

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN - (Print): 2519 – 7908 ; ISSN - (Electronic): 2348 – 0343

IF:4.335; Index Copernicus (IC) Value: 60.59; Peer-reviewed Journal

## **Counseling Research Using Enhanced Critical Incident Technique for Data Collection: An Example from a Phenomenological Study**

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### **Abstract**

The Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) is an improved version of Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which is a well-established qualitative research method (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, and Amundson, 2005). The improvements made to ECIT, made it more compatible as a psychological investigative tool (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, and Amundson, 2009). This article describes the methodology of using ECIT in a phenomenological study. The methodology is the part of a larger study that explores counselors' perspectives towards the use of complementary alternative therapies for children with intellectual disabilities. This article will provide you the detailed steps of how to develop an interview protocol using ECIT. This paper will serve two purposes in counseling research. Firstly, it will serve as a guide for those interested in using ECIT as a data collection method to draw rich unique experiences from participants secondly will contribute to the qualitative methods in counseling research.

**Keywords:** Counseling Research, Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, Data Collection, Phenomenology

### **Introduction**

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach used extensively in disciplines like sociology, psychology, health sciences, education. According to Creswell (2017) phenomenological studies describes the lived experiences of a group of people about a phenomenon. Phenomenology is usually selected as the best fit for a study that involves identifying the meaning behind an experience or phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). There are different types of data collection methods that could be used in phenomenology. The most commonly used methods include, the use of narratives in interviews, journals protocols, participant observation, the use of reflective journals researcher's own introspective accounts. Other techniques such as the use of art or poetry are also used by some researchers.

Critical Incident Technique (CIT), though not a very common data collection method in phenomenology, helps to promote the understanding of an experience or perspective at a deeper level, focusing on critical events (Butterfield et al., 2009). Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) is an enhanced version of Flanagan's (1954) CIT. CIT is a well-established qualitative research tool utilized in many areas of the health sciences. It is a versatile set of principles which will be modified adapted to satisfy the unique situation at hand. ECIT is used in both the data collection analysis stage. ECIT provides a framework for data interpretation by determining the frame of reference, forming the categories determining the level of specificity in data reporting (Butterfield et al., 2005). Researchers can infuse ECIT into personal interviews identify the critical incident component. The researcher can then track the emergence of new categories by member checking using the table of Helpful Critical Incidents (HE), Hindering Critical Incidents (HI) Wish List Items (WL) as suggested by Butterfield et al. (2009).

## Literature Review

ECIT as an innovative research methodology has been applied to the fields of counseling psychology to improve the data collection process promote trustworthiness of the original CIT (Butterfield et al., 2009; Hiebert, Domene, and Buchanan, 2011). First, ECIT has been used to investigate the effectiveness of interventions in counseling. For example, in 2018, Amundson, Goddard, Yoon, Niles explored the effectiveness of hope-centered interventions in employment counseling by using ECIT. In addition to quantitative surveys, researchers conducted face-to-face online ECIT interviews with participants to understand helpful hindering critical incidents. ECIT interviews help researchers to explore the within group differences on their changes during treatment, help factors, hindering factors, wish list items of participants (Amundson et al., 2018).

Second, researchers have used ECIT to explore the helping hindering factors in therapeutic relationships among different populations. Richards Bedi (2015) used ECIT as a data analysis tool in their study to explore the helping hindering factors of therapeutic relationships for male clients. Researchers used critical incident surveys to engage 86 participants to discuss both positive negative factors of therapeutic relationship by asking them the one most significant incident in their therapeutic relationships. In the data analysis procedure, ECIT was incorporated to conduct credibility checks (Richards and Bedi, 2015). In addition, Rochelle (2013) used ECIT to explore the helping hindering factors of Aboriginal clients in therapeutic relationships. In this study, the researchers had interviews with 10 participants, ECIT was utilized in content analysis, category formation, credibility checks.

Third, ECIT is also a technique that researchers have used to explore factors regarding help seeking behaviors. Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, Westwood (2018) incorporate ECIT in their study on helping factors for male military veterans in seeking committing to counseling. Researchers contacted military veterans who had completed a 10-day veteran transition group completed interviews with them to discuss their levels of engagement during the program. In addition to the CIT implemented in different stages of this study, such as interview preparation data collection, ECIT was primarily used in credibility/trustworthiness checks.

Beks (2017) also conducted a study in help seeking behaviors among veterans with ECIT. However, Beks (2017) specially focused on veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, ECIT was used throughout the whole research process, on the contrary of only credibility/trustworthiness check in the study of Kivari et al. (2018). Beks (2017) utilized ECIT to interview 16 partners of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder explored the hindering facilitating factors of their access utilization of mental health services in Canada. In this study, Beks (2017) followed the ECIT guidelines created by Butterfield et al (2009), including establishing the general aim, creating plans specific steps for interviews, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation results report.

Fourth, ECIT has been incorporated into studies on multicultural counseling training. Collins, Arthur, Brown, Kennedy (2014) used ECIT to explore how counseling training facilitated the multicultural counseling social justice competence of counseling students. Thirty-two participants from two institutions in Canada answered the online survey described their critical incidents in their training process. The researchers used ECIT to gain the critical perspectives of the gap between the education needs of participants as a wish list, in addition to questions usually used in traditional CIT, ECIT was also used in data analysis credibility/trustworthiness checks (Collins, et al., 2014). Building on this study, Brown, Collins, Arthur (2014) further explored how to develop multicultural counseling social justice competence from the perspective of counseling students. Fifty-nine students answered the online survey, of which items were composed by traditional CIT regarding helping hindering factors ECIT regarding wish list items. Moreover, ECIT was also incorporated in the data analysis procedure (Brown, Collins, and Arthur, 2014).

Fifth, ECIT has been used to explore coping skills among different populations. For example, Conn Butterfield (2013) interviewed 10 police officers to inquire about their coping skills for secondary trauma distress. In this study, ECIT was utilized in addition to traditional CIT for the contextual components, wish list items in interviews, credibility/trustworthiness checks. Moreover, Shayanfar (2016) used ECIT to investigate how adolescents cope with negative emotions in peer interaction by interviewing 10 junior high students. In this study, Shayanfar (2016) followed five steps of ECIT proposed by Butterfield et al. in 2005, which includes creating general aims, making plans setting specifications, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation report.

Amundson, Yeung, Sun, Chan, Cheng (2011) used ECIT to explore the immigration experiences of successful Chinese immigrants. In this study, the researchers used ECIT to prepare research questions. They inquire about the contextual factors, helping hindering factors, suggestions for future immigrants in interviews with 20 participants (Amundson et al., 2011).

Dym (2015) incorporated ECIT to investigate the experience of rejecting gang lifestyle of adolescent males. The researcher interviewed 11 participants with the ages from 19-27 potential opportunities to join a gang in their adolescence. The researcher followed the entire five-step guideline for ECIT developed by Butterfield et al. (2009).

## **Materials and Methods**

A lot of confusion exists whether CIT is a method for data collection analysis or a methodology. Viergever (2019) argues that CIT is a methodology not a method could be combined with other qualitative approaches. However, the article does not mention the use of ECIT. Previous studies have not explored the use of ECIT in phenomenology. This limitation in research literature will be addressed in this article. Phenomenology includes lived experiences. The most common methods of data collection in phenomenology include the use of narratives in interviews, diaries protocols, participant observation, the use of reflective diaries researcher's own introspective accounts (Finlay,2013). Data is more important than the data collection method in phenomenology. The researcher needs to engage involve with the phenomenon as holistically as possible. ECIT could be a method that can help the researcher to fully underst the phenomenon. ECIT can be used to develop the interview protocol.

### **ECIT as a data collection tool**

As a data collection tool ECIT gives rich data, as it uses prompting questions to ensure that entire events experiences are captured in a useful manner (Britten, 2014). Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) interviews cannot be compared to narrative or life history interviews (Britten, 2014). In ECIT interviews, the focus is to find factors that help hinder participants in relation to a specific phenomenon, in this study, the use of complementary alternative therapies for children with intellectual disabilities. The intention to use ECIT was to elicit meaningful 'critical' events or phenomena that each participant felt helped them during their clinical experience. In order to explicitly look at these factors an interview protocol was created using the Theory of Planned Behavior.

#### **Steps to use ECIT as a data collection tool**

*Step-1: Select the desired theoretical lens*

The theoretical framework provides a backbone to build the research. In this research study, the theory of planned behavior is selected as the theoretical framework. The interview protocol is based on the theoretical framework. An appropriate theoretical

framework is needed to get the required data to answer the research questions. Previous literature methodology can be helpful in deciding which theoretical framework to select. This research was looking for a well

validated decision-making model that may provide an appropriate framework to understand the

perspectives of counselors toward the utilization of complementary alternative therapies for

children with intellectual disabilities. Theory of planned behavior is a good fit in this situation.

*Step-2: Develop an interview protocol*

Interviews are generally used to provide researchers with rich detailed qualitative data for understanding participants' experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). An interview protocol is a guide for the interview: what to say at the beginning of the interview to introduce the researcher the topic of the interview, how to collect participant consent, interview questions, what to say at the end of the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). It is important to have a well laid out script for your interview protocol. The introduction of the script can include critical details about the study such as what the study is about, why there is a need for this study, the informed consent confidentiality. The conclusion can provide your contact information other information that the participant would like to know or expect after the interview is completed (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012).

*Step-3: Identify the critical incidents*

Critical incidents are events that help promote, or impede a certain behavior or phenomenon (Butterfield et al, 2009). By infusing ECIT into personal interviews the critical incidents are identified. One of the main advantages of ECIT is self -insight. Through self -insight participants are able to think more critically about how the critical incidents have been helpful or hindering.

*Step-4: Develop the table of Helpful Critical Incidents (HE), Hindering Critical Incidents (HI) Wish List Items (WL)*

The ECIT focuses on three incidents, the helpful critical incidents, hindering critical incidents wish list. Helping critical incidents are events that are helpful to promote or reinforce the phenomenon under study. In the example of this study, helpful critical incidents are some events that the participants felt have reinforced them to use CAT for children with intellectual disabilities. An example of this would be a response in the interview such as "I wasn't quite sure how children would react to CAT, but to my surprise I was really impressed by their interest towards CAT". This response did not have any supporting details in the transcript. So, the researcher would ask the participant during the follow up interview whether this was, in fact, a helping critical incident, if the participant agreed, then he or she would be asked to describe its importance provide an example of a time it helped. Only if the participant agrees that the item is a critical incident provides an example, this will be transferred into the table of helpful critical incidents. Similarly hindering critical incidents are events that are not helpful, that come in the way of using the phenomenon under study. For example, in this study, hindering incidents would be all those factors or events that impede the use of CAT for children with intellectual disabilities. On the other h, a wish list is an event or factor in an ideal scenario that the participant would wish to see for the phenomenon under study. In this study, a wish list item is proper training in CAT, so that participants are equipped with the tools for using CAT, when needed.

To get to these critical incidents the second part of the follow up interview had three different scenarios followed by two or three questions focused on three specific beliefs- behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs control beliefs. These questions are heavily influenced by the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen,1991).

*Behavioral beliefs.* Scenario 1: The counselor who works for children with intellectual disabilities receives specific training in one or more of complementary alternative therapies plans to integrate these therapies into practice.

- What in your opinion are some of the advantages of using CAT while working with children who have intellectual disabilities?
- What in your opinion are some of the disadvantages of using CAT while working with children who have intellectual disabilities?

*Normative beliefs.* Scenario 2: The counselor who works for children with intellectual disabilities chooses to recommend specific complementary alternative therapies, without referral to a licensed therapist.

- What are your thoughts about the professional organization's approval of this recommendation to use complementary alternative therapies for helping children with intellectual disabilities?
- What are your thoughts about the professional organization's disapproval of this recommendation to use complementary alternative therapies for helping children with intellectual disabilities?
- What are your thoughts on the ethical considerations of this recommendation to use complementary alternative therapies for helping children with intellectual disabilities?

*Control beliefs.* Scenario 3: The counselor makes direct referral to a trained practitioner of a specific complementary or alternative therapy that the counselor thinks would help children with intellectual disabilities.

- What are the factors that would prevent, challenge or discourage you from integrating complementary alternative therapies in your professional practice?
- What are the factors that would motivate or encourage you to integrate complementary alternative therapies in your professional practice?

### **Helpful Critical Incident Categories**

Participants reported 130 helpful critical incidents (CI). These critical incidents were placed into the following 6 helpful categories: (a) Effectiveness; (b) Motivation; (c) Trust; (d) Experience; (e) Practice; (f) Professional Development.

### **Hindering Critical Incident Categories**

Participants reported 56 hindering critical incidents (CI). These critical incidents were placed into 5 hindering categories. The 5 hindering categories that emerged are as follows: (a) Ethical concerns; (b) Lack of training; (c) Lack of supervision; (d) Space time constraints; (e) Lack of resources.

### **Case Illustration Methodological Guidelines**

First, the researcher aimed to explore critical incidents that happened while using complementary alternative therapies while counselors worked with children with intellectual disabilities. Critical incidents are identified as 'turning points' in decision making. The use of ECIT, thus helped me to identify those critical incidents or turning points that helped these counselors to make decisions on whether or not to use CAT along with counseling while working with children with intellectual disabilities. Now it is time to talk about the bigger picture. The overview of the research which included ECIT as a data collection method. The purpose of the study was to explore analyze counselors' perspectives towards complementary alternative therapies in counseling when working with children who have intellectual disabilities. This study utilized a phenomenological design, wherein the phenomenon is complementary alternative therapies. Qualitative studies are used to understand people's perspectives experiences through the virtue of stories narratives. Therefore, data collected will be observations, words, stories, documents. This study specifically looked at words in the form of interviews critical incidents. An interpretative phenomenological

method was chosen. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their major life experiences is committed to the detailed study of each particular case before moving to broader claims. IPA captures lived experiences of specific people in specific situations within a social cultural context, producing relevant findings, coupled with a subjective reflective process of interpretation (Clancy, 2013). Interpretative phenomenology also focuses on exploring how human beings make sense of experiences transform these experiences into consciousness (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This framework was a good fit for the current research study because it aligns with the theory of planned behavior (which was the theoretical framework selected), by providing reasons interpretations for human behavior.

ECIT was used in data collection. The interview had two parts, the first part was looking into general perspectives the second part was specifically focused on the critical incidents. Part 1- General perspectives. Initial questions of the focus group were repeated, to ensure that the participants had a chance to add any missing information, or if the participants wanted to share more. Four new questions were used, based on the focus group transcriptions to further explore the general perspectives of counselors, this was the first part of the follow up. The second part of the interview was the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique.

Part 2- Enhanced critical incident technique. It is a versatile set of principles which will be modified adapted to satisfy the unique situation at h. The researcher infused ECIT into the personal interviews identified the critical incident component. For this some scenarios are provided to the participants depending on the phenomenon using the theoretical framework. So, for example in this research, the researcher used the following scenarios which were efficient to capture the critical incidents that led to the qualities of experiences that each participant had towards the phenomenon. The researcher provided a scenario to identify the critical incidents related to behavioral beliefs, some probing questions were provided after the scenario. this same format was adopted for normative beliefs control beliefs. These scenarios were selected based on the theoretical framework which was the Theory of Planned Behavior. ECIT was also used in this research for ensuring Credibility Validity of data using data triangulation. Qualitative research is often non-replicated cannot be generalized because the findings are specific to the selected group. In order to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher minimizes threats to credibility, transferability, dependability confirmability by triangulating the data sources data analysis methods. Member checking was used to gather underst all the possible perspectives of participants because member checking is considered as an important strategy for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Kornbluh, 2015). Synthesized results of enhanced critical incident technique were used for member checking. For this the researcher tracked the emergence of new categories by member checking using the table of Helpful Critical Incidents (HE), Hindering Critical Incidents (HI) Wish List Items (WL) as suggested by Butterfield et al. (2009). These tables or synthesized results of ECIT were used for member checking. The researcher tracked down the critical incidents in these tables these were returned to the participants for ensuring credibility of data collected. ECIT as a data collection method strengthened the research by gleaning data from the respondent's perspective by being explorative flexible. ECIT also enabled the generation of an accurate record of events a rich data set of firsth experiences. Hence ECIT is presented as an excellent data collection tool in phenomenology.

### **Discussion on Implications to Counseling Research**

In the area of counseling research scholarship, current scholars can use the steps in this study, to use ECIT for data collection in qualitative research. Synthesized results of ECIT can further be used for member checking data analysis. There are some specific strengths of ECIT which makes it a strong tool for data collection. These are the ability to collect data from the respondent's perspective, explorative theory building, flexibility the collection of an accurate record of events a rich set of first-h experiences. Previous research has shown that ECIT is an excellent tool for cross-cultural research with marginalized special populations (Britten, 2014). Oftentimes researchers encounter issues with narrative interviews by having difficulty in

understanding what is 'real' versus 'perceived' memory over time (Britten, 2014). By using ECIT, which follows a semi-structured interview format, it is much easier to extract the details of the experiences or perspectives that participants have, using the helpful /or hindering incidents. All these above-mentioned factors make ECIT an effective approach in counseling research.

### Limitations

As in any other qualitative research method, the researcher is an instrument leaves the participant after data collection. In ECIT, as we are focusing on critical incidents, there could be situations where traumatic triggers are exposed (Butterfield et al., 2009). Another important thing to consider while using ECIT as a data collection tool is the recall of memory. When participants are asked to recall critical incidents, make sure as the researcher, give them instruction to use events or experiences that have occurred in the recent past. It is a great plan to limit recall of incidents up to six months (Butterfield et al., 2009). The more detailed the recall, the more accurate the information will be (Flanagan, 1954).

### Conclusion Future Considerations

Previous literature gives evidence of ECIT as an innovative research methodology that has been applied to the fields of counseling psychology to improve the data collection process promote trustworthiness of the original CIT (Butterfield et al., 2009; Hiebert, Domene, and Buchanan, 2011). ECIT has been used to investigate the effectiveness of interventions in counseling. Researchers have used ECIT to explore the helping hindering factors help seeking behaviors in therapeutic relationships among different populations. ECIT has been incorporated into studies on multicultural counseling training. Future researchers can use the steps in this study use ECIT as a data collection tool, not only in phenomenology, but can use it in grounded theory research or case studies (Mathew, 2019).

ECIT can be further used as a credibility checker also as a data analysis method. Researchers who are interested in triangulation, can definitely choose ECIT as a secondary form of data collection or data analysis, along with other methods.

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