March 22, 2012 | Rachelle Annechino | 19 Comments

Interviewing for Introverts

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Interviews are one of my favorite things in the qualitative toolkit. They weren't always.

Working at a research institute I've gotten to hear a lot of interviews, and they have pretty much always been fascinating — but I was uncomfortable with conducting them myself. I'm not exactly a social butterfly, and the thought of being an official interviewer asking official questions of research participants was a bit unnerving. You have to sort of lead (really more like guide) a conversation, and you may have to recruit strangers to participate, sometimes without being able to compensate them for their time. It seems like a job for an extrovert who loves talking to people. I've known qualitative researchers who were geniuses at talking to people (among other things), and have always envied them. But barring the right (or wrong?) combination of alcohol and setting, that's not my skill set.

What I figured out eventually though is that interviewing is not so much about talking to people as it is about ***listening*** to them. Not to say that talking doesn't play a role in getting to the listening — the Talking Geniuses (still jealous) do great work with their combined talking and listening skills. But being an introverted type can also be made into an advantage.

Below are some interviewing concepts that I've found useful to keep in mind when doing interviews, along with some practical suggestions that might work especially for those of us who aren't gifted talkers [1].

1. **Don't put words in people's mouths.** In fact, talk as little as possible. A pause that's a bit longer than a pause would be comfortable in everyday conversation can work wonders in provoking further insights from a respondent. It signals that you're waiting for them to say more, and gives them time and space to think more deeply. (See? Awkward pauses aren't a reflection on your social skills. It's a *research technique*.)

Yes, you have to say things sometimes, but you don't have to say a lot. Often just saying "Hmm" will provoke an interviewee to expand on an idea or offer up new information. "Can you say a little more about that?", repeating an interesting word mentioned by the respondent in a questioning tone, briefly re-stating what the respondent just said to make sure you're understanding can also all be interview gold.

2. **Try to avoid positive or negative feedback.** Listening to lots of interviews about people's experiences with illicit drugs gave me a clearer idea of why this can be a good guiding concept. If an interviewer says "That's wonderful" in response to someone's description of a recent attempt to quit using a substance, the respondent may react by emphasizing quitting attempts and downplaying current use, for example. There's no getting around the feedback loop between an interviewer and a respondent, and that loop can be an important part of analysis, but avoiding positive or negative feedback as much as possible can often produce information that is less aligned with the interviewer's biases.

3. **Expect to be surprised.** But don't expect anything else. A difficult part of the notion that interviewers should avoid positive or negative feedback is that not getting much feedback can make some people shut down. Also lots of people use expressions with a positive inflection like "That's great" as conversational support.

For me the word "interesting" can be a good compromise — partly just because it's a word I say too much anyway. What's not interesting? But "interesting" can also be a way to let people know that you want to hear more without expressing a judgment about the content of what they're saying, and without imposing "common sense" expectations about what people are saying or how they're interpreting it. If I say someone's attempt to quit using a substance is "great," I might not learn that, for example, quitting made the respondent realize all the things they enjoy about the substance and that they never want to quit using it again.

4. **Respondents are the experts on their own experiences.** You are just there to listen and learn. It can be helpful to say something at the beginning like "I might ask some questions that seem really dumb or obvious.

That's just part of the interview process. You're the expert, and I want to try to understand how you see things, in your own words." You don't necessarily have to 'lead' an interview. Sometimes what seems like a tangent in the moment ends up being the most meaningful part of an interview.

But yeah, you do have to guide people, and manage how much you need to cover in a limited amount of time. In an interview where the interviewer and respondent can see each other, body language can work really well for this. Although introverted or shy people may not always be great with body language, it can be more manageable when you understand your role as primarily listening, and the spotlight is not on you. One visual cue that I use in interviews is hunching down and making myself visually lower than the respondent. They're the expert. When I need to jump in and it's hard to find a good pause, I sit up straighter, maybe shuffle around some papers. This usually produces a pause and I can jump in without it feeling like a jarring interruption.

5. **Recruiting complete strangers can totally work.** When I've needed to "get out and meet people" for a recruiting effort, I have found that handing out flyers in person has worked best for me. (A) I don't have to give a spiel. (B) The people I'm encountering don't have to waste time trying to figure out whether/how to engage with the possibly crazy person's spiel, but can just read the flyer if they feel like it (assuming literacy or language differences aren't an issue) and then let me know if they're interested. If you're a smile-y sort of person, smiling can help, or just generally looking approachable. You don't necessarily have to be the life of the party who has mastered circulating and networking though. People may find it easier to approach you on their own terms.

So that's what's working for me for the moment, but I'm still learning and always interested in thoughts/suggestions/tips, if you have any to share. And I guess the obligatory follow-up to any set of guiding principles meant for humans is: Break them (in an ethical way) when you need to.

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[1] I'm not sure which things came from where anymore — probably some things are from multiple sources, but a lot of these suggestions are gleaned from advice from researchers like **Tamar Antin**, **Jenna Burrell**, **Juliet Lee** and **Roland Moore** (thank you!), and/or from written sources like:

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2008). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications, Inc.
LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Ethnographer's Toolkit* (1st ed.). AltaMira Press.
Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings*. Wadsworth Belmont, CA.
Thomas, R. J. (1993). Interviewing important people in big companies. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *22*(1), 80–96. (This one complicates the suggestions in #4 a bit. Although the respondent is an expert on their own experience, it can be important to let the respondent know you're informed to varying degrees about the interview subject.)

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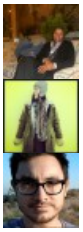

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19 Comments on "Interviewing for Introverts"

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parnopaeus *March 23, 2012 at 12:13 pm #*

This is a fantastic set of tips and very timely for me, as I'll be beginning the interview process for my dissertation very soon!

Your advice in #4 is really helpful, because I'll actually be interviewing people I already know quite well since I've been in a participant-observation ethnography project for some time now. I was really dreading asking these folks some of my questions because the answers seem so obvious. There are so many things that they might think I SHOULD know since I've been watching them for a long time, but these are things that I want to hear them talk about in their own words. I think I'll preface every interview with something like your phrase in #4 to help avoid that awkwardness!

Reply

Rachelle Annechino *March 23, 2012 at 2:42 pm #*

Glad it's helpful! Yeah, the obvious questions thing can be super awkward, even kind of tense.

I guess it could be sort of like a breaching experiment like Jenna wrote about…

Reply

Gordon Ross (@gordonr) *March 23, 2012 at 5:16 pm #*

Going all the way back to 1988, I'd like to add Grant McCracken's classic to the list, The Long Interview. http://www.amazon.com/Long-Interview-Qualitative-Research-Methods/dp/0803933533

Reply

Rachelle Annechino *March 24, 2012 at 3:22 pm #*

Thanks!

Reply

Jofish *March 27, 2012 at 5:05 am #*

What do your flyers look like? Can you share something that's worked for you? Where have you done it? I've never tried that, but it sounds interesting.

Reply

Jofish *March 27, 2012 at 5:05 am #*

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Reply

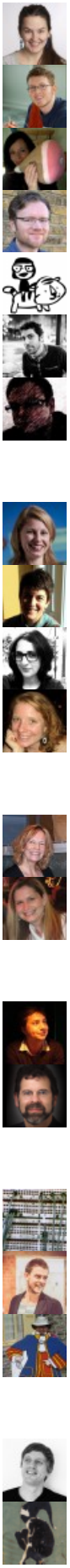
Rachelle Annechino *March 27, 2012 at 10:50 pm #*

Hi Jofish. I've mostly tried flyers in Bay Area cafes and libraries, or on the street outside of cafes.

Some flyer phrases I've used are things like "Help out a grad student" or maybe "Help out with a research project, get free coffee," at the top, and then something along the lines of "I would like to interview [you/people who X] about [X]. Very relaxed and easygoing, takes about [X] minutes. Please let me know if you're interested."

Might also include "You can pass on any question," and/or "There are no right or wrong answers" on there somewhere.

Kind of interesting to think about what they look like and what difference that might make…



I've used markers-on-random-scrap-paper flyers, and flyers printed out on copy paper and then cut into squares. Seemed like the markers-on-scrap-paper ones worked better.

carolynmreed *March 28, 2012 at 1:46 pm #*

Reply

This is great, Rachelle! I especially love Points 2 and 3 as I know that in my effort to be a great listener/conversation partner I miiiiight just get a little too excited sometimes. Thanks for keeping us all on the straight and narrow!

Rachelle Annechino *March 29, 2012 at 4:48 am #*

Reply

Thanks, Carolyn. No doubt your excitement is a good conversation prompt too

Tiago *August 2, 2013 at 4:43 pm #*

Reply

Me and my team usually go by asking the best, worse and ideal experience people have had (think they would have) – in the context of the experience being redesigned -, followed by a 1,000 times "why". Me and my team complement the latter with Observation and Living the Experience. What would your comments be in regards to this process? Any feedback will be greatly appreciated!

Rachelle Annechino *August 5, 2013 at 1:21 am #*

Reply

I really like "best" and "worst" sort of questions (a lot of times I ask something like "What do you like the most about x?", "What do you like the least about x?"), especially in relation to things that people might feel uncomfortable praising or criticizing in an interview setting.

"Best" and "worst" seem to give people permission to say something negative about something they might feel pressure to view positively, and vice versa… and sometimes they help people to think more deeply about a topic.

Asking about an "ideal" experience is a good idea that I should try to do more often. Thanks for mentioning that.

For me "why" questions can be great but also tricky to ask. Sometimes I will try to bring in the idea of "why" without asking a direct question, like saying "Hmm, that's interesting. I wonder why [whatever]".

But in the end it depends on the person I guess. Some people get flustered by direct questions, especially ones that they don't know how to answer right away — and some "why" questions seem to be extra hard to answer. Maybe that's more to do with the topics I tend to be interviewing people about though?

Anyway, If I can frame a question that might fluster someone in a way that gives them space to either talk about it right then or not, maybe come back to it later, that can help. But other people respond better to direct questions.

… Which also reminds me how culture comes into play with all this stuff too. I was just rereading this post and kind of stumbling over the bit about longer-than-normal pauses, because I keep thinking about how people from some Native American cultural backgrounds tend to use what are, from my pov, unusually long pauses in conversation. From their pov, my usual "normal" pause is too short, and my "longer than normal" is just normal.

Agh, so many things to think about!

Marine Clause (@marineclause) *August 16, 2013 at 10:34 am #*

Reply

I discovered your tips through the Design Thinking Action Lab Stanford (virtual course) and they are very helpful. I would add to look at the person.

And especially if you are doing a virtual interview like Google Hangout. You may be tempted to stuck to what you are writing or even have a look at something else in your screen. But the person you are interviewing needs to feel you are 100% with her !

Rachelle Annechino *August 16, 2013 at 10:32 pm #*

Great point!

Reply

Rafi *September 3, 2013 at 3:34 pm #*

I've always been fascinated by topics involving introversion and how to overcome it (when the situation calls for it). These tips would come in handy. Thanks a lot!

Reply

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