after a couple of days, it get less and less. At the present moment when it happen I was thankful that I was practically one of the last person, one of the last person to speak with her and she was telling me how good she felt today. And I was finding it strange. But then you know after a while I was saying to myself is it supposed to be like that, accepting it that you die? Why she didn’t live longer because she was so young, more like my age group?

Sylvia’s response began in what sounds like agreement with Mary’s idea that there is closure to be found in death for people who are suffering. She remembered that she was “one of the last person to speak with her” and perhaps enjoyed for a moment this important role. But then she also recalled “she was telling me how good she felt today,” undermining the notion that her client was constantly suffering without relief. Sylvia seemed to acknowledge this tension (and perhaps others) by saying, “And I was finding it strange.” She then directly questioned Mary’s notion that the deaths of people who are suffering should be seen as relief and thus taken in stride by grievers. Sylvia also appeared to challenge Mary’s assertion that acceptance of a death is a single, definitive act. With “finding it strange” and “but then you know,” the messier and less predictable side of these processes began to make themselves clear. Notably, after this exchange, Sylvia seemed to try to close the topic comfortably by acknowledging that her bond with her client allowed each to give the other “encouragement” that they needed at important

points in their lives (such as the client’s death). “So you know, I accepted it [the death] easier,” she concluded.

We see from these interviews how ideas from one interview (in this case, religious philosophy as a source of solace) can be taken up and experimented within the second one. We also see how interviewees work toward being able to disagree with one another in ways that allow the conversation to continue and how they generate and grapple with ideas of practical use in doing this work.

Relaying Styles

A second example illustrates how a clash between the styles of interviewing used by the interviewer and desired by the interviewee can play out across both interviews. In these data, we see how different ways of conceptualizing the interview—as a space of more traditional elicitation versus as a space for conversation—can lead to discomfort on the part of participants and shifting styles. The relaying of concepts described above is also apparent here.

Susan and Margaret, both in their early 50s, each had extensive experience in home care, though Susan had been an aide for 25 years, over twice as long as Margaret. We placed them together because we noticed at the earlier focus group that they had a preexisting relationship and thought this might facilitate rapport. This pair had briefly practiced asking each other questions in their interview preparation, although their interviewing styles developed over the space of the formal interview. Susan began by interviewing Margaret, asking, “Number one question: How did the death of your client affect you?” Margaret responded:

Well the death of my client affect me in so many ways. It affect me emotionally, I would say financially, but most of all emotionally because when my client die I was so attached to her that she came—she was part of my family. (Margaret)

At Susan’s urging, Margaret continued with a brief description of her relationship with the client, the signs of her own emotional distress in the wake of the client’s death, and the lack of social support that she saw as contributing to this. Susan’s next question was harder to answer, however.

- Susan: Okay so now the next question: how do you prepare yourself for a client’s death? How did you prepare yourself prior to the death of your client?
- Margaret: Well there is no way to prepare yourself for death. [...] I do not know how to explain. How do you prepare yourself for a death of your client?

Margaret repeated the question, seemingly to better absorb it herself. She eventually came to speak about needing to be observant, to look for signs that a client might be getting closer to death—slowing down, deteriorating physically, and requiring periodic hospitalization.

Susan later asked Margaret about what she wanted other aides to know, to help them prepare for client death. Having

already spoken about the emotional experience, Margaret answered this time with a lengthy exploration of the financial and logistical dimensions of losing a client, a topic she turned to perhaps as a result of the earlier discussion in the larger group. Margaret began by saying, “When a client die, do not tell yourself that you’re going to get a job the next day or the next week.” Margaret went on to suggest that aides save money so that they are financially prepared and even that they pursue their education further so they can secure more stable jobs. She then seemed to recognize the impracticality of this advice for many aides and said:

- Margaret: I want to elaborate about the death, how to prepare yourself to a client’s death. You can’t prepare yourself; you can never prepare yourself for a client’s death. Could you? That’s a question I’m asking myself too. Could you?
- Susan: It’s very difficult.
- Margaret: It’s difficult to prepare yourself for a client’s death; it’s very difficult but, as I say, you have to do it. But how? That’s a question I’m asking myself and I don’t think I can come up with the answer.

This time Margaret seemed to be directing her questions, in some sense (despite her claim that she is asking herself these questions), at Susan; inviting her to have a conversation, to think together about this question of existential and practical concern for them both. Susan, in assuming a more traditional and detached interviewer role, responded minimally. Although Margaret did ultimately come up with a range of additional “answers” on her own (e.g., ask for better information about the patient’s health status from family members; start looking for another job early, before your patient passes away), she appeared to be unsatisfied by these.⁴

When Margaret began Susan’s interview, she started with the same question (“How did the death of your client affect you?”), although it prompted a very different type of response. Susan recounted a deeply emotional, vivid, and complex story about how her father’s death preceded the death of a client and her emotional responses to the two events became entwined. Susan’s lengthy stories then dominated the first half of the interview. Susan’s own traditional interviewing style and posture had assumed that open-ended questions would elicit long and detailed responses (even though Margaret did not often respond this way), and when it was her turn to be interviewed, she performed the interviewee side of this style. In the second half of the interview, however, Margaret attempted to develop her own style and voice as an interviewer. Margaret initiated this shift by reviewing some of what she had heard from Susan. In the excerpt that follows, Margaret’s style as an interviewer, offering or repeating answers to her questions, is distinct from the minimalist responses Susan typically gave as an interviewer. While she often maintained the assertive (and almost badgering tone) that Susan first used when she was interviewer, Margaret did not take on a detached position. In fact, her desire

for conversation (rather than storytelling) on these topics still infused her participation, as she both incorporated her voice while periodically reopening spaces for Susan’s as well (as she does at the end of this exchange).

- Margaret: So what you are saying, the agency can help by . . . ?
- Susan: By helping you to get a job. Providing a job for you . . .
- Margaret: So you want the agency to reassure you?
- Susan: Reassure you.
- Margaret: That even though this client dies
- Susan: Mm-hmm.
- Margaret: You’re going to get a job.
- Susan: Right . . .
- Margaret: It will help you emotionally.
- Susan: Exactly.
- Margaret: And financially. It would help eliminate . . .
- Susan: A lot of stress.
- Margaret: Okay. Eliminate a lot of stress.
- Susan: Yes. Yes, yes.
- Margaret: Okay that’s what you are saying?
- Susan: Yes because, you know, when I was working for the hours, it was four days, forty hours. Everything was paid. After that, yes, there was some money. But how long that money is going to last?
- Margaret: So that’s why you say the agency could do more?
- Susan: Yes.
- Margaret: To help. You would like the agency to do [something] when the clients die?
- Susan: And they didn’t do it. [Begins a longer reflection on how the agency did not help her when she was in this situation and how she is planning to proceed going forward.]

From this point forward in the interview, Susan’s centrality as storyteller was slightly softer and Margaret continued to occasionally insert her own concerns into the conversation, particularly her now seemingly strong view that agencies should do more to help aides.

- Margaret: So do you think that aides should protest against that agency? That the agency should do more concerning the death of a client?
- Susan: I don’t . . .
- Margaret: Because I think we should come together and voice our . . .
- Susan: Your opinion?
- Margaret: Voice our opinion on this.

Margaret was careful to remain the person asking questions—the interviewer—but she conveyed more about her own views than Susan did as interviewer. In Susan’s interview, Margaret threaded in the topics, the emotions, and the desired style from her own interview. As the interviewer, she sought a coproduced interview to answer the questions that she herself could not answer satisfactorily.

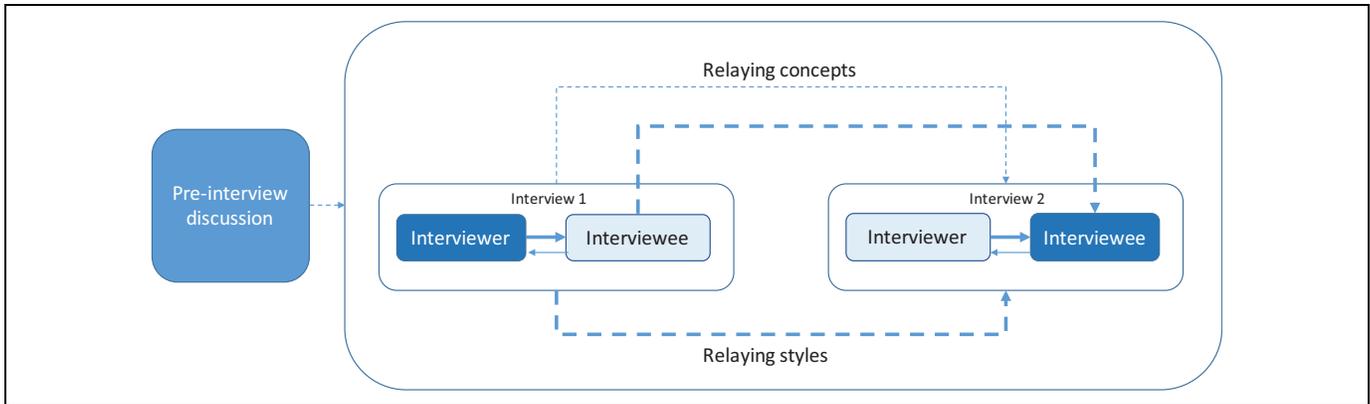


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of multilayered elicitation.

Discussion

Our experiment with sequential reciprocal peer interviews indicates that this technique has potential to elicit robust, valuable data that center the priorities and experiences of participants. Both the questions and the answers in these interviews serve as data. As we have discussed, marginalized populations in particular may conceptualize and express core issues in ways that external researchers cannot because of the unique positioning of each. For instance, these peer interviews conveyed the attraction of religion/spirituality as a way to process client death and the pervasive distress created by the job insecurity of client death in ways that our focus group data did not.

Our experiment also suggests strongly that these interviews should be viewed not only as two products of two storytellers, but rather as a single joint product, an ongoing conversation in which specific ideas or concerns are being worked with in new ways after participants switch roles. In this way, the interviews remind us of Richard Serra's sculptural installation, *Stacks*, which is made up of two large metal squares placed 60 ft apart, directly facing one another (Yale University Art Gallery, 2012). A viewer may come upon one of these and interpret it as a single sculpture, occupying space in a particular way and conveying its own messages. When viewed together, however, the squares bring to life the space between them, which becomes part of the artwork and expands its meaning. Similarly, reciprocal peer interviews can stand on their own and be analyzed as such, but what they reveal may be richer and more complex when the two interviews are viewed as a single entity. We provide a conceptual diagram of these forms of elicitation in Figure 1. In this figure, within-interview elicitation is denoted with solid arrows and meta-elicitation with dotted arrows, while bolded arrows (both dotted and solid) are the relationships we show in the analysis above and nonbolded arrows are forms of elicitation that we view as possible but that are less strongly demonstrated in our data.

Our data indicate several benefits of reciprocal peer interviewing. Most notable of these is the collective and iterative emic shaping of the data through meta-elicitation, which results in data that have been refined through the active engagement of

participants. Specifically, in our first example, we have shown how reciprocal peer interviews can function as a hybrid of focus groups and interviews, utilizing some of the generative features of focus groups (i.e., the ability to work with ideas introduced by another participant) while also benefiting from the time and space for an interviewee to truly grapple with those ideas rather than to more superficially endorse or reject an idea, as often happens in focus groups. Another advantage of our approach (in contrast to paired interviews, Hight, 2003; Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, & Manning, 2016, for instance) is that the external researcher is not present in the room and thus exerts less control over the flow of conversation, allowing participants themselves to determine topics and ways of interacting. A conversational space without the external researcher may be particularly productive for disenfranchised and isolated populations, like home care workers, who may benefit from the encouragement and/or example of peers in finding a voice in the unfamiliar terrain of a research interview.

There are also potential limitations of this approach. The most important is that shared authority, participant comfort, and rapport cannot be assumed merely because these interviews take place between peers and are reciprocal. Like all forms of data collection, reciprocal peer interviews are influenced by power dynamics within the interview (between participants) and outside (between external researchers and participants). Within interviews, meta-elicitation dynamics may limit what information is exchanged between participants in important ways. As in a focus group, core concepts emerge to the exclusion of others, strong views can be polarizing, and norms subtly established in the group can work against participants' efforts to express views outside of these norms (Krueger & Casey, 2008; Morgan, 1997). Additionally, as our example of relaying styles shows, the failure of an interviewer to establish a comfortable space in which the interviewee feels supported in speaking can result not only in possible silences and elisions in the first interview but can continue to create strain and direct talk as matters of interviewing style get worked out in the second.

As external researchers, it is important to recognize that we influenced the production of data in multiple intentional ways:

through our workshop design, our choice not to pregenerate an interview guide, our matching of participants, and our decision to make the interviews reciprocal and sequential. We also chose not to actively involve participants in the data analysis phase. Given the logistical challenges associated with bringing home-based workers with diverse schedules together for the focus groups and workshop, engaging them in data analysis did not seem feasible. Instead, we gathered their initial ideas about the most important aspects of their interviews, and the concepts and themes they felt would be most useful for trainings and advocacy, in the debrief focus group. This last choice—about where participation ends—is indeed a limitation in a sense and one that external researchers must consider carefully. As literature on this topic indicates, decisions about the types and extent of participation must calibrate the needs and interests of participants with those of external researchers, which is almost always a challenging process (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2012). On the one hand, there are the potential benefits to both groups, as detailed earlier in this article. On the other hand, while including peer researchers throughout the research process may appear to be the most equitable choice, there are important questions about the ways in which participation can function as a kind of “tyranny” for participants (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Requiring contributions of labor and time from participants bears the potential for exploitation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). We believe that our participants were adequately compensated and they told us that they valued the chance to share their experiences with each other and the research team. We also shared their interviews and a summary of research findings with them and invited their feedback. Given their work schedules, however, we felt that involving them further in data analysis could be an unnecessary burden. Thus, despite our efforts to even the playing field, the power imbalance between ourselves as external researchers and our low-wage worker participants still infused many of our decisions.

In designing the research process, we also shaped the data in ways that surprised us. For instance, our creation of a space for group discussion prior to the interviews appears to have played a role in eliciting (at least some dimensions of) the data, by suggesting the importance of some topics (e.g., job insecurity) over others. Additionally, our efforts as external researchers to maintain a flexible approach during training, open to more traditional interviewing or conversation, led—in the situation of Margaret and Susan in particular—to a surprising appropriation of an authoritative and detached interviewer role. In sum, our analysis suggests that shared authority—the much touted benefit of peer interviewing—is actively created and negotiated in reciprocal peer interviews and should not be taken for granted.

Increasing rigor in reciprocal peer interviewing begins with a recognition of the method’s aspiration to center marginalized voices. If the goal of such interviews is capturing participants’ emic perspectives, this cannot be done without relinquishing many traditionally researcher-held forms of control. However, at the same time, these perspectives cannot be elicited without

certain forms of structure and preparation. Based on our experience, and building on insights from others using this method, we believe that the following steps are necessary to ensure rigorous projects: (1) balancing structure with flexibility in designing the workshop and interviews, (2) thorough preparation of participants, and (3) careful consideration of meta-elicitation dynamics.

The examples described in Table 1 answered the question of what to structure and what to leave flexible in different ways. How researchers strike this balance reflects the research topic, the realities of the research context and participants, and the researchers’ epistemological stances. Regardless, in order to maximize quality, researchers should closely attend to the ways in which structure and flexibility are shaping the data and make adjustments along the way. For instance, our structural approach of alternating interviews, rather than questions (as was the case in Porter et al., 2009), did not allow the first interviewee to revisit her own responses, stories, and conversations in light of hearing the second interviewee’s account (though Margaret’s interviewing style may have been an attempt to amend her own responses as an interviewee). While we did conduct a debrief focus group, we did not ask participants explicitly whether there were topics they wanted to revisit. An exit interview conducted by one of our external researchers with both interviewees could gather this information more precisely, while also triangulating the data. While our project included more training and preparation than the other two studies, we intentionally left flexible the specific interview questions and strategies with which participants would enter the interview. We now see that flexibility does not always result in a rich dialogue (as suggested by Donaghey (2014)). Further structure in helping participants to prepare for interviews, as we discuss below, might be appropriate.

In order to maximize data richness and participants’ ability to navigate shared authority, we would advise further training of participants on core interviewing skills (as suggested by others (Porter et al., 2009)) and on different ways of taking up both interviewer and interviewee roles and increased opportunities for practice to increase skill and confidence. Building on this, we would also suggest two other types of preparation. First, researchers should recognize the potential mix of interviewing and response styles that can emerge (e.g., story/answer elicitation vs. conversation). Participants may mix these styles but agreeing on what the mix ideally will be in advance may be advisable as a way of reducing frustration for participants. This mix may be set by external researchers in advance or it may be decided by participants themselves in the planning for the interview. Second, opportunities to discuss reflexivity (i.e., each participant’s positioning and interests in the research), as some others have noted (Quinney et al., 2016), might also be critical to assisting participants in coming to consensus about how they will engage with the research and perhaps would facilitate discussions of ideal interviewing styles as well.

Finally, careful consideration of meta-elicitation dynamics can also help to increase analytic rigor. Our project suggests that there can be substantial flow of both concepts and styles

from one interview into the next. Thus, as we argue above, it may be advantageous to consider interviews together (alongside exit interview data) for the purposes of analysis, rather than separately. For example, such an analysis might assess and acknowledge the presence of echoed topics, like religion in Sylvia's interview, and weigh these ideas in the analysis accordingly. In future work, we will also consider the role of group discussions during the workshop as a potential form of elicitation.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described and analyzed an innovative approach to reciprocal peer interviews and outlined the process through which multiple layers of elicitation are mobilized. In doing this, we have attempted to address one critique of peer and reciprocal peer interviews: that because of the status of the interview as a conversation between peers these data are often considered "authentic" and thus less subject to critical appraisal. Thoughtful analyses of the circumstances of production of all kinds of peer interviews are an important step toward viewing these data as coproductions elicited not only by a particular interviewer but also by many surrounding factors. We examine one of these—the sequential nature of this particular form of reciprocal peer interviewing—but acknowledge there are many possible sources of elicitation, including the degree to which external researchers are present, the forms of training themselves, and the physical spaces in which interviews take place, among others. Considering elicitation as a multilayered and multifaceted process recognizes the complexity of interview interactions and is important in participatory projects that aim to place the concerns of the populations of interest at the fore. Analyses of this type thus have great potential to produce results centered on emic understandings and thus more credible interpretations of these data.

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Notes

1. We use the term "external" to refer to professional researchers who may or may not share core characteristics with the population of research interest.
2. Braye and McDonnell (2013) briefly mention that reciprocal peer interviews were a component of their larger peer interview study, perhaps serving in a training function, but they are not analyzed separately and thus not analyzed as an example of reciprocal peer interviewing here.
3. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Note also that all participants discussed in this article were women of color, originally from the Caribbean.
4. A similar situation arose in the three-person interviewing team, as one interviewer (who as an interviewee told long, well-developed stories) discussed struggling with the relatively short answers her interviewee provided to her questions in the postinterview focus group. Thus, these different expectations of the interview can be uncomfortable not only for the interviewee, as was seemingly the case for Margaret, but also for interviewers.

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