

## Interviews: The Other in Research

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### INTRODUCTION: INVOLVING OTHERS IN INQUIRY

- When using Others in an inquiry, it helps to reflect on the purpose that one expects them to fulfil. Are you asking for their experience so that you can understand it? Are you seeking out those with a similar experience to your own? Are you looking to prove your own hypothesis or to uncover some new insights? Are you looking for the company of those with similar experiences to your own? The answers to these questions will inform the approaches you take towards Others in your inquiry and encourage a reflexive aspect to your research findings.

*“According to French ethno-psychoanalyst Georges Devereux, the researcher “...should not ignore the interaction between the object and the observer, hoping that in time this interaction would fade away, if (s)he for a sufficiently long time continued to act as if such an action did not take place... Researchers should stop exclusively underlining treatment and manipulation of the object. Instead they should simultaneously and some times exclusively reflect and understand their role as observers.” (Devereux, 1992, in Mruck & Mey, 2007).*

*“...the use of reflexive methods and ways of understanding unconscious dynamics e.g. (counter-)transferences, dream analysis or analysis of fantasies may make sense...” (Brown, 1996, in Mruck & Mey, 2007)*

Researchers working within a transpersonal paradigm will know well the transformative potential of an interview. There are three forces occurring at once:

*“First, the interaction becomes a research session by providing new information and knowledge that can contribute to the development of our discipline. Second, it also becomes a clinical session by offering the participants/co-researchers an opportunity to learn more about themselves, more fully integrate and assimilate materials, and work through important issues more thoroughly than before. This is especially likely if relevant and important topics have been chosen for the research project.... Third, hearing the stories of participants/co-researchers and working together with them on the issues addressed in the research project can result in change and transformation in ourselves as investigators”. (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 43)*

- The transpersonal paradigm also recognises the external forces at work in any inquiry. Given these forces at work, what you expect from the Other in your process will rarely be what actually occurs. It is the *unknown* subject, the *unexpected* story, the *unconscious* dynamic, that really are the engine-room of the inquiry. It is through these uncontrollable forces – the philosopher’s stone if you like - that the meaning from your inquiry is generally revealed.

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The art of inquiry therefore occurs in striking a balance between containment of process (Lewis, 2011) and openness to what is occurring.

*“A newborn has an amazing capacity for gathering and analysing an array of data. He or she comes into the world knowing virtually nothing and is bombarded by tastes, smells, sights and sounds. Conclusions emerge as he or she begins to understand and relate to the immediate world...As time goes on the young child begins to use language to classify the unstructured experiences that surround him or her. Words phrases and gestures help in communicating with others and in reinforcing the conclusions drawn about the environment. This natural inductive analysis...is often stifled in the formal educational process and must be relearned for most adults.” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 80)*

- Once you have reflected on why you want to involve others then you can consider the best way to frame the role you would like them to play. For example, one can use others:

As co-researchers

As participants or “subjects”.

As artists or creatives

As validators

As community or brother/sisterhood

Making your motives as conscious and fully explained as possible will enrich your own experience and those with whom you are involved.

- Once you have decided on the way in which you would like to involve the Other in your inquiry, then you can consider the most appropriate setting for your interaction. Examples include:

1. Workshops or one-off groups
2. Co-operative inquiry groups or encounter-type groups
3. Field study – e.g. ethnography
4. Case study
5. Collection of narratives
6. Dream group/Social dreaming matrix
7. Interviews

- Interviews are one of the most popular forms of data collection in psychotherapy research. The format is very familiar to therapists and counsellors who are use to working with this form in their practice. The psychotherapy practice provides a great set of skills to take into a research interview situation and a therapist will often get very worthwhile data out of this sort of setting.

It is important to bear in mind however that the research purpose

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and setting is **different in key ways** to the therapy setting and the researcher will need to adjust his/her practice accordingly. Most centrally, a researcher does not have the participant's agreement to be in therapy – that is not the nature of their arrangement. Researchers should not interfere in the participant's experiences even in the name of "healing".

From a research perspective, the interview format offers the following benefits:

1. Private and intimate setting within which to discuss the topic.
2. One-to-one dynamic enables tracking and focus on one person's experience and feelings.
3. Discussion of the topic can be tailored to the individual participant.
4. Participants' experiences can be compared and contrasted by the researcher as they remain separate from each other. There is little "co-creation" of experience among participants.
5. The setting allows for very close examination of the individual and the experience under study.

The interview approach has the following limitations:

6. Participant experiences remain isolated and separate from each other
7. Interpretations and insights are purely the remit of the researcher – participants are not inspiring each other.
8. Intensity of setting can take participants deeper into experiences and memories than they were anticipating
9. Researcher becomes very involved in the dynamic of the participant but without remit to "process"
10. Variations in participant involvement affects the tone and content of the inquiry from one interview to the next.
11. The participant is going to be working through experiences that are often difficult in one or two meetings.

*"Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first. The spoken or written word always has a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we report or code the answers. Yet interviewing is one of the most common ways in which we try and understand our fellow humans."* (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 697)

A good interview plan will help to contain the process for you and the participants and greatly enhance the richness of your findings. The approach you take to your interviews will arise

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out of your overall research question or hypothesis (Creswell, 2009). Creswell gives the following guidelines as an approach to determining your interview questions:

1. Determine your central question – “what is the broadest question I can ask in the study?” Have no more than 2 central questions. In a phenomenological study on forgiveness the key research question was “*Can you tell us about the time during an important relationship when something happened such that forgiving the other became an issue.*” (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p. 230)
2. Under each central question place between 5 and 7 sub-questions. Sub-questions “*narrow the focus of the study but leave open the questioning.*” (Creswell, 2009, p. 130)
3. The researcher might add an ice-breaker question to open the interview or a “wrap-up” or “summary” question to finish the discussion.
4. Research questions in qualitative research will often open with “how” or “what” but the specific framing of the questions will be influenced by the intention of the method employed. Creswell (2009) gives the following illustrations of intentions:
  - ii. Discover e.g. grounded theory
  - iii. Seek to understand e.g. ethnography
  - iv. Explore a process e.g. case study, heuristics
  - v. Describe the experiences e.g. phenomenology
  - vi. Report the stories e.g. narrative research

Different types of question are used to gather different types of data. Merriam (1988, pp. 78-79), an educational researcher, cites Patton’s (1980) delineation of six basic kinds of question:

- a. Experience/behaviour questions are aimed at eliciting descriptions of experiences, behaviours, actions and activities (e.g. what are some of the memorable experiences you have had as an administrator?)
- b. Opinion/value questions try to find out what people think. They tell us people’s goals, intentions, desires and values (e.g. Why are you a teacher?)
- c. Feeling questions are aimed at understanding emotional responses (e.g. How did you feel when the administration moved you to a different grade level?)
- d. Knowledge questions are aimed at factual

- information (e.g. how many teachers are there in this school?)
- e. Sensory questions determine what sensory stimuli respondents are sensitive to (e.g. why do you like plants in your room?)
  - f. Background/demographic questions are aimed at understanding the respondent's education, previous experience, age, residence etc. (e.g. Will you briefly explain your educational background?)

When you are designing your research the questions might change many times.



## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ARRANGING INTERVIEWS

- **A. Participation Criteria** – The approach you are taking to your topic will influence the type of people you talk to and the way you approach the recruitment and selection of participants. The type of participants you recruit will have the greatest bearing on the nature of the interviews. The following questions might help you narrow down what you are seeking to get from your interviews.
  - 1.. What sort of angle on the experience do you want?
    - do you want to hear about the experience?
    - do you want to observe a phenomenon?
    - do you want someone who has reflected deeply on their own experience and processed it somewhat?
    - do you want narrative that has never been shared before?
  2. What sort of person do you imagine discussing the topic with?
    - do you want people who have experienced something directly or who have worked with the topic in question?
    - do you want people from a certain background or paradigm (e.g. transpersonal or existential)
    - do you want a particular demographic; age, gender, socio-economic, ethnic group etc.?
  3. "It is necessary to locate "excellent" participants to obtain excellent data." (Morse, 2007, p. 231). Morse outlines her qualities for an excellent participant:
 

*"An excellent participant for grounded theory is one who has been through or observed the experience under investigation; they must be willing to participate, and have the time to share the necessary information; and they must be reflective, willing and able to speak*

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*articulately about the experience. Not all of the people who volunteer to participate in your study will have all of the characteristics of an excellent participant.” (ibid.)*

■ **B. Participant Recruitment**

*“In qualitative inquiry, as in many bench sciences, researchers seek the best examples of whatever it is that they are studying. We seek the optimal, rather than the average, experience. By using the worst – or best – cases, the characteristics of the phenomenon or experience we are studying become most obvious, clear, and emerge more quickly and cleanly, than by using cases in which the concepts and experiences are weak or obscured with other noise in the data. Once the phenomena or concepts of interest have been clarified, and the researcher knows what characteristics to look for, then the average or poorer, less optimal examples can then be examined, if necessary, later in the study. ...Qualitative samples should always include processes of purposeful selection according to specific parameters identified in the study, rather than processes of random selection...” (Morse, 2007, p. 234)*

■ **C. Conditions and setting for interviews**

1. Define the parameters for the interview – length of time, location, cancellation procedure
2. Be clear with self and others about what you intend to cover and what sort of questions can be expected
3. Be clear about any preparatory work required.
4. Create a clear letter of agreement for interviewees detailing process, rights of withdrawal, follow-up procedures etc.
5. Make arrangements for counselling support for participants who may have issues arising as a result of the interview
6. Find a neutral location for the interview and consider the environment and atmosphere you want to provide

■ **D. Treatment of people and material**

1. Experiences are the stuff of Being and the sharing of them is a profound act. Respect is appropriate at all stages of the interview process. In meeting another you meet your self.

*“The Thou meets me through grace – it is not found by my seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being. The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it...The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency,*

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*nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou. All real living is meeting.” (Buber, 1958, p. 17)*

2. Even once interviews are completed, responsibility for the material and the experiences you are entrusted with continues. Pay attention to how you treat recordings, transcripts, drafts.
3. Consider how you discuss your interviews and your process of research. Confidentiality is not just for the participant’s sake – it serves you to incubate your experiences. Chewing them over loosely in informal settings will lessen the transformative potential of the process.



## PLANNING AND CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

■ A. *You will plan the structure of your interview ahead of time. The more thought you can give to this process, the more conscious you will make your inquiry and its motivations. The interview process reveals as much about Self as it does about the Other:*

- 2 Will you have a screening interviewing where you determine whether an applicant meets your criteria for participation? Will you ask for any background information?

- 3 Will you require any preparation by the participant; narrative, artwork, dreams etc.

*“[The participants] were all required to write a description of their experience in the following way: 1) to recall a specific time when they were silent for a period of four or more days ; 2) to describe how they felt during that period; 3) to try to describe their feelings just as they were, so that someone reading the report would know what that was like for them; 4) to keep their focus on the experience itself; and 5) to not stop until they felt they had described their feelings completely, taking as long as they needed to complete their description. After reading their written descriptions, or protocols, to acquire a beginning understand of their experience, I proceeded with the “walk-through” interview.” (Marcandontatou, 1998, p. 312)*

- 4 Will your interview be structured, semi-structured or unstructured?
  - a. **Structured**; all participants have same pre-established questions, there is little room for variation in response (questionnaire-style), the approach to coding responses is determined beforehand, all questions asked in same language and sequence, no detailed



explanations of the study, no agreement or disagreement indicated by the interviewer, no interpretation of meaning given by the interviewer, no improvisation of questions of wording changes. (Fontana & Frey, 2005)

- b. **Semi-structured**; *“A well-organised plan, built around the central questions and issues that the interviewer wishes to explore, is a most important tool in a semi-structured interview. The interviewer should have these written on paper but they should also be printed indelibly in his or her mind. In this way the interviewer can take advantage of the situation when the respondent spontaneously drifts off into addressing a scheduled but as yet unasked question. It is extremely important to be able to take advantage of the respondent’s spontaneity rather than stifling it to keep the interview on track...A well-articulated interview plan can afford the researcher this flexibility.”* (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 90)

- c. **Unstructured**; open-ended and in-depth (ethnographic) approach as opposed to participant observation on the other end of the scale.

e.g. *“Presently she smiled, pressed her hand to her chest, and said: “Tsetchwe.” It was her name. “Elizabeth,” I said, pointing to myself. “Nisabe,” she answered. ...Then, having surely suspected that I was a woman, she put her hand on my breast gravely, and finding out that I was, she touched her own breast. Many Bushmen do this; to them all Europeans look alike.”* (Spradley, 1979, pp. 3-4)

This last approach considers primarily how to “get in” to the participant’s experience, understand the language and culture of the participant, how to present oneself, how to gain trust, how to establish rapport etc. (Fontana & Frey, 2005)

- 5 Will the interviews be parallel and independent i.e. each one having the same format and framework, or will they be linear and sequential – each one building on the experiential knowledge arising from the previous ones?
- 6 Will you hold to the question structure you have prepared or will you follow the experience of the participant in the interview?

*“Thus staying firmly and single-mindedly in touch with what it is we are trying to understand at the same time as we open and loosen up our thinking to roam freely defines thinking in the dual modes [rational control and*

irrational free-play].” (Locke, 2007, p. 570)

- 7 Will you give the participant the questions beforehand to consider?
- 8 How much, if any, of your own experience will you share? Will this be a sharing of similar experiences or will you just focus on the participant’s experience?

*“...we used a conversational or dialogic style of interviewing, which encouraged the subjects to participate more. We interviewed in a very informal manner, and at times we shared more personal information about ourselves than do conventional interviewers. When these free-flowing conversations were transcribed, they were often shared with the respondents. That provided key informants with the opportunity to see how their own speech objectified and represented them. If they did not like their self-representations, they were free to edit their comments...In short, a more open-ended, conversational interviewing style generated more engaged personal narratives and more candid opinions. It also tended to humanize the interviewer and diminish her power and control of the interview process.” (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 223).*

Moustakas (1990) cites Patton’s (1980, pp. 197-198) presentation of 3 basic interviewing approaches:

- a. The *informational conversational interview* that relies on a spontaneous generation of questions in which the co-researcher participates in a natural, unfolding dialogue with the primary investigator.
- b. The *general interview guide* that outlines a set of issues or topics to be explored that might be shared with co-researchers as the interview unfolds, thus focusing on common information to be sought from all co-researchers.
- c. The *standardised open-ended interview* that consists of carefully worded questions that all research participants will be asked.

Moustakas recommends “the conversational interview” as being “most clearly consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic exploration and search for meaning.” (1990, p. 47).

- B. Even if preparing questions keep them to a minimum. Leave space for the Other to contribute and to follow the flow of the session.
- C. Be conscious of temptations to change your approach one in the interview. As therapists and counsellors you can be aware of unconscious dynamics at work. These will act as forces on you that were not so evidently in play in the planning stages. If you

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make changes to your plans then make a mental note to reflect later on why.

- D. Prepare for your interview; make yourself comfortable with your environment, wear comfortable clothes, check your equipment, perhaps role-play questions with a colleague. Once you arrive, put your participant at ease; explain the process and give information about the study and what will and won't be done with the data. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, pp. 87-88) suggest 5 issues to cover at the beginning of an interview:

1. *The investigator's motives and intentions and the inquiry's purpose*
2. *The protection of respondents through use of pseudonyms*
3. *Who has final say over the study's content*
4. *Payment – if any*
5. *The logistics of time and place and the number of interviews to be scheduled*

- E. Janice Morse (2007) posits the following “excellent” interview skills as central to “obtaining good data”:

1. *...know at what points in the interview to move the participant's narrative from the general to the specific and when to interrupt to ask for more examples.*
2. *...know when to let the participant move forward in the narrative into new areas or when to move back in the interview to obtain more details...*
3. *...establish trust with the participant quickly and early in the interview process...*
4. *...sort the relevant from the less pertinent or irrelevant information while the interview is on-going...*
5. *...the experienced researcher does not lead the participant nor interrupt...*

She goes on to say that the skill of an interviewer can effect the number of interviews required; “the better the data, the fewer interviews will be necessary.” (Morse, 2007, p. 230).

Beyond technique however, naturalness and authenticity are the most crucial ingredients for a “successful” interview and the researcher should rely on his or her sense of what is required in the moment.

*“Being natural is much more convincing than any performance. Acting like an adolescent does not win the confidence of*

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*adolescents, it only makes them suspicious... Deceptive games have no place in the interview setting or elsewhere... The objective is to learn from the interviewee, not to impress the person with how much the questioner already knows about the area... Even a consummate actor is bound to slip during a lengthy interview, and thus undermine all credibility. Being natural is the best protection.” (Fetterman, 1989, p. 56)*

Bringing closure to the interview is an important stage. Erlandson et al. recommend that the interviewer summarise what he or she “understands to be the important part of the interview; give the respondent ample opportunity to clarify or refine aspects that might cause confusion or dissatisfaction; thank the interviewee for his or her co-operation; and follow up the interview with a thank-you note that indicates the value of the respondent’s information.” (1993, p. 94). You might want to ask the interviewee if they feel they have anything they want to add to the interview in order to complete it.

- F. You will encounter all sorts of attachments and aversions during your interview process.. The interview process is an excellent opportunity to make conscious the inherent assumptions and prejudices informing your inquiry. After each interview you could consider:

1. Why do you like one interview more than the other?
2. Why do you like one participant more than another?
3. What do you feel if a participant makes different meaning out of his/her experience?
4. Are there interviews you want to dismiss?
5. When writing up finding are there interviews or sections of interviews you prioritise and others you disregard? Have you explained your reasons for this?

*“We cannot and should not be unaffected by what is said, unless of course we are either not listening or are simply denying what we feel under the false and smug cloak of scientific objectivity... On the contrary it is only in relating to the other as one human being to another that interviewing is really possible...when the interviewer and the participant are both caught up in the phenomenon being discussed.” (Weber, 1986, p. 68)*

- G. Supporting the participant at points in the interview might be helpful – they may be inquiring into memories and experiences they have not visited before.
  1. Help them to understand the importance and intensity of what they are experiencing. Conveying the value you place on the experience will change their internal

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relationship to it.

2. Give them the opportunity to explore any difficult feelings in the interview. These are essential data for your study and by no means to be avoided.
3. Allow time at the end of the interview for the participant to collect him or herself. As a therapist you may be used to sitting with those overwhelmed by feeling but this may be an entirely new experience for your participant.
4. Make arrangements for follow-up support if necessary. Do not attempt to support your own participants outside of a therapeutic setting – the boundary is important.

## **IV** ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. If the respectful approach outlined here is adopted throughout the process then a good ethical standard of interviewing will be met. An ethical checklist is a useful tool however for ensuring one's thoroughness as an ethical researcher:
  - a. Informed consent; make sure to have written out the process of what the participant is agreeing to
  - b. Give options for withdrawal from the study if they wish
  - c. Make clear how they will get feedback on the findings
  - d. Give information regarding protection of identity, confidentiality and right to privacy
  - e. Give information on steps taken to protect the participant from any harm arising from their participation.

A fuller discussion on ethics of inquiry will be covered in your weekend lectures.

## **V** INTERPRETING INTERVIEWS

1. When we undertake interviews within the transpersonal paradigm and relinquish the idea of their being objective and neutral, then we take on the responsibility to be constantly reflexive about what we encounter. Make plenty of notes or memos about what you experience and observe during the interview process –

both inside yourself and with your participants..

2. Account for contradictory data, what data are excluded and why, any improprieties or surprises that arose in the process. (Fontana & Frey, 2005)
3. Once the interviews are complete then the analysis of the data or coding begins. This is the process of making meaning out of the transcripts.

*“A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data... Just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem’s primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence.”* (Saldana, 2010, p. 3)

Coding can go through several stages – each time consolidating the meaning emerging from the verbatim transcript. The phenomenologist Vallelonga describes his process. *“It entailed 1) an explication of what was implicit, 2) a major translation into psychological language (i.e., a further stripping away of details and particulars), 3) a commentary explaining why I was interpreting the text in a particular way, and 4) a series of reflections triggered by the data.”* (1998, p. 131).

Further detail on the ways in which your data will be analysed and findings reported can be found in the texts pertaining to your method or tradition of choice.

## VI DISCUSSION

What are your fears and desires relating to using Others in your inquiry?

What do you think is your natural interview style?

What prejudices and assumptions has this discussion revealed?

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