Considering quality in qualitative interviewing

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ABSTRACT   Within the field of qualitative inquiry, there has been considerable discussion of how 'quality' might be demonstrated by researchers in reports of studies. With the growth in the application of qualitative methods in social research, along with the proliferation of texts available to qualitative researchers over the last four decades, there has been increasing diversity in how quality has been demonstrated in reports. In this article, I focus on the use of qualitative interviews in research studies, arguing that with a growing array of theorizations of the qualitative interview, researchers must demonstrate the quality of their work in ways that are commensurate with their assumptions about their use of interviews. I sketch a number of possibilities for how qualitative interviews might be theorized, and show the different ways in which quality might be demonstrated from each perspective. I propose this typology as one means by which novice researchers might begin to work through design decisions involved in the process of proposal writing, the conduct of interview studies, and the writing up and representation of findings.

KEYWORDS: *quality in research*, *qualitative interviewing*, *teaching qualitative research*, *theorizations of interviews*

Introduction

For some years I have taught coursework on qualitative research methods to students enrolled in masters and doctoral programs. Students plan and conduct projects for class purposes that are often related to topics that they will explore in more depth in research studies for masters' theses and doctoral dissertations that employ qualitative designs. While their research interests differ widely, students – irrespective of their discipline or topic – draw on commonly used forms of qualitative data such as field notes and observational data, documents and texts, and video and audio-tapes of interaction in research settings and interviews. Of all these forms of data, the most commonly-used data source that I encounter is that of qualitative interviews.[1]

Over the years I have experimented with various ways of preparing students to design and make use of interviews in ways that will effectively serve their research purposes. This work has led to a number of questions: Should I, for example, send students out with the simple advice of 'listen carefully and be slow to speak'; let them sort out what to do in the field? Should we attempt to survey the burgeoning literature that outlines a multitude of approaches to qualitative interviews – that is, students might read a lot in order to gain some theoretical and methodological grasp of the array of interviewing approaches before embracing any one tradition? How might I most effectively assist students in reconciling interview questions with research questions and the overall conceptual and theoretical approaches taken in the research design?

The quandaries involved in teaching others how to conduct qualitative interviews become more acute when students enrol for another course that I teach, *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Students usually come to the class with transcriptions of interviews that they have conducted, a set of research questions that they hope to inform, and a bundle of theoretical and epistemological assumptions about how knowledge is produced and what claims can be made from interview data, together with many questions about the processes involved in transforming many pages of densely-worded text into a representation of 'findings' that relate to 'research questions.'

Thus, as my students and I endeavor to make sense of the data, we collectively re-visit the design process, the research questions, the interview guide, and how these researchers and interviewers transformed research topics and interview questions into interaction with research participants, or 'data.' We begin by asking, 'What stands out in the data?' Sometimes answers to this question relate not to the topic of the interview talk and the research questions – but rather to how the data were co-constructed. For example, students may recognize that they talked too much or that they generated short interviews in which they were not able to facilitate interaction in which participants were forthcoming. Sometimes students notice that interviewees did not answer their questions, or even introduced topics irrelevant to the researchers' purposes. As part of the analytic and interpretive exercise, then, students might ask – did the interview transcripts provide data that may be used to examine the research questions posed? If not, why not? Did this interview 'fail'? Why? Is a 'failed' interview necessarily one of poor quality?

In cases where interviews seem to have 'failed' – I use this term with reservations since 'failed' interviews provide fruitful grounds for asking methodological questions, which are rarely the kinds of questions initially posed – students might ask themselves how they might evaluate the 'quality' of the interviews that they have conducted and the study as a whole. This question, of course, leads to another: By what criteria might the quality of qualitative interviews be judged? Thinking about this issue has led me to revisit various theorizations of qualitative interviewing in order to examine how quality is considered from different perspectives. In this article, I propose an approach

to thinking about quality in relation to qualitative interviews that might be used by novice researchers as they plan for and conduct interviews for research purposes.

Judging quality in qualitative interviewing

Many introductory texts to qualitative research methods provide criteria for judging the quality of interviews. A survey of introductory texts on qualitative interviewing reveals that there is no consistency in the terms used in relation to the assessment of 'quality' of qualitative interview research. For example, Rubin and Rubin (2005) use the terms 'credibility' and 'thoroughness'; Kvale (1996) discusses 'validity'; and Mishler (1986) cites the four 'Rs' from Katz (1983) (representativeness, reactivity, reliability, replicability). As in qualitative inquiry more broadly, a variety of terms have been used to discuss the quality of qualitative interviewing, with debates over how researchers establish the 'validity' of their work – that is, the truth, trustworthiness, or accuracy of their claims – central. Sources for determining the quality of qualitative research have generally been derived from accounts of practice (descriptions), and theoretical traditions (prescriptions) (Freeman et al., 2007). In accounts of practice, showing how 'evidence' is 'credible' by 'examining its source and the procedures by which it was produced' (Schwandt, 2001: 82) has been important for qualitative inquirers using any form of data, including field notes of observations, documentary sources, and interviews.

Methodological texts on qualitative interviewing frequently provide guidelines for effective interviewing – signifying the importance of the procedures by which data are generated for the assessment of quality. For example, Briggs emphasizes what researchers do in relation to the quality of interview practice. In his critique of interview research, Briggs (1986: ch. 5) – writing from a sociolinguistic perspective – suggests specific 'phases' for research design that researchers might follow in order to conduct interview research that is methodologically rigorous:

1. learn how to ask questions in ways that may be understood by participants (e.g. conduct preliminary field work to understand the cultural and linguistic norms used in the community);
2. design an appropriate methodology;
3. reflexivity in the research process (e.g. analysis of interviewing procedures; member checks, microanalyses of interview data; multiple methods of data generation); and
4. analysis of interview data that conceptualizes interviews as metacommunicative events. (Briggs, 1986: 93–111)

In this book, now over two decades old, Briggs was adamant that a methodological overhaul of interview methods was long overdue, and that it must be theoretically founded. Briggs has more recently discussed the

political implications of researchers' methodological decisions with respect to interview research (Briggs, 2002, 2007).

Mishler (1986) has been an advocate for the use of qualitative interviewing as a research method in the human sciences; proposing an alternative model of interviewing to that of standardized survey interviews. Arguing that critiques of narrative interview research are based on false epistemological assumptions about the production of knowledge, Mishler (1986: 112) claims that the 'critical issue is not the determination of one singular and absolute "truth" but the assessment of the relative plausibility of an interpretation when compared with other specific and potentially plausible alternative interpretations.'

Kvale (1996: 145) has summarized some of the 'best practices' frequently recommended in methodological literature by suggesting six criteria for judging the quality of an interview:

- The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.
- The shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subjects' answers, the better.
- The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.
- The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.
- The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subjects' answers in the course of the interview.
- The interview is 'self-communicating' – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations. (Kvale, 1996: 145)

Along with other writers on qualitative interviewing, Kvale (1996: ch. 13) emphasizes the need for researchers to demonstrate their expertise, or 'craftsmanship' as researchers, proposing that 'the quality of the craftsmanship results in products with knowledge claims that are so powerful and convincing in their own right that they, so to say, carry the validation with them, like a strong piece of art' (p. 252).

Discussions of 'quality' in interviewing encompass how interview questions are asked in practice, how studies are designed and conducted, and how interviewing as a method fits with the underlying theoretical and epistemological assumptions about knowledge production. To summarize, methodological writing concerning quality in relation to qualitative interviewing focuses on four inter-related facets of research, namely whether (1) the use of interview data is an appropriate means to inform the research questions posed; (2) the interaction facilitated by interviewers within the actual interview generated 'quality' data – for example, interviewers asked questions in effective ways to elicit the data required to respond to research questions, and both speakers adequately understood one another's intended meanings; (3) 'quality' has been addressed in research design, the conduct of the research project, and the analysis, interpretation and representation of research findings; and (4) the methods and strategies used to demonstrate the quality of interpretations and representations of data are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings for the study.

Critiques of interviewing

Numerous authors from a range of disciplines and perspectives have critiqued qualitative researchers' use of the interview method as a transparent means to elicit data that will inform understandings of the meanings that participants make of their lived experiences (see for example, Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Potter and Hepburn, 2005). As Walford (2007) points out, embedded in one form of qualitative inquiry – ethnography – is a fundamental assumption that interviews alone are an insufficient form of data to study social life. He mentions four key problems relevant to the ways in which research participants might respond to interviewers' questions. These include 'misinformation, evasion, lies and fronts' (Douglas, 1976, cited by Walford, 2007: 147); commenting that even setting aside the

> epistemological question of whether or not there is any ultimate 'reality' to be communicated, the interviewee may have incomplete knowledge and faulty memory. They will always have subjective perceptions that will be related to their own past experiences and current conditions. At best, interviewees will only give what they are prepared to reveal about their subjective perceptions of events and opinions. These perceptions and opinions will change over time, and according to circumstance. They may be at some considerable distance from 'reality' as others might see it. (Walford, 2007: 147)

In addition to epistemological questions about the merits of interview data, and the various ways that interviewees might possibly thwart researchers' purposes in generating 'truthful' or 'credible' data, Potter and Hepburn (2005: 281) argue that there are a number of 'contingent and necessary problems' to do with the design and conduct of interview studies and the analysis and reporting of findings. These authors argue that the interview must be studied as an 'interactional object' (p. 281), and are proponents of greater use of naturalistic data in research in psychology. A range of scholars take issue with their argument (see Smith et al., 2005), similarly to other scholars who have provided well-reasoned arguments for how the use of interviews for social research might be theorized and modified, rather than discarded altogether (see for example, Briggs, 1986, 2007; Hammersley, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 2004; Mishler, 1986; Scheurich, 1995).

Yet, I have found that novice researchers still struggle with making sense of how 'theory' relates to the interview 'method.' A key step for novice interviewers is learning how to use interviews in ways that are consonant with the epistemological and theoretical assumptions underlying a study's design. This entails designing a study and learning how to generate data for analysis that will inform their research questions. As one way of approaching the issue of the theory-method connection in interview research, over a period of years, I have developed a typology of conceptions of qualitative interviews (see Table 1). While I realize that there is a risk of missing elements in constructing a typology, and over-simplifying complex ideas, I offer this as one way of assisting

novice researchers through the maze of advice literature that abounds with respect to qualitative interviews. By recognizing the assumptions about knowledge production that underlie each of these conceptions of interviews, novice interviewers are better able to consider the kinds of strategies that are implied for ensuring that they have addressed issues of 'quality' in both interviewing practice, and the research study as a whole. In Table 1, I have summarized key points relating to the following questions with respect to six conceptions of interviewing that I label here as: neo-positivist, romantic, constructionist, postmodern, transformative and decolonizing. These include:

1. What are the theoretical assumptions underlying this conception of interviewing? What kinds of research questions are made possible from this perspective?
2. What methodological issues are highlighted in the literature in qualitative inquiry with respect to this conception?
3. What are criticisms of this conception of interviewing and/or research?
4. What kinds of approaches have researchers documented to establish the 'quality' of research using interviews from this conceptualization?

I have included references when I have used specific ideas drawn from particular scholars' work, and I follow Table 1 with a brief discussion of the scholarly strands that I have used to support the use of these particular labels.

Although the format of a table suggests clear demarcations between different approaches to interviewing, in my reading of the literature, I have found this not to be the case. The typology, then, should be read as suggestive, rather than prescriptive, and publications of qualitative inquiries show that researchers blur boundaries, mix methods, and draw on diverse theories in conducting their work. As noted earlier, I offer this typology as a way *into* the literature for *novice* researchers (cf. typologies developed by Crotty, 1998, and Lather, 2004, in introductory texts used in teaching qualitative research methods). By identifying broader thematic tendencies in methodological literature on qualitative interviews, I hope that beginning researchers might locate areas of scholarly work that align with their assumptions about using interview for the purpose of social research that will direct their work further.

Discussion

A NEO-POSITIVIST CONCEPTION OF THE INTERVIEW

Much of the advice literature on qualitative interviewing assumes that the interview subject has an inner or authentic self, not necessarily publicly visible, which may be revealed through careful questioning by an attentive and sensitive interviewer who contributes minimally to the talk (e.g., Foddy, 1993). In this approach, the skillful interviewer asks good questions, while carefully minimizing bias and researcher influences through taking a neutral role. By taking this approach in the interview interaction, it is thought that quality data will be generated from which valid findings may be produced.

TABLE 1   *A typology of conceptions of qualitative interviews*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
'Neo-positivist' (Alvesson, 2003) RQs: What are participants' beliefs, perspectives, opinions, and attitudes concerning x? What are participants' experiences in relation to x?	Interviewee (IE) is able to access interior and exterior states and describe these accurately through language. IRs and IEs can have a common understanding of the research topic and interview questions. Contextual influences on the generation of data may be minimized. It is possible to minimize or avoid influencing IEs'	Interviewer (IR) takes neutral role in interview, and does not express his/her own perspectives on research topic. IR minimizes researcher influence (i.e. bias) via use of 'open' and 'non-leading' questions. IR asks 'good' questions in a sequence that generates 'valid' and	Research participants do not necessarily do what they say they do. Research participants might not tell the truth, and may deliberately mislead the researcher. The researcher's subjectivities and beliefs may bias the data through the way questions are sequenced and formulated. Analyses and representations of interview data frequently do not account for the	*Pilot studies and ethnographic observations. *The researcher uses multiple methods of data collection in order to check accuracy of IE's statements (e.g., interviews may be supplemented with observational data, naturally occurring data; interviews may be sought with different people within a social setting in order to gain multiple viewpoints or check details from prior interviews); *triangulation*. *The researcher uses *multiple interviews* with participants, rather than one-shot interviews, in order to confirm the accuracy and stability of IE's reports over time. *The researcher demonstrates the *longevity* of fieldwork in order to establish the credibility of IE's reports. *The *bias* of the researcher may be eliminated by asking questions that do not lead the IE; questions are asked in a particular sequence, usually from general to specific. *The researcher may use the process of *member checking* of transcriptions and interpretations with research participants to demonstrate that he/she has developed an adequate understanding of the phenomenon investigated. *The researcher makes his or her research process accessible and transparent by documenting it in a detailed way that may be replicated by others (e.g. inclusion of interview guide in final report; searching for discrepant data; supporting

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TABLE 1   *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
	answers to interview questions.	reliable data about the research topic.	researcher's part in the co-construction of data.	assertions with sufficient data); *audit trail; transparency of research process.*
'Romantic' (Alvesson, 2003) RQs: What are participants' beliefs, perspectives, opinions, and attitudes concerning x? 'What are participants' experiences in relation to x?	Interviewee (IE) is able to access interior and exterior states and describe these accurately through language. Through development of rapport, IRs develop detailed understandings of the IEs' perspectives about the research topic and interview questions.	Interviewer (IR) establishes genuine rapport with IE, demonstrated by a trusting and caring relationship between IR and IE. IR is friendly, open, honest and forthcoming with IEs; responds to IEs' questions.	Conversational interviewing techniques conceal the asymmetrical nature of the IR-IE relationship and interview structure. Facilitation of friendly conversations between IR and IE may generate confessional detail from the IE that may be used in manipulative ways by researchers.	*The researcher uses multiple methods of data collection in order to verify IE's statements (e.g. interviews may be supplemented with observational data, naturally occurring data; interviews may be sought with different people within a social setting in order to gain multiple viewpoints or check details from prior interviews); *triangulation.* *The researcher uses *multiple interviews* with participants, rather than one-shot interviews, in order to establish ongoing relationships with participants that may extend beyond the research period. *The researcher demonstrates the *longevity* of fieldwork in order to establish that he/she has established rapport with participants that leads to generation of quality data. The researcher is self-consciously aware of his/her *subjectivities* in relation to the research participants and the research topic, and explores how these relate to the research findings in representations of research (*subjectivity statements,* inclusion of accounts concerning challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
		IR asks 'good' questions in a sequence that generates self-disclosure by both IR and IE. Greater reliance on conversational interviewing techniques.	It is not possible to access the 'authentic' self of research participants.	researchers in the research process in final reports, demonstrations of *researcher reflexivity*). *The researcher is sensitive to ethical issues in the research process, and may use the process of *member checking* of transcriptions and interpretations with research participants to demonstrate that he/she has developed an adequate understanding of the phenomenon investigated; participants' disagreements with the researcher's interpretations may be incorporated into the final report, or inform the research design (e.g. further research may be conducted on issues highlighted by participants). *The researcher is sensitive to how the sequencing of questions impacts data generation, as well as the need to pursue sensitive or difficult topics within the interview. *The researcher makes his or her research process accessible and transparent by documenting it in a detailed way so readers have enough information to find the report plausible and credible (e.g. inclusion of interview guide in final report; searching for discrepant data: supporting assertions with sufficient data); *audit trail; researcher journals; transparency of research process*. *The researcher's contributions to the interview talk may be included in the final report.

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Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
'Constructionist' (Silverman, 2001) RQs. How are interview accounts organized and socially constructed by interviewers and interviewees? What are the conversational resources used by IRs and IEs to characterize and account for research topics?	Interview data are co-constructed by IR and IE. Interview data represent situated accountings on a particular research topic and do not provide a means of accessing interior or exterior states of affairs of speakers or access to 'authentic selves' (Baker, 1997).	Audio- and video-recordings of interview data are transcribed in detail in order to analyse how data are co-constructed by speakers (e.g. pauses, repairs, laughter and turn-taking may be relevant features for analysis). *How data are constructed by speakers*	Analytic focus is too narrow. Findings of analyses are trivial. There are difficulties in reconciling investigations of 'how' data are constructed with 'what' topics are being discussed in research projects (Silverman, 2001). Focus on detailed transcription represents a positivist approach to research that aims for a 'full' and 'final' transcription.	*Audio- and video-tapes of transcriptions are frequently made available* to audiences by researchers; transcriptions are seen as theoretical constructs rather than 'holistic' representations of data. *The IR's participation in the interview talk is subject to the same kind of analytic focus as talk generated by the IE, and the IR's talk is included in the final report. *How speakers orient to the 'categories' implied in the interview questions may be a topic of analysis. This exposes how researchers' and participants' demonstrate their understanding of the topic and questions presented. *Group data analysis is encouraged via *data sessions*. *Naturally-occurring data* is considered to be a valuable source of data in order to understand how participants make sense of topics of research (e.g., recordings of naturally occurring events might supplement interviews with participants of those events).

TABLE 1 *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
	Interview data may be analysed for how IR & IE make sense of a research topic, construct narratives, as well as possible ways of discussing topics (or 'culture in action') (Baker, 2000, 2002).	becomes a topic of analysis, and informs analysis of *what* is discussed (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 2004). IRs and IEs rely on ordinary conversational skills to do interview talk. All interview data may be analysed for the conversational		

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TABLE 1   (*Continued*)

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
		'action' being performed by speakers in accounting for his/her cultural knowledge about a research topic (e.g., praising, justification, excusing, complaining).		
'Postmodern' (Fontana and Prokos, 2007) What are the multiple meanings expressed by	Interview data are situated performances of selves co-constructed by IR and IE.	Reliance on multiple means of interviewing, including conversational, semi-structured and open-ended, life history, online, and/or interactive interview techniques.	Approach is critiqued by some researchers for not being evidence-based, replicable, objective, and generalizable.	*The researcher is self-consciously aware of his/her *subjectivities* in relation to the research participants and the research topic (*reflexivity*), and explores how these relate to the research findings in representations of research, as well as the ways in which it may be uncomfortable (Pillow, 2003) (*subjectivity statements*, inclusion of challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by researchers in the research process in reports of studies).

TABLE 1 *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
participants in the social setting of an interview concerning x topic? What multiple and contradictory subject positions are occupied by IRs and IEs in interview contexts?	Data produced represent partial and fragmented aspects of non-unified selves. Both IE's and IR's part in the interview are subject to analysis and representation, and may draw on critical and autoethnographic work. Impossibility of fully categorizing and representing data from research interviews (Scheurich, 1995)	Creative analytic practices (e.g. fiction, poetry, drama) may be used to analyse and represent data (Richardson, 1999).	Results in narcissistic and subjective reports. Impossibility of achieving consensus of understanding as to what data mean (Eisner, 1997).	*Researchers aim to dialogue and engage with audiences (often beyond academic settings) in ways that are challenging and provocative, and call upon readers/listeners/participants to consider topics in different ways (*engagement and interaction with audiences*). *Emphasis on reflexive, dialogic, deconstructive and multiple representations of interview data using non-linear and fragmented texts, and arts-based inquiry methods. *Data representations complicate audience members' understandings of topics. *Use of aesthetic criteria for judgment of quality of performance (e.g., artistic merit, beauty).

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TABLE 1   (Continued)

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
'Transformative' (Wolgemuth and Donohue, 2006) RQ: How might IRs and IEs challenge their beliefs and assumptions about x topic through an 'inquiry of discomfort' (Wolgemuth and Donohue, 2006)? How do participants engage critically and reflectively with topics relevant to their daily lives? (e.g., Freeman, 2006)	The IR *intentionally* aims to challenge and change the understandings of IEs. Research contributes to emancipatory and social justice aims in that it assists in transformation of the parties to the talk, as well as generating data for research purposes.	IR may work in collaboration with IEs to design, conduct and present the research project. IR 'dialogues' with IE to develop transformed and/or enlightened understandings of research topic. Interpretations of data produce critical readings of	Researchers do not have the right to impose their agenda on others in the research process and may have limited understanding of the issues of relevance to the participants. There may be a disjuncture between the researcher's perspectives on an issue and those of the participant. This may be interpreted by the researcher as false consciousness on the part of the participant, thereby	*Ensuring authentic input and access to full participation for all participants in all aspects of research process and representation of findings. *Sensitivity to the participants' understandings of issues: what they see as relevant topics for research, and what is helpful for communities engaged in research project. *The researcher is self-consciously aware of his/her *subjectivities* in relation to the research participants and the research topic (*reflexivity*), and explores how these relate to the research findings in representations of research (*subjectivity statements*, inclusion of challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by researchers in the research process in reports of studies). *Communicative and Pragmatic validation* (validity of work is tested in dialogue with others, and in terms of resulting actions producing desired results) (Kvale, 1996).

TABLE 1 *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
	Two strands: • *Therapeutic* strand focuses on 'healing' of the patient (Kvale, 1999) • *Critical strand* focuses on transformative dialogue.	cultural discourses that challenge normative discourses.	pointing to an underlying asymmetry in the research process, with the researcher retaining the right to make final interpretations (Kvale, 2006). Therapeutic interviewing blurs the distinction between 'therapy' and 'research.' Difficult to ascertain how, if, and when authentic transformation has been achieved by participants in process.	

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TABLE 1   *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
'Decolonizing' (Smith, 1999) RQ. What are the life stories and experiences of indigenous peoples?	Research, historically, has been used to the detriment of indigenous peoples. Impetus for research is to contribute to restorative justice for indigenous communities, and contributes to the agendas of decolonization, transformation, mobilization and healing of indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999: 116).	IR is well-informed of historical impetus for decolonizing methods, and understands and is sensitive to cultural traditions of particular community that he/she is studying. The IR, with IE, generates the kind of talk that is deemed appropriate and valued in a particular	Research is not sufficiently 'scientific' or 'academic.' Indigenous ways of knowing may be seen as contradictory to Western ways of knowing and doing 'research.' Researchers may be seen to be doing work to serve the academy, rather than serving the needs of indigenous communities.	*The researcher is self-consciously aware of his/her subjectivities in relation to the research participants and the research topic (*reflexivity*), and explores how these relate to the research findings in representations of research (*subjectivity statements*, inclusion of challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by researchers in the research process in reports of studies). *The researcher is self-consciously aware of his/her relationship to the indigenous community that is being studied, and the impact that his/her positionalities may have on the conduct of the research, and representation of findings. *Findings from research are shared by the researcher in respectful ways with and for the benefit of the communities studied, and in ways that may be understood by community members. *The researchers is aware that release of some research findings may have negative impacts for the community studied, and works actively to ensure that this does not take place (the well-being of the community is deemed more important than the publication of research findings).

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
	Research includes community action research based around claims, and advanced indigenous research and studies programs in academic institutions (Smith, 1999: ch. 7).	indigenous community given the requirements of gender, status, and age of the IR/IE. Analytic methods and representations draw on emancipatory and critical theoretical perspectives, and may involve community participation. Alternative representational		

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TABLE 1   *(Continued)*

Conception of qualitative interview and possible research questions	Theoretical assumptions about social research	Methodological issues highlighted in literature	Criticisms of this approach to interviewing	Approaches to ensuring quality of research
		strategies may include testimonies, story telling and oral histories, writing involving language revitalization, poetry, fiction, film and art (Denzin et al., 2008).		
		Data analysis and interpretation is respectful of indigenous peoples, their knowledge, spirituality, and practices.		

Neo-positivist assumptions about interview data are clearly evident in much published research, particularly in research that uses mixed methods design. In contrast to studies that have used standardized surveys, however, one is likely to see the inclusion of semi-structured interviews that use open, rather than closed questions. While researchers represent the results of standardized surveys numerically in the form of various statistical analyses, researchers using a neo-positivist conception of qualitative interviews are likely to represent findings in the form of themes supported by extracts from interview transcripts, sometimes complemented with models or diagrams. Data are commonly coded and categorized (e.g. via ethnographic, phenomenological, or grounded theory procedures) to provide accounts of cultural groups, and generate substantive theories concerning research topics.

As noted in Table 1, establishing the truth and accuracy of reports provided by participants is of paramount concern, along with showing how the researcher has minimized his/her influence on the generation of data. Thus we see in this approach to quality a focus on demonstrating that the data generated (i.e. interview transcripts) provides evidence that is credible through showing that (1) participants were reliable and accurate witnesses, and (2) the researcher was a reliable and accurate witness and reporter of the data gathered for the study. The credibility of the findings is established by demonstrating in research reports that the researcher has gathered sufficient information in field work (through longevity in the field, use of multiple data sources and checking interpretations with sources) to know what is 'really going on', or what participants really think, believe and do.

A ROMANTIC CONCEPTION OF INTERVIEWING

The assumption that interviewers can minimize their influence on the generation of data has been questioned for several decades (see Mishler, 1986; Oakley, 1981, for examples). In contrast to a neo-positivist conception of interviewing, a romantic perspective recognizes, if not celebrates, the place of the researcher in the study (e.g., Douglas, 1985). This has led to methodological writing on qualitative interviews that proposes a 'romantic' conception of interviewing (Alvesson, 2003; see also Silverman's, 2001 discussion of 'emotionalist' approaches to research) in which the interviewer (IR) is open about his/her interests in the research topic, and will readily express this within the interview setting when called upon by the interviewee (IE).

In contrast to the neo-positivist conception of the interview, when used for the purposes of social research, the IR-IE relationship in the romantic interview is one in which genuine rapport and trust is established by the IR in order to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing. A romantic conceptualization of interviewing will lead the interviewer to work to establish rapport and empathic connection with the interviewee in order to produce intimate conversation between the IR and IE in which the IR plays an active role. This generates IE's self revelations and 'true' confessions which will

generate data to produce in-depth interpretations of participants' life worlds. Data are frequently coded and categorized to produce thematic accounts; or subject to various narrative analytic methods to produce evocative narrative accounts concerning the participants' life worlds. Research draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives for data analysis, such as feminist, phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and psycho-social theories.

As noted in Table 1, researchers taking a romantic conception to interviewing strive to demonstrate that they are reflexive researchers, aware of their subjective positions in relation to the research participants. IRs also demonstrate how they have established rapport with participants and generated quality data. In this conception of interviewing, the burden of proof for establishing quality has shifted from showing both the participants and researchers to be reliable and accurate witnesses, to emphasizing the researcher's accounts of his/her place within the research process (in the generation of data, research design, and analysis, interpretation and representation of findings), and relationship to the participants of the study.

Similarly to the neo-positivist conception of interviewing, a feature in the romantic conception of interviewing is the assumption that researchers are able to access the authentic selves of interview subjects via interview talk. This view has been questioned by researchers taking constructionist and postmodernist perspectives to interviews. Below I show how a constructionist conception of interviewing rejects access to the authentic self via interview data in favor of a 'locally produced subject' in relation to a particular interviewer. Here, *how* the interaction unfolds becomes a topic of study in its own right, with researchers interested in the documentation of 'the way in which accounts "are part of the world they describe"' (Silverman, 2001: 95).

A CONSTRUCTIONIST CONCEPTION OF THE INTERVIEW

From a constructionist perspective, the interview is a social setting in which data are co-constructed by an IR and IE to generate situated accountings and possible ways of talking about research topics (Silverman, 2001). Data provides access to particular versions of affairs produced by interlocutors on specific occasions. Baker (2002: 781) explains that rather than analyzing interview talk as 'reports' corresponding to matters outside the interview – that is, what people actually believe, observe, or do – if treated as 'accounts,' we can investigate the 'sense-making work through which participants engage in explaining, attributing, justifying, describing, and otherwise finding possible sense or orderliness in the various events, people, places, and courses of action they talk about.'

From this perspective, 'how' interview data are co-constructed by speakers becomes a topic for study, rather than merely a transparent resource for discussing particular research questions. Some of the scholars working in this tradition draw on ethnomethodology, which teaches us that when people talk to one another, they are also performing actions (for example, clarifying, justifying, informing, arguing, disagreeing, praising, excusing, insulting, complimenting,

and so forth). In interview talk, this means that in any sequence of utterances, speakers show how they have oriented to and made sense of other speakers' prior talk.

While methodological issues may be foregrounded in this approach to the examination of interview data, Baker (2002: 792) has argued that the study of people's sense-making practices in interview talk – just as in any other social setting – provides access to how members of society assemble 'what comes to be seen as rationality, morality, or social order,' and locates culture in action (Baker, 2000). Data may be analysed through inspection of both structural and topical features. For example, Holstein and Gubrium have promoted the view that researchers can usefully study both 'how' interview interaction is constructed in addition to 'what' is said (see also Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 2004; Silverman, 2001: 97–8). A growing number of researchers have used a constructionist approach to the interview, and draw on analytic methods from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, membership categorization analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and sociolinguistics (for a review, see Roulston, 2006).

A POSTMODERN CONCEPTION OF THE INTERVIEW

Denzin promotes a fourth version of the research interview, which I call here the 'postmodern' interview (see Fontana and Frey, 2005; Fontana and Prokos, 2007). Denzin (2001: 24) has conceptualized the interview as a 'vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society,' rather than a 'method for gathering information.' In contrast to an authentic self produced in an interview with the skilful interviewer as in the neo-positivist and romantic models, this interview subject has no essential self, but provides – in relationship with a particular interviewer – various non-unitary performances of selves (Denzin, 2001: 28–9). Indeed, Scheurich (1995: 249) writes that '[t]he indeterminate totality of the interview always exceeds and transgresses our attempts to capture and categorize.'

Data generated in the interviews can be part of work that uses creative analytic practices (CAPs) (Richardson, 1994, 1999, 2002) to represent findings, such as ethnodrama (Mienczakowski, 2001), plays (Saldāna, 2003), fiction (Angrosino, 1998; Banks and Banks, 1998; Clough, 2002); performance ethnographies (Denzin, 2003a, 2003b), readers' theaters (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995), poetry (Faulkner, 2005), and film (Trinh, 1989). This kind of work engages with audiences in new ways, often outside the academy. In Denzin's conception of this kind of work, a major aim for this 'new interpretive form, a new form of the interview, what I call the reflexive, dialogic, or performative interview' (2001: 24), is to 'bring people together' and 'criticize the world the way it is, and offer suggestions about how it could be different' (p. 24).

The application of postmodern theoretical lenses to view interview data and the use of alternative modes of representation has been both critiqued and celebrated (Gergen and Gergen, 2000). For example, in the USA, the National Research Council's (NRC) report *Scientific Research in Education* (2002: 25)

rejected work from a postmodernist position that posited the impossibility of generating 'objective or trustworthy knowledge.' Instead, the NRC reinforced a particular perspective of science as evidence-based, replicable, objective, and generalizable. Yet, such critiques have not dampened the enthusiasm of qualitative researchers across disciplines for alternative ways of doing and presenting research (see for example, Gale and Wyatt, 2006). Data analysis methods draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives, including critical, poststructural and postmodern theories in order to represent multiple and fragmented 'selves', deconstructive readings, and non-linear narratives. Representations may be partial and fragmented, and reject the notion of a unified self.

As noted in Table 1, engaging with audiences in ways that provoke thought and dialogue – if not action – are central to establishing the quality of work conducted from this perspective. As discussed earlier in the section on the romantic conception of interviewing, explanations of the part played by the researcher/interviewer in the research process are emphasized in this approach – thus, the autoethnographic and self-reflexive 'I' is often featured in reports.

For researchers using a postmodern conception of interviewing, an underlying assumption is that representations of findings are always partial, arbitrary, and situated, rather than unitary, final, and holistic. Rather than achieving comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon of investigation, researchers attempt to open up spaces for new ways of thinking, being, and doing. As a result, judgments about the quality of the work are in large part determined by readers and audience members – and may be based on aesthetic criteria such as the artistic merit of the performance (see for example, Eisner, 1997; Saldaña, 2006). The effectiveness of the finished work in instigating dialogue and provoking interaction among audiences may also be used to judge the quality of the research.

A transformative conception of interviewing

In that Denzin's proposal of a 'new interpretive form' for the research interview challenges its audiences to reconsider the world in new and critical ways, and promotes a conception of a research interview as 'dialogical,' there are some overlaps with the openly transformational intent in the next conception of the interview outlined below. I use the term 'transformative' to denote work in which the researcher *intentionally* aims to challenge and change the understandings of participants. Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006: 1024), for example, argue for conducting 'emancipatory narrative research with the explicit intent of transforming participants' lives by opening up new subjective possibilities.' This work contributes to emancipatory and social justice work in that it assists in transformation of the parties to the talk, as well as generating data for research purposes. From this perspective, the IR dialogues with the IE and may work in collaboration to design, conduct and present the research project. The IR and IE develop 'transformed' or 'enlightened' understandings as an outcome of dialogical interaction, and interpretations of data produce critical readings that challenge normative discourses.

The transformative interview has been discussed from two perspectives – in research emanating from an emancipatory or critical agenda (such as action research); and in work in which the 'therapeutic' interview has been applied to social research (Kvale, 1999). The distinction between these two perspectives of the transformative interview lies in the conception of the change made possible. In the first perspective, the transformative potential for participants cannot be predetermined, 'since people's meanings and prejudices can only be brought forth at the time of articulation' (Freeman, personal communication, 13 June, 2006). In the therapeutic interview, change involves healing of the patient. According to Kvale (1999: 110), '[t]he purpose of the therapeutic interview is the facilitation of changes in the patient, and the knowledge acquired in the interview interaction is a means for instigating personality changes.' Kvale has advocated for the use of the psychoanalytic interview as a means of generating knowledge; and outlines a lengthy tradition in the field of psychology in which 'some of its most lasting and relevant knowledge of the human situation has been produced as a side effect of helping patients change' (1999: 110). A further distinction might be made in that while in some incarnations the transformative interview is explicitly dialogic (and both IR and IE contribute to and are transformed by the interaction); in others it appears that some researchers work to transform others. Analytic methods and representations draw on critical, emancipatory, and psychoanalytic theoretical perspectives including critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis.

The key difference, then, between a 'transformative' interview and other models described earlier is found in the rationale for the researcher's selection of the interview for research purposes. In this kind of interview, the relationship between the IR and IE seems to be less asymmetrical, with 'transformative dialogue' enacted in the interview interaction. Thus, from this perspective, the researcher's intent is to conduct emancipatory or transformative work through the use of interviewing as a method. Similarly to the postmodern conception of interviewing, researchers working from a transformative perspective aim to challenge their audiences. However, these researchers go a step further, and purposefully challenge themselves and the participants of studies to think critically about the topics of investigation. This, then, is a central focus for demonstrating quality – that researchers have worked to communicate with participants and audiences, and have been successful in fostering productive dialogue and action contributing to social justice goals.

Kvale's (1996) proposals for *communicative* and *pragmatic validation* (that is, the validity of work is tested in (1) dialogue with others, and in terms of (2) resulting actions producing desired results) is helpful in considering how quality might be assessed in this form of interview. Similarly to the postmodern conception of interviewing, how research participants, communities, and audiences respond to and take up the findings of research is crucial in the assessment of quality for the transformative interview.

Nevertheless, writing on the transformative conception of interviewing is still sparse (although, see Freeman, 2006, for an example), and we have yet to see how this approach to data generation is taken up, adapted, and used for the purpose of doing social research. There are particular groups, however, who are likely to reject the notion that researchers might attempt to instigate dialogues of change with research participants in interviews. Some, perhaps, would reject direct involvement in research altogether. I speak specifically of 'decolonizing' approaches to research, which I discuss in the next section.

A DECOLONIZING CONCEPTION OF INTERVIEWING

When Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 98) writes that decolonization of indigenous peoples 'is now recognized as a long-term process involving bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power,' she is also writing about research practices. In her influential book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith shows how western research practices that have objectified and endangered indigenous peoples throughout the world are an integral part of European colonialism. These practices, Smith asserts, have largely been experienced negatively by those who have been the objects (see also Stronach, 2006, who addresses imperialism as a contemporary and continuing phenomenon in research). Negative experiences with whites – research included – have led many indigenous people to mistrust non-indigenous peoples, researchers, and research itself (Smith, 1999).

According to Smith (1999: 116–18), the indigenous research agenda involves the processes of decolonization, transformation, mobilization, and healing. She writes, that these 'are not goals or ends in themselves,' but 'processes which connect, inform and clarify the tensions between the local, the regional and the global ... that can be incorporated into practices and methodologies' (Smith, 1999: 116). Further, she asserts that indigenous peoples are moving through the conditions of survival, recovery, development, and self-determination (p. 116). Thus any researcher planning to conduct research with indigenous peoples must thoroughly consider the issues outlined above, realizing that to be 'culturally sensitive' and to follow ethical codes of research conduct simply may not be enough.

Smith (1999: 139) writes that researchers with 'outsider' status are particularly problematic in indigenous communities, given that indigenous voices have often been silenced and marginalized by non-indigenous experts (see Smith, 1999: 177–8 for models for culturally appropriate research by non-indigenous researchers). In some communities, research may only be conducted by indigenous researchers. Even so, indigenous researchers with 'insider' status in a community still face particular challenges in conducting research, given that often they are trained by and must meet standards for research required by academic communities that are in tension with those of indigenous communities. What then, might a 'decolonizing interview' look like? Smith does not write

specifically about a decolonizing conception of the interview; however, given the larger agenda that she articulates, together with the examples she provides, I draw pointers that must be considered in light of the particular issues relevant to different indigenous communities around the world.

Prior to the interview, and throughout the research process, interviewers observe culturally specific ethical protocols required by indigenous communities to gain entry to the community, as well as culturally specific protocols of respect, and practices of reciprocity with those involved in research (Smith, 1999: 118–20, 136).[2] This might include consideration of possible negative outcomes of the research, and worked to eliminate these (Smith, 1999: 173), as well as an awareness of the potential for abuses of power in the researcher-researched relationship (Smith, 1999: 176). In the interview the IR, with the IE, generates the kind of talk that is deemed appropriate and valued in a particular indigenous community given the requirements of gender, status, age and other relevant social locations of the IR/IE. Indigenous knowledge, practices and spirituality are taken into account by the IR in the design and conduct of the interview. Data analysis and interpretation are respectful of indigenous peoples and their knowledge and practices, and may incorporate specific methods to involve members of the indigenous community. Analytic methods and representations may draw on emancipatory and critical theoretical perspectives, and may involve community participation. Alternative representational strategies may include testimonies, storytelling and oral histories, and alternative representational practices including poetry, fiction, film or art. Findings from research are shared by the researcher in respectful ways with and for the benefit of the communities studied, and in ways that may be understood by community members.

As noted in Table 1, a key emphasis of decolonizing methods, including interviews, is that they contribute to restorative justice for indigenous peoples. Thus, quality issues in this kind of work are intertwined with the ethical responsibility of the researcher to do just research for the good of the indigenous community, and to do no harm. Conventional notions of 'objectivity,' 'validity,' and 'reliability' make little sense if applied to this work. This, of course, may present obstacles to the advancement of indigenous researchers who work in academic institutions, and whose work is assessed using traditional notions of academic rigor. Yet, there is a growing body of work from indigenous scholars from all over the world that talks back, contradicts, and produces new understandings that counter the findings produced by non-indigenous researchers over many decades. The work of indigenous scholars is supplemented by that of non-indigenous researchers who have selected to work with indigenous communities.

Conclusions

In this article I have sketched multiple and overlapping conceptions of qualitative interviews, and discussed how these imply different approaches to

demonstrating quality. By presenting a typology of conceptions of qualitative interviewing, I hope to prompt further discussion about the possible ways that 'quality' might be demonstrated by researchers who use qualitative interviews. Table 1 addressed a series of questions, including:

1. What are the theoretical assumptions underlying this conception of interviewing? What kinds of research questions are made possible from this perspective?
2. What methodological issues are highlighted in the literature in qualitative inquiry with respect to this conception?
3. What are criticisms of this conception of interviewing and/or research?
4. What kinds of approaches have researchers documented to establish the 'quality' of research using interviews from this conceptualization?

By reviewing a variety of theoretical conceptions of qualitative interviewing, I hope to have provided some insight into two key issues. First, different theoretical conceptions of interviewing allow for an array of possible research questions. Second, different theoretical conceptions of interviewing imply a variety of methods for demonstrating (1) the 'quality' of interview interaction, and (2) the 'quality' of the research design, analysis, interpretation and representation of research findings. By carefully considering how 'quality' might be demonstrated in both the generation of data, and the overall design, conduct and reporting of qualitative studies, researchers might more effectively deal with the array of critiques posed concerning the use of interview data for research purposes.

Researchers' theoretical assumptions about qualitative interviews have implications for how research interviews are structured, the kinds of research questions made possible, the kinds of interview questions posed, how data might be analysed and represented, how research projects are designed and conducted, and how the quality of research is judged by the communities of practice in which work is situated. On one hand, we can visualize interviewers who aim to take a detached and neutral role in relation to research participants, aiming for the generation of 'objective' knowledge concerning what people 'really believe and experience'; while on the other hand, we can envision interviewers who position themselves as co-constructors of knowledge, striving to develop collaborative relationships with interviewees to initiate some form of social change. There are many other possible positions. While there is much debate with respect to the limitations and merits of each of the perspectives to interviewing outlined in this article, by seriously considering how different theoretical stances on qualitative interviewing treat the design and conduct of interviews, the analyses and representations of findings, and the demonstration of quality (Freeman et al., 2007), novice qualitative researchers can make informed decisions concerning research design and methods, what kinds of research questions might be posed, how interview questions are formulated, and appropriate ways to analyse and represent interview data.

For those of us who teach qualitative research methods, further thought might be given to how we might assist our students to consider the implications of the many choices they must make throughout the design and conduct

of a study. Quality research is much more than simply selecting methods and following recipes. By helping students to thoughtfully consider the epistemological assumptions about knowledge production, and what kinds of evidence might be used to warrant claims, I argue that novice researchers will be able to more effectively design and conduct studies of quality.

NOTES

1. This reliance on interview data is not solely students' responsibility. The structure of the course work in qualitative methods in the university in which I teach emphasizes the use of qualitative interview data. This is not an uncommon view, and is reflected in the proliferation of books and articles on qualitative interviewing – to which this is another contribution.
2. See also Smith (2005) and Bishop (2005) for suggestions concerning researcher conduct and models of decolonizing research in the Maori context.

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