

# How Come there is No Male Respondent in Your Study?: Vulnerability and Risks

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## Abstract

Conducting qualitative research on topics that are considered as social taboo or emotionally laden can lead a researcher to stressful research process especially to a novice researcher. As a novice researcher of mixed methods research design, the author was challenged to understand the complexity and intricacy of quantitative and qualitative research process. This article considers the validity procedures of qualitative research that the author has applied in an exploratory sequential design and the unexpected challenge of losing male respondents who withdrew in a middle of interview. The withdrawal of the male respondents has left indelible emotional marks in the author's research journey as a novice researcher. Retrospectively, this article considers some of the reflections by the author during the research process in terms of overcoming the feeling of despair due to losing male respondents.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity, challenge in qualitative research, losing respondents.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing research guideline on qualitative research procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2004; Barbour, 2006; Silverman, 2010). In this article, I examine my own story as a novice researcher in mixed methods design in conducting qualitative research (as a part of multiphase design). By doing so, I hope to share my experience as a researcher cum data collection instrument as what Rew, Bechtel and Sapp (1993) proposed, "the inherent value of human beings and their inter-subjective experiences underscore the significance of the use of the self-as-instrument in qualitative inquiry. No other entity could fully capture the multidimensionality and intricacy of the human experience" (p. 301). My story came into written form as a part of a postgraduate research journey that I documented in my doctoral thesis. Even though I did not use qualitative research approach as the main research methodology and design, yet using multiphase mixed methods design prompted me to learn and discover the differences of qualitative research from quantitative research. As I revisited my qualitative research journey by looking at the personal daily journals that I kept while collecting data, I re-examined again the reflections that I had while facing one of the least unexpected challenges, which was losing male respondents.

I begin the story with a short vignette of my reflections, which captured the vulnerability feeling that I had and how I utilised emotions in my own doctoral research. I then shift to my reflexivity of my research journey as an audit trail. I discuss some recommendations and strategies that I implemented in my doctoral journey as an example of how I utilise emotions in research through facing vulnerability as a novice qualitative researcher, even though I employed mixed methods design as the main research methodology of my research. The experience to lose male respondents in my doctoral journey enriches my research experience which beneficial to be an independent researcher.

### 1.1 A short vignette of my doctoral journey

Giftedness and talented is a topic that intrigue me since a little incident that I had when I was 10 years old in a mathematics class. I was not an A student during primary school. Yet, I was amazed when I got 5As for my UPSR

results. Since then, I always wonder if there is such thing as real talent or gift. I believe that I am not one of those individuals who might belong to the category of gifted or talented. When I was given the opportunity to further my study at doctoral level, I decided to explore the topic of giftedness and talented. Coincidentally, it was also around this time when the news about a math prodigy known as Adi Putra Abdul Ghani became the nationwide attention (at least in Malaysia). The question of what and how giftedness and talented is perceived by individuals especially teachers became the main focus of my study. After careful and exhaustive exploration of the suitable methodology, I decided to use multiphase mixed methods design. The first phase of my study is considered as preliminary study. In this regards, I used qualitative approach to start my investigation of the conceptions of giftedness and talented among pre service and in service teachers in Malaysia. The preliminary data, which I gathered from open-ended questions and interview, led me to uncover several themes relating to conceptions of giftedness and talented. The themes were used to construct items of survey questionnaire, which I later pilot, tested. The second phase of my study was pilot test study. During my pilot testing, I also interviewed several respondents (pre service teachers and in service teachers) to explore the suitability of the interview protocol that I later used in the main study. Everything seemed to be smooth with no glitches of losing respondents at this point. People who I interviewed seemed motivated and willing to share their understanding about giftedness and talented from their teaching and learning experience. I expected that respondents in the main study would act the same way too. How foolish I am to think that way? Nothing from the preliminary and pilot study phases has prepared me well to deal with the unexpected event in the third phase of my study in which I lost my male respondents during the interview session in specific.

## **1.2 Reflexivity on the research procedure**

From the beginning of my study, I acknowledged the existence of power relation between me as a researcher and the respondents of my study through previous literature. Finding other researchers' experiences in terms of power relation in their research did little help in my preparation on dealing with unexpected events due to power relation which is the respondents' withdrawal in the third phase of my study. Honestly, after the withdrawal of the male respondents, I was shocked and confused. At that point, I asked myself repeatedly, "What have gone wrong? Is it something to do with my gender identity as a female researcher? Have I done enough to bridge the gap that might exist due to power relation between the respondents and myself as a researcher? What have I done to make them feel inferior during the interview? What should I do?" At that point, I tried very hard not to relate the incident with my gender identity. Perhaps, I was trying the best I could to be objective and stayed focus on the data collection process without allowing my emotions to interfere with my thoughts.

According to Converse and Schuman (1974) since any form of hesitation or even refusal for interviews could be considered as expectable in any research yet too much acceptance of refusals can diminish a researcher's efforts. When I lost the respondents, I started to question if I have done enough exploring the relevant methodology for my study. I discussed the withdrawal issue with my supervisor. He was supportive and gave me ample time to solve the issue myself. He prompted me to think back the steps that I have taken and would take to overcome the withdrawal issue. He also suggested me to revisit again my literature review especially on the qualitative research methodology, its procedures and ethical issues. His suggestion for an audit trail reminded me about the careful steps that I recorded in my data-collection logbook which was proposed by various qualitative researchers such as Rodgers and Cowles (1993), Shenton (2004), and Cutcliffe and McKenna (2004). In addition, he encouraged me to share my experience of losing respondents due to unexpected withdrawal in the monthly seminar that was held in my school. His support and encouragement to face the unexpected issue boosted my deflating confidence at that time. In this matter, it is important to maintain psychological contract with my supervisor as suggested by Phillips and Pugh (2006). An aspect of the psychological contract that I have set with my supervisor at the beginning of my doctoral journey was I would inform him about my progress frequently and discuss delicate matters openly. Even though in my panic-stricken moment, I know that I should not keep anything on myself without sharing it with my supervisor. Having psychological contract with my supervisor did help me to stay focused and attentive. My supervisor's suggestion to retrace back the steps that I have taken and revisit the literature review on research methodology made me searched and researched more about qualitative research methodology.

Knowing the danger that such incident might weaken my future efforts in my doctoral journey (as my experience as a novice qualitative researcher at this point did not addresses unexpected incidents such as withdrawal of respondents), I re-examined again the relevant resources related to qualitative methodology more rigorously. Reflectively, I acknowledged the fact that the previous research courses that I had attended focused mainly on quantitative research and thus, I became familiar with quantitative research as compared to qualitative. Through

informal discussion with fellow PhD colleagues who employ qualitative methodology in their research and available resources that I could find about qualitative methodology, I found myself to feel overwhelmed with enormous information about research methodology. Since I used a mixed methods methodology, I need to get myself familiar with three different methodologies (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approach). The emotional strain prompted me to reevaluate my thoughts and emotions in order to be emphatic with my respondents who might feel overwhelmed when I asked them certain questions relating to their understanding of giftedness and talented after they have completed a survey questionnaire. Even though some interviews were not conducted right after the survey, awareness about my own emotions heightened my awareness towards my respondents' feeling and thus, my empathy towards them. In addition, I feel compelled to be emphatic towards my respondents.

Being emphatic towards respondents is regarded as an acceptance of emotion in qualitative research. This is in line with a proposition by Sciarra (1999), "Because entering the meaning-making world of another requires empathy, it is inconceivable how the qualitative researcher would accomplish her goal by distancing herself from emotions" (p. 44). In this regards, as a novice mixed methods researcher, my attempt to understand their reasons to withdraw from my study was not only to assure that I have done correctly the qualitative research process in a process of audit trail, but also to understand my respondents better as they shared their understanding about giftedness and talented. Knowing their hesitation and reasons of withdrawal opened up a new perspective about qualitative methodology to me as a novice researcher.

To encourage respondents to participate in the interview, I purposely went to all of the respective locations to conduct the survey for the quantitative part of my study. I believe that by physically present at those locations would allow me to build rapport with potential respondents for the interview later on. According to Seidman (2006) interview requires a researcher „to establish access to and make contact with potential respondents whom they have never met. (p. 12). He also contends that initial contact visit is necessary to develop mutual respect between a researcher and respondents or respondents of a research. This mutual respect is essential in order to minimise power relation as well as to maximise cooperation and honesty from respondents.

For my research, in deciding the number of respondents to be interviewed, I purposely decided the number of respondents for the interview (a participant to represent each group, gender and race. Six respondents for each group i.e. pre service or in service that represents three main races in Malaysia: Malay, Chinese and Indian and comprise of male and female equally and thus, the total numbers of respondents are twelve.). Thus, ideally there would be twelve respondents in this study. This study involved exploratory study and thus, to have a representative of individuals from two groups of understudy from different gender and race is an ideal sampling. In this study, I let all respondents knew that I required twelve respondents for the interview when I briefed them about the study while distributing structured questionnaires to them. According to Seidman (2006), it is best to inform the respondents about the nature of the study in general and to be explicit about what will be expected of them (p. 48). In this study, respondents were informed about the study in general as well as the expectations on them which are limited to their commitment and also right to withdraw from the interview at any time or postpone the interviews for another time regardless of the reasons.

For the interview, fifteen respondents have volunteered to be interviewed at first. Out of fifteen, after contacting them to set for the location and time for the interview session, only eight females respondents and three males respondents were willing to be interviewed. I gave the respondents the opportunity to propose the suitable place for the interview session. Therefore, there was a variation of places where I conducted the interview sessions. Even though the places for interview sessions were varied, but it was decided upon respondents' consent. In most cases, the respondents suggested the location for the interview, as I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable when they were being interviewed. Thus, I only let the respondents know about the criteria of the places suitable for interview sessions where I could safeguard ethical aspects of conducting interview such as respondents' privacy and elimination of distraction. In this case, I let the respondents to have the final say on the location. According to Converse and Shuman (1974), the location for the interview is essential for getting frank responses as respondents might be feel or act more like themselves in familiar territories as compared to when it is conducted in unfamiliar territories. In this study, a participant agreed to be interviewed in a research room in my faculty because she felt more comfortable to be interviewed in a different place other than her school. When she was asked her reasons, she explained that she did not want any possible interruption from her colleagues or students during the interview.

For the male respondents, initially, only three have volunteered to be interviewed. Yet, when I contacted a male teacher to finalize the date for the interview session, he refused to be interviewed. Another two respondents were willing to be interviewed but withdrew after answering few questions. Since they had answered a semi structured

questionnaire completely which I gave prior the interview session, I requested for informal interview in which I recorded the reasons of their withdrawal from the study. The informal interview could provide valuable insight on the unpredictable challenges conducting this study. In short, I managed to interview only six female respondents but no male participant either in service or pre-service teachers.

Even though, I could not get male respondents to be interviewed in this study, yet I acknowledge and aware of the challenges and uncomfortable power relations that I have to face which is considered as politics of interviewing as what stated by Limerick et al. (1996, p. 449). They proposed that interview could lead a researcher to discover new information yet the discovery process means a researcher has to face the challenge of uncomfortable feelings, and contradictions. They also assert that it is not unusual for a researcher to face with a power relation with respondents. A proposition by Nunkoosing (2005) states that interview presents different challenges to both interviewer and interviewee. In this vein, Nunkoosing proposes that “interview challenges the interviewer’s skills to seek information from the interviewee as seeker of knowledge and methodological expertise” (p. 699). As for the interviewee, in his words, Nunkoosing contends that, interview invites and persuades individuals to think and talk – that is to discourse – their needs, wants, expectations, experiences, and understandings at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

Reflecting on Nunkoosing’s proposition, I was enlightened with a fact that to participate in an academic research could be a daunting experience to some respondents who perceive that they have to be as informative and helpful as they should to contribute meaningfully to an academic research. This perhaps relate to the role of a teacher in which a teacher is perceived as someone knowledgeable who transmits information to students. In addition, as teachers, when they were placed in a situation whereby they were asked questions about gifted and talented based on their experience, it might compel them to present themselves as knowledgeable and informative. As such, when they were unsure about how to respond due to lack of information, they assumed that they were not competent enough to tell me more about what they know. According to Converse and Schuman (1974), during an interview, it is common for respondents to be „appealed to on an intellectualised level. (p. 73) and thus, this conscious perception on how they should portray themselves as thoughtful and well-informed on the topic understudy might lead them to withdraw from participating in this study.

From the informal interview conducted with two male respondents who withdrew from the interview session in a middle of interview, one of them revealed that he does not know much about gifted and talented because in his teaching training courses, the focus is on students who are academically low achievers. One of them said “It is not (sic) teachers do not know. In institute of teacher education, the focus is on the weak student ... don’t know how to deal with gifted students”. He further explained that “the information about giftedness is scarce”. When he was asked further why he declined to be interviewed, his response was “I feel that the more I answer the questions that you ask, the more stupid I become”.

Another respondent stated that “I notice in the questionnaire, there are many things that make me feel “wow” (in amazement)... but there are many new things that I don’t know about (gifted and talented)”. Unlike the female respondents, even though they are also unsure about certain aspects of gifted and talented, yet they were more willing to share their views on gifted and talented as compared to the male respondents. One of the male respondents even said that “If it is just for opinion, (I) can but if it is possible, I don’t want to talk about something based on my opinion without information”.

From their responses, it could be summarised that their refusal reflect their anxiety or insecurity to participate in an academic research. From one of the responses, a participant assumes that participating in an academic research means that he has to provide factual information, not his personal view or understanding about certain issues understudy. In this instance, it was a paradoxical situation that I have to face as a female researcher to interview reluctant male respondents in convincing them that I am impartial and not judgmental on their response. In addition, knowing my social identity prior the interview might also influence them to withdraw from this study. In short, my gender and social identity -i.e. a female PhD student and an academic staff (on a study leave) - might also have influenced on how the female and male respondents react. Even though, I tried to minimise any inequality inherent in the research relationship with my respondents, it seems that I did not manage to convince the male respondents by downplaying my gender and social identity and desexualising the research interaction even.

While the females were more open and cooperative in this study (for the interviews), males were more reserved and hesitated when I first approached them to participate in the interviews. This is not a new scenario in any research. In two different studies by Arendell (1995) and Arendell,(1997) on divorced individuals, she found that

men reacted differently from women when asked about personal relationship. In addition, she further illustrates that gender identities and hierarchy are influential factors in interview interactions as well as respondents' responses. In summary, gender the researcher-participant relationship is inevitably complex, multifaceted, and dynamic (Arendell, 1997).

However, other than social identity, I aware that there might be difference in the interpretive aspects during interview as proposed by Riessman (1987). In Riessman's (1987) study, it was found that interpretive aspects in the interview have no relation with gender. Also, she found that gender similarity between the interviewer and respondents does little help in the interpretive process of different narrative styles used by respondents. In addition, she also contends that a researcher's personal framework -i.e. includes educational, cultural and social components - might influence the interpretive aspects involve in interview as well. Therefore, she emphasises that researchers should be aware off different narrative genres or forms of telling (Riessman, 1987) that respondents used during qualitative interviews especially as well as researcher's personal perspectives. In this study, I found only minimal differences exist in terms of the respondent's narration. However, keeping in mind about Riessman's (1987) proposition, I followed suggestions by Rose (1945) to be objective and honest during the interviews.

When I introduced myself to the respondents, at first I purposely limit the information about my identity just as a PhD student at Durham University, United Kingdom (it is because to do a PhD without a sponsorship is rare in Malaysia especially doing a PhD at overseas university). However, somehow respondents knew my other identity as an academic staff. In this vein, it seems that my status as a PhD student as well as an academic staff in one of the local universities made them to perceive me as an authority or expert in the field of gifted education. Even with the female respondents, I did not self-disclose myself too much because I realise that excessive self-disclosure might negatively reinforce their responses or behaviours. In a study by Mann and Murphy (1975) it was found that intermediate self-disclosure might significantly improve the respondents' reactions toward the researcher. In my study, even though I attempted to foster the rapport with my participants through self-disclosure, yet it did not motivate the male respondents to render their assistance and cooperation during the interview session.

## **2. LAYERS OF VALIDITY PROCEDURES**

In my study, the audit trail process became a part of validity procedures for my qualitative research. Following proposition by Creswell and Miller (2000) of three layers of validity procedures from the lens of researcher, respondents and people external to the study such as other researchers or reviewers, I carefully described the processes in my thesis. The first layer of validity procedures involved my own self-reflexivity as a researcher. In this regards, even though at first I was feeling apprehensive to write a detailed description of the withdrawal of male respondents in my thesis because I was afraid it might influence the way my future PhD internal and external examiners perceive the quality of my work, with the assurance of my supervisor who reminded me about the validity of qualitative data that I had, I presented a detailed description of the whole process of data collection (including the quantitative part) in my thesis. This approach is consistent with what Cho and Trent (2006) asserted that "the question of validity in itself is convergent with the way the researcher self-reflects, both explicitly and implicitly, upon the multiple dimensions in which the inquiry is conducted" (p. 324). For example, in my thesis, I described my anticipation about the hesitation of some respondents to be voice-recorded and the way I assured the respondents through emphasizing the importance of voice-recording as a means to record interview data. In addition, by informing the respondents about ethical standards of research, it did help to reassure the respondents about their right as participants in my study.

Secondly, the respondents' validation of the interview transcripts and codes serve as the validation procedures involving the respondents in this study. Knowing that interview transcripts will be validated by the respondents, I made sure the transcribing process as rigorous, transparent and truthful as it is. However, since transcribing is regarded as "an interpretive process" (Green et al., 1997, p. 174), it is not a direct process because a researcher needs to decide which parts of the verbal records are important and what kind of conversational aspects need to be emphasized such as pauses, silence, or voice intonation. In addition, a researcher needs to rely on their prior knowledge on language used in the interview and the cultural aspects that go with it, for instance dialect or accent. Therefore, to write down what is being heard demands a researcher who act as a transcriber to engage in interpretive acts (Tilley, 2003). According to Poland (1999), researchers involve in interpretive acts when dealing with ambiguous utterance from interviews. In my study, ambiguous utterance due to incomplete sentences and laden with emotional contexts by the respondents during the interview were highlighted by adding conversational features such as (...) for pause, or "um" to denote verbal tics. For emotional contexts from the interviews, which are not easily expressed in written words, I followed what is suggested by Patton (1999) to use such conversational

features. To ensure the accuracy and fidelity of the transcribing process, I listened to the verbal recordings at least three times after I have completed transcribing. This is because other than ensuring the validity process of the data, I also want to ensure that I get enriched research experience through getting familiar with the transcribing process and the data. According to Bird (2005), if researchers opt to do transcribing themselves, they would enrich their research experience especially if they are graduate researchers. I informed the respondents the processes involved in transcribing process in detailed when I submitted a copy of the verbal and transcript to them. This is to ensure that they knew how their responses during the interview were treated and thus, validate the accuracy of the transcripts. In addition, to validate the authenticity and accuracy of the verbal records and transcripts, all of the respondents were given a chance to review, amend or omit any part of the transcripts if they wish as suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). However, any amendment or omission of transcripts was not used in the analysis process.

The third layer of layers of validity procedures involved people external to the study such as other researchers or reviewers. In this study, the codes that I developed through concept driven approach as suggested by Boyatzis (1998) were later on measured using inter-rater reliability test using Fleiss's Kappa. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) proposed that in ensuring the quality of data coding, researchers need to measure the developed codes using measurement such as inter-rater reliability test. They contend that inter-rater reliability is a way to verify a researcher's interpretation of participants' view on a phenomena or behaviour through measuring agreement between two or more raters. In addition, this process is also known as member checks (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, p. 92) in which it could occur at the beginning of an analysis or at its conclusion that serves as a way for a credibility check. Tashakkori and Teddlie's proposition is similar to proposition by Hout et al. (1987) in which inter-rater reliability relates to a comparison of „coded discrete variables. (p. 146) which is a usual practice in social science research. In this study, the inter-rater reliability testing assessed 105 excerpted statements from participants' responses.

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a novice researcher, it might seem to me that the propositions by Cho and Trent (2006) and Creswell and Miller (2000) are recent propositions. However, due to my attempt to revisit and expand resources on qualitative research methodology, I realized that the propositions by Cho and Trent and Creswell and Miller in their work in the 2000s reflect on an earlier proposition by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), validity and reliability of qualitative data depend on two aspects: trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness of qualitative data refers to four criteria: credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bryman, 2004). Authenticity refers to the degree of originality and importance of a research understudy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The aspects of trustworthiness and authenticity were documented in detailed in my thesis and was evaluated by examiners during viva voce. What I presented in this article is a shorter version of detailed and thick description of the validity methods and strategies that I used in my doctoral study. Some of the methods and strategies that I used are also being implemented in current research that I embark in my post PhD journey.

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