

Social surveys and interviews are staple methods within health research. One of the perceived merits of the postal questionnaire is the anonymity it affords to participants, enabling people to provide honest accounts, particularly in relation to sensitive topics. Interviewing can potentially introduce bias to participants' accounts because of a compulsion to provide socially desirable responses. Here we examine these assumptions through a comparison of questionnaire and interview accounts of the help-seeking experiences of people with symptoms of cancer.

Public discourses of early diagnosis of cancer are increasingly commonplace, particularly after the 'Be Clear on Cancer' campaigns, which reinforced the importance of consulting quickly when experiencing cancer symptoms. This study aimed to explore the help-seeking experiences of people with symptoms of lung or colorectal cancer by inviting patients to complete a questionnaire about their symptom onset and first consultation with a health care practitioner. A sub sample of these participants were interviewed about their help-seeking experiences, with the interviews taking place within 8 weeks of the questionnaires being returned.

We found that the reported length of the help-seeking interval (time from first symptom to first consultation with a health care practitioner) differed in questionnaire and interview accounts for the majority of participants. Whilst we may have expected participants to report longer intervals in the questionnaire, because of its perceived ability to reduce social desirability bias, we found that the converse was true; for most of the cases where there was a discrepancy in interval length between questionnaire and interview, longer help-seeking intervals were reported in the interview.

We shall consider possible explanations for these unexpected results, suggesting that the concept of 'public accounts' and 'private accounts' provides insight into these discrepant participant responses. The formality of the questionnaire and the closed nature of questioning may encourage participants to report more socially acceptable behaviours in order to conform to public discourses around early help-seeking and early diagnosis. Whereas in interviews, participants were able to report more deviant accounts because they were within the private setting (their homes) and were able to narrate their stories and detail their reasoning.

Problematizing the research landscape

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EXPLAINING DISCREPANT RESULTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS CONCERNING HELP-SEEKING: ARE 'PUBLIC' AND 'PRIVATE' ACCOUNTS THE KEY?

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