22 Exploring the life experiences of less-educated rural older adults

Challenges and the possible solution – life story interviews

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This chapter provides a life-story interview strategy to encourage research participation when interviewees are less educated and less articulate. Unlike the traditional life-story approach or oral history method which emphasize the "natural emergence" of participant's life experience, this strategy suggests a starting point, a triggering "linguistic frame" and a "acceptable interview field" to facilitate interview involvement.

This strategy could be used in circumstances when participants feel their story is "too normal to be told" or when the knowledge background between interviewer and participants is remarkably significant. Further research needs to be conducted to improve method rigor.

Introduction

It's almost been a research trend to use qualitative studies to encourage marginalized participants to "speak out" and share their stories (Lincoln and Lanford, 2018); however, it is challenging to encourage inarticulate, marginalized, less-educated or even illiterate older participants to articulate their experiences and stories (Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006; Wenger, 2001). On the one hand, participants with a lower educational level/illiteracy tend to employ an unstructured expression style and respond with more direct, concrete answers that are inadequate for explicit phonological analysis (Ardila et al., 2010). On the other hand, lower education levels and illiteracy are so closely related with being marginalized that these individuals have been positioned in a "listener's" point of view for life, hence they see their life story as "not much to tell" (Gheorghiu, 2011; Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller, 2011). This issue was illustrated by sociologists and anthropologists who explored the experiences of marginalized groups (e.g., immigrant women or economically disadvantaged people). Those participants also manifested certain levels of anxiety during the interview – they were afraid to say "something wrong" or "something valueless" in front of a "authorized figure", that is, the researcher (Gheorghiu, 2011; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014).

Very few studies have presented methodological solutions for interviewing less-educated/illiterate older participants, but there is, fortunately, a substantial amount of literature that has provided methodological guidance for interviewing inarticulate participants (e.g., those with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties) (Hollomotz, 2017; Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006). It is notable that illiteracy cannot be equated to cognitive impairment or learning difficulties, yet they do share some similarities in terms of linguistic and cognitive performance, such as inarticulateness and unresponsiveness (Ardila et al.,

2010; Booth and Booth, 1996), concrete expressive style (Julayanont and Ruthirago, 2018), deteriorated memories (Paddick et al., 2017) and problems with tracking time (Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006). All told, illiteracy and low levels of education might hinder interviewees' ability to engage with what mainstream qualitative interviews seek to establish as a "serious, effective and successful communication" process (Wenger, 2001).

This chapter is based on a dissertation project that aimed to examine the decision-making processes for Ageing-in-Place (AIP) among "three-nos" older persons population in rural China. Three-nos older persons are a special group of people that the government is responsible for, including all their health and social care till the end of their life. Eligibility to be deemed a "Three-no" older person requires: (1) aged over 60; (2) unable to work; (3) no source of income and (4) no children or other individual with a legal responsibility for support and care (Wu, Mao and Zhong, 2009). The three-nos older persons in rural contexts who participated in this study were impoverished, less-educated, marginalized and vulnerable. Demographically, they were more often male than female and were socially isolated and socio-economic (SES) disadvantaged. More importantly, they usually had dropped out of school at an extremely young age (at an average of eight years old) or even never attend school because of historical turbulence and poverty. Three challenges met with during the interview process will be discussed, followed by a discussion on the potential solution of a life-story interview strategy being used to tackle such challenges in order to achieve a more collaborative interview result.

Here the author illustrates three challenges hindering the "natural emergence" of stories among Chinese three-nos persons (Charmaz, 2017): (1) unresponsiveness, (2) difficulties with time and (3) "good policy" and self-repression.

Unresponsiveness and fragmented responses

Unresponsiveness is an umbrella concept that comprises a variety of situations such as interview silence and resistance (Booth and Booth, 1996; Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006). In this chapter, unresponsiveness accounts for participants' inability to answer certain types of questions, especially open-ended questions that employ abstract terms (Booth and Booth, 1996). In fact, it is true that open-ended questions (e.g., "could you please describe your daily life"; "could you describe your childhood") might receive little valid information from less-educated individuals.

RESEARCHER: Could you please tell me about your daily life?
DW: Nothing, just nothing. I don't have to do anything [related to farming in residential facility], even harvesting grass from the land.

DW (76-year-old) was a disabled, childless and illiterate woman who had been residing in a rural residential facility for three years. DW relocated into residential faculties because of a conflict: her nephew had offered her a room and "a place to eat", but then her nephew's mother deemed her as "unable to work" and "a waste of food". When asked about the scenario that caused her to relocate to the residential facilities, her answer is fragmented:

RESEARCHER: So, what happen? Why did you relocate here?
DW: Because the policy is good and supportive…. My husband died, I don't have children, the policy is good.
RESEARCHER: Who asked you here?

DW: [silence and confused for three seconds] My nephew didn't allow me to come here, but I arrived in last year.
RESEARCHER: Why?
DW: He thought moving was inconvenient. Then his mother blamed me. Then I came there from home, my nephew come, then he leads me, again, so that I'm here.

The dialog above is full of fragmentations and misinterpretations. Theoretically and understandably, "all human stories are told in a fragmented and unitary form" (Gheorghiu, 2011); however, for participants with expressive difficulties, they are prone to a more direct, concrete linguistic style when narrating their stories (Ardila et al., 2010; Hollomotz, 2017).

Unresponsiveness is not merely a linguistic constraint but is generally overlaid with other social factors such as low self-esteem or oppressed experience (Booth and Booth, 1996). For example:

RESEARCHER: Could you please describe your daily life?
SP: [confused and laughs]
TRANSLATOR: It's just your daily life; what do you do after you wake up? When do you eat your breakfast?
SP: I'm just … cook and eat. I could basically do things [support her independent living], so I just … chop woods, burn, cook. It's basically enough for me.

Understandably, for the majority of participants, "eating after farming, farming after eating" was too routine to be narrated. Their silence and confusion did not signify a misunderstanding the interviewer's question; rather, they question the merit of their own stories and struggled with the necessity and appropriateness of narrating. In other words, marginalized participants exhibit uncertainty about "what is worth telling" when placed in a story-teller's position (Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

Ambiguous sense of time

Low-educated/illiterate participants might also have an ambiguous sense of time (Ardila et al., 2010; Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006). They usually refer to an abstract marker of personal significance (e.g., birthday, celebration day) rather than an actual, numerical point of time to organize their memories (Hershatter, 2011; Hollomotz, 2017). For instance:

RESEARCHER: You went to XX village [another village far from her home] when you were young. When? Could you elaborate more?
HM: I was tall enough to cook. [Stoves in rural area were approximately one meter in height.] Then the Liberation came. After the Liberation, I came back.

For HM, her own "biographical map" relies on her height relative to the stove and the coming of the Liberation. Scholars also suggested that the way the rural women remembered their past was deeply influenced by the collective narrative of the *Liberation* (*jiefang*) and collectivisms that are a significant "memorial millstone" and influence their future expectations for every aspect of their life (Hershatter, 2011). Hence the intertwined memory between someone's life event and historical events is obvious, embedded into one's matrix of experience and comprises one important part of one's self.

The "good policy" and oppressed self

All stories have their structural foundation, and all plots have their own political origins (Hyvärinen, 2016). Less-educated Chinese rural residents sometimes refer to "good" government and "good" policies to contextualize their individual choices and, more importantly, to avoid researcher's questions.

RESEARCHER: Could you please tell me about your daily life?
TS: Daily life? It's hard to tell, but the government policy treats us so well.
RESEARCHER: No, I mean, just your life.
TS: No matter what, it's a good policy. We were old and single men; it's satisfactory if we consolidate together [with his brothers] and contribute to the society. We feel grateful. It's not the government's responsibility on some issue, and it's unspeakable.

It is reasonable that this rural Chinese citizen was "trained" to answer inquiries from authorized figures such as government official with a formal, "socially proper" language form (e.g., individual responsibility, contribute to the society) (Hershatter, 2011). The research setting replicates such "trained" experiences wherein low-educated rural residents were used to being situated in the listeners' position rather than narrator's position. Therefore, like many other oppressed groups who had also long been invisible and silenced, the mainstream discourse failed to provide a legitimate narrative framework to establish a discursive model or accommodate the interviewee's individual identity (Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

In general, it is not easy to encourage less-educated Chinese rural residents to present a holistic "life story" and/or "self" in front of a researcher. The traditional interview strategy could be challenging when stories are not "naturally emerging" because of participants' inarticulateness, which also contributes to their cognitive conditions, linguistic skills and subordinate social positions (Booth and Booth, 1996; Charmaz, 2002; Hershatter, 2011). Less-educated Chinese rural residents were full of stories and experiences, so the difficulties encountered during the interview cannot be simply encompassed as "inarticulateness". Feminist historian Gail Hershatter (2011) concluded that there should always be a humbling reminder for the qualitative researcher to consider "the missing voice" and the "story behind" the main narrative. More importantly, it is always significant to remember that even the most inarticulate people can disclose a great deal more than their conversation reveals (Booth and Booth, 1996).

A potential solution: a life-story interviewing style

Unresponsiveness, ambiguous sense of time and self-suppression could be tackled by certain interview techniques, specifically, life-story interviewing strategies. The life-story approach arranges events in a sequential and causal order, containing characters, plot and usually a certain "theme" (Hyvärinen, 2016). It allows for researchers to contextualize individual actions while either developing or refining a conceptual framework for further understanding (Lanford, Tierney, and Lincoln, 2019).

The life-story oriented interview strategy is used to encourage participants to be "involved;" it allows for the "natural emerge" of interviewee's stories and the co-authoring and co-production of participants' experience (Charmaz, 2002; Lanford, Tierney, and Lincoln, 2019). Ideally, the life-story approach allows for the researcher to minimize

his/her influence during interview by following the participants' own narrating structure and style (Adriansen, 2012; Jessee, 2019); however, this approach could still present difficulties when innerving less-educated/illiterate Chinese people from rural backgrounds. Here we propose a pragmatic life-story interview strategy to interviewing low-educated and illiterate older participants, in order to encourage those marginalized group to collaborate and become involved with the interview process.

Starting point

The traditional method employed during a life history approach encourages the participant to start by responding to an open-ended question about a very early retrospective experience or significant life event (Adriansen, 2012; Lincoln and Lanford, 2018). In contrast, scholars also suggested that open-ended questions might receive little information from inarticulate participants (Hollomotz, 2017). Usually, the lack of responsiveness to open-ended questions requires the researcher to adopt a more direct interviewing style (Booth and Booth, 1996); the "active" style, by definition, means broaching a conversation topic that is more "attractive" and "answerable".

Narrating the experience of illness is a strategic and problem-solving approach to gain a sense of body-mastery (Seale and Charteris-Black, 2008). In China in particular, rural older people tend to relate their health status to acquaintances and receive advice from their peers in order to maintain and cultivate their social capital in "a society of the familiar" (Anson and Sun, 2005). Chinese rural older participants were more willing to describe their health status and history of illness rather than their routine life, perhaps because such physical experiences are situated in the middle of the spectrum of being "too normal" and "too complicated" so that its constitutes a "worth-telling story". Scholars also suggested a "milestone" technique when interviewing inarticulate participants; that is, to create a concrete frame of reference using artifacts such as photos in order to trigger participants' willingness to share (Hollomotz, 2017). For older, less-educated rural Chinese people in particular, the experience of illness – including pain management, hospital visits and the history of disease – constitutes an effective "frame of reference", which fostered a relationship of trust and a more considerate attitude on the one hand and smoothing the way into answering more difficulties questions and enabling them to organize a legitimate and "socially proper" story on the other. Other "frame of reference" approaches such as farming activities and farming lands could be also examined upon further study.

Historical events and significant life events

The past is durable and continuous. The narrative of the past is individually and collectively constructed and embedded in a framework of dominant political discourse that rules out "other versions of stories" that were inconsistent with its narrow representation of reality (Hyvärinen, 2016). Social historian scholars pay attention to the c*onstructive* characteristics of storytelling wherein individuals select merely one fragment of the past, present and future to narrate and present a story, which empowers them with a capacity for subjectivity so that their narrated versions of stories were, sometimes, diverse and even rebellious (Jessee, 2019).

A methodological concern about gaining data is using the historical timeline of events, which could be stimulated and vivid when compared to the direct, flattened interviewing style that regards participants as merely "information provider" (Adriansen, 2012; Kat

Kolar etal., 2015). However, for less-educated older participants from rural China, their narrated timeline might not be linear (Hershatter, 2011; Hollomotz, 2017). What follows are several life events and historical events that were commonly and intensely experienced by rural Chinese populations that may encourage less-educated participants to speak out.

Individual life events: (1) early childhood and parents; (2) education; (2) marriage and children; (4) house division; (5) history of illness.

Historical events: (1) the Liberation; (2) the Great-Leap Forward and Collectivism Period; (3) the Family Responsibility System; (4) the relocation of villages.

Significant historical events could stimulate participants' memories about their past and enable them to relate these stories so that the patterns of how the stories were constructed could be analyzed and reconstruction from various versions in order to achieve the inner consistency (Hershatter, 2011). Hence, it is effective to remind less-educated rural participants of the larger context their stories occurred within certain "answerable" topics and "historical milestones" that could also soothe their anxiety, bridging their individual experience with a broader, more structured perspective and facilitating the co-construction or even re-construction of their own stories (Adriansen, 2012).

Triangulation

Triangulation describes the process of the researcher referring to other sources of information to add contextual interpretation or cross verification of certain scenarios during or after the qualitative interview (Kat Kolar et al., 2015; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014). Scholars also advocated for a collective analysis method which includes the presence of "local voice and meanings" through the final stages of study, particularly when dealing with the "hidden transcript" or "invisible figures" of research participants (Dodson, Piatelli and Schmalzbauer, 2007; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014). Unfortunately, collective members who share similar social backgrounds with the participants were only involved during data analysis process (Almlund, 2013).

This chapter endorses such collaborative approaches of "involving the local, maybe non-academic third party" to fill the gaps of understanding and knowledge construction. It could be a person who worked as local drivers or forest rangers, who could even marginally understand the academic language and "disassemble" some of abstract, formal term which the researcher didn't realize its abstraction.

RESEARCHER: When did you come to the residential facility? What happened?
HM: My nephew died. I lived in the high mountain over there [a village 3 km from research site]. I was been *bounded* to there.
RESEARCHER [confused]: What is …?
TRANSLATOR [to researcher]: It was the Old Society (before Liberation) when she was kidnapped and adopted to that village. You know, after the Liberation, she came back.

Most of time it is not the content of the questions that should be translated, it is the expressive style and abstract terms that are taken for granted in mainstream and academic discourse, yet expressions outside the participants' routine language frameworks should be disassembled and re-narrated in a more direct, concrete and "answerable" way (Hollomotz, 2017; Kat Kolar et al., 2015). Besides, the additional informant or translator would not merely be functioning as a supplemental informative figure; instead, they could bring local meaning and reflexivity into interview settings by de-constructing what the researcher had assumed.

Summary

Low levels of education/illiteracy might hinder the interviewer gaining in-depth data; however, is it not reasonable to question participants' ability to elaborate their stories (Hollomotz, 2017; Lloyd, Gatherer and Kalsy, 2006). Low-education/illiterate rural participants have certain difficulties expressing their experience, and such expressive challenges were not merely the result of their linguistic skills but were embedded in a broader socio-economic context – a rural/urban distinctive discourse wherein rural residents' living experience were encompassed as "backward and primitive" (Lai, 2016).

The authors advocate a life-story interview strategy to encourage participants' willingness to reveal their stories. By using a concrete and "answerable" starting point, by intertwining life events and historical events and, by inviting a local translator, interviews could smooth participants' nervousness and encourage them to relate their stories. This methodological technique is inspired by the time mapping approach wherein participants' life events could be co-authorized by researchers and participants alike (Adriansen, 2012). It paves the way for individual reflexivity of one's stories as well (Kat Kolar et al., 2015).

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