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Ethical considerations when conducting joint interviews with close relatives or family: an integrative review

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Ethical considerations when conducting joint interviews with close relatives or family: an integrative review

**Background:** Researchers are obligated to do no harm to participants of research. Conflicts in relationships can cause negative well-being; therefore, insight is needed into the particular ethical considerations that arise when conducting joint interviews with close relatives or family members simultaneously in the healthcare setting.

**Aim:** To collect and share knowledge related to ethical considerations conducting joint interviews.

**Design and methods:** A literature review inspired by the integrative review method was performed. Data were retrieved through a structured search in PubMed, CINAHL and the Philosopher’s Index and Academic Search Premier for articles published in English from 1980 to 2016 and included 18 articles, of a possible 2153. Article content was assessed line-by-line, and ethical considerations were extracted and organized in three subgroups regarding: Planning joint interviews; Conduct joint interviews and Reporting on joint interviews.

**Findings:** Participants should be offered the best terms for a constructive, on-going relationship after the joint interview has ended. This obligates the researcher to ensure a safe environment during the joint interview and create a delicate balance between the needs of the participants, using nonconfrontational techniques that foster equal and neutral but dedicated attention to all parties, before, during and after the joint interviews.

**Conclusion:** Specific ethical considerations should be taken into account before, during and after joint interviewing. Further research is needed before a final conclusion can be drawn.

**Keywords:** ethics, families, relationships, joint interviews, qualitative research, methodology, integrative review.

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**Introduction**

For several decades, family researchers have conducted interviews with relatives, either with each individual or with more family members simultaneously (1). In this present review, family is defined as: ‘A group of individuals who are bound by strong emotional ties, a sense of belonging, and a passion for being involved in one another’s lives’ (2). Hence the term ‘family’ and ‘close relatives’ will be used interchangeably in this study. Interviews aim to illuminate the experiences and perceptions of the participant(s), mainly through relations and communication (3). Participants provide insight into their lived lives and intimate spaces. This makes interviewing an ethically delicate process (4). According to the Helsinki declaration, health researchers are obligated to protect the privacy and dignity of participants and to refrain from conducting research involving undue physical and/or psychological risk (5).

**Background**

In this study, a joint interview (JI) is defined as an interview with two or more family members, conducted by one researcher (6). JIs can be useful to shed light on the essential elements of a family relationship, because it provides a unique possibility for participants to describe family relations, dynamics and interactions from their perspectives (7).

Several synonyms are used for JI, including pair interview, dyadic interview, small-group interview, family interview and relationship-based interview (8). Although
there is no definitive definition of a JI we decided to define it as described to scope the literature search. The term ‘joint interviewing’ can also refer to a situation where two researchers interview one participant; a situation in which it might be challenging to distinguish between different researchers’ approaches (9). These kinds of interviews are not included in this review.

JI produce data that are qualitatively different from those produced in individual interviews and focus group interviews (8, 10). A JI differs from a focus group interview, and other types of interview, in the requirement that, in a JI, there must be either a pre-existing relationship and/or a shared experience between participants (11). Focus groups are mostly conducted with groups where the participants do not have a close relationship with each other (11, 12) which could be the reason why considerations about the participants’ ongoing relationships are not often described (13). A JI presents a unique opportunity to reveal and support dynamic communication between participants (8, 10). Although similar to focus group and individual interviews, more ethical considerations should be made in a JI because of the complexity of the relationships involved (6, 14, 15).

Studies have found that relationships comprised by negative interaction processes represent the strongest predictor for negative adult health status and have an even greater impact than the positive effect of loving and caring relationships, suggesting that relational conflicts are more harmful than anything else (16). Relationships have special features that need attention and depend on respect and willingness among people involved (17). Consequently, researchers conducting JIs with family or close relatives simultaneously should be knowledgeable about how to maintain a balanced ‘give and take’ relationship between participants in order not to do harm but to preserve, or at least not to jeopardize, any existing relationship. Although the purpose of JI is not family therapy, studies have shown that JI poses similar features to family therapy because participants get to tell their story. The difference between interview and therapy lies in the lacking interference from the researcher whose primary role is to gather data not to solve problems (18). As indicated, the unique ethical considerations in JIs with close relatives are not often described (13, 15) in the literature, which also presents a challenge to researchers who plan to conduct JIs.

Because of the ethical considerations involved in ensuring that existing relationships are not jeopardized, some researchers choose to interview each member of a couple separately. One example in which ethical issues might arise might be a married couple, where the two partners could have differing views on women’s smoking habits during pregnancy. The husband might be against his wife’s choice to smoke, because it might harm the baby (19). Partners involved in domestic violence cases, where the two are in conflict with each other would present another example where JI could cause further distress to participants (20). Other issues include discussions about topics considered inappropriate to talk about in front of one’s partner, such as sexually related issues (3) and severe illnesses, because of issues about caregiver burden, where the caregiver wants to protect the patient and vice versa (21).

In considering whether JIs could provide the specific data needed, it could be an advantage to increase knowledge about the specific ethical considerations for interviewing family or close relatives together in JIs. Knowledge about the methodological aspects of JI is important but sparsely explained in the literature.

**Aim**

Our aim was to collect and share knowledge related to the ethical considerations conducting JIs. We outlined the research question: What are the ethical considerations entailed in simultaneously interviewing family?

**Method**

We performed this study with inspiration from the integrative review which is considered to be the broadest type of research review (22, 23). In an integrative review, data material other than research studies can be included, such as theoretical articles and articles explaining researchers’ reflections as ‘notes’, for example. In addition, integrative reviews summarize past empirical or theoretical literature to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon. A wide range of purposes can be covered, including the analysis of methodological issues surrounding a particular topic (23). Although literature reviews are often guided by PICO (population, intervention, comparator, outcome) or PEO (population, exposure, outcome) in this context it was difficult to identify the components of the research question. Consequently, we focused on the structured approach performing an integrative review which requires the following: The formulation of a suitable research question, a transparent search strategy, an explanation on how findings were retrieved with explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, a quality assessment of the articles found, a condensed presentation of the results and a discussion (24, 25).

After consulting a librarian at the university library, we searched PubMed, CINAHL, the Philosopher’s Index and Academic Search Premier from 1980 to 2016. To make our search as complete as possible, we located additional material through ‘chain search’ and the ‘link-related articles’ in the databases where available (similar
articles are outlined by the database), together with personal, expert recommendations (26). Because the term ‘ethics’ was included, which is mandatory in research studies, we had to accept a substantial number of hits to ensure we captured as many relevant articles as possible (27). The principal keywords used in all four databases were ‘family’, ‘ethical considerations’, ‘interview’ and ‘qualitative’. All the main keywords were created in blocks in all four databases on the basis of relevant synonyms and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms (or MeSH synonyms for each database) for ALL FIELDS and then combined with the Boolean phrase OR (see example of block search Table 1). To ensure the greatest variety of search terms, they were created using truncation (*) where relevant (see Table 1). Finally, all blocks were combined with AND for each of the four databases, which resulted in a total of 2153 hits for closer examination.

Articles were included if published in English between 1980 and 2016, dealing with ethical considerations conducting JIs with family or close relatives according to our definition. We included qualitative studies, methodological articles and notes concerning JI or similar. We excluded qualitative research not performing JIs, focus-group interviews, together with articles without peer review, book chapters and grey literature. The evaluation process in this review was challenging as described for theoretical reviews (28) because it can be hard to evaluate researcher’s descriptions hence we chose peer-reviewed articles as a quality concept.

The literature search retrieved 2153 hits and all titles were read for any relevance to the inclusion criteria; 2101 titles were excluded, and 52 with apparently relevant titles were included. Abstracts from the 52 articles were read for more specific content about JI and ethical considerations. A further 24 articles were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 28 articles were read thoroughly, and eight were excluded because, although they addressed dyads, they dealt with individual interviews. The remaining 20 articles were assessed ensuring peer-review and two were excluded because they did not fulfil that criterion. This resulted in 18 relevant articles (Table 2 and Figure 1). Every article was read thoroughly line by line, and ethical considerations were extracted. Subsequently, we organized data and synthesized the extracted data into the three predefined subgroups (29) (i) ethical considerations when planning JIs, (ii) ethical considerations in conducting JIs and (iii) ethical considerations following and reporting on JIs. Afterwards, the synthesized data were labelled with subheadings.

In following the principles of the integrative review method, we included articles on methodological aspects of conducting JIs, qualitative research and notes on JI or similar (22). The articles we assessed were not all reflecting studies in themselves, in which ethical issues surrounding JI would be the topic, and for which the studies would be designed. Instead, they were researchers’ personal reflections on JIs that were written as a result of their experiences conducting various studies where they conducted JIs. Our review explored third-person interpretive data, because we did not locate any studies with the purpose of exploring the ethical issues in conducting JIs. The review contributes with a summary of important themes which, to the best of our knowledge, have not so far been gathered in the context of JI.

Below, we present ethical considerations described in the reviewed data for the aforementioned three stages in the research process of JI.

Results

Ethical considerations when planning joint interviews

Ensuring informants understanding of what participation means. The benefits of collecting data, using JIs, needs to be weighed against the potential risks to the participants (13). Participants should be given clear information about the study and any potential consequences, especially concerning their relationship, when they are interviewed together. This could help them consider what information they wanted to share with their fellow interviewee(s), be it their partner, close friend or other family members. Some authors suggested that ahead of the interview, the researcher could provide the basis for a discussion about ethical ground rules with potential participants (13, 18, 30, 31). Some topics might cause disagreement between participants and could be difficult for participants to address because of reluctance to hurt the other party by being too candid. These misunderstandings might be prevented and the risks of potential harm diminished if feedback from participants was sought initially regarding their understanding of the research aim and the implications for themselves in participating in the JI (13). If potential participants were recognized as particularly vulnerable because of, for example, gender dynamics or caregiver relations, it should be considered whether JI was a suitable method for data collection (15, 32).

Give participants possibility to choose between individual or joint interviews. When the decision to conduct JIs was made, the best way to include participants should be considered. The data presented different options; the decision could be made solely by the researcher or by the participants themselves, or both. Highet (33) described a study about cannabis smoking habits among adolescents, where the researcher gave the participants the opportunity to choose friend pairs thereby improving the youngsters’ willingness to share experiences because they
would be in a safe and shared environment. Others suggested that it could be optional for participants to participate in either joint or separate interviews (30, 32, 34–36). Another approach was to build in flexibility throughout the study, allowing the participants to change their minds about how they wanted to be interviewed. If disagreements between participants occurred, they could choose to be interviewed separately. As described by Eggenberger (36), a father and a daughter were interviewed separately because of a family conflict. Data also showed another consideration that needed to be addressed; coercion among family members; for example, where one family member tries to pressurize others to participate (13, 37).

**Finding a suitable context for the interview.** Based on the data Jls can be hard to plan, especially if they involved sensitive topics that might cause potential participants to decline participation because of the perceived challenges involved in talking about difficult issues (9). Some researchers found it easier to arrange Jls at participants’ private homes. It was more convenient for the participants (33, 38). In a JL, the researcher did not have to ask one of the spouses to leave the room in their own home as is sometimes necessary when conducting individual interviews, thus avoiding this discomfort (34).

**Extended informed consent.** The data revealed that the letter of consent should address the specific challenges about confidentiality, privacy and the participants’ roles when more than one participant is present during the interview. Some authors suggested that information could be discussed on meeting the participants before the JL (6, 8, 13, 14, 36). Data indicates that interactions between participants could be the focus of analysis, if stipulated in the research question and in the letter of consent (8, 35, 37, 38). If the purpose was to explore power dynamics, it was important to inform the participants beforehand to avoid hidden agendas (37).

**Motives for participation.** Another ethical question outlined was that the researcher should take into consideration situations in which participants might have different motives for participating in the interview. They might perceive the research aim and process differently and expect the researcher to react in certain ways, all of

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**Table 1** Block search example from CINAHL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block 1 Interview</th>
<th>Block 2 Family Interview*</th>
<th>Block 3 Ethics Interview*</th>
<th>Block 4 Qualitative Interview*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group interview (n = 335), Qualitative interview* (n = 49 365), (MH) qualitative studies (n = 145 789), Interview* (n = 26), Mini interview* (n = 31), Interview study* (n = 28 383)</td>
<td>Relatives, (MH) Extended Family (n = 64 060), Couple* (n = 98 25), Couple Therapy, (MH) couples counselling (n = 900), Group, (MH) group processes (n = 181 421), Research group (n = 848), Family (n = 64 108), Spouse*, (MH) Spouses, (MH) significant other, (MH) family coping inventory, (MH) caregiver (n = 21 595)</td>
<td>Ethical issues (n = 27 037), (MH) Privacy and Confidentiality (n = 12 540), (MH) Ethical dilemma, (MH) Ethics (n = 8070), Ethical decision-making, (MH) Decision-making, Ethical, (MH), Decision-making, (MH) research ethics, (MH) Research ethics, Ethical considerations (n = 5527), Ethical principles, (MH) Ethics theory (n = 628), Ethical aspects, (MH) psychosocial aspects of illness (n = 2942), Ethical problems (n = 827), Ethical Challenges (n = 481), (MH) Ethical Nursing, Ethical (n = 41 252)</td>
<td>Qualitative research, (MH) researcher – subject relations (n = 5531), (MH) Qualitative studies, qualitative (n = 64 953), Qualitative data (n = 3850), Qualitative Methods, (MH) Communication Methods, total (n = 1710), Qualitative Nursing research, (MH) research nursing, (MH), Nurse researchers, (MH) clinical nursing research, (MH) Nursing care studies (n = 19 793), Qualitative research Method (n = 145)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All four blocks added with AND (n = 910)

Relevant headlines of the 910 articles found in this block search (n = 14)

Of the 14 apparently relevant titles number of relevant abstracts (n = 7)

When content read thoroughly relevant articles for inclusion (n = 6)

Using the ‘link-related titles’ from the database no relevant articles were found

MH, Mesh Heading.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Study design and methods</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Ethical issues targeted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allan (1) England</td>
<td></td>
<td>To examine some of the benefits that can arise when spouses are interviewed together</td>
<td>Note descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Conflicting accounts, constraints in reflections about individual normative patterns, dynamics, sensitive approach, concealment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allmark et al.</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>To illuminate questions which should be posed by ethic committees and researchers conducting interviews</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Individuals and pairs</td>
<td>Confidentiality, privacy, harm, therapeutic effect, informed consent, dual role and over-involvement, politics and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arksey (9) England</td>
<td></td>
<td>To illuminate aspects of collecting data through joint interviews</td>
<td>Method descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Conflict, unbalanced participation, gender differences, planning issues, tension, disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beitin (18) USA</td>
<td></td>
<td>To review literature on interviewing different configurations of family members</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>Informed consent, conflicts, individual vs. joint accounts, tension, unbalanced participation, therapeutic effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bjørnholt &amp; Farstad (38) Norway</td>
<td></td>
<td>To address the methodological controversy regarding the question of whether couples should ideally be interviewed together or apart</td>
<td>Reflection from three studies descriptive</td>
<td>14 couples 58 families 14 couples</td>
<td>Anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, prompting memories, joint vs. individual accounts, conflict, publishing issues, well-being of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggenberger &amp; Nelms (36) USA</td>
<td></td>
<td>To describe the experience of conducting family interviews to come to understand families’ experience of the hospitalization of a critically ill family member</td>
<td>Phenomenology Semist. interviews</td>
<td>11 Families adolescents and young children</td>
<td>Confidentiality, anonymity, provide safe environment, informed consent, conflict, respect, harm, attention to all parties, not to take sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaphy &amp; Einarsdottir (35) England</td>
<td></td>
<td>To explore young civil partnerships as complexly situated relationships by exploring how they were scripted</td>
<td>Case study interviews individual and dyadic</td>
<td>Same-sex couples n = ?</td>
<td>Unbalanced participation, tension, concealment, conflict, confidentiality, choice of individual or joint interviewing, joint vs. individual accounts, power, truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highet (33) England</td>
<td></td>
<td>To discuss the methodological and ethical features in joint interviewing exploring young people’s smoking and cannabis use</td>
<td>Case study interviews dyadic</td>
<td>Friendship pairs n = 59</td>
<td>Choice of individual or joint interviewing, well-being of both participants, power, unbalanced participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margolin et al. (13) USA</td>
<td></td>
<td>To highlight areas of potential concern and ambiguity related to abuse reporting and Certificates of Confidentiality and ethical issues when studying families</td>
<td>Method descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Potential harm to individuals and the group, competing interests, safety, confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, harm, sensitive topics, tension, parental consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan et al. (8) USA</td>
<td></td>
<td>To discuss the general issues involved in dyadic interviews, and provide empirical examples of how they operate in practice.</td>
<td>Case study interviews dyadic</td>
<td>20 Family/health workers</td>
<td>Problematic relationships, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, power, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris (34) England</td>
<td></td>
<td>To explore some of the methodological and ethical issues around joint interviewing that arose during the data collection for a project investigating the psychosocial needs of cancer patients and their main carers</td>
<td>Method joint and individual interviews</td>
<td>19 Cancer patients and their carers</td>
<td>Secrets exist, truth, choosing joint or individual interview, informed consent, unbalanced participation, power, prompting memories, privacy, confidentiality, joint vs. individual accounts, conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
which could cause tension and place the researcher in an ethical minefield (13, 31, 33).

Confidentiality and anonymity. Another issue presented in the data was considerations about confidentiality surrounding all participants which should be made initially, because the matter could cause obstacles to arise when conducting JIs (14, 30). Anonymity is automatically ceded among the participants whenever individual cases are gathered into dyads or any group where people know each other (8, 13, 38, 39). Some researchers argued that one of the advantages of JIs was that ethical dilemmas were minimized because participants are all present (34, 38). Data indicated that the presence of a partner could either reduce or increase the depth of the interview and the data obtained. It has been put forward that some participants would not feel comfortable disclosing information about some subject in the presence of their spouse (1, 9, 15, 18, 31) in much the same way as if a child were participating (13, 39).

Protecting children’s safety. When a younger child was included in a JI, particular consideration should be given to, for example, topics addressed during the JI to protect Table 2 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Study design and methods</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Ethical issues targeted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neill (39)</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>To analyze the methodology and reality of sampling ‘whole’ families for a grounded theory study exploring child and family management of acute childhood illness.</td>
<td>Grounded theory joint and individual interviews</td>
<td>Families including children n=?</td>
<td>Coercion, confidentiality, informants’ feeling of safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norlyk et al. (15) Denmark</td>
<td>To discuss methodological and ethical considerations choosing to conduct individual or joint interviews with couples</td>
<td>Discussion paper</td>
<td>Couples/families n=?</td>
<td>Confidentiality, individual versus joint accounts, harm, well-being of participants, vulnerability, conflicting accounts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reczek (37) USA</td>
<td>To provide a roadmap for developing and executing in-depth interview studies, including more than one family member</td>
<td>Method descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Confidentiality, conflict, disclosure of information, uncomfortable during interview, harm, coercion, sensitive topics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakellariou et al. (32) England</td>
<td>To focus on the unique contributions of this method in exploring the intersubjective and heteroglossic nature of illness experiences</td>
<td>Narrative-based study with joint interviews</td>
<td>Three Couples living with motor neuron disease</td>
<td>Individual vs. joint accounts, privacy, conflict, informed consent, harm, well-being of participants, tension between couples, vulnerability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohier (6) USA</td>
<td>To propose dyadic interviews as a strategy for maintaining objectivity in qualitative interview and achieving a number of other advantages related to evidence and credibility of data, as well as ethics</td>
<td>Note descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Objectivity, harm, informed consent, privacy, comforting gestures, conflicting accounts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor &amp; de Vocht (30) United Kingdom</td>
<td>To explore people’s experiences of sexuality and intimacy within the context of their illness through joint and one to one interviews and the ethical considerations regarding the different interview approaches</td>
<td>Heideggerian study interviews individual and dyadic</td>
<td>14 Couples living with motor neuron disease or cancer.</td>
<td>Individual vs. joint accounts, conflict, privacy, truth, participant well-being, sensitive researcher, not taking sides, anxiety, confidentiality, harm, disclosure of information, informed consent, therapeutic effect, prompting memories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentine (31) England</td>
<td>To discuss whether families should be interviewed together or apart and to explore some of the practical problems, ethical issues and power dynamics in household research</td>
<td>Note descriptive</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Conflicting accounts, enclosure, unbalanced participation, privacy, power, anxiety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
both the child and the rest of the family (33, 38, 39). Furthermore, it was argued that, attention should be given to the child’s developmental level, to engage with them appropriately and ensure that they feel safe during the sessions (33, 36, 39). Parents act as gatekeepers before enrolment of the child (13, 39), and in the case of interviewing children together, attention should be given to the fact that there are no specific guidelines regarding researchers withholding data obtained from children (13). This could compromise both the child and the parents.

Ethical considerations in conducting joint interviews

Be aware of disagreements between interviewees. Joint interviews provide an insight into the shared experiences of couples or families, as well as novel and interesting data. Data presented that an ethical dilemma in JI arouse during the interview when one participant indicated disagreement with their partner through their body language but without expressing disagreement out loud (1, 30, 31). This could also occur when one partner shared something unknown to the other, or when a partner did not wish disclosure of a certain topic to others (13, 14, 30, 35–37). During such situations, JIs could expose relationship-related conflicts (8, 15, 18, 31, 32, 37).

Handling disagreements between interviewees. Some researchers argued that if disagreements occurred, the researcher assessed participants need and ability to debate and deal with these conflicting issues during the JI which provided interesting data (6, 38). The possibility of blending their stories and perspectives sometimes brought benefits to couples and reduced the conflict level between them (1, 8, 30). Several researchers have experienced situations where participants engaged in conflicts during the JI solving their problems (6, 36, 38). It is also stated in data that the possibility of discussing hurtful matters helped the participants enhance their coping strategies and created a sense of cohesion (14). In some cases, participants have noted how participation helped them to further discuss a certain problem (30, 36). This could resemble a therapeutic intervention, but data emphasized that there is a difference between therapeutic conversations and JI in that the aims are different (18). In the JI, the intention is to gather insight into a phenomenon, whereas therapeutic conversations aim to support the participants through a particular challenge. Data suggested that, in JIs, couples will try to tell consistent
Recalling certain memories can course discomfort or comfort. Interviewing couples together had in some instances caused further discomfort because the participants were forced to remember disagreements they had forgotten, thereby causing new distress, which is ethically problematic if the family participants deliberately suppressed certain memories (14). On the other hand, memory recall created an opportunity to enrich the data, because the participants triggered each other’s memories, and joint reflections brought further nuances to the data (6, 38).

Data indicated that it could be challenging to determine whether and how it would be appropriate to address signs of discomfort in participants, in case they did not wish to reveal certain topics or issues, and this required some interviewing experience (14, 30). To reduce the likelihood of harm, researchers were encouraged to redirect questions if they clearly caused a sense of discomfort to the participants (6, 37). The well-being of all participants was paramount, especially in research dealing with severe illnesses and sensitive topics (13, 15, 30).

However, talking about sensitive topics could be seen as an advantage, diminishing the ethical challenges as explained in a study by Sohier (6), because the participants comforted each other during the interview when sensitive and painful topics were discussed. Some researchers argued that interviewing partners separately generated anxiety because this approach could generate a suspicion that the partners were keeping secrets from each other (30–32, 34). In particular, when topics were sensitive, it seemed that participants often preferred to be interviewed together (31).

Give space for varying interpretations. Another possible consideration in conducting JIs was when one participant dominated the conversation. This diminished the opportunity to achieve the purpose of the JI. Although this imbalance did not occur in every JI, it should be avoided if at all possible (9, 18, 33–35). Some researchers presented that gender issues required ethical considerations; earlier studies from the 1970s and early 1990s found that women felt inhibited when they were interviewed with their partner; they withdrew and let their partner lead the conversation (9) and that attention should always be given to the power distribution between the researcher and the participants and any power imbalance should be avoided (33).

The data highlighted that in a JI, as opposed to an individual interview, a wider range of perspectives is presented, requiring the researcher to distinguish between individual and shared accounts (15, 34, 35). Participants could not express their individual views in the same way as would be possible had they been interviewed separately (1, 15, 30, 37). As a consequence if the research question was aimed at individual accounts, JI would not be appropriate, because it provides collective data, which can be hard to assign to individual participants (8, 32).

Avoid taking sides. A researcher presented concerns for participants’ well-being and recommended a nonconfrontational approach to questioning; for example, asking in a neutral way if participants would like to comment further on a discussion in which there is obvious disagreement (30). The task of the researcher was recommended to avoid taking sides; therefore, it could be necessary in certain cases to avoid engagement in discussions between couples, so as to prevent the disempowerment of one of the interviewees (6, 14, 30, 36).

Ethical considerations following and reporting on JI

Ensuring the well-being of interviewees. The data presented ideas to minimize potential harm to the participants, by stating that the researcher could provide a follow-up interview by telephone after the JI to make sure that there were no further issues that should be addressed (6, 30).

Anonymity in publications was stipulated as important, but stated that when related people are interviewed together, both parties are aware of the topics addressed (13, 30, 37, 38). Whether or not findings in JIs resembled the truth has been problematized by some researchers in the data. There can be secrets that are shared or withheld among family members and it may be argued that this could affect data trustworthiness. This should be included in the researchers’ reflections after the interview (15, 30, 34, 35).

One researcher stated that in family research, the topics discussed could concern family members not included in the interview. In this case, it was paramount to anticipate whether the interview could cause harm to participants not present when data from the JI was presented. The individual risk to each participant should be assessed and distinguished from risk to family relationships. In any case, family members not participating in the JI must be protected at all times by not publishing data that could compromise them (13).

Considering terminology used, when reporting findings. Data also stipulated that the terminology used in articles to refer to the different participants in JIs could be an issue. For example, although the label ‘carer’ is used to anonymise a participant, it is not always suitable because not
all partners in a caring role would identify themselves with the term ‘carer’, even though they live closely with a patient suffering from a severe illness (34).

Discussion

We summarized what has been written about ethical considerations conducting JI. By ensuring informants understand what participation means, give them the possibility to choose between individual or joint interviews, find a suitable context for the interview, provide extended informed consent, explore motives for participation, discussing confidentiality and anonymity and protecting children’s safety represent some of the important issues in the preparation of the JI. Different views on how best to inform participants and how to obtain consent have been put forward. During the JI it is important to be aware of disagreements between interviewees and handle them with respect. To know that recalling certain memories can course discomfort or comfort and give space for varying interpretations while avoiding taking sides between participants. During and after the JI, it is important to ensure the well-being of interviewees and to consider the terminology used, when reporting the findings. The data presented different and sometimes conflicting views on ethical considerations doing JIs which will be discussed below.

Planning the Joint interview

Controversies regarding the pros (33, 34, 38) and cons (9) in the planning process of JIs have been presented (13, 37). Cohesion is more likely to occur in JIs than in focus group interviews, because in JIs the participants are close related with inherent power issues and they could have different agendas for participating. We could argue that these problems could be remedied through the planning process (6, 8, 13, 14, 36).

The Joint interview

Whether or not conflicts are likely to arise' during a JI can be discussed. Both negative (8, 18, 31, 32, 37) and positive (1, 13, 30, 32, 36) outcomes have been reported on the exposure of conflicts in JIs, and there have been differing views on whether disagreements surface during a JI (9, 15, 34, 37). This indicates that it can be extremely difficult to predict what will happen during a JI and how the participants will react. Some would claim that all conflicts should be avoided (6, 14, 30, 36, 37), whereas others state that, when collecting suitable data in line with the research question, it can sometimes be constructive for relationships to get differing perceptions out in the open and have the opportunity to discuss issues (1, 6, 8, 30, 38). Nevertheless, there is a delicate balance between collecting data relevant to the research question and engaging in therapeutic conversations, which should not be the purpose of the JI (18).

Preserving the relationship

Although similarities among the different qualitative data collection methods, in terms of anonymity, confidentiality, discomfort, power imbalance and consent exist this literature review revealed, that JI poses some specific ethical considerations because the participants are interviewed together. The pre-existing relationship between participants and their continuing relationship after the interview should be preserved, allowing the best possible circumstances to unfold in the future without causing distress and jeopardizing the well-being of the participants. There is also a specific context in JIs, especially regarding the relationship between interviewees and the impact the researcher’s choices have before, during and, especially, after the JI which is in line with other studies (13, 31, 32) that discuss whether relationships are too fragile, leading to a negative impact after the encounter.

When conducting individual interviews with close relatives, the researcher is able to protect the participant and their nonparticipating family members differently because the researcher decides what to reveal if the nonparticipating family members differently because the researcher decides what to reveal if the nonparticipating family members differently. However, when memories are jogged between participants, the challenge about revitalizing suppressed memories arises in JIs. However, some participants feel more relaxed about ‘anonymity’ and revealing secrets when both of them are present (35). This might partially explain why some participants feel insecure if they are separated (30–32, 34).

Shared stories

Sometimes truth seems to be an issue in qualitative research, but instead of focusing on truth, it is more useful to focus on authentic stories, because these are coconstructed by participants in the JI (40). To discuss truth then becomes irrelevant; because the truth is the story the participants create and cocreate together in the JI, regardless of whether their individual accounts differ. The verifiability of data from JIs has come into question, because participants often tend to give a presentable public account (34). It could be argued, however, that data provided might be more valid and reliable when the aim is family research illuminating family unit issues (6, 15).
During the JI enabling feedback from participants about how they understood topics discussed or events that occurred, researchers could enhance the validity of the data (6). When participants help each other to remember things, this could also be seen as a validation process of shared narratives (6, 34).

Additional research warranted

Based on the review, we found no studies researching the participants’ perception on ethical challenges when interviewed together with a close relative therefore more knowledge from JI participants on how they perceived the session are needed due to the intense focus on the dyad.

The review presented that a sensitive approach is required when interviewing more than one person at a time (6, 13, 15, 30). No explanations are offered in the reviewed articles as to how researchers should acquire these particular skills, including the ability to strike a delicate balance between participants’ perceptions, without leaving any participant in a delicate position. The only mention is of the requirement of research experience as a prerequisite when conducting JIs. ‘How to manuals’ on JI is warranted.

Some challenges in JIs seem to be somewhat similar to what can happen in a focus group interview (12) such as; the problem with imbalance during interview when one part dominates the other (18, 33–35) gender unevenness (9) or differing expectations from the interview session (6, 14) towards both the possibility to express individual and shared accounts (34, 35) and the aim of the study (13, 31, 33); but the consequences on the balanced ‘give and take’ relationship between relatives could be somewhat different (6, 14, 15, 21, 30). Sandelowski (9, 41) found it more feasible to gather men’s accounts about family matters when conducting JIs opposed to individual interviewing. However, more studies are needed to gain knowledge about gender differences and discomfort when participants are to discuss different family-related topics in JIs, because there seem to be different views about the parties’ interest to share their perceptions with researchers.

Limitations

We did not use PICO or PEO and instead of focusing on the participant selection process, a specific disease, treatment, intervention or the methodological quality of each article we focused on the issue of ethics. Our interest in specific ethical challenges and considerations in conducting JIs allowed us to search relevant articles and conduct an integrative review, as has been done by others (42).

Because we included articles about researchers’ reflections, a conventional quality assessment of the articles was not possible, although this is normal procedure in integrative reviews (22, 23). Instead, we included peer-reviewed articles and excluded grey literature and book chapters; because we wanted to be sure that the articles would be of peer-reviewed standard.

We had to accept a substantial number of hits because all scientific articles have to mention ethics and because of the lack of a definitive definition of JIs. This was accepted to ensure that we would reduce the possibility of excluding relevant articles. By excluding focus group interviews, we might have missed out some ethical challenges similar to those presented in JIs. It could be argued that a JI could also be called a mini focus group that contains fewer participants than the usual number for focus groups (8).

Although we conducted a thorough and structured search for relevant articles, we might not have found them all. We chose databases deemed relevant in the context of health care. Another issue could be publication bias (43). Most scientific articles have a word limit and, therefore, researchers might not mention their ethical considerations when doing JIs (8, 13). As a result, we could only locate 18 articles. Because of our choice to exclude grey literature and book chapters, we might have overlooked certain knowledge.

Conclusion

The nature of JIs with families or close relatives poses some specific ethical challenges. But the main concern is about the relationship. The participants’ on-going coexistence can be fragile. Participants should be offered the best terms for a constructive, on-going relationship after the JI has ended. The potential creation of conflicts between participants should be given a lot of consideration, because of the negative impact conflicts could have on participants’ on-going well-being. This obligates the researcher to ensure a safe environment during the JI and create a delicate balance between the needs of the participants, using nonconfrontational techniques that foster equal and neutral but dedicated attention to all parties, before, during and after the JI. Further research is needed before a final conclusion can be drawn.

Author contributions

BV, HK and BØ were responsible for the study design. BV conducted the literature search with support from HK and BØ. BV, HK and BØ performed the data analysis. BV and HK were responsible for the drafting of the manuscript. BV, HK and BØ made critical revisions to the manuscript for important intellectual content. HK and BØ supervised the study.
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