

Constructing an Identity for the Researcher in Qualitative Interviews*

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Abstract

This article explores identity issues faced by someone who is new to qualitative research and qualitative interviewing. As a ‘research note’, it cannot be the exhaustive final word; instead, it offers an overview of the subjects and, where appropriate, some personal accounts of the writer’s first steps in interviewing Japanese undergraduates about their English language learning and language identity. The article attempts to establish some working definitions of qualitative research and identity construction by drawing on several seminal works. The article also considers some of the difficulties of qualitative research—in particular, finding a suitable identity for the interviewer.

1. Working Definitions

A. Qualitative Research:

‘Research’ is usually considered to be something ‘scientific’, involving experiments in the laboratory or in the field, from which statistical evidence can be

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drawn. Such evidence and the methods used to analyze it are ‘quantitative’ because they are supported by numbers. Scientists engaged in quantitative research seek to maintain impersonal objectivity in their experimental methods and in their analysis of the data.

In the human and social sciences, however, the objective, impersonal, quantitative approach does not always work very well. Richards (2003) contends that ‘experiments or surveys will only take us so far’. While they may offer valuable insights, ‘they are not designed to explore the complexities and conundrums of the immensely complicated social world that we inhabit’ (2003: 8). By contrast, qualitative research provides ways to investigate social and human conditions that cannot be dealt with by numbers alone.

Richards (2003) offers three reasons to engage in qualitative inquiry, summarized here:

- 1) To get a ‘first hand-sense of what actually goes on in classrooms, schools, hospitals and communities’. (Developing such knowledge and understanding takes time, i.e., more time than experiments and surveys usually allow.)
- 2) To pursue a ‘person-centred enterprise’ that is ‘therefore particularly appropriate to our work in the field of language teaching’. (Richards and others argue that human relations figure prominently in teaching and learning. Affective matters are not easily separated from education and are not reliably quantified.)
- 3) To provide opportunities for the ‘transformative potential for the researcher’. (In the quantitative sphere the researcher is normally expected to stand apart from the findings; by contrast, in qualitative research ‘investigation depends on engagement with the lived world, and the place of the researcher in the research process itself is something that needs to be addressed’.) (Richards 2003: 8–9)

Qualitative researchers, then, are candid and unapologetic about their personal involvement in their research. They embrace their connections to the subject (appropriately, it is hoped) rather than distance themselves from it. Such researchers may even be personally transformed by the research, and, when it happens, this is

usually considered a desirable outcome. As part of a tentative definition, then, the qualitative researcher constructs an identity that arises from the nature of the research itself and the process of doing it.

The qualitative researcher's identity is also constructed in response to ongoing currents of academic discourse. Consequently, some background ideas and terminology must be considered: Richards (2003: 9) prefers the term 'inquiry' in relation to the qualitative enterprise, to distinguish its humanistic project from the 'research' of the 'hard sciences'. By contrast, Holliday (2007: 19–20) embraces the more robust term 'research'. In most other respects, however, Richards and Holliday agree on the basic contours of 'postmodern qualitative' investigation. Both would reject the objectivist assumption of positivism that 'just as there is an objective world which is governed by laws discoverable by science alone, so there are social laws governing the relationships among individuals, institutions and society as a whole, as well as laws of historical development, and that these laws, once discovered, will not only explain the past and the present but enable us to predict future developments' (Richards 2003: 37). In effect, the false analogy that positivism draws between the physical world and the social world opens the door to qualitative research. Consequently, the identity of qualitative researchers is constructed, in part, as a resistance to positivism and in accordance with current alternative paradigms.

Richards (2003) and Holliday (2007) remain in general agreement as they consider the epistemological and ontological foundations of qualitative research. These include the traditions of post-positivism (i.e., naturalist qualitative research) and of postmodern qualitative research. Both Richards (2003: 37–38) and Holliday (2007: 16–17) acknowledge but appear skeptical of post-positivism's assumption of objective reality, even when qualified by the possibility that reality can only be imperfectly understood. They also share a preference for postmodern qualitative research, with the attendant perspectives of several paradigms: e.g., critical theory, constructivism, and feminism; and of various strategies: e.g., ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and grounded theory.

Constructivism is particularly relevant to qualitative inquiry into identity

construction. As Richards (2003: 38–39) quotes Schwandt (1994: 118): ‘[Constructivists] share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it... The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors’. As Richards goes on to clarify, ‘This is a view holding firmly to the position that knowledge and truth are created rather than discovered and that reality is pluralistic’ (Richards 2003: 38–39). Holliday (2007) pushes the limits of constructivism further by insisting that ‘reality *and* science are socially constructed’. Holliday defines other salient features of constructivism, and of postmodernism generally, that affect the ways that qualitative researchers construct an identity: ‘researchers are part of the research setting’; ‘investigation must be in reflexive, self-critical, creative dialogue’; and qualitative research ‘aims to problematize, reveal hidden realities, initiate discussions’ (Holliday 2007: 16).

In postmodern constructivism, then, the construction of both reality and identity can be regarded as largely improvisational. As suggested by Groucho Marx, we may all be ‘just making it up as [we] go along’ (McLeod 1932). This is not a trivial point. Holliday (2007: 19) cites Gubrium and Holstein (1997: 38) as saying that postmodernists ‘argue there is no “there” until it has been constructed’. ‘Improvisational’, however, does not necessarily mean ‘undisciplined’. For the qualitative researcher, Holliday’s notion of ‘reflexive’ investigation that ‘problematizes’ the subject requires, among other things, that the researcher continue to question what s/he is doing and what s/he discovers in the course of research. Nothing can be taken for granted. Everything is subject to question. The identity of the researcher / interviewer must include a large capacity for doubt, particularly self-doubt. It is from such doubt that ‘complexity and contradiction’ in the researcher’s constructed identity and in the research itself begin to take shape, however imperfectly. It is also from such doubt that ‘scientific’ rigour arises, in both modern and postmodern ways of thinking.

B. Identity Construction:

Self-questioning doubt extends to the issue of identity construction and,

particularly for the purposes of this research note, to the identity of the researcher. Norton (2000: 5) uses the term 'identity' in order 'to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future'. For the researcher, as Norton would be likely to accept, this succinct definition of identity construction must endure the scrutiny of postmodern questioning. To this end, as Richards (2003) observes, for postmodernists, 'meanings ... are equivocal, unstable moments in the ongoing process of interpretation, reflecting linguistically constituted subjectivities—the assumption of a self is problematic. They, like facts or theories, are constructs reflecting an ongoing power struggle centred on the definition of what counts as reality, and the representations of researchers are not neutral windows on the social world' (2003: 39). For that matter, neither are the identities of researchers 'neutral windows'; they too may be 'equivocal, unstable moments in the ongoing process of interpretation'. The researcher's identity is continuously shifting, affected by an ongoing 'relationship to the world' that potentially alters in the course of the research itself and in every other moment of experience.

The struggle concerning 'what counts as reality' arises from the 'crisis in representation' that has taken place in the social sciences and the humanities during recent decades. A full account cannot be given in such a brief research note as this, but at its core the crisis follows from questions raised by radical postmodernists about whether lived experience and the postmodern self can be discussed seriously, or at all, except through language games and notions of hyperreality. In radical postmodernism, 'The stuff of interviews—a field of distinct social events and personal experiences—hardly matters in hyperreality. The self, in particular, is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, totally abstracted and rapidly flitting about in myriad versions of hopelessly leading questions without reference to source or defining circumstance' (Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 7). Recalling what Gertrude Stein said, in another context, 'There is no there there' (Stein 1937: 289).

'Affirmative' postmodernists, however, have found ways to resist this rather

bleak outlook through ‘reflexive empiricism’ that allows them to ‘take postmodern sensibilities to heart while not succumbing to purely textual deconstruction. Rather, they explore and present in new ways empirical texts based on, or related to, interviews, directing us to the many constructive intersections that interviewing has with culture, fiction, history, biography, poetry, and social interaction, contexts that were formerly viewed as principally separate from the interview in its own right’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 10). This is all good news for the beginning qualitative interviewer who might otherwise give up in despair before even starting. In fact, the ‘constructive intersections’ that link interviews to such a wide range of other genres should inspire optimism.

Holliday (2007) acknowledges the power struggle inherent in ‘doing and writing’ qualitative research but finds sources of liberation in the process for the qualitative researcher: ‘[B]ecause she reflexively seeks to acknowledge in what way she is the arch designer of data collection, and how she disturbs the surface of the culture she is investigating, the postmodern researcher is in a position to dig deeper and reveal the hidden and the counter’ (2007: 19). For Holliday, the ‘doing’ and the ‘writing’ of qualitative research must be intimately linked if the depths of the research are to be sounded. For the researcher / interviewer, agency and identity are subject to such constraints. As one digs, identity proves to be dynamic, shifting, improvisational, and, as it were, complex and contradictory. A qualitative researcher may ask legitimately, ‘Who am I?’: The interviewer conducting the research? The writer transcribing and reflecting on the words of the interviewees? The researcher interpreting and, in effect, constructing reality out of shared experiences with the interviewees? A foreigner in a host country? A middle-aged adult whose authority as a teacher I am trying to downplay as I interview some of my young-adult students outside of class hours? All of these things? Some? None? Or other roles not yet even imagined?

2. Identity Construction in Qualitative Interviews

Many works devoted to qualitative research quote the now-classic observation

that we live in an 'interview society' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 314, cited in Richards 2003: 49; also cited in Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 7). The claim evokes an even more pervasive remark by the pop artist Andy Warhol that in the future everyone will endure the mixed blessing of being 'world famous for fifteen minutes' (Moderna Museet Gallery 1968). Considerations of fame aside, interviews are an inescapable feature of contemporary life. Even if we never find ourselves confronted with a TV host's battery of probing questions, most inhabitants of academia encounter, on one side of the desk or the other, such professional threshold crossings as 'job interview, appraisal interview, lesson observation feedback interview, student placement interview and so on' (Richards 2003: 49).

Not all interviews are created equal, however. Each interview type has a particular style arising from its specific purposes. Nevertheless, in most interviews, including the ones mentioned above, the chief aim is to elicit information. 'Please tell us about yourself', the most common 'open-ended' question in interviews for jobs and school admission, may sound, superficially, like an invitation to engage in friendly self-disclosure. Instead, it is really a high-stakes probe of information, for which interviewees had better be well prepared (or else be able to think fast) to explain how their experience matches the qualifications of the position.

What distinguishes a 'qualitative' interview from most other types, including those above, is that its chief purpose looks beyond information gathering and, instead, seeks understanding. '[W]e do need to clear away once and for all the natural assumption that the interview is simply a matter of gathering facts', Richards (2003) says. 'Of course it can be used for that, but in qualitative inquiry we need to go deeper, to pursue understanding in all its complex, elusive and shifting forms; and to achieve this we need to establish a relationship with people that enables us to share in their perception of the world' (2003: 50).

The qualitative interviewer's identity, then, is shaped by the need to create 'a relationship with people' (i.e., the interviewees) in pursuit of 'understanding' their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Interpersonal skills, including the ability to put the interviewees at ease, are particularly valuable. In addition, it is absolutely essential that the interviewer remember, as it were, 'to check his ego

at the door'. As Richards (2003) observes, 'In interviews we are concerned only with encouraging the speaker, not with putting our own point across, so the skills we need are still collaborative but they are focused on drawing from the speaker the richest and fullest account possible' (2003: 50). A qualitative interviewer, then, constructs an identity that shows respect for the interviewee by keeping the focus on her experience and interests. A preconceived agenda imposed by the interviewer will not do. As the interviewer listens to the interviewee's responses, the decisions regarding when to probe and make other significant turns must be guided by respect for the personhood of the interviewee.

How does the novice qualitative interviewer construct an appropriate identity, particularly for the time that s/he is on the opposite side of the digital recorder? Does s/he imitate an established model, select elements from many models, or devise a fresh one? Is s/he a TV talk-show host trying to put guests at ease while, at the same time, working to elicit interesting responses? Is s/he a psychologist or counselor trying to encourage breakthroughs of self-awareness in a patient? Is s/he a TESOL interviewer probing students' levels of understanding and fluency by posing increasingly difficult questions? None of these models is entirely satisfactory, even in combination. The qualitative interviewer must create (and continuously re-create) a new and distinct identity.

In the process, an entire lifetime of professional habits, both good and bad, may need to be discarded. To mention just one, the Socratic method of questioning, so useful in making others aware of their deficiencies, does not really have a place in qualitative interviewing. The aim is no longer to disassemble the student intellectually but to encourage the interviewee to keep talking freely about what matters to her, in the interest of uncovering and discovering new insights about her experience.

Similarly, the aim of the qualitative interviewer is not that of the therapist, seeking insights that will heal the patient; instead, the goal is for the interviewer to get out of the way and let the interviewee talk freely, so that insights emerge as a byproduct of open comments, guided loosely by some open-ended questions. Matters may be complicated by the need to open up the personality of a novice

interviewer who tends towards reticence if not introversion. Other the other hand, a natural disinclination to ‘chat it up’ glibly may represent an advantage, as someone of that bent may not need to ‘unlearn’ counterproductive interlocutory habits.

In any case, before asking interviewees to talk about themselves at length and depth, the interviewer might profit from self-examination and reflection. As suggested earlier, to prepare for asking others questions about their identity, interviewers themselves might reflect on the question of ‘Who am I?’ Doing so would help interviewers develop empathy for the interviewees who will face questions that probe their identities. It might also clear away mental cobwebs that could otherwise impair interviewers’ judgement and send them down unproductive courses of inquiry.

3. Qualitative Interviewing: Problems and Possible Solutions

A major challenge of qualitative interviews is to find ways to catch significant traces of both 1) the fleeting moments of a roughly hour-long session, and 2) the evanescent impressions and memories of the interviewee’s experience that may span months and even years. In more than one way, conducting such an interview is like trying to hit several moving targets at once. In my still limited experience, the interview plays out simultaneously as an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee(s) and as a process of observation and decision making in the mind of the interviewer. The process of interviewing others about their own identity construction and trying to capture something potentially useful is not unlike experiments in subatomic physics. Researchers may detect only traces left behind, not the thing itself. In interviews, after all, I find myself asking interviewees about things that cannot be observed directly, either by me or by the interviewees themselves. Identity construction is a mental process, and often an unconscious one, inside the mind and shaped by memories and experience. By its nature it is dynamic, evolving and never complete.

As an interviewer I must establish a relationship with the interviewees—or rather, build on a relationship already established in the classroom and develop it further

in the interviews themselves. To give the interviewees a sense of the purpose of the interview, I have found it useful to tell them from the start that they are helping me with research into the ways that Japanese students see themselves as English language learners. (It is important to be sufficiently clear and at the same time adequately vague: I mention ‘language learning’ but not ‘identity’.)

An inherent difficulty of interviewing is that the questions themselves cannot be too direct. An interviewer simply must not ask point-blank, ‘So, how did you construct your language identity during your time at this college?’ This, in fact, is what I would like to know, but asking the question in this way would be likely to scare off most interviewees. The terminology and the ideas behind the question are too abstract to handle. As much as possible, the questions must be open-ended, indirect and gradual, with the hope that eventually the responses will reveal traces of the desired understanding of the students’ efforts to construct an identity during their time at the institution.

The strategy of indirectness, of trying by ‘indirections [to] find directions out’, can become problematic, as it did in *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1601: II, i). If a literary analogy may be permitted, many characters in *Hamlet* attempt to test the reality of each other’s truthfulness, guilt, or sanity through a variety of elaborate guises, all of which end badly. For qualitative interviewers excessive obliqueness may also send the interview in unproductive directions, though probably not to tragedy. Still it is possible for interviewers to be too clever for their own good.

To increase the likelihood of success, it is wise to remember Richards’s definition of the ‘golden rule for all interviewing’: ‘*Always seek the particular*’ (2003: 53). Richards adds that this will probably mean focusing ‘specifically on events’ and letting ‘attitudes and beliefs’, as it were, ‘emerge from this context’ (53). To investigate my students’ developing language identities, I have asked them, as my advisors recommended, fairly open questions that invite students to reflect on their life histories through personal narratives: ‘When and how did you first become interested in English?’; ‘Did you ever dislike English?’; ‘Why did you chose to come to this college?’; ‘In what roles have you used English during your time in the college—in and outside of the classroom?’; ‘How do you think you have

changed during your time at this college?’ and ‘How do you expect to use English in your future life after graduation?’ Back-up questions, which I have not yet tried, include: ‘When did you stop thinking of yourself as a high school student?’ and ‘How do you see your current situation at home or at work?’ (e.g., ‘Are you treated like a child or an adult or something in between?’).

A productive qualitative interview, however, involves more than putting together some thought-provoking questions, offering them in a positive and encouraging way to willing interviewees, and then waiting for insight-laden responses. Planning is certainly essential, but even more so is the interviewer’s skill in managing the flow of the interview. The focus of the interview (and of the interviewer) needs to be wholly on the interviewees as they speak, encouraging them to keep talking with minimal interruption.

One of the best ways to encourage the speaker is to remember that ‘a good interviewer is a good listener’ (Richards 2003: 53). Unfortunately, sustained listening is not easy. ‘For one thing, there are natural distractions arising from the task in hand (How does this fit in? What’s the next move and so on), but there’s also the effort involved in focusing attentively on extended accounts while also monitoring the fact that you are visibly doing this’ (Richards 2003: 53). Managing a qualitative interview is essentially a juggling act.

The skills of good listening are not easily cultivated, but the potential rewards are great. For example, at the end of what he calls an ‘epistemological parable’, Patton (2002) holds out a handsome prize to those who succeed in improving their ability to listen: ‘You have learned the importance of finding out what people have to say about their experience.... Ask and listen.... Each person you question can take you into a new part of the world. The skilled questioner and attentive listener know how to enter into another’s experience. If you ask and listen, the world will always be new’ (Patton 2002: 340).

It would be easy (and possibly even correct) to dismiss this high-minded parable as a naive assertion of faith in the power of good intentions. Nevertheless, there is more than a kernel of wisdom to the idea that the interviewer should be unconditionally open to whatever the interviewees have to offer. We should

remember that in our interviews, as in our reading of student papers, we are enjoying the privilege of looking inside young persons' minds. We should also remember that with such a privilege comes the responsibility to respect the personhood of each interviewee.

Richards (2003) devotes a full and highly detailed chapter to interviewing techniques and analysis, much of which is beyond the scope of this research note. As an introduction to the subject, however, Richards offers a succinct list of do's and don't's that have proven very helpful to me in my initial efforts at interviewing students:

Do: Listen carefully (e.g., non-verbally say, 'I'm listening'); Offer supportive feedback (e.g., 'hmm,' 'yes'); Respond to emotion (give the interviewee a chance to talk about it); Let the interview take its own shape—let the interviewee discover things as well; Monitor your responses to give the interviewee proper space.

Don't: Close off interviewee space; Interpret for the interviewee; Judge (e.g., offer moral comment, advice or consolation); Stick rigidly to the topics you think are important; Interrupt unthinkingly. (Richards 2003: 54)

In the course of four recent interviews (with two students at a time), I have frequently caught myself violating most of these do's and don't's; I have also seen myself slowly improving as a listener, dropping teacherly habits of commenting, and increasingly using verbal and nonverbal ways of encouraging the interviewees to continue speaking.

To improve as an interviewer and elicit better responses, I expect to revisit previously recorded sessions many times and apply the insights gained to future interviews. To these ends, as Richards (2003) promises,

[Y]our own development as an interviewer will be affected by the extent to which you are prepared to listen carefully to your own interviews and develop a sensitivity to the interactional and relational dimension.... The key to this is open-minded listening and a willingness to be self-critical, so that your ear for what is happening develops along with your awareness of the part you can play in the interview event. Kvale captures the relationship well when

he insists that interviewing is a craft, but one that rests in the researcher's judgement rather than following 'content- and context-free rules of method' (1996: 105). (Richards 2003: 50–51)

Interviewing, then, may be thought of as a set of skills at which one can get better through conscientious practice and self-examination. When the skills of questioning and listening have been mastered, they may be considered part of the interviewer's identity during interviews. If they are thoroughly internalised, they may define part of one's identity in other areas of life as well.

4. Conclusion

In this research note, I have examined many complications involved in constructing an identity for myself as a qualitative researcher / interviewer. I have tried to establish some working definitions of qualitative research and identity construction in relation to postmodern perspectives. These definitions are tentative and far from complete. I have also reflected on the challenges posed by qualitative interviewing and have considered a range of possible interview strategies and questions. The next step is to test and revise the largely hypothesised strategies and questions against the realities of live interviews with an increasing number of interviewees. Analysis of the interview questions and responses may shed light on the identity construction of the interviewees as well as on my own struggles with identity and methodologies. The results, it is hoped, will serve as the basis of further research.

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[和文要旨]

本論は、定性的研究及び定性的インタビューを行うにあたって、この分野の新参者が直面したアイデンティティーの問題点を探ることにより、その内容を研究ノートとして今後の研究の課題に役立てたいとする第一歩である。そして、インタビューを通じて英語学習及び言語アイデンティティーの意識調査を日本の大学生に行う上で、この分野の概観及びインタビュー方法の適切性、そして「定性的研究」と「アイデンティティー構築」の定義を言及し、試論する。研究に際しては、まず「定性的研究」と「アイデンティティー形成・構築」を定義することで「科学的研究」との相違を明確化する。実験回数が研究結果を明らかにするといった非人間的な方法、即ち「科学的」方法ではなく、人間社会においては人間関係を中心に形成されるアイデンティティーの研究経過や研究それ自体が自然に生み出す方法を重視する必要がある。その方法に比例して、研究者自身のアイデンティティーも研究経過に伴って形成されていくことになる。インタビューを行う上で、調査側、即ちインタビューを行う者は、常に質問内容の確認、見直し、そして今後の見通し、さらにインタビューを受ける者の解答

結果を理解しながら今後のインタビュー方法を向上させる必要がある。本論においては、過去の定性的インタビューに関する研究資料に基づいて、インタビューの質問形式を考察し、その問題点と解決策にも焦点を当て、インタビュー方法の「黄金律」も探求していく。結果、研究者自身の調査方法、方法論確立、内容再考、結果考察といった行動を振り返り、アイデンティティーと方法論との狭間で葛藤しつつも、本論における問題点と解決策の考慮及び分析が今後の研究調査に光を投げかけることを期待したい。