

Title: Multi family member interview studies: a focus on data analysis

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Abstract

Although qualitative research about couples and families becomes more and more widespread, the aspect of data analysis remains largely underexposed in the literature. In this methodological paper, we outline one specific approach for data analysis in the context of multi family member interview studies. Inspired by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Dyadic Interview Analysis, this approach allows for the detailed and systematic analysis of family practices and the co-construction of shared family realities. Based on an example study in the field of medically assisted reproduction, we give a detailed explanation of the aim of this approach, the different steps in the analysis process and the output of a multi family member interview study. The findings of this example study are discussed in light of the methodological challenges and opportunities.

Introduction

Qualitative research about systemic practice has gained more ground in recent years, both when it comes to systemic practitioner research – systemic therapists studying their own practice in a reflexive way using qualitative research tools (e.g., Simon & Chard, 2014) – as well as to more general qualitative research about couple and family therapy (e.g., Borcsa & Rober, 2015; Chenail et al., 2012). In their recent volume *Research perspectives in couple therapy*, Borcsa and Rober (2015) present a range of discursive qualitative methods to study both meanings and processes within couple therapy sessions. In the same realm, qualitative research about couples and families as such becomes more and more widespread and can entail relevant implications for systemic practitioners (e.g., Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Wyatt et al., 2015). Rather than focusing on narrative and discursive aspects of dialogues within therapy, these studies explore family members' experiences and perspectives with regard to a broad range of topics. Most often, qualitative studies about couples and families make use of in-depth interviews as a data collection method. Interviews can be conducted with one or more family members, alone or together. When the perspective of more than one family member is taken into account, these studies are called 'multi family member interview studies' (Reczek, 2014).

Multi family member interview studies (MFMIS) help us to understand broader family dynamics by obtaining and combining the perspectives of multiple family members (Reczek, 2014). These studies can be used to address several types of research questions: questions about the co-construction of family members' views in the context of their social relationships, questions about certain family practices or family life as a whole, questions about similarities and contrasts between the views of family members, etc. (Harden et al., 2010). The output of MFMIS generally reflects a degree of integration of the perspectives, stories and (shared) experiences of the participating family members. However, this output may vary alongside the epistemological position of the researchers. Without going into detail here (for a more extensive overview, see Reczek, 2014), one can situate MFMIS in

both a (post)positivist, social constructionist or critical epistemological framework. Eisikovits and Koren's dyadic interview analysis (cfr. *infra*), for instance, reflects a focus on an accurate story about a couple, as interpretations of one interview will be limited by the content of the partner's interview. In contrast to this (post)positivist point of view, a social constructionist framework advances that there is no need to search for 'the truth', rather researchers "weave together threads of individual accounts" (Harden et al., 2010, p. 448). In addition, Harden et al. state that "individual versions are fluid, influenced by the anticipation of others' accounts and by the interaction with the researcher." (p. 450). Topics of MFMIS include parents' experiences of taking care of their adult son suffering from psychosis (Wane et al., 2009), cancer patients' and their relatives' motivations for genetic testing (Dancyger et al., 2010), and experiences of second couplehood (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010), to name but a few.

Two aspects are central in conducting MFMIS: collecting appropriate data and conducting a systematic analysis of these data. In an overview of methodological approaches for MFMIS, Reczek (2014) has addressed the aspect of data collection, discussing merits and perils of doing individual interviews, dyadic or group interviews, or a combination of interview formats. Furthermore, Morris (2010) outlined the advantages of combining both separate and joint interviews for the study of the needs of patients and their carers and – in so doing – tuning into the participants' interview preferences and gathering the richest possible data (Morris, 2001). A number of researchers have outlined the ethical dilemmas that come with interviewing family members alone or together, sequentially or at the same time, etc. (*see*, for instance, Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Forbat & Henderson, 2003; Norlyk et al. 2016; Ummel & Achille, 2016). The second aspect however, data analysis, remains largely underexposed in the literature (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Ummel & Achille, 2016). While the complexity of this type of analysis can be overwhelming (Warin et al., 2007), only a few articles pay more than usual attention to data analysis (e.g., Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Ummel & Achille, 2016). In this paper, we want to make room for this often overlooked aspect of qualitative research with couples and families: how do we go about the actual data analysis, including

descriptive coding and processes of abstraction and interpretation, and the cyclical movements between these levels of analysis? In order to do so, we will outline one specific approach for data analysis in the context of MFMIS in an applied and practical way. Based on an example study in the field of medically assisted reproduction (Van Parys et al., 2016), we give a detailed explanation of the different steps in the analysis process and how this leads to significant output of a multi family member interview study.

Example study

The example study focused on sister-to-sister egg donation and aimed to offer an in-depth understanding of kinship constructions within these family constellations (see Van Parys et al., 2016). The study is part of a larger qualitative research project called 'Parenthood Research' on family members' perspectives on social and genetic parenthood after or within the process of medically assisted reproduction. For this research project, we interviewed parents with different family structures (heterosexual/same-sex couples) and different reproductive treatments (sperm/egg donation; use of own gametes) at two stages of treatment (during treatment; seven to ten years after successful treatment). In addition, a number of donors and children in these families were also interviewed. For the purpose of this example study, we focused on the interviews with parents using sister-to-sister egg donation to conceive, with the donating sister, and with one of their children. Studying kinship constructions in these families is particularly interesting because the donor is present in the (extended) family. Research questions that were asked were: How do family members handle the biological and genetic links between the different family members? How is relatedness experienced by the family members? How are the bonds between the donating sister, parents and child shaped and moulded (Nordqvist 2014)?

The need for a qualitative research method that would guide our analysis of family data arose when we encountered the rich perspectives on the meaning of social and genetic ties in the interviews with parents, donors and children in these families. Rather than investigating the different parties'

experiences in their own right (based on the single interviews), we wanted to construct a more encompassing perspective, weaving the individual accounts into one, more comprehensive, systemic account (Harden et al., 2010). Conceptualising this study from a systemic perspective, we aimed at prevailing the relational dimension in the collected data (Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). Inherent to data of the parents of family 1 are the perspectives of the child and the donor in this family, and vice versa. By analysing the data together we did not only acknowledge this relational dimension, but we also made it explicit. Putting together these different perspectives helped us to “gain an understanding of family dynamics beyond individual accounts, allowing for a view of the complex set of relationships between individuals” (Reczek, 2014, p. 324).

Only a few existing studies have analysed data from recipient couples and egg donors together (e.g. Lessor 1993, Laruelle et al. 2011). To our knowledge, the example study is the first study linking donors’ and recipients’ perspectives on an intra-familial level. Moreover, in an area where children are much discussed while their voices often remain underrepresented, we deemed it important to include the children’s perspectives as well. Obtaining interview data from the three parties involved – the parents, the donors, and the children – we wanted to create a systemic perspective on how kinship is constructed and enacted within these families.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with three heterosexual couples, their egg donors (the mother’s sister) and one of their children were included in the study. Couple interviews consisted of open-ended questions about the fertility treatment, perspectives on parenthood, family relationships both within the nuclear and within the extended family, and moral issues such as the rights and obligations of a donor versus a parent. Donor interviews followed a similar structure as the parent interviews. Child interviews consisted of three main themes: the family, the conception story, and the donor. Using an elicitation technique inspired by the Apple Tree Family (see Tasker and Granville, 2011), children’s views on family relationships were mapped and further questioned throughout the interview.

All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer (first author). In this way, the interviewer-researcher was in the best place to make sense of the link between the different accounts. However, this also implies that the interviews were conducted sequentially, giving rise to participants' mutual influence in between interview moments (Reczek, 2014). Starting from a social constructionist perspective, which does not subscribe the goal of obtaining 'neutral' or 'objective' data, we tried to take into account these influences rather than eliminate them, for instance when participants mentioned phone calls in which they 'recalled together how it all went at the time of fertility treatments'. In every family, parents were interviewed first. After the interview, we asked permission to interview the child and the donor (both at a later point in time).

Due to decisions made earlier in the project children and the donors were interviewed separately, while the parents were interviewed together. This decision was based on the assumption that the child, the donor, and the parents can be seen as three different stakeholders in the process of medically assisted reproduction using donor gametes (Nelson et al., 2016). Unlike other studies (e.g., Eisikovits & Koren, 2010) that focus on couplehood and therefore could benefit from interviewing two partners separately, for this example study obtaining the parents' co-constructed story about kinship seemed to be the most suitable approach. As a consequence, the approach to MFMIS presented here makes use of a combination of interview formats (joint interviews with the parents and individual interviews with the children and with the donating sisters). Even though we are aware that this adds to the complexity of the analysis, this will not be our main focus in the following explanation of data analysis in MFMIS. Rather, we intend to outline the main steps in this data analysis process, as well as the challenges that are associated with analysing data from interrelated data sources, in this case members of the same extended family.

Data analysis

As outlined above, literature about the exact application of data analysis methods for MFMIS is scarce. The most elaborate explanation can be found with Eisikovits & Koren (2010) in their

conceptualisation of dyadic interview analysis. In essence, dyadic interview analysis refers to the analysis of separate interviews with two members of a dyad and can be seen as a suitable method for the study of the experience of intimate realities. After analysis of the individual interviews, a second analysis is performed starting from the search for 'overlaps' and 'contrasts' between the individual accounts, both on a descriptive and on an interpretative level. As a result, the individual perspectives from the two distinct partners when brought together, constitute a 'dyadic' perspective in which partner 1's story limits the interpretations of partner 2's story and vice versa and an additional perspective on the nature and dynamic of their relationship is created. Even though the work of Eisikovits and Koren is revealing in many ways, in our opinion it lacks a detailed description of the analysis on an individual level before one moves on to the dyadic level (the authors only state they use 'content analysis', p. 1645), as well as it fails to outline a systematic approach to the actual dyadic analysis (apart from the general indication that 'the dyadic version is mainly interpretative, distant from the descriptive level', p. 1643). As a consequence, the reader is left with many questions concerning the exact application of dyadic interview analysis. Therefore, we added a number of elements to the approach, with the goal of making the subsequent steps in data analysis more explicit. After reviewing a number of example studies (e.g., Alexander et al., 2012; Dancyger et al., 2010; Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Ummel & Achille, 2016), we advanced the following overarching data analysis strategy:

1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of all interviews (interview per interview)
2. Analysis of each family unit
3. Integration of themes and subthemes of each family unit, resulting in new cross-family thematic categories
4. A continuous auditing process throughout all phases of the analysis

For the first phase, the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were applied (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a qualitative research method rooted in phenomenology and has a specific

focus on lived experience and on how participants make sense of these experiences (e.g., Clare, 2003; Osborn & Smith, 1998; Stuart-Smith et al. 2012). This phase included memo-writing for each interview, a first coding based on the research questions, clustering of the codes and writing a short narrative for each of the interviews. The implementation of IPA provided a strong base for the subsequent analyses on a family level and on a group level. In the second phase, an overarching analysis within each family unit was conducted. Bringing together the narratives and clustered codes resulting from the first phase, we aimed at constructing new thematic categories on a family level. In the third phase, we moved one step further and conducted an overarching analysis across families. At that point the goal was to look for convergences between earlier developed themes in the different cases (the different families), while also paying sufficient attention to families' unique ways of constructing and enacting kinship. MAXQDA, a software package that aids the storage and analysis of qualitative data, was used to facilitate the analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, a team of auditors was asked to challenge the way the first author constructed themes and subthemes at several points in the analysis (Hill et al. 1997). For this study, the first author got the opportunity to collaborate with a team of both internal (researchers involved in the Parenthood Research project) and external (researchers involved in a project on the ethical aspects of bodily giving and sharing in medicine) auditors. Based on extensive research reports, these auditors verified whether the analyses had been conducted transparently and systematically, and whether the research reports were credible (Smith et al. 2009). Discrepancies and gaps in the analysis were identified by the auditors and this significantly improved the depth of the analysis. Furthermore, the auditing process led to an advanced co-construction of family realities, as not only family members' voices, but also researchers' voices of a range of disciplines (psychology, family studies, bioethics, phenomenology, sociology,...) were invited.

Table 1 gives an overview of the analysis process, including the interplay between the researcher and both the team of internal and external auditors. Note that the research question was adapted to its current form throughout the analysis process, a practice that is common in qualitative research.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Worked example: disambiguating motherhood

In order to document the analysis on a family level (step 4, 5, 6) and the overarching analysis on a group level (step 7, 8, 9, 10), one theme reported in the paper (Van Parys et al., 2016) will be explained in detail by reconstructing both the analysis within a family cluster as well as over family clusters. The theme, 'disambiguating motherhood,' refers to the practice of appointing the mother role collectively to the woman receiving the child. By spelling out clearly who the mother of the donor child is, family members left no room for doubt about this. Note that the terminology used here was based on the reading of a number of New Kinship Studies, in which the disambiguation of kinship patterns was discussed (e.g., Carsten, 2004; Thompson, 2005).

After the analysis of all interviews separately (step 1, 2 3), coding outprints (i.e. lists of codes generated by the MAXQDA 'Reports & Export' function) were colour marked and new integrative interpretations were made on a family level. Examples of codes that later on would be classified under the overarching theme 'disambiguating motherhood' can be found in Table 2. Codes such as 'donor no other role than aunt' (parent), 'never feeling that donor child was part of me' (donor) and 'my Mum remains my Mum' (child), when interpreted together, show how kinship constructions are actively 'worked' by all family members (Nordqvist, 2014). More specifically, the mother-child connection was deemed stronger and more important than the donor-child connection. Singularizing motherhood can be seen as one strategy to disambiguate motherhood in sister-to-sister egg donation families (Van Parys et al., 2016). In the second part of the table an example quote from each of the interviews is provided. For the purpose of this paper, quotes are changed in order to protect confidentiality.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Overall, this analysis on a family level was not a straightforward process but rather a continuous back and forth movement between more abstract levels of analysis and detailed investigation of each meaning unit.

Based on the analyses on a family level, the overarching analysis was performed. To this end, new links across family units were sought and explicated in overarching themes. In this phase for instance, we also started to see that even though all family members seemed to engage in efforts to disambiguate motherhood, at the same they also acknowledged the 'special' meaning of the donor (the donating sister). In this respect, family members tried to find a balance between acknowledging what is uncommon and special (the child being born out of the sister's egg cells) and emphasizing or normalizing the donor's position in the family (captured in the overarching theme 'Acknowledging and managing the 'special' link between donor and child'). Again, data analysis in this phase required a flexible position of the researchers and a cyclical movement between more top-down and more bottom-up ways of interpreting the data.

Findings, strengths and limitations of the example study

This study showed the continuous balancing of meanings related to the mother-child dyad, the child-donor dyad and the donor-father dyad. We found that family members on the one hand cherished the genetic link between parents and child allowed by the sisters' egg donation, while, on the other hand, they continuously seemed to manage the meanings related to this link, by downsizing, symbolizing, and or differentiating it from the mother-child bond. Our data analysis approach made it possible to carefully compare, reflect on and integrate the perspectives of the participating family members and in this way lifted our systemic understanding of kinship constructions within these families. For a full discussion of the example study's findings and limitations of the study, see Van Parys et al. (2016). One limitation that is particularly relevant for this methodological paper is the use of a combination of joint and separate interviews. While this in itself added to the complexity of the

analysis (cfr. supra), using joint interviews when collecting data from the parents also has the drawback that this prevented us from obtaining individual versions of the relationship (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Norlyk et al., 2016). It is possible that mothers – having a specific relationship with the donor, being a sibling relationship – experienced the process of egg donation differently than their partners. Possibly, the current interview format did not allow for these differences to be represented, as a couple interview inherently is more directed towards a ‘shared’ couple reality (Taylor & de Vocht, 2011).

Challenges in multi family member interview studies

MFMIS using multiple data sources can be seen as an excellent approach to the study of systemic realities. However, some challenges need to be addressed. For instance, power relations are different in interviewer-adult compared to interviewer-child dyads. This has implications both on the level of data collection and data analysis (Harden et al., 2010). In terms of data collection, the use of different questions/tasks will elicit different kinds of data. With regard to data analysis, there is the risk of paying more attention to adult data than to child data as the former are likely to be more dense and/or revealing (Harden et al., 2010). Of utmost importance are the ethical aspects of multiple perspectives research: recognisability of participants increases when their perspectives are linked to their family members’ perspectives. In order to assure ‘network confidentiality’ when doing research with families, one needs to balance between anonymizing details and maintaining authenticity (Harden et al., 2010, p. 447). Thus, for ethical reasons the dissemination of the results should be on a general level, rather than on a dyadic or systemic level (Ummel & Achille, 2016). This means that the strength of this analysis (being able to offer an in-depth understanding of shared family realities) at the same time encompasses the method’s main limitation: we simply cannot exemplify all new insights at a systemic level when seriously considering our responsibility to protect (network) confidentiality.

Conclusion

Even though data collection and ethical issues of qualitative research including multiple family members increasingly receive attention in qualitative research literature, detailed documentations of data analysis processes remain scarce. In order to provide an answer to this gap in the literature, the current methodological paper aimed to exemplify one approach for data analysis within MFMIS.

Taking the above mentioned challenges into account, multi family member interview analysis can be seen as a valuable research approach, allowing us to systematically analyse family practices and the co-construction of shared family realities. Findings generated by these studies might further our understanding of the therapeutic complexities systemic therapists often encounter, possibly better than outcomes of classical quantitative or qualitative research.

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Table 1: Overview of the analysis process

Step	Explanation
1) Detailed memo writing for all interviews	First thoughts, interpretations, surprises, etc. were written down.
2) First coding of all interviews	Meaning of each relevant part of the interview was captured in a concise phrase.
3) Writing narrative per interview	The 'fragmented' (through coding) analysis was captured in a comprehensible text.
→ 1st auditor report: summary of the nine narratives, organised per family (to internal auditors)	
4) Analysis on a family level: Family 1	Based on the narratives and the codes, the three interviews of Family 1 were analysed together. In search for connections between family members' perspectives, coding outprints were colour marked and new integrative interpretations were made on a family level.
→ 2nd auditor report (to external auditors)	
5) Finetuning of the research question	Based on external auditors' feedback the research question was revised.
6) Analysis on a family level: Family 1, 2 and 3	Starting from this new research question all analyses on a family level were completed.
7) First overarching analysis	Based on the analyses on a family level, a first analysis on the group level was performed. To this end, new links across family units were sought and explicated in overarching themes.
8) Re-appraisal of coding in light of first overarching analysis	The analysis on the group level was checked with the individual interviews.
9) Second overarching analysis	Based on the adjusted coding outprints, analyses on a family level were fine-tuned and a second analysis on the group level was performed.
→ 3rd auditor report (to internal and external auditors)	
10) Further fine-tuning of the analysis	Researcher went back and forth between overarching ideas/understandings and ideographic descriptions.
11) Writing-up	All thematic categories were explained using illustrative quotes.
→ 4th auditor report (to internal auditors)	

Table 2: Example codes and quotes for the overarching theme ‘disambiguating motherhood’

Parent interview	Donor interview	Child interview
Codes	Codes	Codes
‘donor no other role than aunt’	‘never feeling that donor child was part of me’	‘my Mum remains my Mum’
‘emphasizing physical resemblances between mother and donor child’	‘minimalizing the meaning of physical resemblances with the donor child’	‘defining parent-child connection through care, resemblances, and being together’
‘being thankful towards the donating sister’	‘differentiating between feeling towards own child and towards donor child’	‘calling the donor aunt’
‘not mentioning aunt’s role of egg donor at home’	‘defining parenting as taking care of child on daily basis’	
‘emphasizing that gestational bond reinforces mother feeling’		
Example quote	Example quote	Example quote
“She [the donating sister] certainly doesn’t take the role of a second Mum, or something like that. She’s an aunt and she’s my child’s Godmother.”	“I never experienced it like that, like ‘There, that’s my child right there’. You know, to me, it’s not my child. I never experienced any mother feelings towards [name donor child], no it didn’t cause me any trouble.”	Interviewer: So your aunt who gave the egg, what does she mean to you? Child: I really think my Mum remains my Mum, you know. Even though the egg comes from my aunt.

