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To Transcribe or not to Transcribe....that is the Question

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Authors	Cabral, Linda M.
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To Transcribe or Not to Transcribe....That is the Question.

Greetings! I am Linda Cabral from the University of Massachusetts Medical School's [Center for Health Policy and Research](#). A big part of my job uses qualitative methods to evaluate different health and human services programs. Our data collection processes can include utilizing one-on-one or group interviews and as well as focus groups. With this type of narrative (i.e., first person data collection), decisions must be made up front as to the ultimate format of your data set. One of the decisions is whether or not to audio record these data collection events and another is whether these audio files will be transcribed. Transcribing data can be a tedious process requiring several hours for each recorded interview. A general rule is that the text of a 30-40 minute interview takes about 1-2 hours to type and results in about 15-20 pages of text. Recently, we have been faced with a myriad of projects requiring decisions on how formal our transcription process should be. Let me offer you some of our thinking and lessons learned!

Lessons Learned

- Decisions are needed as to the level of detail needed from each qualitative data collection event, which can range from a verbatim transcript to a less formal write-up of notes. While transcribing your own data can have significant analytic benefits (getting close and personal with the material), it may not be practical for everyone – particularly if you're time-strapped.
- Transcription of interviews allows for each evaluation team member to go through the transcript carefully, providing an easily readable document from the study. Having a transcript can facilitate working together in a team where the tasks have to be shared. Agreement about data interpretation is key.
- When considering outsourcing transcription:
 - Realize that a fully transcribed interview will result in pages and pages of data to sift through. There will be a lot of “noise” in there that could potentially be eliminated if the transcription was done in-house by evaluators familiar with the project's evaluation aims.
 - You have choices as to the type of transcript that would be most helpful to you, including: word-by-word verbatim; clean verbatim (removing ‘hmm’ and ‘you know’); or one with improved grammar and readability.
 - You have options ranging from independent contractors to large firms that specialize in transcription services. Transcribers can be paid by the word, the hour, or the length of time of the recording.

Hot Tips

- Always have your evaluation aims drive your decision about whether to transcribe or not.
- Plan ahead for how notes, audio recordings, and transcripts will be stored and how personal identifiers will be used in order to main data integrity.
- Budget the necessary time and resources up front whatever your decision is!