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Dyadic Interviews in Qualitative Research

Your Practical Guide

 **Sage**



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About the Author

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Professor Nigel King is a freelance consultant in qualitative research, and Emeritus Professor in Applied Psychology at the University of Huddersfield. He has written extensively on qualitative methods, in particular on interviewing, thematic forms of analysis (especially Template Analysis) and visual methods. He is the author of *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (Sage, 2e 2019, with Christine Horrocks and Jo Brooks), and *Template Analysis for Business and Management Students* (Sage, 2017), and co-editor (with Jo Brooks) of *Applied Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Palgrave, 2017). His substantive interests include: human responses to outdoor/natural spaces; death, dying and bereavement; collaborative working in health and social care.

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Introduction to Dyadic Interviews

Learning Outcomes

In this chapter, you will:

- learn what a dyadic interview is and what it is not;
- recognise what is distinctive about dyadic interviews;
- understand the differences between dyadic versus individual and focus group interview formats;
- start to consider whether a dyadic interview may be an appropriate design for your research.

Introduction

Qualitative research is more than just interesting reading, it has true potential to help us understand the world in new ways (Mauskopf & Hirsch, 2016). In the last two decades, we have observed an increased diversity of legitimate qualitative techniques all aiming to advance our understanding of the social world. Indeed, new qualitative techniques and approaches continue to develop at a rapid rate (Cassell et al., 2017; Stainton Rogers & Willig, 2017). One such advancement is the dyadic form of interview. It is a technique that involves two research participants who simultaneously interact in response to open-ended questions (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 1276). It fills an interesting gap between traditional one-to-one interviews and focus groups, which require three or more participants. The format has emerged as a successful research tool, particularly within the fields of family studies (e.g. Blake et al., 2021; Seale et al., 2008) and health research (e.g. Majee et al., 2017; Wawrziczny et al., 2015). More sporadically, it is also used in management (Szulc, 2021), tourism and hospitality (Dale et al., 2021), psychology (Staff et al., 2017) and sociology (Tiwari et al., 2021).

The most obvious goal of dyadic interviews is to engage two individuals in a conversation that, if well-designed and moderated, can be a rich source of interactional data, revealing similarities and differences in the perceptions of both interview partners. As such, they can often access perspectives and experiences that would otherwise prove difficult to unearth (see Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). For instance, the method has been

used with success to explore how gay fathers and surrogates identify and address their procreative roles and responsibilities (Fantus, 2021), how mental health symptoms experienced by youth with a history of child sexual abuse are treated (Tiwari et al., 2021), or how couples deal with financial conflicts (Salimi Bajestani et al., 2020). Although dyadic interviews have been appearing in studies for almost half a century (see Allan, 1980; Arksey, 1996) and are associated with a large number of advantages (Morgan, 2016), they still represent a developing method and remain relatively underused in comparison to one-to-one interviews and focus groups – which appear to be the default choice when setting up qualitative studies (Wilson et al., 2016) or the ‘gold standard’ in qualitative research (Silverman, 2022).

The methodological literature dealing with dyadic interviews is still emerging. The emphasis is placed primarily on the data collection process as well as the advantages and disadvantages of conducting interviews with dyads (e.g. Szulc & King, 2022). Much less is known about the development of methods suitable for the analysis of the data thus derived (Hochman et al., 2020). Many researchers, especially postgraduate students, do not have sufficient knowledge about what to expect when faced with a decision about employing dyadic interviews as a suitable method for their study.

We found one of the key strengths of dyadic interviews to lie in recognising shared experiences between individuals and embracing them as a source of valuable information. In this way, employing the method enabled us to stimulate ideas that might have been forgotten or not recognised by the study participants. Moreover, we found dyadic interviews to allow participants to trigger ideas from each other that help them jointly explore a topic and co-construct their version(s) of the explored phenomena. This is true for dyads composed of people who do not have a close previous relationship as much as it is for those who do. The conversations between our participants were frequently based on a mix of agreement as well as differences in experiences and perceptions. Such comparisons arose directly in the course of the interviews and, in some instances, were probed by us as interview moderators. Thanks to the format of interviews, participants remained in vibrant interactions, disclosed in-depth thoughts and engaged in an intense discussion that generated particularly rich data.

However, we also faced concerns before employing dyadic interviews. These included questions about the risk of participants being unwilling or unable to freely share information in the presence of the second interviewee (see, for instance, Bell & Campbell, 2014). What happens if a member of a dyad changes their response because of the other person? They may withhold information, change presentation style, comply with the perceptions of another interviewee or perhaps engage in some impression management to look good in front of the other person. However, the presence of an interview partner may equally well act as a buffer for socially desirable answers since the presence of another participant implies that the extent to which one’s answers are true may be easily assessed if members of the dyad know each other.

For one of us (JS), a decision on whether to employ a dyadic format of an interview for her PhD took months. After the choice was made, there were further challenges. The first related to gaining ethical approval to conduct dyadic interviews which raised some concerns relating to confidentiality between participants, which is difficult to guarantee (we discuss

this further in Chapter 5). The second was the complexity of sampling and recruiting participants for dyadic interviews. Joanna faced questions such as whether members should self-select into pairs, or whether this should be the researcher's task? What happens if people do not want to be interviewed together? Could this potentially lead to conflict or discomfort? What is the optimal level of acquaintance, can we allow for differences in power status among our dyads? How might the composition of a dyad influence the quality of data? We will return to these issues later in the book, especially in Chapter 3.

These were not easy questions and at the time when we first started using the method, not much guidance was available to help us find the answers. We had to experience it to understand it. As we now have a chance to write down our reflections, we hope that this book will become a go-to resource allowing anyone interested in conducting dyadic interviews to make an informed choice about the adoption of the method and guiding them throughout the process from the beginning to the very end.

Defining the Dyadic Interview

Before we can consider what dyadic interviews have to offer and why you might use them, we need to be clear about what we mean by the term. Defining 'dyadic interview' is not as straightforward as you might think. Within the literature, there are a range of terms that are used more or less synonymously to refer to interviews in which a single interviewer conducts a discussion with two participants simultaneously. These include: *joint interviews*, *conjoint interviews*, *paired interviews* and *couple interviews*. At the same time, the term *dyadic interview* itself is used in different ways in different areas of literature; sometimes to refer to interviews with members of an established relationship (most often romantic/spousal couples) whether they are interviewed together or apart, and sometimes just to pairs of participants interviewed together (with or without an assumption of a pre-existing relationship). Our concern in this book is with what might be considered 'true' dyadic interviews, defined as stated below:

For the purposes of this book, a 'Dyadic Interview' is an interview conducted by a researcher with two participants at the same time, in which interaction between the participants is actively encouraged.

We want to cover any kind of research in which two participants are interviewed together, regardless of topic, discipline or wider methodological position. The dyad of participants may be physically present together or may be interacting with the researcher online. We will use the phrase 'separated dyads' to refer to those cases where people in some kind of relationship are interviewed separately on a matter of mutual interest and relevance. We recognise that our definition is narrower than that used in much of the previous literature, including the only previous book (to our knowledge) devoted specifically to this method (Morgan, 2016). However, we feel that the interactional element between participants is a crucial strength of the method and wanted to make it essential to our definition.

In Appendices 1 and 2, you will find case studies contributed by Joanna and Publa Antwi. These case studies offer reflective insights into their adoption of dyadic interviews as the research design for their respective PhD theses. Through their narratives, they illuminate the challenges encountered at various stages of employing dyadic interviews, along with the strategies employed by Joanna and Publa to navigate these challenges successfully.

Why Use Dyadic Interviews? Comparisons With Traditional Approaches

You may well be reading this book because you are faced with a decision whether to use dyadic interviews as opposed to either individual interviews or focus groups. In fact, in many studies, all three of these forms could be viable options for qualitative researchers interested in obtaining rich data on certain phenomena. For example, if you were interested in how overseas students integrate with ‘home’ students at university, you could simply carry out individual interviews with a sample from each group. You could hold focus groups, either with home and overseas students separately or in groups that mix the two. Or you could use dyads, each consisting of an overseas student with a nominated home student friend. To make a good decision, what you need to consider is the strengths and limitations of each method in relation to the specific research question you are addressing. Below we will compare key features of the three types of interviews and highlight why you might choose to opt for dyadic interviews.

The first and foremost factor that should influence your choice is your research topic. Is it one in which the interaction between members of dyads is likely to shed light on your research question in a way that adds to what could be achieved in one-to-one interviews or focus groups? This might be the case where the relationship between participants is a focus of research and you can expect that the dyadic format will encourage rather than inhibit the openness and breadth of their discussions. This is very commonly seen in the literature, where pairs such as spouses, parents and children or patients and carers are interviewed together. Or it might be that the nature of the roles of dyad members means that they bring interestingly different perspectives when they talk with each other, whether or not they had previously known each other well. This was the case in our study of altruism in organisations that we refer to as an exemplar at several points in this book (Szulc & King, 2022). If we think about our hypothetical study of home and international students, we might choose dyadic interviews with friendship pairs across the two groups where we wanted to explore how personal relationships helped facilitate integration.

Related to the previous point, it is worth considering the fact that the three interview methods create different opportunities for the voices of research participants to be heard. During individual interviews, participants share their perspectives and experiences, facilitated by the interviewer. It is the participant’s story alone that is of interest and they have the opportunity to elaborate upon this in considerable detail. In both dyadic interviews and focus groups, the interactions amongst participants are as much part of the data as their individual direct answers to the researcher’s questions. Naturally, the larger number of participants in a focus groups means that their participants have less time to develop their

answers than do dyadic interview participants. Morgan et al. (2013) state that in a typical focus group, each participant has around 15 minutes of contribution time and in dyadic interviews, this time is at least doubled.

Bearing in mind that last point, a second main consideration for your choice of interview method should be the kind of data produced and how that fits with your research question. Although there has been very little methodological research directly comparing the kind of data produced by dyadic interviews with that of either individual interviews or focus groups, there are a few studies that can supplement anecdotal evidence from researchers. Kvalsvik and Øgaard (2021), in a study that explored the food choices of older adults, demonstrated that dyadic interviews elicited a higher number of thematic codes (52) than an in-depth individual method (37). The authors suggest the difference is due to dyadic interviews yielding data related to both the individual and the collective experience of both members of the dyad. Similarly to Morgan (2016), Kvalsvik and Øgaard suggest that individual interviews provide rich data on individuals' perspectives, but dyadic interviews may generate a greater variability of themes.

Turning to the comparison between dyadic interviews and focus groups, Morgan and Hoffman (2018) investigated how participants addressed the substantive aspects of the topics they discussed in the two interview formats. The authors found that conversations between research participants were indeed different between the two methods. Specifically, dyadic interviews involved more and shorter exchanges between the interview partners, whereas in focus groups, these tended to be longer, with fewer exchanges between the participants. Also, explicit connections to the content of the previous speaker's statement were made less often in focus groups than dyadic interviews. We must be careful not to overgeneralise from a very few studies, but it does seem credible to conclude that dyadic interviews may be effective for producing data that has a breadth of variability to it, but that is more truly interactive than might be found in a focus group.

The practicalities of conducting different formats of interview also need to be borne in mind. Focus groups are often acknowledged as an efficient way to gather many different views in a qualitative study (e.g. Gibson & Riley, 2019), though scholars have warned of the dangers of seeing them as simply a 'cheap' option to include more participants than could be accommodated in an individual interview study. Namey et al.'s study of the cost-effectiveness of individual interviews and focus groups in evaluation research actually found that focus groups were less cost-effective (Namey et al., 2016). On this logic, one might see dyadic interviews as falling between the other two in terms of 'efficiency', but we would concur with those who stress that this should not be a major determinant of your choice. In any case, it is important to note that dyadic interviews and focus groups generally take longer to set up, conduct, transcribe and analyse than individual interviews (see Coenen et al., 2012; Kvalsvik & Øgaard, 2021).

Finally, we should discuss the role of the interviewer and his/her relationship with participants in all three data collection formats. The researcher-participant relationship is vital in in-depth individual interviews. Researchers using this method tend to establish a closer connection with the participants, which fosters emotions that facilitate a rich interview experience where research participants answer the questions of an interviewer and thus

follow an interview agenda. In dyadic interviews, in turn, participants play a more active role. As we suggested elsewhere, they are an integral part of a three-person interactional system, through their presence and interventions (see: Szulc & King, 2022). Heaphy and Einardsdottir (2013) clearly demonstrated how participants in dyadic interviews do not just respond to questions asked by the researcher but themselves help set the agenda and the direction for the narratives that they produce. This may also be the case, although to a lesser extent, in focus groups – but it is specifically dyadic interviews where the relationship between the two participants receives the most attention (see: Kvalsvik & Øgaard, 2021).

What we tried to do above is to show some of the key differences in the ways in which qualitative interviews (be that individual, dyadic or group ones) can be conducted. Our discussion is summarised in Table 1.1, a useful resource to return to when faced with a decision about the most appropriate research design for your study.

Table 1.1. A Comparison of Dyadic Interviews With Traditional Approaches

| | Dyadic Interviews | Individual Interviews | Focus Groups |
|---|---|--|---|
| Optimal research topics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where dyadic interaction is directly relevant to the research question | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where research seeks in-depth individual accounts of experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where group discussion can illuminate perspectives on the research topic from the community or population represented |
| Nature of data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breadth as well as depth Frequent exchanges between participants likely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong emphasis on individual depth of data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breadth Variety of positions/perspectives Perhaps fewer extended interactions between participants than in dyadic interviews |
| Practical challenges | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of participants (especially where dyad characteristics are tightly defined) Somewhat more complex to transcribe and analyse than individual interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually more interviews to organise than for the other two methods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of participants (though often less challenging than many dyadic interview studies) More complex to transcribe and analyse than other two methods |
| Interviewer role and relationship with participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewer part of a three-way interactional system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality highly dependent on interviewer-participant relationship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewer (moderator) managing relatively large number of participants May require an assistant in larger and/or more complex focus groups |

Conclusion

We hope that our brief introduction to dyadic interviews encourages you to find out more about the method and to consider using it for some of your future research projects. The specific nature of dyadic interviews we outlined in this chapter brings many factors to consider when planning and conducting research as well as when analysing your data and writing up the findings. In the remaining chapters, we will focus on these in more detail. In Chapter 2, we provide an overview of the use of dyadic interviews across disciplines, through a ‘snapshot’ scoping review of fifty recent empirical studies using the method. We look at such things as disciplinary basis, methodological approach, dyad composition and analytical techniques. In the following chapter (Chapter 3), we discuss the key challenges associated with the formation and recruitment of dyads. The next two chapters look at the experience of involvement in a dyadic interview, first from the perspective of participants (Chapter 4) and then from the perspective of the researcher (Chapter 5). Regarding the former, we highlight how dyadic interviews can be affirming and validating for participants, but also note the risks of exposure and unhelpful power imbalances. Regarding the latter, we explore how the method can help researchers address key issues for qualitative research and discuss the ethical challenges that face them. The focus of Chapter 6 is on the way in which data gathered through dyadic interviews can be analysed. We highlight the lack of specifically dyadic approaches and consider how these might be developed from sources such as multi-perspectival analysis and focus group analysis. Finally, in Chapter 7, we explore areas for further development of dyadic interviews and its implications for research practice.

Self-Reflection Questions

- 1 Why might I consider dyadic interviews for my research design?
- 2 What added value can the interaction between the two research participants bring to my study?
- 3 What might be the practical advantages and challenges of dyadic interviews?
- 4 What is demanded of me as an interviewer/moderator in a dyadic interview?

Note: You should come back to these self-reflection questions as you read the following chapters and see how your answers evolve.