

INTERVIEWS II: THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

1. THE HUMANISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVIEWER SKILLS

1.1. Foundation of the Humanistic Framework

Research interviews have been portrayed in a variety of different ways, but they can most simply be seen as a conversation between an interviewer and respondent, which sets out to provide data for the former. As such all interviews have their basis in human interaction. An awareness and knowledge of interpersonal skills has been an invaluable asset to the inquiry process, so it seems sensible to use theory which addresses human interaction in order to make sense of the processes involved. The framework offered here is based on the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers, which forms the basis for much contemporary work in human relations and interpersonal skills development. The purpose of this humanistic framework is to raise awareness of the means by which interviewers can move towards influencing the interview interaction in facilitative ways, and mirrors Rogers' pragmatic concerns with understanding and enhancing human interaction. Rogers' argues that there are three fundamental attitudinal qualities in facilitative relationships;

- Realness or genuineness
- Respect, acceptance and trust
- Empathic understanding

These provide a simple yet powerful conceptual framework for researchers to make sense of the wide range of skills required as an interviewer. No matter what research stance is being taken by an inquirer, the success of an interview is influenced by the interpersonal skills of the interviewer. At its most basic, the depth or richness of interaction will almost certainly be influenced detrimentally if the respondent is disaffected by the behavior of the interviewer. However in grounded and constructivist research, the interviewer wishes to:

A) Ground their analysis in respondents own categories or frames of reference;

B) Encourage respondents to explore their own issues rather than simply answer questions reflecting the interviewer's points of interest;

C) Follow a constructivist methodology, where the inquirer believes that new knowledge/theory is formed within the dialectic between researcher and researched, which is enhanced by the expression of both respondent's explicit and tacit meanings, values and beliefs.

Thus, the interpersonal skills of the interviewer become paramount, because of the need to be sensitive to the ways in which respondents construct meaning and move between roles within their discourse. At the same time they need to be conscious of providing a facilitative climate which encourages the respondent to access, reflect on and express tacit, as well as explicit knowledge and meaning. In this situation, it is more likely that an unstructured interview mode will be useful. It is therefore to this form of interview, which relies more heavily on the interpersonal skills of the interviewer, that much of what follows can most usefully be applied.

1.2. A Search for the Truth

Before considering the process of research interviews and the skills of interviewing, we need to raise an important epistemological issue. If researchers are to ground research in respondents own perspectives, we must first ask where their meanings and knowledge reside, and how are they derived? There are basically two answers to this. The traditional that is, scientific, positivistic, survey perspective is that the interviewer mines the knowledge, experiences and feelings of the respondent for the authentic data. Respondents are like vessels containing a body of answers which can be accessed if the interviewer can find the right questions to ask. In this case the literature on interview strategy is primarily concerned with maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows. The interview conversation is thus framed as a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding, or misdirection, a persistent set of problems to be minimized.

Whilst this methodology might be useful in certain contexts, where the focus is on human meaning consider a constructivist standpoint. The constructivist position is that meaning is socially constituted and knowledge is created from the processes used in obtaining it. Interviews are therefore deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge, treasuries of information awaiting excavation as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. This means that both the interviewer and the respondent are actively creating meaning

through the interview interaction. The respondent can be seen as a narrator of a diverse, multifaceted, and emerging resource, rather than the reporter of a series of facts or units of knowledge. The content and process of the story that is told by the narrator is knowledge in the making, and is influenced by both the role in which they perceive themselves and the nature of the audience. In education, a teacher's response to a question may vary depending on whether she sees herself as a classroom teacher, curriculum manager, union representative or indeed as a colleague or mother. It may also vary depending on whether she perceives the audience for her answers as colleagues, managers, the education authority, union or national assessment project and so on. The interviewer therefore needs to surface positioning throughout the interview and bring out the linkages between these roles and the ways in which respondents construct their own perspectives. Respondents can then be encouraged to explore previously unarticulated or unformulated experience which can address knowledge in ways relevant both to the inquiry and their own experience.

In this way we can make sense of the respondent who seems to be offering contradictory statements. In a research study, one senior teacher said, at one point, that his experiences of a training event had provided him with nothing new. Later he appeared enthused about the interpersonal learning which had been involved. This seemed contradictory, until it was realized that the former statement referred to his role as a senior manager and his desire for knowledge of management strategy, whereas the latter comment related to personal that is, nonprofessional learning, which raised his awareness of the importance of emotions in human interaction. That he had not made a linkage between affective responses and management strategy was in itself interesting and led to further reflection. The multiple roles in which people position themselves, means that there are multiple valid perspectives, and the interviewer needs to be sensitive to the shifts between these narrative positions in order to develop the linkages with the ensuing discourse. These can be heard in comments like speaking as a coordinator, if I were in his position and so on. Indeed the interviewer can encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing the possible answers that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. The truth for a constructivist is in the moment of interaction, continually moving and subject to multiple existences and interlinks.

1.3. A Humanistic Framework for Interviewer Skills

Some writers have attempted to show how interviewer effects on respondents can be minimized, usually in an attempt to provide objective data within the context of positivistic or scientific methodologies. The assumption made here is that the interviewer will always affect the interview interaction in some way, if not through conscious or unconscious verbal communication then through body language, social position, race or gender. Indeed research indicates that up to 50% of everything said by survey interviewers is something other than a specified question or probe.

The issue of power and its relationship with race, culture, social position, ability and gender is clearly an important contextual influence on the interview process, and should not be minimized. The presentation of any identity is an activity that must be considered and can, to a degree, be actively manipulated to facilitate talk about relevant subject matters. This is not something to be eliminated or standardized; it is something to be actively used to productively engage respondents in the research task. Although some writers have highlighted problems in Rogers empirical work, much research has demonstrated the utility of humanistic theory in the fields of psychotherapy, counselling, education and management.

In common with all these areas, the research interview relies on the researcher's interpersonal skills and so it seems appropriate to apply humanistic theory to its processes. There are however, clearly differences between therapeutic and research contexts, not least the ongoing nature of therapy and the focus on the clients growth and development. Nevertheless there are also significant similarities which warrant an exploration of common underlying skills. There is a parallel between the therapeutic situation and the unstructured interview. The unstructured interview provides a platform for people to speak their minds in a way and in such detail that rarely occurs to the ordinary person. The interview can become almost therapeutic, because the respondent is provided with a platform for expressing his or her opinions, attitudes and explanations. There are few people in this world who have had the experience of finding someone intelligent, attentive and eager to listen without interruption to all that he or she has to say. Several respondents have commented on how positive they felt about having the opportunity to discuss their professional concerns.

The assumption made here is that the human relations skills of the counsellor or therapist can be utilized productively by research interviewers. A key aspect of

Rogers' theory is that a facilitative relationship is based on the attitudinal qualities that exist between people. These are congruence; empathic understanding; and unconditional positive regard. According to Rogers the following changes (amongst a fuller list) could be observed in clients whose therapists exhibited these three attitudinal qualities:

1. Increasingly express feelings about their lives and problems;
2. Become increasingly accurate in their assessment of the meaning of their feelings;
3. Begin to experience fully, in awareness, feelings that have in the past been denied to awareness or distorted in awareness.

The application of these three points to the interview situation would clearly have benefits for grounded and constructivist methodologies which aim to encourage respondents to explore issues in their own terms and to reflect on tacit and explicit meanings. It is this type of effect that the development of the skills discussed below aims to elicit. To reflect differences between therapeutic and interview contexts, the three key attitudinal qualities quoted earlier have been slightly altered. Rogers himself re-labels the qualities for the contexts of education and management, and in addition, what Rogers calls prizing has been replaced here by the term respect to reflect the interview context, where (in comparison to the other contexts mentioned) there is much less emphasis put on the growth and development of the respondent;

1. Realness or genuineness. The interviewer enters into the interaction with the respondent without presenting front or facade, being fully herself. The interviewer must therefore develop awareness of and be close to her own feelings.

2. Respect, acceptance, trust. The interviewer accepts the respondent's feelings, opinions and person. She has a basic trust in and respect for the respondent's worth as an individual.

3. Empathic understanding. The interviewer nurtures a sensitive awareness of the respondent's perception of the world as they see it, seeking to understand the respondent's world as if standing in their shoes.

On the surface the interview appears to require no more than knowing how to talk and listen, but underneath a range of subtle skills and sensitivities are required. One of the greatest obstacles to overcome in learning to be a skilled qualitative

interviewer is unlearning the bad habits practiced and reinforced in our daily conversations. The unstructured interview is particularly sensitive to the influence of the interviewer, simply because it relies so heavily on their interpersonal skills. Research has set out a number of reasons that interviewers should have superb listening skills and be skillful at personal interaction, question framing, and gentle probing for elaboration. These include;

- the need for cooperation in personal interaction.
- respondents being unwilling or uncomfortable in sharing their perspectives.
- respondents being unaware of recurring patterns in their lives.
- respondents untruthfulness (often for good reasons).
- lack of interviewer familiarity with local language.
- lack of interviewer comprehension of responses.

Some researchers warn against the use of the unstructured interview by inexperienced researchers, and suggests that training or some background in human relations skills is required. Interviewers need to be simultaneously aware of at least four things;

1. who he or she is and what they are about;
2. what they are offering the respondent in terms of support, encouragement and the opportunity for reflection;
3. what the respondent is able and willing to offer in return;
4. how best to receive data whilst promoting meaningful communication.

Points one and three are related to the ways in which both the interviewer and respondent construe their experience, and the importance of this is illustrated in later sections. Some highlight the importance of raising interviewer's awareness of feelings during an interview, and the ways in which these affect the interviewing process. They also point out the impact of transference and countertransference which can result in respondents offering what they think the interviewer wishes to hear, or interviewers according certain aspects of respondent's discourse undue prominence.

All the above points relate to the issue of the rapport between an interviewer and the respondent. We can further define rapport as a basic sense of trust which allows the free flow of information. In the context of the framework offered here, rapport relates to the verbal and nonverbal skills required to demonstrate respect,

acceptance, trust which ultimately facilitate empathic understanding. Practically speaking, if people feel valued then their participation is likely to be enhanced. Rogers' theories about helping skills dominate the practice of counselling and interpersonal skills training, and so it is to these skills (largely synonymous or overlapping with the terms counselling, communication, helping, human relations and social skills) that we now turn to in attempting to develop the framework of interviewer skills which encompass the points made above.