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Conducting research interviews

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to draw on experience in supervising new researchers and the advice of other writers, to offer novice researchers, such as those engaged in study for a thesis, a pragmatic introduction to conducting research interviews.

Design/methodology/approach – After a brief introduction, the paper is organized into three main sections: designing and planning interviews, conducting interviews, and making sense of interview data. Within these sections, 11 questions often asked by novice researchers are posed and answered.

Findings – Novice interviewers need to conduct some research interviews in order to start to develop their skills in the craft of interviewing. This paper is designed to give novice interviewers the advice and support that they need before starting on this journey.

Originality/value – Other research methods texts offer advice on research interviews, but their advice is not tailored specifically to new researchers engaged in research for a thesis. They tend to offer options, but provide limited guidance on making crucial decisions in interview planning, design, conduct, and data analysis.

Keywords Research work, Research methods, Interviews, Research interviews, Qualitative research, Qualitative data analysis

Paper type Conceptual paper

> When the person of the researcher becomes the main research instrument, the competence and craftsmanship – the skills, sensitivity and knowledge – of the researcher become essential for the quality of the knowledge produced (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008, p. 84).

1. Introduction

Many novice researchers in business and management and other areas of the social sciences decide upon interviews as a means of collecting data. By interviews, we mean face-to-face verbal exchanges in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to acquire information from and gain an understanding of another person, the interviewee. The interviewee may be invited to talk about their own attitudes, beliefs, behaviours or experiences, as a citizen, user, consumer or employee. In research in organizational studies, management and business, the interviewee may be selected either as an individual or as a representative of their team, organization, or industry.

If you are new to research, and possibly engaging in research to complete a thesis or other small scale project, and are planning to use interviews as a research method, this article is written for you – in other words it helps you to think about the decisions that you need to make in designing interviews, and supports you with conducting the interviews, and analyzing the data that you gather from interviews. Along the way it provides answers to some of the questions that new researchers frequently ask. Whilst its emphasis is on helping you to do rigorous research and to succeed and maybe even excel, it is also pragmatic in recognizing the time and other constraints often experienced by new researchers.

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There are many other sources of advice on conducting research interviews which you could also consult. First, there are many research methods textbooks that offer a basic grounding in research methods (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Cresswell, 2008; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Saunders *et al.*, 2009); since these books have a wide scope, they only provide limited information on research interviews as a data collection method. Amongst such texts there are some that deal specifically with qualitative methods – these often give useful details on the use of interviews with different research strategies, such as ethnography and case study (Cresswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2010). Finally, there are a number of texts devoted specifically to interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008; Roulston, 2010), which are very valuable but can be a little daunting for the novice interviewer who is seeking a relatively quick and pragmatic approach to conducting interviews and analyzing interview data. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) suggest, learning the craft of research interviewing is only achieved by learning a little about the process from texts and other advice, getting out there and doing a few interviews, and then reflecting on the process, and revisiting the texts. This article is designed to help the novice interviewer towards a position where they are prepared and confident to conduct their first few interviews.

This article starts with discussion of a number of questions that are associated with the design and planning of the interview process, and then moves on to consider aspects of conducting interviews, and finally, concludes with some thoughts on making sense of the data and writing up a findings chapter.

2. Designing and planning interviews

Q1. Why should I choose interviews for my research?

Interviews are generally used in conducting qualitative research, in which the researcher is interested in collecting "facts", or gaining insights into or understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, or predictions. For example, in conducting interviews with members of a social network site in order to ascertain the reasons for their membership of the site, and the benefits that they perceive themselves to derive from membership of the site, the interviewer might be seeking "facts" like how often they visited the site, opinions on the benefits of the site, stories of any particularly negative or positive experiences, and the interviewee's predictions as to the future for social networking sites. Interviews can be conducted either with one person, individual interviews, or with a group of people, focus groups. In this article the focus is on individual interviews in which the interviewer interviews one person at a time.

Although there are many different approaches to collecting data with which interviews can be compared, a common consideration for novice researchers is whether to choose between interviews or questionnaires. The big advantage of questionnaires is that it is easier to get responses from a large number of people, and the data gathered may therefore be seen to generate findings that are more generalisable. For example, if, say 400 students were surveyed on the factors that affected their choice of mobile phone service provider, provided that the sample has been drawn appropriately and the data is satisfactory in other senses, then this study would have the potential to be generalisable to other members of the same student population. If, on the other hand, instead of using questionnaires, the researcher had opted to conduct interviews, time constraints would dictate that they collect data from rather fewer students, say, 20. With only responses from 20 students we would feel a lot less confident that the data collected would

necessarily support generalization to the rest of the specific student population. On the other hand, if these interviews have been appropriately designed and the interviewees appropriately selected, they give may have potential to generate a range of insights and understandings that might be useful, to say, mobile service providers.

In other circumstances where it is possible to identify some people who are in key positions to understand a situation, such as, say, the managers responsible for implementing a corporate social responsibility policy in a specific brand of a retail chain, interviews might not only be preferable to questionnaires because they provide more details and insights, but also because the key informants are unlikely to take time to fill in questionnaires.

Q2. Which type of interview is best?

Interviews are often classified on the basis of their level of "structure". At one end of the spectrum are structured interviews in which quite a few questions are asked, generally answers expected are relatively short, and the questions are posed in the same order with every interviewee. Structured interviews can be quite similar to questionnaires, except that instead of leaving the respondent to complete and return the questionnaire at their own leisure, the interviewee poses the questions; this is one way of increasing response rate when postal or online questionnaires do not elicit a sufficient response rate. At the other end of the spectrum are unstructured interviews. In unstructured interviews, the interview is based on a limited number of topics or issues or prompts, with the emphasis very much being on encouraging the respondent to talk around a theme; in addition, the interviewer may adapt their questions and their order in accordance with what the interviewee says (Bryman, 2001). Such interviews require skill and experience to conduct, and may generate a series of interview transcripts that are difficult to compare and integrate. The most common type of interview is the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews take on a variety of different forms, with varying numbers of questions, and varying degrees of adaptation of questions and question order to accommodate the interviewee. However, for a novice researcher, a semi-structured interview based on an interview schedule that centres on around six to 12 well chosen and well-phrased questions to be delivered mostly in a set order, but with some flexibility in the questions asked, the extent of probing, and question order, is a good starting point. Each question may have two to four sub-questions or prompts, which are used by the interviewer if they are necessary to ensure that the interviewee explores the main question sufficiently.

On this basis, it becomes evident that one of the big advantages of using interviews is that whilst data collection (interviewing) might be more demanding than distributing, say, online questionnaires, designing an interview schedule, is much easier, and requires much less pre-knowledge than designing a well constructed questionnaire.

In summary then, interviews are useful when:

- The research objectives centre on understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes.
- There is insufficient known about the subject to be able to draft a questionnaire.
- The potential interviewees might be more receptive to an interview than other data gathering approaches.

Q3. How do I decide the questions to ask?
It goes without saying that the questions in the interviews are designed to generate data that is intended to answer your research questions. On the other hand, the questions posed to interviewees may not exactly match your research questions – they need to be adapted to the intended participants and they need to encourage interviewees to talk around a topic. So, in some senses, the origin of the research questions influences the choice of interview questions. Both research and interview questions can be informed by practice or experience, or by theory or previous research, or, as is common with research in practitioner disciplines, a mix of both. Research that is informed by previous theory and research is described as inductive. With inductive research, theory is a significant factor in determining the research questions, and indeed, it may be possible to use interview schedules in two or three published research articles as the basis for the interview schedule for your research. Provided that their sources are acknowledged, and the questions are adapted to your specific research question, this is not cheating – it rather makes it easier to compare your research with previous research and to make a clear claim about what is new in your findings. Deductive research is where the researcher deduces theory from the data that they have gathered; interview questions are likely to be generated based on experience or practice. Purely deductive research is difficult to conduct, analyse, and write up and new researchers should take this into account I choosing their approach. On the other hand, many studies are inductive/deductive, being informed by both theory and practice.

Q4. How long should the interviews be? And, how many interviews do I need to conduct?
These two questions are very commonly posed by new researchers, and the answers to both go hand in hand. There are two approaches to answering both of these questions: the theoretical, and the pragmatic. Dealing with the theoretical approach first, the length of the interview as well as the number that you need to conduct depend on the nature of your research questions, and your research strategy. For example, an in-depth ethnographic study in which sensitive and personal issues are being explored might require longer, and less structured interviews, and possibly fewer interviews than say, a survey-type study into the impact of technology on working practices.

Switching to the pragmatic approach, it is important to take into account both the length of time that interviewees are willing to make available for the interview, and the number of willing participants that can be identified. It is also important to, as far as possible, interview a sufficient number of people so that people with different roles, experience, backgrounds, and any other source of variability that might influence answers are included in the study. Finally, the new researcher needs to take into account their time resources (for both conducting interviews and analyzing interview data) and their ability to sustain effectiveness over longer interviews. Generally, then, taking all of these factors into account, a good rule-of-thumb for new researchers is to aim for around 12 interviews of approximately 30 minutes in length, or the equivalent, such as six to eight interviews of around one hour. For a more extended study, more interviews can be conducted as a second phase, if necessary. A key criterion is that the interviews must generate sufficient interesting findings. Careful decisions on the length and number of interviews should avoid "drowning in a sea of data" – remember if you collect data, you will be obliged to analyse it!

Finally, the researcher must be prepared to adapt to circumstances. This means being prepared, for instance, to allocate a slightly longer time slot to allow for eventualities such as the interviewee being late, interruptions, or other good grounds to continue the interview beyond the anticipated time. Sometimes it will become apparent after initial data analysis that it is necessary to conduct additional interviews, or on occasions make use of follow-up interviews to clarify or extend data gathered from initial interviews.

Q5. How do I select and enlist potential interviewees?

The findings of your research depend critically upon your selection of interviewees. When writing up your research it is normal to provide a basic profile of interviewees, in terms, of say, job role, qualifications, experience, gender, and other criteria that might be important to the study. For example, in a study of the personal information management behaviours of undergraduate students, such a profile might show the year of study, gender, age, and degree subject for each interviewee. Such a profile is a necessary part of demonstrating that the interviewees have the "authority" or the knowledge to offer useful insights and comments on the research topic. For example, in a study to explore the purchasing processes associated with specialist financial analysis software, it will be important to speak to those in the purchasing organizations who make the purchasing decisions. So, the first question in selecting potential interviewees is "who is in a position to answer my questions or to provide the insights that I seek?" Silverman (2010) describes this as "purposive sampling" in which respondents are selected on the basis of the groups that your research addresses.

The next consideration is access to potential interviewees. In simple terms this depends on two key factors: their willingness and availability; and, your ability to visit an agreed location for interview, which may often be selected to suit the convenience of the interviewee. Assume that all potential interviewees are busy people (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). If they are going to give you some of their time, they will want to feel, at the very least that they will not be inconvenienced, embarrassed, or expected to reveal something that they regard as confidential. They will probably make a very fast decision on the basis of your initial approach regarding whether they are willing to talk to you or not. So, the quality of any initial e-mail, telephone call, or letter is key. It is important to:

- Indicate who you are (including the university and course that you are attending) and why you are conducting this research.
- Capture the interest of the potential interviewee, with a brief explanation of your research, and if appropriate send them the interview schedule.
- Be clear as to the amount of their time that the interview will take.
- Ask their permission to record the interview.
- Assure them of confidentiality.
- Provide any details regarding benefits to them, such as a summary of your research.
- Give your contact details, and invite them to indicate their availability over the next, say, two weeks, remembering that they may be away from the office when you first try to contact them.
- Follow-up if your initial contact does not provoke a response.

Once you have enlisted your first few interviewees, snowballing, the process of "gathering" interviewees, by asking initial contacts or interviewees to recommend other potential interviewees, can be very useful. Finding willing participants is often one of the most difficult and time-consuming elements of your research – allow plenty of time for it.

Finally, if you have difficulty getting potential interviewees to agree to a face-to-face interview consider telephone, Skype, or even e-mail interviews. Telephone and Skype interviews save a lot of traveling time relative to personal interviews, and possibility remove some potential interviewer bias (Bryman, 2001), but something of the rapport and richness of the interaction may be lost. A final option, which may be preferred by some participants since they can provide the information at their leisure, is an e-mail interview, in which the "interviewee" completes an interview schedule and sends it back by e-mail to the researcher. This process is similar to using questionnaire, except that in this case all of the questions are open questions; e-mailing the interview schedule and has all of the limitations of questionnaires, but might be considered as a last resort.

3. Conducting interviews

Q6. How do I ensure that the interviewees "understand" my questions?

This is an ongoing consideration, and something that you need to continue to reflect on even as you analyze your data. But, the starting point is to examine your questions carefully for "jargon" that the interviewee might not understand. For example, in the field of innovation, there is a concept "paradigm innovation"; it is unlikely that the interviewee will be acquainted with the "academic" term "paradigm" so asking whether an interviewee's organization engages with paradigm innovation, is likely to confuse. Instead questions need to be designed to cover this concept, without actually using the term. In addition, questions should be checked to ensure that they:

- are not leading or have implicit assumptions;
- do not include two questions in one;
- do not invite "yes/no" answers;
- are not too vague or general; and
- are not, in any sense, invasive.

Also, consider the order of the questions carefully. The order should be as self-evident as possible, and lead naturally to the conclusion of the interview. Often earlier questions set the context for later questions. So, for example, if in a study on trust in teams, the first question asks "what do you understand by trust in a team context?", this has "keyed in" the interviewee to their thoughts on the nature of trust, and this will inform their answers to subsequent questions. And, finally, be absolutely sure that all questions asked are relevant to the research topic.

The next step is to conduct a pilot survey. A preliminary pilot just to check that the questions make sense can be conducted with friends and colleagues, but at least one pilot interview should also be conducted with a member of the interview group that you are targeting (e.g. academic librarians, brand managers). Make any necessary changes that emerge from this pilot testing.

Q7. How do I get the conversation going?

As Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) suggest an interview is a conversation, and it is very important to remember this, both during the interview, and later when you are analyzing the interview data. Both participants will experience and interpret the conversation differently depending on their previous experience and background, personality, and purpose in participating in the interview. On the positive side, the interviewee may welcome the opportunity to reflect on and talk about a topic in which they are interested, and they may recognize that they will learn something useful from this process. If you are prepared to give them a summary report of findings from a series of interviews this might also be of value to them in learning, and, in a work context, possibly adapting their practice. On the down side, they may be pressed for time, bored with your topic, or feel threatened by being asked questions about something they think they should know more about than they do. Reflect on this and adapt your questioning as the interview progresses.

So, how would you normally get a conversation started with someone that you may not know? To get the interview started, introduce yourself, and introduce your research. Briefly explain why you are doing this research, and why it is of interest to practitioners/consumers/managers as appropriate. Also indicate the anticipated length of the interview, and assure the interviewee that anything they say will be treated as confidential, ask their permission to record the interview, and remind them that if they do not wish to answer any question, they may decline to do so. Now move into asking your questions.

As the interview progresses, you are responsible for managing the interview. Try to keep to time, with a view to getting answers to all of your questions. Gently move the interviewee on, or offer prompts to encourage them to elaborate if necessary.

Q8. How can I get the interviewee fully engaged in the interview process?

Engagement starts with the choice of your research aim and objectives; if at all possible choose a research topic that the interviewees are likely to find interesting and relevant to their life or work. Then, make sure the questions give scope for expressing their opinions or discussing their experiences. One of the biggest assets that an interviewer has is that people generally like giving their opinions or talking about themselves (provided the questions do not stray into areas that they regard as sensitive or confidential).

Prompts under each question can help the interviewer to keep the interview moving forward. Other techniques to prompt, include silence, repeating the question, and the use of words such as why, what, how, and who (as in why did that happen?, what happened next?, how did you deal with that?, and who were the main players?).

There are also specific techniques that you can embed in your interviews that engage the interviewee in a task. Such tasks encourage the interviewee to reflect further, as they "talk aloud" about the task, and they also have the significant benefit for the novice interviewer of taking the interviewee's attention away from the direct interaction with the interviewer. Card-based games are a simple technique for engaging the interviewee. Words indicating the topic for discussion are written on cards. At the simplest level the cards may be used as prompts, as the interviewee is asked to talk about the theme on each card in turn. But, there are many variations on this technique; the options available depend on the research. If, for instance,

the researcher is interested in the innovation processes conducted in an organization, the cards might contain the name of each possible stage. With all cards on the table, the interviewee could be asked to first remove any stages that they do not use, and then to organize the remaining stages in sequence. If the research is seeking to explore the factors that affect willingness to share information with colleagues, interviewees might be asked to place the cards (factors) in priority order, and to explain why that have ordered the cards in that sequence (Rowley *et al.*, 2012). Whilst the outcome of the task, such as a priority order, might in itself be of interest, the primary objective of this type of exercise is to encourage the interviewee to reflect and talk. Other tasks, such as: the completion of short self-tests or other inventories appropriate to the topic can also be used to provoke reflection (perhaps for research on motivation, leadership, customer satisfaction); or images used in either association tasks (often used in branding research) or to understand how people interpret a situation. In other words, be creative!

4. Making sense of the interview data

Q9. How do I get started on analyzing the data?

As soon as possible after the interview has been conducted, the interviewer should listen to the interview recording, and take time to think about what the interviewee has said. They should make notes on the important points from the interview, and on any practical details that might affect subsequent interviews. As the interviewer listens to the recordings of the interviews one after another they will start to become familiar with the various key points being made by the respondents, and start to understand their various perspectives. This familiarization process continues with transcription of the data. Best practice is to listen to the recordings and transcribe them verbatim into text form, in preparation for further analysis. However, this can be extremely time-consuming. Silverman (2010) recommends that researchers first transcribe a few interviews in detail, analyse these, and then decide how many and which of the remaining interviews need detailed transcription.

Completed transcripts should also be sent to any interviewees that have agreed to check them, to give the interviewee the opportunity to correct and approve the transcripts. If this is not feasible, the researcher may follow-up with some quick conversations with interviewees to clarify key points, if necessary.

Q10. What is the best way to analyse the data?

Cresswell's (2007, p. 150) comment on the analysis process associated with qualitative data is particularly apt:

> [. . .] one enters with data of text or images [. . .] and exits with an account or narrative. In between the researcher touches on several facets of analysis and circles around and around.

He also makes another very salient point when he observes, following Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 150), that:

> Data analysis is not off-the shelf; rather it is custom-built, revised and "choreographed".

Cresswell (2007) also suggests that data analysis is a spiral (in other words you may go round more than once before you reach the centre of the spiral!). Together, these factors suggest that there is no universal recipe for success, which tends to mean that data analysis can be a confusing and daunting process.

Nevertheless, to get started, there is a general agreement, that there are a number of key components of data analysis, and whilst some iteration may be expected, with good management and fortune this may be focused on the final two components. These components are: organizing the data set; getting acquainted with the data; classifying, coding, and interpreting the data; and, presenting and writing up the data. The first three of these components are dealt with under this question, whilst the fourth forms the subject of Q.11. As designed below, there is an assumption that you will b conducting thematic analysis. In other words, you are trying to surface and link key themes that emerge from the research into a coherent narrative – you are focusing on meaning. There are also other approaches to analyzing interview data, based on language and the way in which people express their ideas and experiences, and on prior theoretical frameworks (see Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) for more details).

However, before these components are discussed in more detail, a few words on the use of computer software for the analysis of interview data is warranted. Computer software, such as *nVivo* can be extremely useful in facilitating the analysis of interview transcripts. Such software may allow the researcher to annotate the text, code the text, search for keywords, and organize the text. The most common use of such software is, using codes allocated by the researcher, to collocate all of the text relating to a specific code. In short, computer software helps the researcher to manage the data, but for the novice researcher it is another thing to learn, and, any case, with smaller data sets many researchers prefer to work with Word documents, moving the text around themselves, of even with paper and market pens. Whichever approach you choose, the basic process is very similar.

Organizing the data set. The first thing to do is to enter the transcripts into a database with appropriate structure. This may be as simple as creating a sub-directory containing a Word file for each interview, or, if appropriate, re-arranging chunks of text so that all the text relating to the answers to a specific question are in one place (whilst not losing sight of who said what). Interviewee codes are an important initial device for keeping track of everything. Alternatively, as discussed above, you may prefer to load data into a qualitative analysis package.

Getting acquainted with the data. Irrespective of the approach being adopted, there is no substitute for reading, and becoming thoroughly acquainted with the data. Typically, researchers conduct a structured reading, annotating the text for key themes, pivotal observations, or anything else of interest as they read. During this component, you need to start the process of considering the way in which you will ultimately report on your research and, in particular to start thinking about key themes. You should be reflecting on what kind of information you want to identify as key themes – is it "facts", experiences, processes, actions, behaviours, views, influencing factors, interactions, or something else? If you have conducted semi-structured interviews, then the interview questions may be a good basis for key themes.

Classifying, coding and interpreting the data. This component focuses on imposing structure on the data set. First the themes, whether they are emergent form the data or pre-figured (based on the interview questions and/or prior theory) need to be crystallized and finalized; these themes or categories are the main areas in which insights have been generated, and will eventually become the basis of the narrative in the findings chapter. Try to keep the number of "main" themes to six to eight; you may them wish to develop sub-themes within each theme. Themes will need names, or codes; *in Vivo* codes

sometimes used to represent the themes in the words of the interviewees. Once the themes and their codes have been decided, the next task is to code the text using the codes, so that text covering similar themes in different interviews, or in different parts of the same interview can be drawn together and compared, and appropriate understandings of the things that the interviewees have said about a theme (or sub-theme) can emerge, and quotes can be identified to support such insights.

An important aspect of surfacing meaning from the data is the process of interpretation. Qualitative researchers are involved in interpretation as they seek to make sense of the data. In order to reduce potential bias in interpretation, good practice is to invite another researcher to check the classification and coding. Alongside this, the researcher should always be reflecting on their own assumptions, and the potential bias that they might introduce. Further, whilst the positivist researcher may incline to believe that they have uncovered "facts", most qualitative researchers would recognize the inherent subjectivities in their findings, and present them rather as insights, perspectives, and questions for further research.

Q11. How should I write up the interview data in my findings section?

Findings from interviews are usually presented under headings that reflect the main themes that have guided the analysis. These themes must also align with the objectives or research questions. If findings do not align with the research questions, it may be necessary to review, sharpen and adjust the research questions; ultimately, any account of the research, including, for instance a thesis, must be coherent throughout.

Key sub-themes under each main theme should be identified and reported and, typically, illustrated through the use of quotes from individual interviewees. It is important that the quotes match the text, and that quotes are used sparingly. For example, a page full of quotes, with no explanation or accompanying text is not acceptable. In addition, on occasions it is useful to indicate the importance of a given sub-theme, by indicating how many of the respondents agreed with a particular point. For instance, in the context of a study of the evaluation of the impact of e-government, the findings might report: "All except one of the interviewees agreed that citizen engagement in the evaluation process was necessary". Some new researchers wrestle with reporting on themes or sub-themes where interviewees disagree; they are sometime inclined to view disagreement as signifying that there are no clear findings; this is not the case – the divergence of opinions is in itself significant, and should be reported. Finally, presentation of findings can be significantly enhanced by appropriate use of tables (including text, not numbers), diagrams, and other devices that summarise and analyse the data.

5. Conclusion and moving on...

This article has explored the key phases involved in using research interviews, namely, planning and designing research interviews, conducting research interviews, and making sense of the data. Every research is different, so it is not possible in this article to cover every eventuality, but this article should enable novice researchers to achieve success with their first round a of interviews, and along the way to develop skills in setting up professional one-to-one meetings, participating in those meetings, listening, and understanding, and interpreting. However, before concluding our exploration of research interviews, we offer a short coda.

In attempting to offer a general approach to conducting research interviews, this article has ignored the link between research philosophies and strategies and the design, conduct and analysis of interviews. In other words, it has adopted what Silverman (2010) describes as the positivist model of reality, in which the interview process is assumed to give direct access to knowledge that already exists in the mind of the interviewee. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) on the other hand, see an interview as a professional conversation in which knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview is then an:

> [...] inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest (p. 2).

Roulston (2010) develops such distinctions further and elaborates on the difference between the neo-positivist constructions of the interview (which in general guides the approach adopted in this article), the romantic conception of the interview, and the constructionist concept of the interview, as outlined in the following different conceptions of research interviews:

- *Neo-positivist.* The "skilled" interviewer – ask good questions – minimizes "bias" and "research influences" – through taking a "neutral" role – generates "quality" data – produces "valid" findings.
- *Romantic.* The interviewer establishes rapport and empathetic connection with the interviewee – produces intimate conversation between interviewer and interviewee in which the interviewer plays an "active" role – generates interviewee's "self-revelation" and "true confessions" – produces in-depth interpretations of participants' life worlds.
- *Constructionist.* The interviewer and interviewee – co-construct data in unstructured and semi-structured interviews – generating situated accountings and possible ways of talking about research topics by the interviewer and interviewee – researcher produces analyses of how the interviewer and interviewee made sense of the research topic and constructed narratives; research provides understanding of possible ways of discussing topics.

Readers should be able to recognize characteristics of the neo-positivist conception throughout this article. The discussion in this section is included to open their minds to other conceptions of the research interview, and to invite them to consider whether these might be appropriate in their subsequent research.

These different conceptions of research interviews align with different views on the nature of knowledge and how it is generated. For example, the positivist views knowledge about the social world, and being independent of opinions and views, and being based on "facts", in a similar way to the way in which facts can be established in the physical sciences. Social constructionists, on the other hand, regard knowledge and realities as being socially constructed during the interview process, and accordingly, the "knowledge" or understandings and meanings generated, and they way in which they are expressed through narrative are highly dependent on the context in which they were generated.

In addition, the approach adopted in the design of interviews, and especially in the analysis of the data may be dependent on the research strategy or approach adopted. For example, Roulston (2010) and Cresswell (2007), whilst offering overarching frameworks for all types of interview data analysis, variously demonstrate

the differences in the data analysis process associated, respectively, with narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.

Some new researcher might enjoy reflecting more deeply on some of these considerations, but many will prefer to take the more straightforward positivist or neo-positivist approach reflected in this article, to help then through the first stage of learning the craft of research interviewing, but they should continually reflect on the role of both parties in the interview, the power relation between them, and its consequences for what is said, how it is ultimately analysed and the value of any "findings".

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