
Increasing Participant Motivation when Conducting Interviews in Non-Traditional Home Spaces

Robin Brewer

UMBC

1000 Hilltop Circle

Baltimore, MD 21208 USA

Brewer3@umbc.edu

Abstract

This paper presents challenges of conducting interviews in shared home spaces from the context of older adults in independent living communities. Such communities push the boundaries of standard conceptions and definitions of a home environment. I first present one case study where semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. Using lessons learned from this, I have modified the methodology to include participant-driven interviews (PDIs) for richer data collection. PDIs reduce participant's levels of anxiety typical of more formal methods and retain their interest longer by allowing them to guide the interview. I then discuss how semi-private home spaces could be replicated for future research in the home and why PDIs should be used.

Author Keywords

Participant-driven interviews, home, methods, older adults

ACM Classification Keywords

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Human Factors, Design, Experimentation

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Interaction in public

To gather information on common behaviors in people's lives, studies have been conducted in various environments including public bus shelters, street corners, and publically-accessible online communities [1,3]. Conducting studies in public places are more natural than in laboratory environments, but also have more distractions than in formal laboratory settings.

Interaction in private

Studies in the home, where people are most comfortable, can positively impact participants' behaviors. The home is easy to access but direct observation is not feasible because it disrupts the typical flow of daily behaviors. It also houses many possessions of personal value to the participant. Some methods to take advantage of this sense of attachment include home tours and cultural probing [5,6], yet there are some places that are neither public nor private - semi-private places.

Introduction

The home is a rich space to study people. It is a personal space where many long-lasting behaviors tend to form. The strong connections to these environments make them great places to elicit information about daily life. Research in the home can result in developing new tools and home interfaces and allow researchers to better understand their participants in a more informal environment. There are many research methods for gathering data in the home including varying levels of interviews, contextual tours and cultural probing [4,6] – each with its own advantages and disadvantages. For example the participant may feel more comfortable and share more information, but they could also feel protective of their environment and reluctant to share. Other disadvantages to conducting research in the home include external distractions such as the TV or telephone, and the need for the researcher to be seen as trustworthy to gather rich data.

Semi-private home spaces, often shared environments such as retirement communities and living laboratories, lie in between public and private spaces. With the rise of people, especially older adults, living in shared home spaces, it is important to study how to conduct research in them. The number of older adults is increasing [2] and with the high cost of owning homes in today's economy, independent living communities are becoming popular options within this age group. Most residents have to use shared resources in semi-private spaces such as lounges and computer labs. In this paper I present two case studies of older adults in independent living communities. The first case study shows how applying standard interviewing methods will not suffice. I then improve this methodology for the second case study. The research question that I aim to

answer is 1) how can rich information be elicited from older adults in unconventional home environments? Through an exploration of different interviewing techniques, I find that participant-driven interviews work best to elicit such information by reducing anxiety of participants and retaining their interest for longer periods of time. I then conclude with a reflection for future researchers conducting research in non-traditional home spaces.

Case study #1 – Semi-structured interviews

For the first study, I studied older adults (65+) with varying income levels and educational backgrounds. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, which were conducted across two different independent living communities. In the first community, interviews were conducted in the living rooms of participants. In the second community, interviews took place in a multi-purpose meeting room of the retirement center. The locations were decided upon by the activities coordinators in each community.

Each location afforded its own advantages and disadvantages. For the living room setting in cases where the participant had a computer in their apartment, it was easy for them to access the computer to provide further examples to responses they had given during the interviews. Also these interviews caused other questions to be asked regarding computer use. For example, one participant asked if I could help her log into her e-mail. Once the computer booted up, it turned out she actually wanted help logging into Facebook. Ironically during the interviews she responded that she didn't have a Facebook account. If the interviews hadn't been conducted in the privacy of her own home, I am unsure

Case Study #1:

N=19 older adults (65+)

Compensated \$10

Semi-structured interviews asking participants questions about their online and offline communication patterns

Settings: living rooms (private) and multi-purpose rooms (public)

Case Study #2:

N=5 older adults (65+)

Volunteered, no compensation

Participant-driven interviews where participants came to each session with their own questions of how to use different features of the Internet including how to search for information online, send an e-mail and empty their inboxes

Setting: Computer lab (semi-private)

if she would have been comfortable asking for computer help. As researchers, it is important to reflect on the impact that contextual factors in different home environments have on participants. Also, because older adults often have difficulty remembering events, the contextual setting of these interviews allowed them to review such events, providing validity of answers.

The multi-purpose room used in the second setting was a room used for many extra-curricular events and meetings. While it was a neutral space without distractions of family members or friends interrupting, it was not contextual. Also this setting may have reminded participants of their busy schedules. No interviews lasted more than 15 minutes in the multi-purpose room, whereas in the participants' apartments interviews lasted closer to 30 minutes. This lack of intimacy in the space may have been compared to the lack of intimacy in other public places where their activities are conducted such as choir, tinkering and stamp clubs.

Based on this study, disadvantages of the private home environment included distractions such as telephones ringing, neighbors visiting and reminders of other activities they had to complete that day. With such distractions, it was often difficult to realign the focus of the participants back to the questions being asked. Drawbacks of the public spaces included seemingly shortened interview responses and interruptions of other residents using the same space. Therefore, I decided to modify the methodology and conduct a second case study.

Case study #2 – Participant-driven interviews

Using what I learned from the first case study, I conducted another study with participants who lived at a different retirement community. While compensation usually motivates participants, the older adults volunteered their time because they wanted computer help. I offered to help them with their computer problems weekly. The 30 minute 1-on-1 sessions served as a non-traditional form of interviewing called participant-driven interviews (PDIs). For these PDIs, participants came with a specific computer goal in mind. The PDIs were conducted in the computer lab which was a private room but accessible to all residents in the apartment building. This combination of public and private space defined the semi-private space, a non-traditional home research environment.

Reflection

Advantages to conducting research in this semi-private space included a participant-motivated interview focus and a more exploratory environment. Participants could show what they knew how to do and ask specifically what they didn't know how to do, which would be difficult without a computer and in a more public space. Without distractions of other people, participants were able to focus on their self-imposed task and ask about particular areas of the screen. For example, one participant needed me to point to relevant screen areas for deleting e-mail messages from his inbox.

Also, computer help sessions were scheduled weekly for 30 minutes each. Because they led the interviews, participants were motivated to stay longer than in case study #1 where no sessions lasted more than 30 minutes. These longer session lengths and multiple

sessions over a series of six weeks afforded richer data collection. Not only was I able to build trust of the participants but the lack of familiar distractions, such as those in a private apartment also motivated the older adults to complete their goal for the day. However, other residents were able to enter at any time. These extrinsic distractions combined with the hearing disabilities of participants often made it hard hear and deterred the participants from asking more questions.

Overall, the contextual factors of the home seemed to have both positive and negative effects when conducting the participant-driven interviews. In the semi-private space, participants seemed willing to share more than in the public multi-purpose room space, and were less distracted than in the private apartment space.

Future Work

For future researchers conducting studies in semi-private spaces, I recommend to contextualize the discussion, isolate the environment, and motivate participants by giving them more control. By conducting the interviews in a location focused on the topic of discussion, participants were able to directly show and discuss their concerns and problems. Also, the lack of extrinsic distractions in these semi-private spaces allowed them to focus more on accomplishing the goals of the study. I recommend researchers attempt to imitate semi-private spaces by adding context and removing distraction. Lastly, participants *need* to be motivated to complete the study and answer questions with robust responses. Here, participant-driven interviews allowed them to do so. Participants remained on topic and on task, and asked questions throughout the study. These questions served as their own interview questions which they wanted to be

answered. PDIs better engaged participants by making them less susceptible to intrinsic and extrinsic distractions and researchers should incorporate them into future work in the home.

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Recommendations with Future Researchers

Based on these studies, researchers should:

- a) Strongly consider participant-driven interviews in the future when soliciting information in the home
- b) Replicate semi-private spaces when many distractions can be present in the private or public research space