

## **Researcher on the Couch:**

### **Is “Understanding the Self” critical for Qualitative Research?**

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#### **Introduction**

All agree that experienced, well-trained researchers produce better research results. This is true of both quantitative and qualitative research. More specific questions, however, are difficult to answer: What type of training? How much experience? For example, does a researcher merely need to be familiar with interview protocol? Should he apprentice a more experienced researcher? Should he conduct theoretical analysis in advance? Or should he undergo analysis himself?

This paper focuses on training for qualitative research interviews. This topic is equally relevant for field research, and to some extent, quantitative research. However, due to the confines of this paper, I hold myself to the interview. Simply stated, the quality of the knowledge produced in an interview depends on the craftsmanship of the researcher. Researchers conducting qualitative research interviews should possess the competencies of their craft, including solid theoretical foundation, analytical skills, strong communication and interpersonal skills, sensitivity to contextual factors and open-mindedness. This paper argues for another critical competency which has received less attention: “Understanding the Self”. Researchers’ attention is sharply focused on the subject of research (as it should be) but often to the extent of losing focus on the self.

This paper builds on points made by Kvale (2003) in *The Psychoanalytic Interview as Inspiration for Qualitative Research*. In this chapter, he constructs a case for the relevancy of seven key aspects of the psychoanalytic interview in understanding the research situation. (Box 1. The mode of understanding of the psychoanalytic research interview, p. 278). In this paper, I expand upon one of the seven modes, “The human interaction”. In the case of psychoanalytic therapy, the nature of interaction is a critical component: “Psychoanalytic therapy takes place through an emotional human interrelation, with a reciprocal personal involvement. The emotional transference is employed by the therapist as a means to overcome resistance offered to the therapist when attempting to make the patient’s unconscious conscious to him. The psychoanalysts do not seek to eliminate their own feelings towards their patients, but to employ this “counter-transference” in the therapeutic process as a reflected subjectivity” (Ibid.).

Though researchers can learn from therapeutic interviews, we should not try to imitate them. Possessing an awareness of ethical differences is key. For example, certain aspects of the psy-

choanalytic interview are “out of bounds” for researchers. This includes implicit or indirect questioning to get beyond subjects’ defences, emotional interaction between researcher and subject, and interviewer interpretations that challenge subjects’ self-perceptions (Ibid). While I agree with these points, I argue that some effects a researcher has on his subject are within his control while some are not. This paper explores aspects outside researcher control.

Most are aware of extreme examples of personal bias in qualitative research, such as "going native" or being influenced by counter-transference reactions based on yearlong relationships. I argue that smaller dangers lie in more time-limited and impartial research interactions. While they don't serve to invalidate research data, they have impact worthy of consideration. While I don't believe psychoanalysis is necessary for the qualitative researcher, I do believe he has a responsibility to understand himself and how he potentially is impacted by forces outside his awareness.

### **The researcher's self**

Consider this hypothetical example: A young female psychology student decides to do a set of qualitative interviews for her thesis (“speciale”). Her topic is “Everyday Wisdom” among senior executives in international companies. She wants to investigate how international work experience and high status positions influence general world views. Her sample group is middle-aged men. She asks herself before conducting the interviews, “what will it mean to an older man that a young attractive woman is coming to interview him? How will it make him feel? Will it influence his response to my questions?” She considers how to dress for the occasion and where the interview should take place. She is satisfied, having devoted time to consider how the subject may be influenced by her person in researcher role. But what does she fail to consider? She has not considered what it means to HER to conduct this interview. What does she bring to the situation? What projections might she hold about older men in authority? Or unresolved aspects of her own sexuality? Might she sometimes use her femininity to her advantage in extracting desirable tidbits of research-relevant information? What about the impact of her own anxiety over her research inexperience? Or her desire to please men? Or appear competent? Has she asked if it's relevant that her father holds a similar position? What personal questions is she trying to answer by choosing this topic? Or what about the institutions she and the subjects represent? Will the historical relationship between academia and private industry play out in the interview relationship?

In line with constructivist thinking, “it can be maintained that virtually no information about a person, group or social system exists without a relationship with that person or social system” (Berg & Smith, 1988, p. 22). Our knowledge of the world is understood through our eyes based upon our relationships with the world. In the qualitative research interview, the researcher's instrument is himself. As is also the case with psychoanalysis and anthropology, the central research instrument remains the person of the researcher, with his or her specific experience, expertise and perspectivity. In an interview Jean Lave states that “the only instrument that is sufficiently complex to comprehend and learn about human existence is another human. And so what you use is your own life and your experience in the world” (Lave & Kvale, 1995).

Interesting questions follow this line of thinking: What exactly do we mean by our “own life” and our “experiences in the world”? How much of this can we detect in advance? How much appears in process? How much is invisible to our own eyes?

When preparing the research interview, most researchers consider numerous aspects that may impact the subject of investigation: interview context, order of questioning, language, taping apparatus, to mention a few. We as researchers understand external factors influence the nature of the data collected. Are these same factors not true of the researchers themselves? Berg and Smith (1988) respond, “given that we are human beings investigating human beings, it is logical to expect that whatever we conclude about those whom we research will be equally applicable to us, the researchers. Hence if our research teaches us that social relationships influence what we attend to, what falls into our blind spots, and the attributions we make, then it follows that the relationships we are involved in during the research will influence us in similar ways. Instead of affirming which method is right, serious social science asks us to investigate ourselves while we are investigating others ...this places the scrutiny of self in the center stage of social inquiry” (p. 9).

Scrutiny of the self is a prerequisite of psychoanalytic education. Psychoanalysts, unlike researchers, are expected to undergo analysis as part of training. This is because “their capacity to reflect on their own unconscious motivations is deemed essential to therapeutic effectiveness” (Schön, p. 220). According to Freudian theory, the unconscious is understood as the hidden aspect of personality. It’s the aspects we cannot see nor control. It’s the driving power behind our behavior fuelled by instincts, wishes and desires (Schultz and Schultz, 1994). If we allow ourselves to be inspired by psychoanalytic theory, we must also accept that unconscious factors are at play in research relationships whether we know it or not. Because we cannot control these unconscious forces, I argue that “understanding the self” is an important component of researcher training. It is the most effective tool available to us. A researcher should understand what he brings to the interview situation. He should understand how his observations and interpretations are being influenced and how he impacts the interview interaction itself.

### **Two specific examples: Anxiety and Group Memberships**

Berg (1988) in “Anxiety in Research Relationships” claims, research relationships provide “fertile ground” for arousing anxiety for several reasons. First, he explains, the intense dynamic of social science, humans investing humans, forces the researcher to confront personal weaknesses, unconscious conflicts, or current struggles in the development of his personality. Second, research relationships contain transference and counter-transference reactions, like all other human relationships. For example, research relationships have complex authority relations which may give rise to re-enactments of family and parental conflicts. Because this transference is unconscious, anxiety is not easily traced and can be attributed to other events in the research relationship. Third, group identities (such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion) can evoke anxiety in the research interview due to historical relationships between groups. This point is discussed in the second example.

Berg offers a personal example of conducting research in an all-female organization. He discusses conscious considerations of the impact of his gender on the research but only later, after reflection, did he discover more hidden effects. He identified the role of his own sexuality. He found himself attracted to some of the women in the firm which evoked his desire to be liked. He found these feelings to be so unprofessional and anxiety-provoking that he had not admitted to them nor examined them. In retrospect (over a year after the conclusion of the project), he could see that his feelings had influenced who he chose to interview and therefore his perception of the firm. Though the impact was subtle, his own unexamined anxiety had impacted the research findings.

Kram (1988) in "On the Researcher's Group Memberships" seeks to determine how the researcher's personal characteristics shape the research process. Group memberships have been emphasized in work stemming from the Tavistock tradition, evolved from the work of Wilfred R. Bion, using psychoanalytic theory as inspiration for organizational research. The underlying theory is explained: "Categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, social class and age are created through group life, and their formation and definitions are often influenced by unconscious processes. Groups create images of themselves and others and then behave as though properties ascribed to individuals belonging to these groups were somehow inherent in the individuals rather than a product of complex group forces." (website: [http://www.fielding.edu/events/SS02/psy/SS02\\_PSYtavistock.htm](http://www.fielding.edu/events/SS02/psy/SS02_PSYtavistock.htm), Summer 2002). In practice, figuring out the impact of group memberships on qualitative research entails examining: 1) how one's identity shapes one's own perceptions, behavior and reactions; 2) how group memberships affect the research subject's reactions and willingness to respond authentically; 3) how memberships of all participants in the research process affect the nature and quality of data collected; and 4) how the researcher's identity affects interpretation of findings in the conclusion of the study (Kram, 1988).

Kram's own example was her choice to investigate mentoring relationships as a subject for study. Then, in her late 20's, she had been aided by several important relationships with senior colleagues to overcome professional and personal hurdles. Her unconscious motivation (unknown to her at the time) was to better understand these relationships in her own life. Later, in designing the research project, her own group memberships (young, female) influenced those she approached for interview in a large company due to her own comfort level. She approached more junior level rather than senior level employees when establishing initial contact. After completing her study, she noticed, as a white woman, she had not considered the additional impact of race in these relationships. Kram hypothesized that had she been other than white she would not have over-looked this significant dimension. Further, her hypotheses focused on what she perceived as the benefits to the junior member of the mentoring pair due to her own experiences. Kram later interpreted she was too young to appreciate how senior members benefited from mentoring a junior, or specifically, how her mentors had benefited from mentoring her. She concludes that her own group memberships and life experiences influenced her framing of research questions, choice of interview contacts and the data she attended to, or rather, did not attend to.

## Understanding ourselves as researchers

Some interpretational bias can be accounted for in research design. For example, Kvale (1996, 2003) addresses criticisms of qualitative interview data as subjective and offers ways this can be addressed, intensive training of therapists and interviewers can make them aware of their personal experience on the interaction. When reporting the interviews, the documentation, and lines of argumentation for the interpretations put forward, and also the investigator's perspective, can be explicitly stated. The researcher should also critically examine his analysis, describing methods for controlling selective perceptions and biased interpretations. In other words, the researcher should play "devil's advocate to his own findings" (1996, p. 242).

This paper asks the additional question, how does a researcher explicitly state personal experiences or biases that, in the beginning of a study, may be unavailable or inexplicable to him? In other words, what does a researcher do when the devil arrives in disguised form?

Kram (1988) suggests three ways the researcher can control for aspects of the self in the interview process:

- 1) Systematic self-study: keeping a personal journal throughout the research process, including emotional reactions to events and internal thoughts. Self-study can also be enhanced by personal therapy and honest feedback from colleagues.
- 2) Clinical supervision: a one-on-one relationship with a more experienced teacher is an opportunity to enhance self-awareness, relationship and diagnostic skills, and illuminate blind spots or biases. (This point is also emphasized by Schön and Kvale.)
- 3) Creating a research team: colleagues can provide feedback, enhance each other's learning through joint investigation and discussions of data collection and analysis. Diversity within a team enhances awareness of the impact of group memberships.

If "understanding the self" as a researcher is so critical, why isn't everybody doing it? What explains, the novice interviewing in much qualitative research today? In part, barriers are training traditions and conflicting messages about the influence of self in the interview process. Berg and Smith (1988) argue that personal involvement has been viewed in research as bad, illegitimate and unscientific. "Especially when social science trains its fledgling practitioners to believe that good science is interest free, neutral, and dispassionate, it is all too likely that the influence of a researcher's values, prejudices, gender, group affiliations, career interests, and so on will go purposefully unnoticed or unexamined" (p. 27).

Schön (1986) further explains the impact of different views on the meaning of profession: "according to the objectivist view of professional competence as technical expertise, skilled professionals have accurate models of their special objects and powerful techniques for manipulating them to achieve professionally sanctioned ends. The constructionist view of profession leads us to see its practitioners as worldmakers whose armamentarium gives them frames with which to envisage coherence and tools with which to impose their images on situations of their practice. A professional practitioner is, in this view, like an artist, a maker of things"(217-218).

Should qualitative researchers strive to be “good scientists” who neutralize themselves in the human interaction or should we strive to be artists and worldmakers who contribute to science through the very uniqueness of our being; the good, the bad and the ugly? We are left to make our own choices about the appropriate path to follow.

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative interview is a mode of research that leaves numerous choices open to the researcher about how to proceed. As Kvale (1996) argues, “the absence of prescribed sets of rules creates an open-ended field of opportunity for researcher’s skills, knowledge, and intuition. Interviewing is a craft that is closer to art than to standardized social science methods” (p. 84). With an absence of rules, there is a greater responsibility for the researcher to be personally competent. Understanding the self is fulfilment of this responsibility. It’s one of the strongest tools we possess. I argue, a researcher has similar responsibility as a therapist, to understand himself in the human interaction. While we can control many aspects of the self in relation to others, there remain less conscious or unconscious factors outside our awareness. The danger is not the influence of the self in interaction but rather the fear of self-understanding because one may learn something unpleasant. What one doesn’t know about the self effects the subjects of investigation, the data of the investigation, the data analysis, and, ultimately, the results of the investigation.

Psychologists, in the competency area “understanding the self”, should have an advantage over other social scientists by sticking to their own trade, psychologists may find many of the necessary interview tools within their own therapeutic backyard. This includes understanding one’s own influence in the human interaction. Due to the “artistry” of psychoanalysis, its combination of theory, technique, and self-understanding, Schön claims, one cannot be taught psychoanalysis but must learn it for themselves. Viewing the qualitative research interview in similar light, as a combination of theory, technique and self-understanding, we must not expect to be taught but rather embrace the task of learning it for ourselves and learning about ourselves in process.

Returning to the research examples, with increased self-understanding would our psychology student be able to avoid complicated feelings due to transference reactions to her own father? Would Berg feel less anxious in the presence of women he finds attractive? Would Kram be less influenced by her young, white, female group memberships? Probably not. But they would be able to use their own experiences and reactions as part of the research data, as information from which to learn and gain valuable insights, instead of viewing these aspects of self as obstacles to good research results, or worse, as elements to conceal or be apologetic about later on.

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