

A novice reflects on The Research Interview: Reflective Practice and Reflexivity in Research Processes

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121

Steve Mann intended this book for the novice and experienced qualitative researcher, with the aim “to raise awareness and sensitivity to the range of issues inherent in the use of qualitative interviews” (p. 28), particularly since Mann believes that “studies require a more reflexive treatment of the language of the interview” (p. 271). In this book, the experienced qualitative researcher gains a teaching aid for reflective practice (explicitly the vignettes throughout the book as well as Chapter 10), and the novice gains an introduction to reflexive practice, as well as the logistics of interviewing.

At a minimum, the first chapter would be appropriate “required reading” for an introductory qualitative research course insofar as it will indicate whether there is a good fit between the student researcher and the methodology she intends to research her topic. If the thoughts and ideas presented seem foreign, unfamiliar, or unappetizing, then qualitative research may not be the best choice at this point. For example, Mann presents interviews as co-creations influenced by the researcher’s personal history and personal knowledge of the research topic, which, along with her own physicality and position in society, may influence the creation of knowledge in the research process. In this chapter, Mann also takes the opportunity to deal with potential positive angst regarding the validity of the qualitative research findings by discussing processes to increase the rigor, transparency, credibility, and overall quality of the research. For example, Mann stresses the importance of keeping a diary to “make explicit your assumptions and evaluate how these shape the interview, record dilemmas, concerns and troubling ethical questions, as well as breakthroughs and realizations” (p. 19) and practicing reflective bracketing, whereby “the researcher maintain[s] [...] some distance between the researcher and the research project” (p. 21).

Mann introduces his main theme of the reflexive treatment of language in interaction, by distinguishing between reflection, reflective practices, and reflexivity. Reflection involves learning from experience, by thinking over the experience and evaluating it. Reflective practice is the process of learning from experience through some form of reflection. Reflective practice can only be built through experience. Reflexivity involves being self-aware, “examining your assumptions, beliefs, ‘conceptual baggage’ and preconceptions and how these affect the interaction and dynamics in the interview” (p. 27). As well, reflexivity recognizes importance of context and the co-construction of knowledge in interviews.

For the novice, Mann provides good advice on the logistics of interviewing (ensuring you have access to the building/office, how to transition from the opening activities of obtaining consent, breaking the ice and setting the stage, to the main activity of asking questions, to recapping and wrapping up the interview), transcription (do it yourself for “thinking” and “noticing” benefits, what level of detail is required), as well as insights into increasing the rigor of qualitative research through reflective practice and reflexivity. Mann provided



insights I wish I had had prior to writing my dissertation proposal (but now have before completing my ethics application) as he provides advice on sampling, and ethical considerations in, for example, the investigation of times of high emotion through unstructured qualitative interviews, or the protection of interviewee identity.

The basics of language-based interactions with others (what interviews are, at bare bones) are dealt with as well as topics such as how to build rapport, how to reflect back what you have heard or would like more details on (using the words of the interviewee), and the importance of leaving space for pauses. I learned that “is there something you’d like to add?” is a better question than “is there anything you’d like to add?” to elicit additional information. However, I think the book short-shifts a major concern of novice researchers: how to develop the questions for your interview. While Mann counsels guarding against various danger zones of interviewing (e.g. asking leading questions, giving away your research result expectations), there are few examples or vignettes dealing with these issues. I would have expected this to be an important part of Mann’s book, particularly as he is concerned with the co-construction of knowledge developed in the interview and the importance of reflexivity.

While the novice gets some good advice from Mann in this book, this does not replace the advice and guidance from the graduate student’s advisor(s) and committee members. Mann did inspire me to buy a beautiful journal to write down my reflections and develop my reflexive practice; to obtain two recording devices (i.e. a recorder and a back-up); and, confirmed my commitments to run a pilot and transcribe interviews myself. Mann, like my mother, advises that the most important activities in the interview interaction are focussing and listening.

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