**Interviewing for Research**

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**Introduction**  
Pages 152 – 159 of *The Research Imagination* (hereafter *TRI*) provide a good, if slightly circumscribed, introduction to interviewing. The authors seem to suggest that interviewing is an appropriate method only in certain circumstances and with certain groups. However, interviewing allows researchers to investigate in detail all aspects of any research project. This method also invites individuals in the context under study to contribute their ideas, their feelings, their hopes and aspirations, and their concerns in their own words in a one-to-one, personal setting. The intimacy of the conversation can, through the trust and commitment *TRI*’s authors mention, elicit rich, precise information.

This handout supplements *TRI*’s introduction with more detail on:

* the kinds of interviews one might undertake in qualitative & action research
* the development of lists of questions and interview strategies that might maximize the information you derive from each interview and allow your interviewees to feel real collaboration in the process
* the creation of an accurate record of each interview in a format that will make your research analysis as straightforward as possible

**Interviewing: “a useful, fascinating and valuable experience”**  
Interviewing constitutes one of the most important research strategies for qualitative research. Thus, each researcher in a project group needs a solid knowledge of its possibilities, even if s/he is not fulfilling the interviewer role in a specific project.

“The thing that I often remind myself when writing question lists and creating research protocols is that this is an enterprise in experience design. As a designer creating and conducting research, I have the opportunity to craft a useful, fascinating and valuable experience for both the participant and myself, in this case, the interview.”

Paula Wellings, Designer

**Types of Interviews**The two main types of interviews used in qualitative research are **unstructured** and **semi-structured** (p. 161) interviews. In an unstructured interview, the conversation between interviewer and interviewee is free-flowing and expansive. The interviewer may guide the conversation to a specific range of topics, but will not limit the range of topics the interviewee wants to discuss, and will be ready to ask supplementary questions that help to move the interview forward in any direction in which the interviewee takes it. An unstructured interview most resembles a conversation. In some contexts, an unstructured interview may take the form of what *TRI*’s authors call **intensive interviewing**.

The advantages of an unstructured interview are its free-flowing nature, which may uncover unfamiliar concepts or perspectives of which the interviewer has no knowledge or experience, and it offers a genuine authority to the experience of the interviewee. Its disadvantages include the time such an open-ended interview might take, and the extensive experience the interviewer needs to orchestrate such an interview. In addition, if several members of a research team are conducting interviews, each interviewer may cover entirely different territory, and thus it will prove very hard to compare data from interviews and draw conclusions. Unstructured interviews, in the context of the RING projects, would prove most productive near the beginning of the project, with a few key stakeholders, when the group is still trying to identify critical areas for research and action.

**Semi-structured interviews** involve the researchers’ developing an interview guide prior to the beginning of the interviewing phase of a project. The guide lists the key questions each interviewer should ask of his/her interviewees, but does not dictate exactly how each interviewer should conduct the interview. It also leaves the interviewer considerable scope to initiate supplementary questions triggered by the interviewees’ responses. However, the guide guarantees that each interviewer will cover roughly the same ground with each interviewee.

Thus, semi-structured interviews work exceptionally well in the wider data collection segment of a research project, where researchers are pursuing the kinds of information that will allow them to design and implement action for transformation. The semi-structured interview also works well when several different interviewers are included in a project, as each person will cover the same territory with interviewees. And, for beginning qualitative reviewers, the interview guide provides a structure that helps to keep conversation with the interviewee lively and moving forward. In the context of the RING projects, semi-structured interviews should provide the most efficient way to collect informative data from a wide range of individuals concerned with your need, issue or problem.

A research group that chooses interviewing as one of its methods, especially when several researchers will be conducting interviews, should also develop a basic script which each interviewer uses to introduce the project. The script should introduce the research project, its sponsor, the individual interviewing, and the method whereby the interview will be recorded (notes, audio, video) if the interviewee is agreeable. *TRI* includes a productive point on p. 163 (bottom of the second column), the terming on an interview as a conversation or discussion.

**Types of Questions***TRI* provides some guidance for questions, but two other authors, Steiner Kvale and Mary Derishwisky, parse the questions for a qualitative research interview slightly differently, and their insights offer ways both to structure and to deepen the interview.

In his book, *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Kvale categorizes questions thus:

* **Introducing questions**:   
  “Can you tell me about….?”, “Do you remember an occasion when…?” “What happened in the episode mentioned?”…
* **Follow-up questions**:   
  Direct questioning of what has just been said, nodding, “mm”, repeating significant words ….
* **Probing questions**:   
  “Could you say something more about that?”, “Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?”, “Do you have further examples of this?”
* **Specifying questions**:   
  “What did you think then?” What did you actually do when you felt a mounting anxiety?”, “How did your body react?”…
* **Direct questions**:   
  “Have you ever received money for good grades? When you mention competition, do you then think of a sportsmanlike or a destructive competition?”
* **Indirect questions**:   
  Projective questions such as ‘How do you believe other pupils regard the competition of grades?”
* **Structuring questions**:   
  Indicating when a theme is exhausted by breaking off long irrelevant answers: “I would now like to introduce another topic:…”
* **Silence**:   
  By allowing pauses the interviewees have ample time to associate and reflect and break the silence themselves. With significant information.
* **Interpreting questions**:   
  “You then mean that….?” “Is it correct that you feel that…?”Does the expression…. cover what you have just expressed?” (Kvale p. 133-135)

Mary Derishwisky, Professor in the College of Education at Northern Arizona University, in an electronic textbook for students, provides guidance to prospective interviewers by framing potential questions thus:

* **Experience/ Behavior Questions**:   
  These deal with *subjects' actions* - be they past, present or future. Through such questions, *you'd be getting the subjects to describe activities, decisions, behaviors, etc., that would actually be observable*. In evaluation research, for example, these might relate to a program. "If I followed you through a typical day [of Program/Activity X], what would I have seen you doing?" These types of questions, by the way, are sometimes called "*simulation*" questions. The idea is to simulate the types, nature, sequence, etc. of actual behaviors or activities.
* **Opinion/ Belief Questions:**   
  These questions are aimed at *understanding subjects' 'world-views' of things*, as alluded to on pg. 1 of this lesson packet. *How do they cognitively structure their reality*? Anytime you see "keywords" such as the following, you can be sure you have an opinion/belief question: "What is your *opinion* of [...]?" "What do you *think* about [...]?" "What do you *believe* about [...]?" As a cautionary note, these are sometimes confused with the next two categories: *feeling* and *knowledge* questions.
* **Feeling Questions**:   
  Unlike *beliefs*, which deal with "*cognitive* subjectivity," *feeling* questions deal with "*affective* subjectivity." Here you are *tapping into subjects' emotional responses* - i.e., feelings of happiness, fear, anxiety, confidence, and the like.
* **Knowledge Questions**:   
  While *feelings and beliefs* are *subjective*, *knowledge* questions deal with *subjects' factual information*. *What things does the respondent know about [...]*? Knowledge of a social program may consist of: what services are available, who is eligible, how long people spend in the program, rules and regulations, enrollment procedures, and the like.
* **Sensory Questions**:   
  These are just what they sound like! They deal with *what is heard, touched, seen, tasted, or smelled*. Example: "When you walk through the doors of your mother's house, what do you see?" "What do you hear the counselor saying to you at the beginning of each session?"
* **Background/ Demographic Questions**:   
  These are the standard items that *describe subjects' identifying characteristics*. They may include *age, educational level, annual income, time enrolled in the current program, and place of residence*. At first glance, they may appear to also be knowledge (factual) questions. In a sense, this is true: but they relate to a particular subtype of "facts:" those pertaining directly to the subject.   
  (The above section is a direct quotation from the electronic textbook: <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~mid/edr725/class/interviewing/introduction/reading4-1-1.html>)

**Silence**Note especially the category of **Silence** in the first set of questionsabove. The skilful management of silence is essential to a successful interview. Most of us abhor silence, and many of us have been trained to fill silence with polite conversational noise. But in an interview, try not to speak immediately when your interviewee falls silent. S/he may have given you the obvious or easy answer to your question: if you remain silent, s/he may amplify or qualify that obvious or easy answer. Or your interviewee may just need some thinking time before s/he continues. It is very hard to remain silent but try to do so.

Similarly, never interrupt interviewees when they are speaking, even if they proffer fascinating information directly relevant to your research which you are desperate to follow up. Instead of speaking, immediately make a quick note of the follow-up question you want to ask. If you interrupt your interviewees, you cut off potential opportunities for discovery.

Be very careful, too, not to talk at any length about your own experiences in an interview, even if you share a common experience with an interviewee. The interview is about the experiences, ideas, suggestions and perspectives of the interviewee. You may want to prompt a reluctant interviewee by talking about your own experience to build rapport. But keep your examples short, and make clear through body language and your questions that your priority is the interviewee.

**Phrasing Your Questions**Only one golden rule exists for phrasing your questions, and the authors above, including *TRI*, all break it. Never ask a question which your interviewee can answer with a simple “Yes” or “No.”

For example, if you are trying to elicit information from your interviewee about the time when s/he became homeless, don’t ask, “Can you tell me about the time you first became homeless?” A shy or embarrassed or laconic interviewee could say just “Yes” or “No.” But if you rephrase the question as, “What can you tell me about the time when you first became homeless?” you are inviting your interviewee to share his/her experiences with you, and are more likely to stimulate a longer, more informative answer. Start questions with words like **what** and **how**, or phrases like **to what extent…** or **tell me more about…**

Finally, keep your questions short and clear. A convoluted question may confuse your interviewee, or make him/her feel inadequate or patronized or lead him/her to suspect you of crafting a “trick” question. As an interviewer, you should not be showing off how clever you are. Note especially *TRI*’s warning (p. 168) about questions which may seem aggressive or labeling to an interviewee.

**Keeping a Record of the Interview**

The ideal record of an interview is an audio or video recording. With audio, you can hear an interviewee’s tone of voice, the moments when s/he hesitates, etc. With the addition of video, you can see individuals’ expressions, and analyze their body language. However, many individuals are very nervous of video recording (fears of an embarrassing appearance on YouTube haunt all of us now), and the discomfort caused by a video camera may compromise the quality of your interview, especially if you are discussing sensitive issues.

Audio recording is much less intrusive, and many of us already use daily devices capable of audio recording. Most iPods and .mp3 players have recording capabilities (although you may need to plug in an external microphone). You can also borrow audio recorders from the Student Technology Assistance and Resource Center in the Johnson Center., or set up a laptop or smart phone to record an interview. You can also simply record audio alone with a video camera. If you wish to make an audio or video recording of an interview, you must obtain your interviewee’s specific consent to the recording. You should also make sure that you can reassure interviewees that you will honor the confidentiality of the research process, and protect any recordings you make from exposure.

If you cannot record your interviews, then you must keep detailed notes of each interview. Try to record in your notes the specific words and phrases the interviewee uses rather than translating their ideas into your own phrases. As a researcher, you need to be able to reproduce the unique content and spirit of each interview. The danger of taking notes is that the interviewer will reduce all the interviews s/he conducts into a homogenous mush.

**Sampling**Chapter 6, pp, 102 – 120 of *TRI* covers very clearly professional approaches to sampling. As interviewing is a qualitative method of research, pay detailed attention to pp. 112 – 118 in developing your interview sample. For example, if several different groups are stakeholders in a specific arena, you should make sure that you not only interview individuals from each group, but also that you interview a representative sample of individuals from each group. If 90% of those whose views you are researching belong to group A, and 10% to group B, then you will not study a representative sample of the total group if you interview 1 person from group A and 6 people from group B. Snowball sampling (pp. 117 -8) is a very productive way of sampling when you are conducting interviews. Never close your interview without asking, “Who else do you think I really need to talk to about this?” or words to that effect.

**When to Interview**

In addition to the contexts recommended in *TRI*, a program of interviewing is a particularly effective research method when

* researchers are unsure or ignorant of key issues, opinions, perspectives and needs within the group/organization/neighborhood/population they are studying
* survey or focus group data does not provide sufficient information about **why** individuals speak, think or act in specific ways
* survey or focus group data does not provide sufficient information about **how** individual opinion and circumstance translates into action
* individuals might be tempted to conform to what the survey researcher wants or to the opinion or view of the majority in a public context
* researchers need to explore in depth emotional or psychological aspects of individual behavior
* researchers need to explore such sensitive issues that trust and personal connection are essential
* no other method provides the depth of detail and nuance the research requires