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Article

## **The Qualitative Research Interview: Participants' Responsive Participation in Knowledge Making**

Mirjam Knapik  
University of Calgary  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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### **Abstract**

Discussions of qualitative research interviews have centered on promoting an ideal interactional style and articulating the researcher behaviors by which this might be realized. Although examining what researchers do in an interview continues to be valuable, this focus obscures the reflexive engagement of all participants in the exchange and the potential for a variety of possible styles of interacting. The author presents her analyses of participants' accounts of past research interviews and explores the implications of this for researchers' orientation to qualitative research interviews.

**Keywords:** research participants, research design

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### **Introduction**

As early as the 1980s, qualitative researchers demonstrated sensitivity to the impact of research interviews on participants (Cowles, 1988; Munhall, 1988). Reacting to the hegemony of standardized measures that were thought to “squelch or deform the localized and personal knowledge of research participants” (Gergen, 2001, p. 21), researchers focused on learning about people's often deeply meaningful and emotionally laden personal experiences. In recognizing the potential vulnerability of persons participating in such projects, early approaches included the development of an ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). Interviews became sites for persons telling their stories to empathic listeners whose projects were framed as having both personal and political emancipatory potential (Gergen, 2001). Brinkman and Kvale (2005) noted that intimate and caring exchanges became widely accepted as the appropriate ideal style of interviewing for research. Furthermore, interviewers were framed as the instruments through which this could be realized (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). It followed that attention

was primarily directed at what researchers said and did. This attention on researchers was also reflected in discussions of participation. The extent to which participants were participating in knowledge making was often construed as a function of what researchers' activities afforded (Macran & Ross, 2002).

Existing articles that have addressed researchers' ethical practices offer valuable data for considering how to go about interviewing for research. In rare cases, articles are inspired by participants' reports on some of the negative aspects of their experiences (Bar-on, 1996; Lieblich, 1996). In other instances, researchers describe the impact on their lives of doing qualitative research (Grafanaki, 1996; McLeod, 1996). Notably, researchers also describe efforts to follow up on their projects by asking participants about the experience of sharing personal narratives for the purpose of research (Grafanaki, 1996; Josselson, 1996; Lieblich, 1996; McLeod, 1996). However, Josselson (1996) noted that when she tried to engage her participants in this way, they felt ambivalent and avoided extensive discussion. When the interviewer subsequently also asks the participant to talk about his or her experiences of the interaction, it is treated as a delicate topic potentially resistant to mutual exploration.

There is, then, a heavy reliance on researchers' personal reflections and an almost exclusive focus on what researchers need to do to manage the research interview. The perspectives reflected in the above mentioned literature would, therefore, be helpfully supplemented by the inclusion of participants' perceptions. For one, the present focus has been critiqued for hindering exploration of a variety of possible ways to engage people in research interviewing (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005). Participants' reflections can serve as a resource for developing alternative styles. A critique further developed here is that selective attention on researchers' activities obscures the spontaneous, embodied, rhetorical responsiveness (Shotter, 1993) of all participants in the exchange. Participants' recollections of their interviews are here a resource for understanding such moment-to-moment participation. Finally, although providing one's interviewer with a reflection on one's experience of the interview might constitute a potentially delicate enterprise, what participants offer as a retrospective to someone not involved in the initial project remains to be seen.

To speak to the critiques, and to address past roadblocks to including participants' reflections, I review here four research participants' accounts of their past experiences of being interviewed for the purpose of research in which I was not involved. All had addressed various themes in their research interviews, including experiences of one's sexuality, experiences of relationships during graduate training, experiences of moving to an area far from home, and various experiences as an Aboriginal child and woman. Although my initial analysis suggested the need to focus on interactions rather than on individuals' actions alone, I did not explore this fully within my original thesis (Knapik, 2003). My analysis sparked an interest in the work of Goffman (1959, 1969, 2001) and Garfinkel (1996, Heritage, 1984), often through the work of others, who drew on these writers in their studies of communicative interactions. I continued to return to the responsive participation reflected in my participants' accounts, and this interest in communicative activities was influential in the present article. I therefore conclude by exploring the implications for how researchers might orient to their own and others' reflexive participation in research interviewing.

### **Research approach**

In this article, I highlight a segment of my analysis of four semistructured interviews with self-selected participants<sup>1</sup> identified here by their self-chosen pseudonyms, Becky, Deke, Charlene, and Tree. All were university students who indicated they were interviewed in the past about personal experiences for the purpose of research. Before their interviews, participants were offered the opportunity either to read the consent form by themselves or to go over it with me. I invited expanded discussions to address their more personal concerns about their participation. All consented to participate in this project and indicated their approval of the early draft of my analyses. I encouraged participants to share whatever they felt was

relevant about their research interview experience and also asked for their commentary about specific ethical dilemmas I had constructed from varied articles on ethics in qualitative research. I contributed to the unfolding accounts through my initial questions (See appendix) and responses throughout the interview. These recollections were told in the context of my asking participants what they remembered noticing about their research interview at the time that was worth remarking on in the present. I indicated my interest in contributing to researchers' debates about best practices.

The recorded interviews lasted about 90 minutes. I transcribed them and sent the transcriptions back to participants for a review of accuracy and completeness. Once they had indicated that these transcripts captured what they wanted to say about the experience, I analyzed them using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. I did not presume to be analyzing some purported original interactions that participants referenced in their accounts to evaluate them. Instead, my focus was on reports of their experience and how they interpreted these. As per van Manen's (1997) guidelines, I read the transcripts repeatedly, articulated my overall sense of each account, identified themes, evaluated the relationship of specific utterances to the various themes, and examined the relationship of themes with each other. I looked for contradictions to the threads I developed and considered what these tensions pointed to.

I forwarded my analysis to all participants and offered to meet again if they wanted to discuss my interpretation. All indicated there was nothing that troubled them about the analysis, 2 expressed appreciation for what it generated for their own ideas, and no additional interviews were requested. In the present article, then, I offer my analysis of 4 persons' recollections of prior experiences of research interviews in response to my guiding questions.

### **Analytic response**

What initially drew my attention were participants' recollections of the many specific moments during which they became aware of and responsive to their unfolding sense of what was happening in the interview. One guiding question that emerged from my reading of the transcripts was what do descriptions of these research participants' experiences say about participation in research? The weight of the word participation increased for me as I immersed myself in these exchanges and sought out various perspectives on dialogue and social interaction. What were participants doing within the back-and-forth of the interview, and at what was this activity directed? My analysis encouraged me to study face-to-face interactions from ethnomethodologically informed discursive perspectives (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Although I do not use a discourse analytic approach here, these orientations are reflected in the present article.

### **Participants' initial orientations**

[I] wanted to see what they were looking at. (Becky)

hmmm, I'm wondering what they are interested in. (Deke)

Oh, I wonder what this is all about? (Charlene)

It brings things to attention, the attention that you tend to fly by on the way to other things.  
(Tree)

Participants described the reason for their earliest participation as their being curious about the topic and the researcher's specific interest; that is, they wondered about the phenomenon as an object that a researcher had marked as worthy of looking at and commenting on. Their person entered the interaction as potentially having the relevant experiences and perspectives to contribute to knowledge on the topic at

hand. However, as will be outlined in more detail, their sense of the research gaze tended to shift in the back-and-forth of the interview.

Participants described their overall orientation to the task at hand as one that would require disclosure about their experiences. However, although they were moved to offer a full and unreserved description, their participation also brought forth issues that called for a more complex management of that initial response. Participants' efforts to sort out what was appropriate to say, and how they might say it, showed some parallels with descriptions from qualitative researchers Duncombe and Jessop (2003), who described attempting to balance what they saw as more abstract political or educational gains from the research with the possible adverse individual consequences for participants. As Parker (2003) described the research context, "There is an array of competing interests and agendas that frame the production of proposals; the expectations and demands of 'subjects' or co-researchers; and the career investments and projected autobiographies that exist in tension in the academic world" (p. 204). Participants described responding to elements that created some tension for them as these became salient from within their interactions with researchers. This included a desire to contribute positively to the quality of the research, sensing that they wanted to set limits on self-disclosure, an awareness of biases and agendas, and a concern over the implications of their story for others.

I want to underscore that I do not understand participants' orientations during the interview as being fully formed and constant, either as an internalized value or as a social imperative, prior to their participation. Neither do I want to give an impression that they invented the forms of their interactions completely anew in response to the moment. Influenced by ideas from ethnomethodology (Heritage, 1984), I read the accounts of their interactions as context shaped in light of their anticipation about research interviewing and their sense of their responsibilities as contributors. However, their accounts also indicated that they shaped the context as they responded to what unfolded. Their descriptions reflected their actively working out how to manage the tensions among the various elements noted above. Furthermore, although the overall orientation to the context might have been "sharing one's story for the purpose of research," their descriptions suggested this context, and the activities by which the context was upheld and changed, had many nuances. As the following section indicates, participants' understanding of what the interaction was about shifted as they attended to what was happening moment-to-moment.

### **Embodied responsive engagement**

It seemed like her body language—and again, I'm interpreting her body language and her facial reactions—seemed to be . . . like this was going to—was a surprise. (Deke)

I sort of sensed that was much more because he was enjoying the conversation. (Tree)

You know, just watching her face, not necessarily what she was saying, but you know, when somebody goes, [raised her eyebrows] "OooOooh," you know, "interesting!" (Becky)

I remember being interviewed when I was younger [a teenager] and not understanding who those people were that were asking me questions, and I might add that not one of them was Aboriginal. They were non-Aboriginal people in our community. I found them very cold, they weren't a pleasant experience for me. (Charlene)

Participants' descriptions of their experiences captured the embodied reflexive nature of exchanges between interviewer and interviewee: As participants in dialogue, they attended to what others did with their words and gestures, and, as I will illustrate later, they shaped their subsequent turns in response both to what happened before and in anticipation of the possible consequences of their utterances (Strong, 2005b). What they ended up reporting about their experience of the phenomenon of interest in their

research interviews, then, was also responsive to continually updated understandings that resulted from their active monitoring of researchers' reactions. As Shotter (2005) noted,

As soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in the same way too), a little ethical and political world is created between us. (p. 104)

Part of what became salient for these participants in terms of that ethical and political world was how researchers received their accounts, what this particular moment of their conversation seemed to be about and who would be positioned at the center and the margins as a result of their narrative.

For Deke, the researcher's expression of surprise indicated to him that he was providing an account that ran contrary to her expectations. Goffman (1959) made a distinction between information given in terms of overt shared meanings, and expressive activity and information that a person gives off and from which inferences are made. The expressive activity of the researcher, in this instance, gave off particular messages that were consequential for Deke's continued interest and personal investment in the study. What Shotter (2005) underscored was that something about this spontaneous activity is lost if we see it as an interpretation following facial contortions. The moment Deke described was not a matter of

I noticed she raised her eyebrows and opened her eyes slightly wider. I thought: perhaps she had a physical pain in her side or perhaps I said something contrary to what she expected to find in her research. I chose the latter interpretation.

The "interplay of visual activity," as Shotter described it (p. 108), was important in the whole of the spontaneous responsive exchange that gave Deke a sense of how his story was being received: The researcher was surprised. Furthermore, Deke described how subsequent back-and-forth exchanges supported his growing sense that his unexpected account was more problematic than interesting for the researcher. For Brinkman and Kvale (2005), ethical and scientific problems arise "if one does not allow one's objects—such as human beings—to frustrate one's investigations" (p. 170). For Deke, this was a salient point in accounting for his eventual loss of interest in the project.

Tree's description is an example of how interactants noticed subtle cues that gave them a sense of how to orient to what the exchange was about moment-to-moment. In his case, he sensed that the researcher had shifted from interviewing for the goals of the research to talking for the enjoyment of it. In Goffman's (2001) terms, this is a change in footing, with even subtle alterations in bodily orientation and tone of voice indicative of "shifts in alignment of speaker to hearer" (p. 95). Goffman's descriptions, then, included social actors who were both witnesses to and participants in the active construction of their actions as one activity or another. Through both verbal and nonverbal means, Tree deduced a shift in his and the researcher's mutual orientation to the activity at hand. The point is not that the interviewer was or was not actually done asking his research questions but that as Tree considered his experience, he recalled orienting and responding to these subtle visual and paralinguistic features of the exchange.

For Becky, the researcher's visible response signaled a normative understanding at play, such that Becky's account was deemed unusual. Becky followed her observation of the facial expressions with "Use of phrases like, 'oh, I've never heard of anything like that before.' Well it wasn't said in a negative way like 'oh, you freak' but it was, you know, I don't know.'" The researcher's visible reaction increased Becky's somewhat inchoate feeling of discomfort with the focus of the research gaze, which for her momentarily shifted from the phenomenon of interest to her as a person. Moreover, she became aware of how she might be categorized: "I wondered if she would misinterpret or misrepresent me . . . [as] an example of an oppressed woman." Goffman (1959, 2001) addressed and developed the concept of impression management, done through both verbal and nonverbal means, as part of the presentation of

selves. What I wish to underscore here is that for Becky, the impression apparently being formed by the researcher did not just matter in the moment but, as part of knowledge making, was personally and politically consequential. Although Becky rated her overall experience as positive, she reflected as follows on her primary concern about her experience: "I would be . . . worrying that I had been clear or that I had said what I had meant or, you know, that it would be interpreted in the way I meant it." As Heritage (1984) noted, "It is not whether we will or will not understand each other but that we will be understood regardless of how we would like to be understood" (p. 119). Becky did not position herself then or subsequently as a person whom she suspected the researcher might define as someone in need of emancipation.

Charlene described her experience of the researchers' being "cold." In terms of embodied responsive interaction, her comments highlighted for me the challenge in attempting to describe our sense of the kind of engagement we are looking for in a research interview and the spatial and sensory terms we turn to in trying to capture what we mean. Davis (1997) drew on spatial terms to make the distinction between relationships between researchers and subjects in quantitative research, and researchers and participants in qualitative research. The former were described as distant, whereas the latter were described as engaged. Researchers rely on terms such as warm, close, or, as Rowling (1999) preferred, alongside. Although it is fruitful to describe our embodied sense of how we would like to be with others, it would be unwise to trust once-over descriptions to describe ultimately correct ways to be with others and conduct interviews. Participants' descriptions of relational preferences reflected complex variations.

Referring to research done with her Aboriginal community, Charlene indicated a preference for researchers to become meaningfully involved in the life of the community, so that a level of trust could be developed. In contrast, Becky appreciated being able to talk about her experiences to someone she would likely never again see socially. Ultimately, what influenced preferences for how interviewer and interviewee were to proceed together were personal inclinations to self-disclose; the amount of time one was able and willing to donate; cultural values and patterns of interacting; assumptions about the research project, the subject matter, and perceived outcome; and multiple other contextual factors that became more and less relevant as the exchange progressed. These variations suggested that more than notions of ideal conversations and relationships, there is a need to consider how expectations and preferences might be negotiated in an ongoing way as part of the research process. It suggests a need to attend to the preferences of participants and researchers both prior to and from within the interaction. Articulating a variety of possible interactional styles is a helpful move in this direction (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005).

The important point for me was that for these participants, noticing how researchers responded to their talk was important in working out how to go on with the interview. In the past this observation has been used to encourage researchers to manage how they look and act to communicate empathy and build rapport. Indeed, my initial inclination for this project was for participants to contribute to this kind of "best practices" list. One of the dangers of this is constructing interviewers as instruments for eliciting unimpeded self-disclosure. Focusing on the capacities of individual researchers to manage their reactions ignores the spontaneity of responses in face-to-face dialogue and the sense that interactants develop as to the nature of the exchange. Imperatives to "do" rapport become ethically problematic when this style of interacting is treated as the management of behavior to harvest data from participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005; Duncomb & Jessop, 2002).

Highlighting responsive research participation complicates the notion that participation can be adequately described in terms of what researchers' designs and activities afford (Macran & Ross, 2002). Although participants do have fewer opportunities to explain what is salient for them when interactions are more structured, it does not make sense to assume that responsiveness is eliminated. Answers might still be chosen in response to what is salient for them in the moment or for their anticipated futures (e.g., cherished self-descriptions, perceived goals of the research, what the question is really asking). Such

issues are often acknowledged through efforts to minimize or adjust for reactivity methodologically. However, in the case of interviews, we can compromise both quality and ethics when we make spontaneous reactions a problem to be managed, as might appropriately be the case in diplomacy and poker playing. Although I do not wish to negate the importance of developing guidelines for researchers, focusing on imperatives can leave unacknowledged the level of improvisation that is inevitably needed and ultimately desirable. Kögler (1960/1996) claimed,

Conversation can be called productive to the extent that it is not subject to the conscious control and prognostic anticipation of the participants. The logic of dialogue reveals its creative potential precisely in what is unexpected, in opening up unforeseen possibilities of understanding. (p. 117)

Spontaneous reactions of both participants and researchers, then, could be helpfully understood as resources. During both interviews and analysis, spontaneous, embodied responsive reactions can serve as markers for examining assumptions and prejudices about the phenomenon under study. It is a matter of noticing these moments and possibly discussing them in the interview or using them later as resources for a more reflexive analysis.

That a glance can create a political world (Shotter, 2005) means that we cannot remove either responsiveness or issues of power relations from the exchange. As the next section highlights, participants' descriptions of their responsive actions reflected a complex interplay between and blending of the personal and the political. Participants' descriptions indicated their activities, such as setting limits on self-disclosure, coping with researcher and sponsor agendas, and managing biases, were developed in response to an understanding they developed within the interview. Their strategies cannot become a list of what participants do in research interviews as if these stand independent of a particular interaction. I describe below participants' reports of how they responsively managed the issues that became salient for them.

### **Responsive constructions of experiences**

Accounts can be constructed not just to forward a particular version but also to undermine other possible readings. Tree described his experience of becoming aware of the possibility that his account would contribute to existing stereotypes. He noted,

I was careful of feeding any sort of bias in how his data was interpreted . . . I have a vague memory of actually trying to steer a couple of answers to avoid that . . . there wasn't a risk to me personally . . . [there was] some spin control on the social group I'm affiliated with.

Tree explicitly indicated, then, that his account was rhetorically formulated in response to his sense that what he said was related to larger social issues. His contribution to knowledge, he speculated, could negatively influence a group of people. Furthermore, he noted that he was aware of the potential for those who commissioned the study, more so than the researcher, to rework it into "something for public consumption [in line] with their own agenda." For Tree, issues of power were at play, and a particular articulation of his experiences was therefore an important means of managing these concerns. Another layer is added to this as he considered that the account he gave was also influenced by the work it needed to do in light of his personal narrative. He reflected on how the story he told at the time was responsive to the identity he thought would fit his anticipated future: "More than than now, I was almost consciously trying to preserve my [place identity]." His description captured how we can become an audience to ourselves when we enter into dialogue with another (Fiumara, 1990) and that narratives are problematically treated as objects that exist independent of their context-bound telling (Miller, 1996). Accounts anticipate an audience, yet how to orient to this element is left unarticulated in discussions of interview styles. What Tree's commentary suggested to me was the need to acknowledge more explicitly

that interviewers can never elicit some imagined unfettered and undirected account. What researchers could work toward is creating the kind of interaction where both their own and their participants' hopes and concerns about the impact of the research project, results in richer discussions of the phenomenon of interest.

In addition to Becky's earlier description of being concerned about being misrepresented, her experiences also included a subsequent reflection on the impact of that interpretation on others. One strategy for responding to these elements was to recruit others who, she felt, might contribute to a more diverse understanding of the phenomenon being researched. She indicated she talked to a girl about participating "who is very liberal but in a different way and I thought having her voice represented would be good as well, just because of the diversity." Considering the research gaze mentioned earlier, she continued to focus on the object of study. She chose to counter the possibility of marginalization by increasing the chances that the researcher would develop a complex and varied understanding of the topic. Again, taking such action was a response to her experiences in the interview. Tree similarly described encouraging both a friend and his wife to consider participating with the justification that they could add new perspectives. Such strategies for contributing to what participants considered proper knowledge, in this case diverse perspectives, reflects another kind of participation. Although snowball methods for recruiting are not at issue here, the point is that participants recruited others with an eye to their particular contribution to a project about which they had developed some sense.

In addition to factoring in the impact and quality of the knowledge they were helping to construct, participants accounted for their particular contributions with reference to the need to set limits on self-disclosure. Becky described how she and the researcher responsively managed how much she would share. She noted,

[I would say] "No I'd rather not elaborate on that, but my basic point is Ta dat ta da," without necessarily wanting to get into details and flesh that out. And then other times more subtle where I think she picked up on . . . it would be more of a question, "Would you like to tell me more about that?" and I'd say, "No." So I guess both ways, subtle and overt.

Becky recalled noticing and appreciating how the researcher responded to signals that she had gone as far as she was willing in sharing her personal experiences. Tree and Becky tried to manage interpretations and cope with social and personal consequences of self-disclosure by offering particular versions of their experiences and not others. This seems to fit with what Brinkman and Kvale (2005) referred to as efforts at countercontrol. However, it is important to consider that participants were not always countering researchers as they generated their account. There were myriad factors to which participants responded when designing their account. This list is extended here with excerpts from Charlene's account.

One element of Charlene's overall concern was how researchers' level of influence on "findings" operated through their privileged status as questioner. The issue was not only about who got to determine what questions were relevant. The problem was also the presumption that the meaning of a construct would be self-evident and shared. She noted,

I didn't understand what they were asking me. I remember that very vividly. I can remember being asked a very simple question, now when I think about it: "How do you cope?" I didn't know what cope meant. And I was a teenager! And I answered the question and I can't even tell you how I answered it because I didn't know what the word cope meant.

Similar to my earlier concern about generating interpretations of descriptions of research relationships as cold or warm, Charlene's description brought to mind Garfinkel's (1967, cited in Heritage, 1984) observations about the indexicality of language use: Words index personal rather than fixed meanings that



make sense within the interaction. As Heritage (1984) noted, ideally, the indexical nature of language serves as a resource for being able to articulate the specific, potentially unique, meaning of something for an individual. I draw on Charlene's account to consider participants' experiences of conversations that failed to give them a sense that the researcher was able to access their experience of the world meaningfully. Ignoring diversity,<sup>3</sup> I contend, can contribute to the problem of equating apparent consensus with understanding (Kögler, 1960/1996; Warnke, 1987).

We might be tempted to make sense of Charlene's description as a problem largely having to do with language differences, with the attendant solution logically turning to translation. However, Charlene offered an example of a research project in which she concluded that the researcher never developed a full understanding of the phenomenon for interviewees: "Because he didn't ask the question. So what he reported was what the elder said, yes, but he hadn't really gone further. He hadn't asked the question." Charlene, then, identified the problem as being with both the form of the questions and the suppositions made about the answers. I rely on a perhaps tired but useful example to communicate my understanding of Charlene's concern. As a researcher, I might be able to establish that what a participant and I are talking about is referenced by the word nature in Western-speech. However, if the presumption is that this word is adequate for "mapping" the other's experience, we can slide into the much-problemitized assumption that the map is the territory (Strong, 2005a). Further complications include the compelling web of practices and values that constitute psychology as a discipline (Parker, 2003). Even where distinctions offer insight about differences, the format required for their scholarly articulation can still operate to colonize the experience of the other (Smith, 1999). What happens if I am in dialogue with a person for whom a concept cannot be apprehended by what in academia is considered a reasoned use of explanatory language? Although art and poetry might suffice elsewhere, it is rare that artistic understandings, for example, are legitimate formats for scholarly endeavors (but see Krumwiede, Bliesmer, Earle, Eggenberger, & Meiers, 2005).

In addition to drawing attention to how an account generated in an interview is responsive to the emerging meanings created between people, Charlene's excerpt can also be examined for the impact of the discursive practices that constitute the event as a research interview. Although she was asked a question that for her had no meaning, and she emphasized that she found her teenage experience with researchers unpleasant, Charlene nevertheless described giving an answer. At a commonsense level, we can observe that this is because a question calls for an answer; whether an answer actually occurs, however, is a matter of what the interaction is about for those involved. Questions, for example, can also be answered with questions. I interpreted this aspect of Charlene's experience by relating it to what Goffman (1967, in Shotter, 2005) described as the sense we get from within an interaction of our involvement obligations. Charlene's answer might reflect her sensitivity to the relation between her actions and those of the researcher, and she cooperated in what the context seemed to call for. Whether participants feel compelled to cooperate in this way has much to do with how they position themselves and others and the extent to which they are able to resist such moves within the interaction (Davies & Harré, 1990). In the interactional genre of the research interview, participants frequently orient to and uphold differential rights and opportunities to influence the course of the conversation. As Brinkman and Kvale (2005) pointed out, the qualitative interview is most frequently oriented to as a one-way dialogue.

Even in research situations that we might describe as more egalitarian, there is a question about the extent to which participants feel they can challenge either the question itself or the understanding the researcher appears to be formulating. Returning to Becky's experience, one she described as positive overall, Becky's efforts to counter the researcher's apparently emerging understanding of her as an oppressed woman were covert aspects of her participation. As Strong (2005a) noted, "Professional communications can be places where meanings are ignored, imposed, altered unacceptably, or smoothed over in ways that privilege the professional's meaning over others" (p. 94). The sense that participants develop about their obligations and their right to challenge and clarify researchers' language use and suppositions has much

to do with how they are invited to interact in both explicit and subtle ways. I contend that what was problematic about the instances described here was not that they happened but that they passed by unrecognized.

Considering the interplay of all the elements to which participants responsively oriented raises questions about the social conditions needed for understanding another's world (Shotter, 2005). Furthermore, how can inevitably responsive construction be oriented to as a rich form of telling rather than as a barrier to proper telling? Shotter (1993) proposed that shared understanding is rare and moving toward an approximation of it requires testing and checking each other's talk, questioning, challenging, reformulating, and elaborating on it, and so on. As these participants' experiences suggested, it is right to question the extent to which the discursive practices and involvement obligations that researchers and participants mutually orient toward allow for the kind of back-and-forth exchange described by Shotter above. I relate this concern for social conditions with Brinkman and Kvale's (2005) questions, "What can be done to make the power relations more transparent and ethically accountable? What can be done to allow the objects to object?" (p. 170). I am curious about what would come of an interaction in which researchers and participants made the potential issues noted above an explicit topic of conversation and attended to them as they sensed their emergence in the interview. The idea is not to get past these elements but to consider their legitimacy and perhaps explore this as another aspect of the phenomenon as it can be understood in the context of research.

To consider answers to the above questions, I conclude this section with one of Deke's descriptions, which captures the repeated theme of dialogue in participants' explanations of the preferences they developed in response to their experiences. He noted,

At the same time it would have really been useful if she had set up the research in such a way where she could, when she did have those raised eyebrows or querying head tilts, to give herself the opportunity, "I'm not sure I got that. Can you tell me more about that? Let me see if I understand what you're saying." Or even saying, "Even in my own experiences . . ."

A preference for the back-and-forth of dialogue was a strong theme for all participants. For example, Tree described his appreciation of moments in the interview when there was a back-and-forth exchange that he described as a "good conversation." Becky indicated that dialogue was important so that participants would not "feel like they're just having the information sucked from them." Included in descriptions of what was appreciated and preferred included what is typically described as active listening: "Stopping and recapping;" "the open ended element, and then the [researcher] reflecting back to me"; "Am I hearing this correctly? Is this what you were saying?" and so on. However, preferences also included: "discussion;" "[the researcher and participant] finding their way up the middle"; talk from the researcher that "provided more than just the questions"; "getting [from the researcher] the kind of information I was very interested in," and, as Deke noted, researchers sharing their experiences. Such descriptions suggest a much more two-way exchange. Also notable is that, like the terms used to describe research relationships, it would be problematic here to assume that dialogue indexed something similar for all involved. Preferred styles of interacting reveal considerable diversity when given more than a one-pass explanation.

### **Negotiated practices**

Participants' accounts of their experience of being interviewed for research reflected how they were rhetorically responsive to elements that emerged as the interaction unfolded. In their retrospectives, they recalled a variety of ways in which they managed the exchange and worked to influence the resulting understandings, their well-being, and the impact of the research on others. For these participants, their involvement was sometimes more, sometimes less, personally, socially, and politically consequential. My analysis does not suggest a need to "do research only as participants want," nor does it suggest single

correct formulas for qualitative research interviews. Such a position assumes that participants are a homogeneous group and that a single proper stance can be identified. Rather, I want to spur dialogue that considers carefully the reflexive participation inherent in the interview and the element of improvisation required by such interactions. I hope such discussions will continue to touch on the status and impact of the knowledge constructed in the qualitative research interview, the responsibilities (unspoken or otherwise) that both interviewer and interviewee orient to from within the interaction, the consequential practices and values of the community within which this activity occurs, and how an uncritical perspective of participation in research inhibits alternate ways of conceptualizing our activities. These individuals' descriptions led me to question what now seemed to be incomplete discussions of rapport and empathic engagement. As instruments for encouraging the participation of individuals, it positioned participants a priori as possibly vulnerable, resistant, antagonistic, passive, etc. Such descriptions obscure the responsive nature of face-to-face interactions and the weight of the word participant. I turn now to some final considerations and possible alternative approaches to interactive dialogue for the purpose of research.

### **Implications for research interviews**

The growing appeal of qualitative interviewing has been made sense of by considering it as a corrective response to the oppressive impact of scientism on our understanding of human experience (Gergen, 2001). However, in the postmodern effort to create conversation among equals in the research interview, there a danger of erasing (Parker, 1998) the ethical and political nature of the qualitative interview. It obscures how participants participate in orienting toward such elements and how their responsive monitoring contributes to the research context. It also obscures how researchers' best efforts might be inhibited by the organizational demands in which interview practices are located (Birch & Miller, 2002). My aim here is to take up participants' descriptions and consider alternatives that take into account their responsive participation.

### **Acknowledging a chosen style and participating reflexively**

One way to frame the discussion about research interview practices is to follow the line of questioning offered by Shotter (2005). What social conditions are required for a person to express him- or herself in relation to another? Such a focus considers what is created between people rather than what one person does or is outside of this particular interaction. It also highlights the inevitable spontaneous expressive responsiveness as a major element in moving forward with others in the knowledge-making enterprise. Taking up more of Shotter's language, I want to suggest the following: If in every meeting between researcher and participant, their responsive interactions creates a unique form of life whereby each, for that time, comes to mean something to the other; then researchers and participants can mutually create conditions that facilitate many kinds of relationships—teachers/students, co-investigators mutually looking at a phenomenon, storytellers/listeners, and so on.

So what interactional styles, what ways of going about in our interviews, might we work out with participants for the purpose of research? What can we say about it, when the discussion above precludes being able to formulate a single, correct way? As noted earlier, Brinkman and Kvale (2005) have offered a variety of approaches to interviewing. I offer a speculative version here that owes a particular debt to my participants and the works of the authors I have cited. An important qualification is that I assume the choice of interactional style is responsive to the subject matter and the preferences and discursive skills of those involved. This is not a recommendation for all topics of research and for all participants. I assume that what unfolds is something worked out and agreed on between researchers and participants and that researchers work at being reflexive. This requires that researchers notice, both in the moment and in subsequent analyses of the transcripts, what happened to topics and meanings turn-by-turn (Strong, 2005b). Who made what relevant? What seemed to prompt shifts in the focus? Elsewhere (Knapik, 2003,

2004), I have suggested ways of interacting with participants with respect to the consent procedure that are supportive of dialogue. In this, I have created a list of questions that researchers can present to participants early in the interview. These are questions past participants found relevant, and I have brought them forth to be more public about potential issues and actively legitimate the practice of participants' asking questions.

The idea is to create social conditions in which participants can bring forth concerns that are meaningful to them. Particular patterns of interacting (e.g., who can ask questions), the possibility of ongoing negotiations, and a discussion of preferences that come to light as the interaction unfolds can be explicit topics of conversation between researchers and participants. This is an important point, as my aim is to present one kind of and not some ideal conversation. I suspect participants will indicate preferences that range from offering their story once and considering their participation complete, to engaging in dialogue that considers constructions and analyses more critically. As well, I suspect that many researchers will recognize my description as an orientation they have already taken up. Although not new to all, I hope there will be two benefits from articulating more explicitly a certain interactional style. One is that it becomes a resource for others. The other is that both its gaps and its merits can be points of discussion.

### **Interactional styles inspired by participants' accounts**

I want to begin by building on two elements of participants' accounts. One is how they initially described orienting to the project through their and the researcher's interest in a particular phenomenon, and the other is their preference for the back-and-forth of dialogue. These elements generate an orientation toward the process as one of mutual exploration. A more egalitarian position can be created by, as it were, sitting beside each other and alternately trying to articulate and understand what it is the researcher and research participant are looking at and to understand that mutual looking. What is it that each person could say about this phenomenon, and what gaps are apparent in descriptions from the perspectives that each person brings to the discussion?

Researchers can also adopt a learner stance. As a counseling student, I owe much of this orientation to Anderson and Goolishian's (1992) concept of "not knowing," also referenced by Shotter (1993, 2005). The interviewees are experts on a phenomenon in terms of their experience. When researchers' knowledge does enter into the exchange, it can be to notice their own attachment to certain ideas as they attend to their responses and the impact of these on the interaction. In this style of interaction, no one is positioned as having an ultimate say on the object of interest beyond their own meanings. The tensions that become apparent in such discussions have the potential for addressing the problem, stated earlier, of conflating consensus with understanding. Consensus is not the aim. As part of this style of interacting, spontaneous responses and the indexicality of meanings can enrich the conversation as they are checked out and expanded on. As Shotter (2005) noted,

Ethically, we must allow other people both to be specifically vague, that is, to be only partially clear, in what they say, while also allowing them to entertain the expectation that we will either assist them in further making their meaning clear, or allow them whatever further opportunities are required for them to do so. (p. 119)

The process is not describable as participants' reporting their experience to a generic receiver.

The proposed orientation is also a response to Becky's description of how she felt her person, rather than the phenomenon of interest, becoming the focus of the research gaze. It is intended to mitigate the tendency to look at, over, or, presumably, into participants to see how they fit with what we already know. We can instead orient to the object or phenomenon of interest as something each person has a chance to describe as if it is located in the world we are attempting to share in that moment. This is not to

remove persons from the process but to facilitate an admittedly interested responsive dialogue in which there is a possibility to try out, reject, and try again to offer a description.

I also contrast this interactional style of mutual exploration with the urge, as has been described to me by fellow students designing their interviews, to design questions carefully to get at a theorized aspect of the phenomenon without revealing one's intentions to participants. It is not that these students consider their strategies without an ethics of care. Their aim is to get at some otherwise hidden information carefully and sensitively, perhaps indicative of an "underlying reality" (Shotter, 2005, p. 106), through an instrumental question. Although I value the possibility of including previously established knowledge into one's research, my issue is with the presumption of getting at something uncontaminated by public acknowledgement. One possibility I see is for researchers to place theories and models of previously accumulated knowledge on the table, so to speak, for active critique, that is, to ask participants to consider what fits, where there are gaps, what questionable assumptions might be at play, and what meanings might be contested when this knowledge is placed alongside their experiential expertise.

To make the discussion less abstract, I offer an excerpt from my own transcripts. In this example, my speech is hesitant, and there is some shared laughter as I try to avoid the use of a term made problematic earlier in the conversation (M: Mirjam; D: Deke):

*M:* Do you think that—I'm going to ask an opinion question and (chuckle) I'm conscious of the word "should" now. (both laugh)

*D:* No, I'm pretty transparent about those things.

*M:* I guess what I'm ask—what I really want to ask (both laugh).

*D:* Go for it.

*M:* is, should researchers be able—have to show competence prior to begin—being given ethical approval to do that kind of interview?

*D:* Yeah, I resist answering the should.

With the "should" mutually oriented toward as a problem, this moment highlighted my tendency to think about the ethics of interviewing in terms of prescriptions for researcher behavior rather than focusing on participatory interaction. My difficulty in formulating a question, one that was steeped in my assumptions, which had already been made problematic in our dialogue, became an important resource in my analysis.

In a discussion of how to attend to the impact of contextual factors as an inevitable feature of research, Speer and Hutchby (2003) proposed "conducting a detailed micro-analysis of research in practice" (p. 34). Although I had no knowledge of conversation analysis at the time of my analysis (and do not claim to have done an orthodox application of it here), I believe my attempts, nevertheless, indicate its potential. The spontaneous and reflexive features of the conversation (my awkwardness and how this was taken up by Deke) became a resource both in the moment and for the analysis. It became important for me to look not only at participants' talk but at my spontaneous responses and planned contributions. What did I do when participants brought forth something unanticipated? How did I respond to arresting words or phrases? When did our speech patterns indicate that we considered our topic "delicate" in some way (Silverman, 2001), and what does this tell me? Where did I overlook the indexicality of meaning, or when did my participant and I attend to this in a way that enriched the discussion?

### **Limitations of the Research**

It should be noted that the participants whose experiences I drew on here were highly competent communicators. As well, at the time I interviewed them, they had some knowledge of the larger community in which research takes place. However, none had knowledge about research interviewing

from a researcher role prior to their participation in the projects they spoke about. At the time of their interviews, there was, then, an anticipatory rather than a knowing quality about their involvement. Nevertheless, there is a need to underscore the limits of generalizing their experiences to those who have no knowledge of a university community or its practices. In instances where participants are not members of the academic community, the level of influence and authority attributed to researchers creates particular conditions. In these cases, it might be necessary for researchers to demystify and acknowledge the scope and limitation of that authority, before a particular interactional style can be negotiated. This point underscores the need for flexibility in considering both participants and topics when aiming for particular styles of interacting. The question of what social conditions we want to create with others for research interviewing is no less powerful because of these features.

### **Possible Directions**

Goffman (1969) insisted that discursive statements “can never be free of ‘egocentric particulars’ and other contexted meanings” (p. 9). The question for me has pragmatic tones: How do we attend to these elements in research interviews and develop understandings of the phenomena of interest in such a way that it enriches our ability to participate with others in the activities this knowledge is intended to help us move forward with? Participants’ reports of their experiences of research interviews suggest there are multiple ways of working toward this. As noted earlier, I suspect that many researchers have developed styles of interacting that they find supportive of the process of knowledge making. Beyond reflections by participants and researchers, the time is ripe for two additional pieces of information. One is for researchers to articulate and report more explicitly on the interactional styles they chose for their various topics and persons. The other is to support the sharing of such information with an interactional analysis of the transcripts to report what, in actuality, they and their participants, turn by turn, created together.

### **Appendix**

#### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Please tell me about your participation in the research project where you talked about your life experiences.

Prompts: What was the interview like for you?

What, if any, benefit did you incur in the process of your participation? What, if any, concerns do you have about the negative impact of your involvement in that project?

What motivated you to participate?

2. To what extent were you involved in the analysis portion of the research?

Prompts: Were you able to read the transcripts and check for accuracies? Were you able to comment on the analysis? What was done with your feedback?

3. Did you ever read the final document? Was it published?

Prompts: What was that like for you? If people close to you knew about your involvement, what was their response?

4. Do you have any other comments?

### Notes

1. My original project included a fifth participant who was not a university student. He is excluded here, because the format of his past qualitative research experience was not strictly in the interview format of interest here.
2. Text in square brackets is intended to offer additional relevant information to the reader, such as providing some context for the quote or indicating nonverbal expressions.
3. Making presumptions about apparent similarities between researchers and participants can be no less problematic. If shared categorical memberships (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, occupations) are salient for participants in conversation, each might assume their language indexes very similar meanings and experiences. Although in early discussions about equitable research relationships similarities between researcher and participant based on such categories were lauded as a solution, Duncombe and Jessop (2002) noted that apparent similarities can also operate to give a sense of rapport that lulls us into assuming that our meanings are shared. Such orientations in research can produce conversations with few useful distinctions. Considering stories are jointly constructed, their superficial articulation is promoted when they are constructed for an audience that apparently already agrees on the way of things.

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