

Research Interviewing: How does it differ from therapeutic interviewing?

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It is understandable to assume that someone with strong clinical skills would easily transition into doing research interviews, but as we found out recently it's not always quite as straight forward as it seems. There are subtle, yet important differences between therapeutic sessions and research interviews that require significant rethinking at every stage.

This article shares the personal experiences of one therapist-researcher (Thora Rain), under supervision, who made that transition successfully.

Let's start at the beginning. What is the purpose of the two encounters? While Berg (*1) described the research interview as a 'conversation with a purpose', there is a little more to it than that:

- It could be said that the *therapeutic consultation* aims to support clients to explore their own subjective experience and deepen their understanding of their meaning-making process with the aim of improving their quality of life.
- Whereas, the purpose of the *research interview* might

be described as an elicitation of the subjective experience or interpretation of the research subject with the aim of understanding the topic from the interviewee's perspective.

The therapeutic/coaching consultation is designed to move the client forward and to assist with that change, while the research interview is to acquire data in relation to a specific topic, without attempting to change the interviewee in the process. Although, in some cases just reflecting on a situation can in itself generate change, it is not the purpose of research interviews to facilitate that change. This is a key distinction. In a research interview if the focus shifts to facilitating change, the data collected may not be valid since it will not have measured what it was designed to measure. There would also be an ethical issue if the informed consent had not included permission to work on change processes.

Another key difference is who owns the outcome. In a therapeutic session the client owns their desired

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outcome and the therapist/coach supports the client to achieve that. In a research interview, the interviewer owns the outcome, and the interviewee agrees to help the interviewer achieve that.

Taking time up front to explore the purpose of each encounter then is vital, and talking this through with other researchers can be beneficial in designing an effective and ethical study.

Skills and competencies

Although there are skills like quickly building rapport, active listening and calibration that are shared and transferable from the therapeutic practitioner to a research interviewer, differences exist which need to be considered. Below we explore some of the challenges clinical practitioners may encounter when transitioning into research interviewing.

Holding the focus

It is the interviewer's responsibility to hold the frame/ focus throughout the interview. This can be done by running an ongoing internal relevancy check and having the research topic and question clearly in view during the interview process. It is easy to be distracted by an interesting story which is unrelated to the research question: the researcher must gently bring the research topic back into focus, without losing rapport. This requires being as much information-focused as interviewee-focused (which is a different relationship balance from a therapeutic session).

Language and framing

NLP practitioners can have a strong habit of framing results and using 'Well done' type of encouraging language. Also, the tendency to reframe and in particular to use a feedback frame can be tempting, but doing so in a research interview is unhelpful since it potentially leads the interviewee and suggests a particular response is desired by the researcher.

A helpful methodology in this regard is Clean Language. It makes maximal use of the interviewees' words to explore and understand their inner world, while keeping the inclusion of researcher words and assumptions to a minimum. (#2)

The type of questions asked can also inadvertently lead an interviewee into therapy. For example, questions that are common in therapy/coaching such as, 'And how do you want it to be?' or 'What would happen if you did?' can quickly turn an interview into a change session.

Equally, the interviewee can be the one who consciously (or not) leads an interview into therapy. Any sign of this should be acknowledged and the client advised that it is more appropriate to raise those issues

with a therapist, NLP coach or counsellor.

It is good practice for interviewers to have some words prepared ready for each of these scenarios and to keep listening for any clues that either party is stepping out of the research interview frame.

Taking care of emotions

Highly emotional expressions by the interviewee do not necessarily fall into a therapy frame; especially if the topic being researched is likely to be sensitive, e.g. trauma, bereavement or redundancy. While the interviewer may well feel empathetic, it is not the interviewer's job to rescue the interviewee or to try to make things better, even if they ask. Often, holding the space and giving the interviewee time for personal reflection or offering a short break will be all that is required for the interview to continue. If it is not, the interviewer must use their professional judgement whether to carry on or to end the interview and suggest ways the interviewee can get additional support.

Summary

While many of the skills involved in therapeutic sessions are similar to research interviewing, there are some clear distinctions which are useful to be aware of when making the transition to researcher. We hope this article has been helpful in highlighting some of the practical considerations and would love to know if you have any others to add our list. ➔



➔ Practical tips

We offer some simple tips for the therapist/coach making the transition to researcher.

- 1 **The environment.** We often don't realise how anchored we are into our environment, conducting research interviews in the same space that we do our client session can keep us anchored to being a therapeutic practitioner rather than the research interviewer. Do your research interviews in a different environment to your client sessions. If this is not practical, change how you use your environment, even just sitting in a different part of the room will make a difference.
- 2 **The context.** Booking client sessions and research interviews into the same day can mean that it's harder to separate out how we engage in each of those activities. Make sure you arrange your research interviews for different days to your client sessions.
- 3 **The relationship.** Client sessions have a strong sense of holding the space, safety and support with the aim of moving through a change process. Research interviews have a distinctly different feel. Interviews are limited in number often to a single interview and the researcher needs to retain a kind of detachment and neutrality. Notice how you are in client sessions and practice shifting your state to concentrate on eliciting and gathering data in a research interview.
- 4 **The notes.** Although research interviews are almost always audio or video recorded, it can be helpful to take notes during the interview. These differ from client session notes as they are more about marking out semantically packed prose or commenting on body language, facial expressions and gestures, along with highlighting any potential themes that are emerging. The notes will also help with the analysis of data, and any follow-up interviews.
- 5 **The interviewees.** Be mindful of any existing relationship, it can bias your interviewees to give you answers they feel you'd like to hear rather than their own experience or interpretation. Having a clearly defined preframe at the start of the interview or in any preparatory communication helps to mitigate this risk. In some instances it will be necessary to employ someone else to collect the data for the research study to keep the boundaries clear.

If you are doing research interviews with your existing clients it is essential to inform them of how the research interview is different from their usual sessions. A signed informed consent form is required prior to any data collection to work within accepted ethical guidelines.

- Be mindful not to link the information that the interviewee provides with other information that they have shared in client sessions. Remember: keep it clean! And similarly, be careful not to integrate previous knowledge into the analysis.
- 6 **Prepare for the interview.** Do a pilot interview (or as many as are required to be confident in the process). It is a great way to test your questions and more importantly to calibrate your own state and engagement as well as the points raised above. Use an expert in research interviews to listen to the tape and look at your analysis to ensure you have noticed any bias or leading. You can even interview yourself, or get someone to interview you on the topic so you are clear what information and views you already hold. This will reduce the risk of confirmation bias – the unwitting seeking of information that matches your model of the world.
 - 7 **During the interview.** Keep your questions clean. It is surprisingly easy to unconsciously introduce your metaphors or to insert leading presuppositions or suggestions into questions and paraphrasing. Again, the use of pilot interviews will hugely assist with ensuring your questions stay clean as you get interested in what your interviewee is saying.

Even if you are familiar with Clean Language, have a list of the standard questions close by to refresh your memory.

Give yourself permission to not follow up on every lead that the interviewee introduces. Go back to your original research question(s) and remain true to the focus of your research.

Also, consider the benefit of using an iterative interview process. This means that you review and analyse the interview data from one participant and then use the results to update and refine your research questions for the next interview or to re-interview that participant. This approach ensures fuller coverage of all topics throughout the study.

- 8 **Keep a research journal.** Keep a research log or journal. This differs from interview notes in that it is about reflecting on your experience throughout the research process. You might for example jot down any reactions, thoughts or observations from the interviews as well as from your associated reading and the research design. This reflexivity aims to increase validity of your method by reducing researcher bias and offers an audit trail of thematic analysis and interpretation.

References

(*1) Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*.

(*2) See Paul Tosey, 'Clean language in research interviews', *Rapport* Late Summer, issue 40.

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