

Phenomenological interview of older adults through virtual media: an experience report

Entrevista fenomenológica a adultos mayores por medios virtuales: informe de experiencia

Entrevista fenomenológica de idosos através de meios virtuais: relato de experiência

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: to report the experience of conducting phenomenological interviews through virtual means in a group of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Methods:** an experience report on the main aspects that the researchers experienced in the virtual phenomenological interview process as an alternative to face-to-face interviews with older adults during social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. **Results:** the experience of conducting phenomenological interviews by videoconference was useful, enriching and satisfying. The difficulties that arose were smaller in relation to the benefits of the technique. **Final Considerations:** the use of technology to optimize qualitative data collection is a recommended strategy that can be adopted by nursing whenever the research objectives allow. **Descriptors:** Interview; Aged; Data Collection; Qualitative Research; Videoconferencing.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: relatar la experiencia de la realización de entrevistas fenomenológicas por medios virtuales en un grupo de adultos mayores durante la pandemia por COVID-19. **Métodos:** se trata de un informe de experiencia sobre los principales aspectos que los investigadores vivieron en el proceso de la entrevista fenomenológica virtual como alternativa a la entrevista cara a cara con adultos mayores durante el aislamiento social por la pandemia por COVID-19. **Resultados:** la experiencia de realizar las entrevistas fenomenológicas por videoconferencia fue útil, enriquecedora y satisfactoria. Las dificultades que se presentaron fueron menores en comparación con los beneficios de la técnica. **Consideraciones Finales:** el uso de la tecnología para optimizar la recolección de datos cualitativos es una estrategia recomendable que puede ser retomada por enfermería, siempre que los objetivos de la investigación lo permitan.

Descriptorios: Entrevista; Anciano; Recolección de Datos; Investigación Cualitativa; Comunicación por Videoconferencia.

RESUMO

Objetivos: relatar a experiência da realização de entrevistas fenomenológicas por meio virtual em um grupo de idosos durante a pandemia de COVID-19. **Métodos:** relato de experiência sobre os principais aspectos que os pesquisadores vivenciaram no processo de entrevista fenomenológica virtual como alternativa às entrevistas presenciais com idosos, durante o isolamento social, devido à pandemia de COVID-19. **Resultados:** a experiência de realização das entrevistas fenomenológicas por videoconferência foi útil, enriquecedora e satisfatória. As dificuldades que surgiram foram menores em relação aos benefícios da técnica. **Considerações Finais:** o uso da tecnologia para otimizar a coleta de dados qualitativos é uma estratégia recomendada que pode ser adotada pela enfermagem, sempre que os objetivos da pesquisa permitirem.

Descritores: Entrevista; Idoso; Coleta de Dados; Pesquisa Qualitativa; Comunicação por Videoconferência.

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been changes in personal, work and academic dynamics in all areas of life. If attention is focused on the nursing discipline, these changes have been an enormous challenge that is sought to be overcome every day from the care, management, educational and research areas.

The epidemiological situation has significantly modified the development and continuity of health research projects, and nursing subject has not been the exception⁽¹⁾. One of the greatest obstacles is the recommendation of social isolation, a measure that made it difficult to maintain face-to-face approaches to collect data for those studies that require interaction with people in the community.

This difficulty grows when studies are carried out with older adults, since they represent one of the age groups with the highest risk of suffering from serious illness and dying from COVID-19⁽²⁾. Social isolation implied a drastic change in activities that older adults carried out outside the home and forced him to implement other forms of social interaction from home in order to avoid physical contact⁽³⁾. This situation forced the researchers to look for alternatives to carry out the field work without exposing older adults to the new virus. One of these alternatives has been the use of videoconferences for data collection and health care for this age group⁽¹⁾, minimizing the risks of infection by eliminating physical contact and costs related to travel and travel times.

Moreover, the use of videoconferences is already part of the daily life of this age group to stay connected with family and friends without leaving home, a situation that has worsened since the pandemic⁽⁴⁾. This issue of familiarity with the use of technologies has been of great help for data collection, as it provides proximity to older adults through platforms that favor interaction between people and which has been successfully adopted by health professionals.

In the qualitative field, the interview technique is the most used for data collection, and even before the pandemic, these interviews were commonly carried out face-to-face when considering closeness to the other a means to generate empathy. This element is considered particularly necessary when conducting phenomenological interviews, since it allows the researcher to delve into the phenomenon being studied. This is probably the reason why some phenomenological researchers consider interviews far from face-to-face unfeasible, despite the fact that empathy arises from support for people's emotional language and not from physical interaction with them.

In this regard, and before a health crisis, the virtual phenomenological interview was taken up as one of the most popular alternatives among qualitative researchers, since it did not show consistent differences between the nature, character and results obtained with face-to-face interviews⁽³⁾, reason that reinforced a decision to establish them as an alternative to the face-to-face interview in any of its modalities, whenever possible and necessary. Phenomenological interviews have specific characteristics that are compatible with the virtual modality. Empathizing with the other, listening carefully, being patient with participants and investigating discrepancies⁽⁵⁾ are actions perfectly achieved through videoconferences by a qualified researcher.

Despite this, there are still controversies regarding the validity and reliability of phenomenological interviews, which are exacerbated by the realization by virtual means, which is why contributions that from the investigative practice account for the functioning and results of this data collection technique are necessary. One of the most common criticisms positions them as a simple act of introspection, nothing further from reality, since a phenomenological interview is based on a meticulous analysis that confers a greater degree of generality, going from participants' deep reflections to the meaning of the phenomenon addressed⁽⁵⁾.

This document describes the experience of conducting virtual phenomenological interviews with older adults during the pandemic as part of data collection of a doctoral thesis in nursing that explores older adults' sexuality. In order to plan and carry out the virtual interview technique, it was necessary to review the recommendations of studies already carried out in this modality, which focus on the actors' familiarity with the handling of the virtual platform to be used, for which they recommend pre-interview practice. During this research, scarce scientific evidence regarding the use of virtual media to conduct phenomenological interviews with older adults became evident; for this reason, it was considered necessary to share the authors' experience in this regard.

OBJECTIVES

To report the experience of conducting phenomenological interviews through virtual means in a group of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

This is an experience report on the main aspects of phenomenological interviews by virtual means to older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between June and September 2021, phenomenological interviews were carried out by videoconference to 16 older adults. A total of 7 participants were men, and 9 were women, and the age was in the range of 62 to 92 years. Five meetings were held via videoconference to: 1) report the research and the older adults' role as a participant; 2) deliver the information sheet and subsequently the informed consent; 3) apply a cognitive impairment test; 4) conduct the interview based on the phenomenological interview script prepared for this study; and 5) carry out the return of the interview. As a virtual medium, the videoconferencing modality was chosen, which were carried out by platforms and applications, such as Google Meet® and Zoom®. The interviews were unique and individual, recorded only in audio format and with an average duration of 71 minutes. In accordance with ethical standards, the camera was left on during virtual meetings for older adults' consideration. According to literature, whether or not the camera is turned on during a virtual interview does not imply differences in people's behavior, but it does promote greater interaction between researcher and participant⁽⁶⁾. All older adults chose to keep the camera on, referring to feeling closer to the interviewer.

This experience report is the result of a research entitled "*Sig-nificado de la sexualidad desde la corporalidad en adultos mayores*",

which meets all ethical principles in research, and was approved by the Interinstitutional Committee on Bioethics of the *Universidad de Guanajuato* (CIBIUG), under Registration CIBIUG- P77-2020.

RESULTS

Approach to older adults

The first challenge to be faced during the pandemic for data collection was, without a doubt, access to older adults, because the situation of social isolation recommended to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 made it difficult to approach the invitation to participate in the study for older adults. To this end, it was necessary to contact a public social assistance agency that is responsible for providing care for this age group. A short video was made outlining the objective of the study and inviting older adults to participate. It was distributed by agency authorities through senior citizen chat groups. Participants contacted the researchers and so contact was initiated.

One of the possible difficulties that were foreseen when carrying out the phenomenological interview by videoconference was the use of technology by older people, an issue in which one usually has the impression of denial or lack of knowledge to use the basic technological tools in this age group. However, the scenario found in this regard was particularly favorable for research as most of older adults interested in participating in the study had already had virtual meetings for various applications. From this, the videoconferencing platforms and applications with which participants would be more familiar were chosen. In some rare cases, the ability to join videoconferencing required support from an older adult's relative.

The researcher-interviewer held an initial videoconference that allowed to know the older adults, their life dynamics and the research in which they were agreeing to participate. This first meeting is extremely important in phenomenological research, as it represents the approach to the study scenario, which, although virtual in this case, provides valuable information for the researcher-interviewer and participant in relation to the other, which will be crucial to achieve empathy. Knowing the participants' world prior to the phenomenological interview allows us to better understand the world in which the phenomenon is found and thus enter it and understand it.

Subsequently, in a second virtual meeting, the Mini-Mental State Examination was applied, to meet the criterion of inclusion of participants preserved cognitive state. A third virtual meeting was intended for the Informed Consent Form, and an information sheet was provided to participants for reading prior to the third meeting. The Informed Consent Form was obtained virtually and videotaped with participant approval. This procedure was based on the Declaration of Helsinki recommendation on the impossibility of obtaining written informed consent.

Once four meetings were held with each older adult, three of them in videoconference mode, a virtual meeting was scheduled to carry out the phenomenological interview. To this end, older adults were advised to have 1 to 2 hours and to choose a quiet, comfortable and private place where the interview could take place without problems.

Phenomenological interview process

The meetings prior to the virtual phenomenological interview, in addition to allowing complying with the design methodological moments, also allowed to generate empathy between the researcher-interviewer and participants. This empathy is undoubtedly an essential element to gain access to the experience lived in a more truthful way, as it gave confidence to older adults to talk about what is important to them.

To achieve this empathy, the researcher-interviewer sought to establish a relationship of trust with older adults, where the importance of knowing their lived experiences in relation to sexuality was highlighted as a way of generating knowledge that improves the quality of life of people at this stage of life. With this, it was possible to maintain the interaction and dialogue with participants on a more personal level. These informal meetings do not provide data for the study being developed, but they help to generate trust and empathy, elements that, as mentioned, are necessary to have access to the phenomenon to be studied.

Prior to the meeting where the interview would take place, audio recording tests were carried out with two different devices. In this way, there was a backup considering the possibility of failures in the recording by the main device.

All interviews started without problems, older adults were reminded of the following dynamics, and a pseudonym to be used during the meeting was chosen. The recording began with the older adults' authorization, starting with the first guiding question. At this point, it should be noted that the interview script contained two guiding questions. From the interaction based on this initial question, a pleasant conversation was developed, rich in information on the subject. The second guiding question arose at various times during the conversations and this was due to the natural course of each interview. Older adults were open to share their experience in an environment of trust and respect. The researcher-interviewer's role was limited to deepening the questions commented by participants and guiding them on the reflection path.

The interviews were extensive in duration and extremely enriching for the purpose of this research. Older adults reported feeling comfortable during the interviews and confident to express their feelings, thoughts and experiences in relation to the topic addressed. At the end of the interview, the need for a fifth meeting to return the interview to each participant was discussed; with this, the criteria of credibility and value of truth were fulfilled according to the criteria of scientific rigor of qualitative research. During the interviews, there were some cases of internet connection problems that were quickly resolved by restarting a communication channel. These incidents did not mean greater difficulties, as they were considered and older adults knew how to act in this regard.

Among the benefits of the technique, we can comment that, in addition to being an effective way to collect phenomenological data, virtual interviews made it possible to eliminate participants' exposure to the virus through personal contact with the researcher-interviewer. This made it possible to have greater comfort when conducting the interview from the older adults' home, reducing the cost of field work and the time spent on it by not requiring travel to other geographical areas.

Among the difficulties, it is necessary to consider the possible unforeseen events that occur in a videoconference interview, in order to plan solutions to them. Among the difficulties that were experienced during the phenomenological interviews carried out, interruptions by older adults' relatives in the first instance can be included, a situation that was the most common, occurring in two interviews. Other setbacks experienced were failures with the participants' internet, microphone and camera. However, the latter were presented at the beginning of the interview, and were quickly resolved in such a way that they did not interfere in the course of these interviews.

Despite the prejudices regarding the use of technology by older adults, in the reported experience, there was no impediment related to the use of technology to carry out virtual interviews with people in this age group, but the researcher-interviewer's ability to generate trust and empathy, an essential element for the success of qualitative data collection.

DISCUSSION

Qualitative interviews have been effective in their virtual form for years, being an alternative for those participants who have limitations of time and place to carry out a face-to-face interview. This modality provides greater flexibility and comfort for participants and researcher-interviewer, allowing them to maintain the same ethical and quality standards as face-to-face interviews, while saving resources⁽³⁾.

In the experience that is related, one of the key points to achieve access to the lived experience that gives meaning was undoubtedly empathy. Generating empathy is not always easy, especially when physical proximity is not available. However, strategies such as supporting verbal and non-verbal language expressions, avoiding judgments, accepting older adults' feelings, and fostering dialogue are recommendations that support the process of empathizing. In addition to this, it is suggested that the interviewer's appearance be neutral and that his efforts focus on concentration, attention, perception and retention during the interview⁽⁷⁾.

To generate empathy with older adults, the researcher began with respectful and dignified treatment, where he sought the greatest comfort to express himself. The researcher-interviewer avoided exercising criticism or contradicting the person's ideas, in order to focus on generating a feeling of closeness, of accompaniment during the process of reflection on the lived experience. Creating an atmosphere of trust and respect at all times was essential to gain access to the essence of the phenomenon studied.

Having access to participants of a study that will collect data through a phenomenological interview via videoconference is undoubtedly complex, especially if there is no support from any institution that acts as a contact bridge. This difficulty is increased when older adults do not use digital media, as these are the main places where they could be contacted more easily⁽⁸⁾. The use of technologies by older adults remains limited, but more and more are entering the digital world. The benefits offered by virtual meetings for qualitative data collection range from convenience and ease of use to saving time on transfers and greater accessibility, since having a cell phone would be

enough to participate⁽⁹⁾. These facilities were also mentioned by older adults interviewed in this study.

In this experience, having the support for sending an invitation to be part of this study was extremely important, as it represented the opportunity of access to the study phenomenon through participants. However, this is not always possible so that in those scenarios where there is no body or institution that can support the approach to participants, strategies could be resumed, such as sending an invitation to participate through ads in the media and social networks, especially in groups of older adults or groups that are dedicated to caring for older adults, which, according to the researchers' experience, are usually participatory. Similar to the above, older adults may not have the ability to use technology to conduct a video conference. In these cases, the verbal and written instruction procedure has been successful, either through a document or through a telephone call, as well as providing practice sessions⁽¹⁰⁾.

A virtual phenomenological interview requires researcher-participant preparation. The meetings prior to the interview are necessary to explore the study scenario and to know the environment in which the phenomenon occurs, as well as the intersubjective relationships that influence it⁽⁷⁾. Conducting an interview without an approach to the study scenario puts at risk the existence of empathy and, with it, the possibility of revealing the meanings. Researcher-interviewer preparation must consist of the phenomenology methodological knowledge⁽⁵⁾ and, in turn, the technical knowledge that will be used⁽¹⁰⁾. Unawareness of any of these could seriously compromise the quality of the data obtained and thus the project itself.

Among the most robust criticisms of the phenomenological interview, are those inherent to its validity. The answer to this methodological objection lies in transparency and coherence, two elements that make it possible to prove the technique use. Transparency allows readers to know the methodological process within which the technique is developed and, with it, the possibility of approving it or not, although it is true that transparency cannot be achieved in its entirety. Since an interview cannot be fully integrated into an investigation report, it is the investigator's responsibility to ensure that this element is present as far as possible. Consistency is another essential element to validate the phenomenological interview, since it refers to using the same analysis strategy throughout the process⁽⁵⁾, an issue where conducting interviews by digital means has no interference.

Positions contrary to the phenomenological interview carried out by virtual means are not uncommon, alluding to the loss of reliability and validity, however, as already mentioned, the videoconferencing modality does not detract from these elements, it only facilitates access to data. At this point, the researcher-interviewer will need to be attentive to the methodological rigor with which data collection is conducted, in order to preserve each of the components of this process. Both coherence and transparency are elements that support the technique reliability and validity, as support for them there is internal and external consistency, components that the researcher must pursue during the development of the interviews and where virtuality does not mean an obstacle, as they depend on the researcher's ability to ratify the phenomenological data and later prove them with reality.

Optimizing the advantages to reduce the use of resources without compromising the quality of meetings and, therefore,

data are the central points to consider when preparing a virtual interview. According to the authors' experience, phenomenological interviews by videoconference allowed us to reach the essence of the phenomenon addressed, although the topic is sensitive because it considers older adults' sexuality to be a taboo subject. Participants were open to dialogue and reflection on their experiences with regard to sexuality. All interviews conducted provided valuable data for the study. Older adults said they were comfortable with the technique taken up for the interviews and referred to the atmosphere in which the conversation became pleasant. Undoubtedly, empathy was built throughout the meetings prior to the phenomenological interview, and it was this element that led to access to participants' most intimate lived experiences.

A scenario of uncertainty that continues to be experienced should constitute an incentive to strengthen collaborative work among nursing professionals, in order to continue generating knowledge from scientific research from all the tools that are available.

Contributions to nursing

The experience of conducting virtual phenomenological interviews with older adults was extremely useful, enriching and satisfying. The difficulties that arose were minor compared to the benefits of the technique. The use of technology to optimize qualitative data collection is a recommended strategy that can be taken up by health professionals as long as the objectives of the research allow it.

Older adults have been the age group most affected by the pandemic. Social isolation measures imposed have sentenced

many to solitude and solitude. Despite this situation, gerontological nursing care must remain and overcome the obstacles that arise to achieve access to this population so much in need of care. To this end, the use of technology has meant a valuable channel of exchange between nursing staff and older adults, especially for psychosocial care and as shown in this document for research, seeking to generate knowledge that allows reflection and guides the practice of nursing care for older adults' needs.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reported experience shows a possible way to carry out phenomenological studies with older adults, whose data collection was based on virtuality with successful results, where obstacles, such as lack of familiarity and reluctance of older adults to use technology, were not present.

The phenomenological interview technique developed in a virtual way represents a valuable tool for qualitative research, carried out by nursing in times of pandemic, since it allows access to people who live the phenomena of care without exposing them. Furthermore, it allows to reduce the research costs, guaranteeing the results that would be obtained with a face-to-face phenomenological interview.

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