



# The qualitative research interview

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite the growing pressure to encourage new ways of thinking about research methodology, only recently have interview methodologists begun to realize that “we cannot lift the results of interviewing out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached”. The purpose of this paper is to provide additional insight based on a critical reflection of the interview as a research method drawing upon Alvesson’s discussion from the neopositivist, romanticist and localist interview perspectives. Specifically, the authors focus on critical reflections of three broad categories of a continuum of interview methods: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors adopt a critical and reflexive approach to understanding the literature on interviews to develop alternative insights about the use of interviews as a qualitative research method.

**Findings** – After examining the neopositivist (interview as a “tool”) and romanticist (interview as “human encounter”) perspectives on the use of the research interview, the authors adopt a localist perspective towards interviews and argue that the localist approach opens up alternative understanding of the interview process and the accounts produced provide additional insights. The insights are used to outline the skills researchers need to develop in applying the localist perspective to interviews.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides an alternative perspective on the practice of conducting interviews, recognizing interviews as complex social and organizational phenomena rather than just a research method.

**Keywords** Research interview, Qualitative research, Interviewer, Interviewee, Research ethics, Research methods, Data handling, Social interaction

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

The research interview, one of the most important qualitative data collection methods, has been widely used in conducting field studies and ethnographic research. Even when it is not the primary method of data collection in a quantitative study, the interview method is employed often as a pilot study to gather preliminary data before a survey is designed. Given the wide application of interviews in research, there has been an extensive literature on the interview method focusing on a range of topics and issues, including different types of interviews (Goldman and McDonald, 1987; McCracken, 1988), strengths and limitations of the method, and various techniques and general advice in conducting “effective” interviews (Douglas, 1985; Fontana and Frey, 1998; Kvale, 2007). Although this stream of research offers great benefits for qualitative researchers, there is a danger of simplifying and idealizing the interview situation based on the assumption that interviewees are competent and moral truth tellers



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“acting in the service of science and producing the data needed to reveal” their experiences (feelings, values) and/or the facts of the organization under study (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14).

Moreover, other quantitative researchers regard the empirical data produced by interpretive methods such as the interview as “unreliable, impressionistic, and not objective” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 12). To these researchers, interviews are regarded as nothing more than casual everyday conversations. However, in comparison to everyday conversations or philosophical dialogues, which usually place the participants on an equal footing, the research interview can be characterized by an asymmetry of power in which the researcher is in charge of questioning a more or less voluntary and sometimes naïve interviewee. Although it may seem that everyone can simply ask questions, interviews conducted in a casual manner with little preparation could lead to disappointing results, such as a wasted opportunity (Hannabuss, 1996).

Therefore, conducting qualitative research interviews is not a trivial enterprise. It requires not only the use of various skills, such as intensive listening and note taking, but also careful planning and sufficient preparation. To collect interview data useful for research purposes, it is necessary for the researchers to develop as much expertise in relevant topic areas as possible so they can ask informed questions. In terms of the interview design process, there are many decisions that must be carefully considered, such as who to interview, how many interviewees will be required, what type of interview to conduct, and how the interview data will be analyzed (Doyle, 2004). Interviewing requires “a respect for and curiosity about what people say, and a systematic effort to really hear and understand what people tell you” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 17).

Interviews provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others, although real understanding may sometimes be elusive. Even when the interviewer and the interviewee seem to be speaking the same language, their words may have completely different cultural meanings. Thus, communicating becomes more difficult when people have different worldviews. However, done with care, a well-planned interview approach can provide a rich set of data.

It would be a highly ambitious endeavor to provide a comprehensive review of the literature given the substantial body of research on the use of the interview method from functionalist and interpretivist perspectives (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Keats, 2000; Wengraf, 2001; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Kvale, 2007). Therefore, the objective of our paper is to provide additional insight based on a critical reflection of the interview as a research method. In doing so, we draw upon Alvesson’s (2003) re-conceptualization of the interview method from the neopositivist, romanticist and localist perspective. The aim is not to be comprehensive about every aspect of the method, but to focus on critical reflections of three broad categories of a continuum of interview methods – structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews – utilizing Alvesson’s framework as the basis of our discussion. This framework was chosen because it offers a more “sophisticated” approach to the variety of research questions and possible interpretations and uses of interview material “through the consideration of a variety of theoretical ideas expressed through metaphors” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14).

When reflecting on interview methods, we argue that the neopositivist view (studying facts) corresponds more to structured interviews, the romanticist view (focusing on meaning) to unstructured interviews, and the localist perspective

(social construction of situated accounts) to semi-structured interviews, with overlap at the boundaries. In doing so, we use a reflective approach developing critical insights into the ways research interviews can be used to understand “social and linguistic complexities”, which should not be seen as source of interviewer bias but rather as something that needs to be examined (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14). We also expand Alvesson’s localist perspective to provide additional insights into the typology of questions used in research interviews and ethical considerations. By discussing the interview method in a reflective way, our paper contributes to a growing body of work (Hammersley, 2003) that sees the interview itself as a topic for enquiry rather than merely as a resource or research method. Our paper also contributes to an instructive and more informed understanding about the use of interviews and their potential, seeking to broaden the application of the interview method to be more conducive to a qualitative understanding of a complex social phenomenon (McCracken, 1988).

The rest of our paper is structured in three additional sections. First, we draw on Alvesson’s (2003) critique of the research interview to better understand the interview process from three perspectives, namely, neopositivist, romanticist and localist point of views. Second, we utilize this framework to reflect on three broad categories of the interview method, from structured, semi-structured to unstructured interviews. Building on the general advice giving literature concerning the design of questions, we discuss how an alternative understanding helps us to apply the interview method in a more productive way taking into account pragmatic constraints along with some ethical considerations in conducting research interviews. Last, we offer our conclusions and discuss practical research implications.

## **2. Alvesson’s insight and critique of the research interview**

Philosophers and social theorists have critiqued interviews as a research methodology focusing their criticisms on the problems of representation, the nature of language, the inseparability of researcher and knowledge, and the problems of writing. In particular, as Alvesson (2003, p. 13) argues “language constructs rather than mirrors phenomena, making representation and empirical work privileging “data” a basically problematic enterprise”. Kvale (1996) breaks interviews down by distinguishing the role of the research interviewer using two contrasting metaphors. One metaphor sees the researcher as a “miner” who probes for “nuggets of essential meaning”, just like a miner unearths buried metal. These nuggets remain constant and the miner’s main task is to transform them into their best and purest state. This conceptualization pictures knowledge as a given that stays stable, and the interviewer as the miner who is seeking objective facts to be quantified. The other metaphor, that of the research interviewer as a traveler, leads to a different conceptualization of knowledge as a story to be told upon returning home – the sum of the traveler’s experience. The story may also be told back to the people among whom the interviewer traveled, and modified so that the traveler is ultimately transformed by the experience. It seems clear that the miner metaphor brings research interviews close to the field of engineering, whereas the traveler metaphor draws the research enterprise into the vicinity of the humanities and art.

In our paper, we adopt Alvesson’s (2003) insight and critique of the interview method to reflect on the current state of the art. According to Alvesson (2003, pp. 15-7), there are three theoretical perspectives on the research interview as a method. The first two represent more established perspectives: neopositivism, studying facts,

and romanticism, studying meaning. Both approaches to interviewing tend to treat respondents as epistemologically passive and as mere vessels of answers. In contrast, the third perspective is localism, which seeks to break with conventional views on interviews by challenging the “assumptions, claims and purposes of those wanting to use interviews instrumentally” (2003, p. 17), and is therefore skeptical about the idea of using the interview as an instrument. Thus, a localist is critical and sees the interview process as an opportunity to explore the meaning of the research topic for the respondent and a site to be examined for the construction of a situated account.

These three approaches represent broadly shared views of the research interview although there are a variety of definitions in the field of qualitative research regarding these three perspectives. For example, Gephart (1999, p. 3) discusses similar worldviews in terms of positivism, interpretivism and critical post-modernism. Table I summarizes Alvesson’s three viewpoints highlighting four key aspects: the interview process, the interviewer, the interviewee and the accounts produced. Below we will briefly summarize these perspectives on the research interview.

First, the neopositivist view sees the research interview as a tool to be used as effectively as possible by capable researchers establishing a context-free truth about objective reality producing relevant responses, with minimal bias. In short, the interview process is “a pipeline for transmitting knowledge” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 3), and thus the interviewer should stay neutral to what interviewees are saying (Miller and Glassner, 1997). The interview process is regarded as a context-stripping procedure in which the interviewer pretends that the context does not affect the meaning of questions and answers (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). Moreover, many researchers choose to be oblivious to the criticisms of neopositivism, such as problems of trust and lack of control over interviewee responses, and endeavor to solve these problems through techniques such as repeat interviews (Morgan, 1997).

Second, the romantic view sees research interviews as a human encounter, encouraging interviewees to reveal their authentic experiences by establishing rapport, trust and commitment between the interviewer and interviewee. The research

Position	Interview	Interviewer	Interviewee	Accounts
Neopositivism	As a tool for collecting data	As a capable researcher to trigger honest response	As a truth teller	As objective data and knowledge transfer
Romanticism	As a human encounter between the interviewer and the interviewee	As an empathetic listener to explore the inner world of the interviewee	As a participant to reveal real life experiences and complex social reality	As a pipeline of knowledge mirroring interior and exterior reality leading to in-depth shared understanding
Localism	As an empirical situation that can be studied	As people who are involved in the production of answers through complex interpersonal interaction	As people who are not reporting external events but producing situated accounts	As situated accounts that must be understood in their own social context

**Table I.**  
Summary of the three  
perspectives on the  
interview method

**Source:** Adapted from Table I in Alvesson (2003, p. 15)

interventions transform the interviewee from a repository of opinions and emotions into a productive source of knowledge. Thus, a romanticist emphasizes “interactivity with and closeness to interviewees”, who are seen as participants (Alvesson, 2003, p. 16). The interview becomes a “moral peak” because it treats interviewees and interviewers as equals, with each expressing their feelings, thus presenting a more realistic picture than can be uncovered using the neopositivist approach (Fontana and Frey, 1998, p. 371).

Last, the localist position is based on understanding interviews in a social context, instead of treating it as a tool for collecting data in isolation. A localist argues that “social phenomena do not exist independently of people’s understandings of them, and that those understandings play a crucial generative role” (Hammersley, 2007, p. 297). Thus, a localist criticizes the notion of interviews merely as a pipeline for transmitting knowledge from the interviewee to the interviewer because such thinking limits the potential of the interview method. Consequently, from a localist viewpoint, an interview is an empirical phenomenon that needs to be examined because the narratives produced are “situated accounts” of the phenomenon. The localist challenges the assumptions, claims and purposes of the instrumental use of interviews as a research tool (Silverman, 1983). Localists view the interview as an empirical setting, helpful in examining complex social or organizational phenomena, revealing less about the interior of interviewees or the exteriors of organizational practices, but more about the complexity of the interview process. Localists thus theorize and interpret research interviews differently because they treat the interviewing process as a social encounter in which the interview is “not merely a neutral conduit or source of bias but rather the productive site of reportable knowledge itself” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 3).

A localist approach to interviewing can be realized in multiple ways because of its potential to explore complex issues from different theoretical perspectives. For example, Alvesson (2003, p. 17) identifies conversation or discourse analysis as types of localism. Here, we see the research interview as a conversation between two people on a specific topic. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) support the view of the research interview as conversation, considering it as the art of questioning and listening. The interview process can be understood simply as conversation because it is the principal means of knowledge transfer in the post-modern/post-structuralist world. According to Lyotard (1984), post-structuralists are characterized by a disbelief in universal systems of thought, replacing them with systems of local meanings. The concept of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by how social actors interpret and negotiate meaning, a process characterized as the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Similarly, Kvale (1996) and Rubin and Rubin (1995) justify viewing interviews as conversation by noting how post-modern researchers lost faith in objective reality mirrored in a scientific model, moving toward discourse and negotiating the meaning of the lived world. Kvale (1996, p. 42) also explains the qualitative research interview as a “construction site of knowledge” which must be understood in terms of five features of post-modern knowledge: as conversation, as narrative, as language, as context and as inter-relational, existing in the relationship between people and the world. Therefore, the research interview as conversation characterizes everyday life by developing a methodological awareness of forms of questioning, focusing on what is said during the dyadic interplay between interviewer and interviewee.

The interviewer seeks to understand central themes in the life of the interviewee in qualitative (not quantitative), open accounts of specific experiences in the subject’s

life world. The interviewer tries to remain open to new and unforeseen phenomenon rather than imposing ready-made frameworks or categories. Although the interview is unstructured, it focuses on particular themes. Thus, the research interview is an enriching experience for interviewees, who through dyadic interplay with the interviewer, obtain new insights into their life world and the research theme (Kvale, 1996, p. 32-3).

In the following section, we utilize the three perspectives to reflect upon different interview methods. By adopting the three perspectives as a framework, we develop insights about the assumptions underlying the strengths and limitations of different interview methods, shedding light on the method and its use. Our purpose is to apply and expand Alvesson's framework to gather insights on different interview methods.

### 3. Toward a better insight of the qualitative interview method

There are many established forms of interview methods utilized to gather insights into a variety of phenomenon, such as focus group and in-depth interviewing (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). The family of qualitative interviews encompasses ways of questioning that "differ in the degree of emphasis on culture, in the choice of arena or boundaries of the study, and in the specific forms of information that are sought" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 19). In essence, the interview method is the art of questioning and interpreting the answers.

Interviews can take place in an individual or a group setting, called focus groups. For example, in focus group interviews several people are interviewed together utilizing a flexible and exploratory discussion format emphasizing interactions between participants rather than between the interviewer and interviewees, with the interviewer serving the role of moderator. Convenience and time savings are the primary advantages of focus groups for both interviewers and interviewees. Also, because the researcher takes a less active role in guiding the discussion, less bias is introduced by the researcher than in individual interviews (Doyle, 2004). However, focus groups are not recommended for studying sensitive topics that people will be reluctant to discuss in public such as professional ethics or management remuneration.

In this paper, we are more interested in the questioning taking place during the individual interview process according to the extent to which the questioning is structured or "standardized". Accordingly we will reflect on three interview methods, structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, utilizing Alvesson's framework as the basis of our discussion (Table I). In developing insights into the interview methods, we argue that the neopositivist view corresponds more to structured interviews, and the romanticist view to unstructured interviews, while semi-structured interviews are reflective of the localist perspective, with overlap at the boundaries (Table II). We use a reflective approach to develop critical insights into questioning and interpreting the answers.

	Structured	Semi-structured	Unstructured
Romanticist		X	X
Localist	X	X	X
Neopositivist	X	X	

**Source:** Adapted from Table I in Alvesson (2003, p. 15)

**Table II.**  
Expanding Alvesson's  
framework to understand  
three types of interview  
methods



### 3.1 *Structured interviews*

The degree of structure is a common way to classify the research interview (Fontana and Frey, 1998). The term “structured” is used widely, but “standardized” as appears in Berg (1998) is also used. The structured interview is where the interviewer asks interviewees a series of pre-established questions, allowing only a limited number of response categories. Organizing and quantifying the findings is thus generally straightforward. Structured interviews are therefore rigid as the interviewer reads from a script and deviates from it as little as possible. All interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order to elicit brief answers or answers from a list.

The practice of structured interviews is heavily influenced by the neopositivist view of the interview method as a tool and the accounts produced as objective data. As a result, the primary concern is minimizing researcher bias and increasing generalizability of the findings, because the neopositivist is more concerned about discovering a perceived objective reality out there. Since researchers take a very active role in question design, there is a possibility that they inadvertently or overtly bias data collected. Thus, highly standardized procedures are designed to substantially reduce the probability of the results being influenced by the interviewer’s bias. However, localists and romanticists could argue that this reduced bias is gained at the expense of giving up the main advantages of qualitative interviews: namely, the ability to capture rich detail and the flexibility to customize procedures and topics as needed to adapt to the background of the interviewees (Doyle, 2004).

From the neopositivist point of view, interviewers are seen as capable researchers whose main mission is to trigger honest, open responses. Interviewees are truth tellers who are faithful to the transmission and production of facts and knowledge. Even the language used in the literature regarding the structured interview method is telling. For example, Berg (1998) suggested the rationale for structured interviews is to offer approximately the same stimulus to each subject to ensure that responses to the questions are comparable. However, terms such as subject, stimulus and response are usually terms associated with experimental, rather than qualitative, investigation. By definition, there is very little room for flexibility in the structured interview approach as evidenced in instructions given to interviewers to ensure they never get involved in a long explanation of the study, or deviate from the sequence of question, or improvise by adding answer categories (Fontana and Frey, 1998).

The underlying assumption is that if the questions are phrased correctly, they will uncover all the information relevant to the topic. Thus, from the true neopositivist perspective, the structured interview is designed to evoke rational responses. Therefore, structured interviews are the preferred interview method of the neopositivist perspective.

Neopositivists also have concerns regarding the ability to generalize the results of structured interviews to other groups who do not participate. Compared with quantitative methods, qualitative interviews cannot study a very large or random sample of people, due to the large amount of time and effort involved and limitation of access. For structured interviews, researchers are more likely to be able to study a relatively large sample. This is because the process of using the same questions with all interviewees and the ability to analyze responses to these questions are substantially less time consuming compared with unstructured interviews.

However, the criticisms about generalizability and the potential bias of the researchers could be misplaced, since using similar criteria to those used to evaluate

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the scientific value of quantitative methods is possibly disadvantaging the researchers' view of structured interviews (Doyle, 2004). We suggest that taking a localist view offers an alternative way of conceptualizing interviews as a situational account of a phenomenon. Localists shift the concerns of neopositivists from minimizing bias and statistical generalizability towards crafting questions that are more conducive to developing generalizable theoretical insights. For example, if we adopt Lukka and Kasanen's (1995) concept of generalization, statistical generalization, although the most typical explicit mode of generalization, is only one of several. Thus, interviews can contribute to other modes of generalization such as theoretical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### *3.2 Unstructured interviews*

At the other end of the continuum of interview methods, we have the informal, unstructured interview, which has its roots in the open-ended ethnographic interview. The unstructured interview process shapes to the individual situation and context, intending to make the interviewee feel relaxed and unassessed (Hannabuss, 1996). Fontana and Frey (1998) point out that most of the data gathered through participant observation is gleaned from informal conversations in the field. The unstructured interview proceeds from the assumption that the interviewers do not know in advance all the necessary questions. From a romanticist point of view, interviewers are empathetic listeners exploring the inner life world of the interviewees, acknowledging that not all interviewees will necessarily understand questions worded in the same way (Berg, 1998, p. 61). As the romanticist puts it, they are seen as participants revealing real life experiences and complex social reality. As Greene (1998) suggests, the purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. Therefore, in an unstructured interview, the interviewer must develop, adapt and generate follow-up questions reflecting the central purpose of the research. Douglas (1985) adds that unstructured interviews may also occur at the beginning of the interview process as an aid to establishing rapport.

There are also other types of unstructured interviews, such as the long interviews, considered by some (McCracken, 1988; Berg, 1998) to be one of the most powerful methods in qualitative research. Different from participant observation, the long interview, using an open-ended questionnaire, is intended to "accomplish certain ethnographic objectives without committing the investigator to intimate, repeated, and prolonged involvement in the life and community of the interviewee" (McCracken, 1988, p. 7). Compared with the ethnographic interview, the long interview is efficient as it can be completed more quickly as long as adequate access is established. The long interview inquires about cultural categories and shared meanings, differing from the in-depth interview, which is concerned with individual affective states and is practiced mostly by professionals such as psychologists.

However, the romanticist would argue that the more prolonged the engagement in the field the more likely the data becomes a mirror of reality because the interviewer begins to understand the context of the interviewees and is able to drill down into the phenomenon in more detail. Thus, the interviewer breaks down the sensitivities of the interviewees, which may be preventing them from telling the truth. Continued time in the field also builds the rapport between the interviewer and interviewees which is necessary to allow the interviewee to get closer to the truth (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 197).



Therefore, the romanticist can argue that the potential for bias is weak because as much of the truth as possible is revealed (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 202).

However, the localist is skeptical about the data collected by unstructured interviews. The true romanticist views the data collected as a mirror of reality, while possibly ignoring the political, social and environmental contexts that existed when the data were recorded. Over time, the world view of the interviewee changes and, as we have already highlighted, the dyadic conversation between the interviewer and interviewee is the cause. Thus, the localist would argue that the interview data only represents the interviewee's world view at a particular point in time in a particular context. For example, the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer is influenced by an imbalance of personal power and authority in which the interviewee, coming from the position of the less powerful, gifts answers in response to the interviewer. Therefore, the data become tainted by the interviewee to a point that it may no longer even be a brief reflection of the mirror of reality, but merely a narrative bordering on a fairy tale like Alice's *Looking-Glass*. The work of the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was criticized for this reason (Freeman, 1984).

### 3.3 *Semi-structured interviews*

Between the continuum endpoints of structured and unstructured interviews lies a multitude of research positions. However, in our paper, we explore the intermediate space of the semi-structured interview, the most common of all qualitative research methods (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 194). The semi-structured interview involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses. Thus, the focus is on the interview guide incorporating a series of broad themes to be covered during the interview to help direct the conversation toward the topics and issues about which the interviewers want to learn. Generally interview guides vary from highly scripted to relatively loose. However, the guides all serve the same purpose, which is to ensure the same thematic approach is applied during the interview.

The semi-structured interview enjoys its popularity because it is flexible, accessible and intelligible and, more important, capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behavior. Often it is the most effective and convenient means of gathering information (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Because it has its basis in human conversation, it allows the skillful interviewer to modify the style, pace and ordering of questions to evoke the fullest responses from the interviewee. Most importantly, it enables interviewees to provide responses in their own terms and in the way that they think and use language. It proves to be especially valuable if the researchers are to understand the way the interviewees perceive the social world under study.

For example, semi-structured interviews help develop understanding of the ways in which managers make sense of, and create meanings about, their jobs and their environment. The issue becomes how to get inside the life world of managers so that the researcher is able to interpret this life world from within (Schwartzmann, 1993). Utilizing an ethnographic approach to questioning, researchers can learn about organizational culture from different individuals' points of view thus bringing into the open an often hidden environment. Many management and organizational issues, such as employee motivation or dysfunctional behavior, can be studied using such an approach.

Underlying the semi-structured interview is the assumption that the questions must be comprehensible to the interviewee while, at the same time, the interviewer must respond sensitively to differences in the way the interviewees understand the world. The localist uses semi-structured interviews to emphasize the need to approach the world from the interviewee's perspective. Thus, both interviewer and interviewee participate in the interview, producing questions and answers through a discourse of complex interpersonal talk.

A primary technique used in semi-structured interviews is the use of scheduled and unscheduled probes, providing the researcher with the means to draw out more complete narratives from the interviewees, drilling down a particular topic. A scheduled probe would require the interviewee to elaborate on a stimulating or surprising answer just made. For example, the interviewer endeavors to follow up immediately with a standard question, such as "please tell me more about that [...]" when the interviewee suddenly discloses an area of great interest.

Thus, semi-structured interviews have the potential to address the major concerns of the localist perspective in order to produce situated accounts. For example, because of the requirement of the interviewer to probe and follow up on questions, semi-structured interviews are able to produce different responses contingent to the traits of the interviewers. Different interviewers will evoke different responses from the same interviewee given the way questions are asked and probed. This is different from the structured interview, which assumes that the same objective truth will be told no matter who conducts the interview so long as the right questions and the same structures are followed. Therefore, for the localist, the interview process is not a neutral tool to evoke rational responses and uncover truths, but rather a situated event in which the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation. Thus, the interview produces situated understanding grounded in specific interactional episodes, which depend on characteristics of the interviewer, such as gender, race, socio-economic class and ethnicity (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

Conducting semi-structured interviews requires a great deal of care and planning before, during and after the interviews with regard to the ways questions are asked and interpreted. In the next section, the different types of questions that can be used in conducting semi-structured interviews are outlined. From a neopositivist view, these questions should be avoided if they are not part of the structured list. Alternately, the romanticist will not bother planning questions because the interview process is a human conversation where the interviewer wants to know what the interviewee wants to reveal.

### *3.4 Typology of questions used in research interviews*

Largely influenced by the localist view of the interview process as an empirical phenomenon and the transcripts produced as situated accounts, our paper adopts the view that there is no one right way of interviewing, no format is appropriate for all interviews, and no single way of wording questions will always work. The setting of the interview, the perspectives of the interviewee and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique environment for each interview. Therein lie the challenges for interviewers requiring responsiveness and sensitivity during the interview to get the "best" possible responses.

As the interview is “a complex and involved procedure” (Minichielle *et al.*, 2008, p. 1), there is no recipe for effective interviewing and designing appropriate and insightful questions is much more difficult than many of us realize. However, some useful guidelines can be considered. Many interview skills or techniques appear easy because they originate from natural human encounters such as conversations. However, as Hannabuss (1996, p. 22) notes:

In the formal, and often very self-conscious and self-monitoring setting of a research interview, they [questions] become quite hard to employ well and deliberately [...] It is easy to let a research interview *degenerate into a conversation, or even chat, which is an opportunity wasted* (emphasis added).

Access to interviewees is often difficult to establish, thus the opportunity to conduct an interview cannot be taken lightly and careful planning needs to take place before the interview begins. As Ahrens and Dent (1998, p. 26) note, “Once access is granted, the task of gaining interviews with busy managers, for whom time is at a premium, is nontrivial”. They go on to comment:

The process of interviewing managers itself calls for sensitivity and interpersonal skills. Interviewees must be put at ease so that they will speak freely, as it were “off the record,” notwithstanding that the researcher is taking notes and openly tape-recording the conversation. Rather like a therapist, the researcher has to have a capacity to listen, to understand and to tolerate pregnant pauses without discomfort, for these serve to precipitate further elaboration by the interviewee. At the same time, he or she has, at points, to intervene to bring the interviewee into direct contact with issues that are being skirted around or avoided (Ahrens and Dent, 1998, p. 26).

Additionally, Hannabuss (1996, p. 26) advocates four important interviewing skills. The first is establishing rapport with interviewees. Second, the interviewer must learn ways to keep the discussion going and, more importantly, avoid questioning which dampens the discourse. For example, avoid asking questions with one-word answers (e.g. yes or no) that stop the flow of the interview or using jargon, abstractions, “loaded questions” and double negatives, that puzzle or annoy the interviewee. Third, the interviewer must know when to interrupt and learn how to focus and pace the interview. Last, the interviewer should adopt a non-judgmental attitude and foster patience so that moments of silence work on the interviewer’s behalf.

Similarly, Shensul *et al.* (1999, p. 141) suggest the quality of an interview can be maintained by paying careful attention to the following three principles:

- (1) maintaining the flow of the interviewee’s story;
- (2) maintaining a positive relationship with the interviewee; and
- (3) avoiding interviewer bias.

As in Hannabuss’ example, the flow of the interviewee’s story can be inadvertently disrupted by the interviewer, such as by redirecting the narrative or interrupting it, rushing to complete the interviewee’s sentences, prematurely terminating a narrative, failing to clarify terms or asking questions the interviewee does not understand, thereby stalling the interview. Positive relationships with the interviewee can be maintained by not offering opinions about responses and avoiding non-verbal indications of surprise or shock, as well as not using non-verbal cues such as nodding to indicate approval or a correct answer. In the case of field interviews, it is also

important to accept the interviewee's hospitality. The interviewer should not pose leading questions or fail to follow up or omit topics introduced by the interviewee.

Most texts on qualitative methods propose a list of interview questions and the following typology is an integrated list based on similar concerns embedded in most typologies of interview questions, drawing on sources such as Kvale's (1996, pp. 133-5) typography of questions (summarized in Table III). Berg (1998) provides a similar list of questions. Because of the subtleties involved in the various ways of asking

Types of questions	Purpose of questions	Some examples
1. Introducing questions	To kick start the conversation and move to the main interview	"Can you tell me about [...]?" "Do you remember an occasion when [...]?" "What happened in the episode mentioned?"
2. Follow-up questions	To direct questioning to what has just been said	Nodding, "mm", Repeating significant words
3. Probing questions	To draw out more complete narratives	"Could you say something more about that?" "Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?" "Do you have further examples of this?" "What did you think then?"
4. Specifying questions	To develop more precise descriptions from general statements	"What did you actually do when you felt a mounting anxiety?" "How did your body react?"
5. Direct questions	To elicit direct responses	"Have you ever received money for good grades?" "When you mention competition, do you then think of a sportsmanlike or a destructive competition?"
6. Indirect questions	To pose projective questions	"How do you believe other pupils regard the competition of grades?"
7. Structuring questions	To refer to the use of key questions to finish off one part of the interview and open up another, or to indicate when a theme is exhausted by breaking off long irrelevant answers	"I would now like to introduce another topic [...]"
8. Silence	To allow pauses, so that the interviewees have ample time to associate and reflect, and break the silence themselves with significant information	
9. Interpreting questions	Similar to some forms of probing questions, to rephrase an interviewee's answer to clarify and interpret rather than to explore new information	"You then mean that [...]" "Is it correct that you feel that [...]" "Does the expression [...] cover what you have just expressed?"
10. Throw away questions	To serve a variety of purposes, i.e. to relax the subject when sensitive areas have been breached	"Oh, I forgot to ask you [...]"

**Source:** Adapted from Kvale (1996, pp. 133-5)

**Table III.**  
Types of interview  
questions with examples

questions, skilful use of the typology of questions requires repeated use and reflection by interviewers to develop their interviewing skills. For illustrative purposes, we will provide some discussion of the types of questions.

*Introducing questions.* Introducing questions are meant to “kick start” an interview and move to the interview’s focus as rapidly as possible. They are not related directly to the research questions but are opening questions, such as “Can you tell me about [...]”, or “do you recall [...]”, or “what happened in [...]”, assuming that the interviewee is ready to talk and is not intimidated, nervous or cold.

In a book offering practical guidelines on how to do research interviews, Kvale (1996) requires that the interviewees be provided with a context for the interview before and a debriefing afterwards. The briefing should define the situation for the subject, briefly explain the purpose of the interview, and ask whether the interviewee has any questions before starting the interview. He also cautions that it is preferable to wait until after the interview to elaborate further on the nature of the study.

Most other writers emphasize the importance for the researcher to establish rapport with the interviewee at this “introduction and small talk” phase that precedes the main interview itself. The intention is to build trust and inform the interviewee about the purpose of the interview in order to get the interviewee talking freely (Mellon, 1990). In this regard, the demeanor and proxemics (use and respect for personal space) of the interviewer should be open, perhaps saying something about him/her self, rather than coolly aloof and professional. In contrast to Kvale, Mellon (1990) recommends throw away warm-up questions as a transition into the interview itself, which focuses on the research question. Mellon stresses the importance of exploring each issue before moving on to the next although, in practical terms, it is often necessary to follow up on unanswered or partially answered questions later. She also acknowledges the need to provide transitional information, such as explaining how a particular question fits the research. This raises a more controversial issue of disclosure which we will address later.

*Follow-up and probing questions.* Follow-up and probing questions attempt to extend the subjects’ answers through the inquiring, persistent and occasionally critical attitude of the interviewer. This can be done directly through rephrasing a statement, or simply through semi-verbal sounds, nods or body language. Akin to “active listening”, these techniques can lead to further elaboration. Kvale (1996) notes that experienced interviewers can recognize red lights in the answer such as unusual terms or intonations which may signal the existence of a rich vein of information as discussed earlier in the semi-structured interviews.

*Specifying and direct questions.* Specifying and direct questions are used to develop more precise descriptions from general statements (Kvale, 1996). Direct questions are usually postponed until later in the interview after interviewees have had the opportunity to make their own spontaneous descriptions.

It is essential for the interviewer to carefully prepare before asking relevant specifying and direct questions to ensure the right people are asked the right questions. Background information about the organization, the environment, the business and the people, etc. needs to be collected from other sources such as web pages and the media. Adequate preparation is also essential to ensure that valuable interview time will not be spent on asking questions that can be answered through documentary sources.

*Indirect questions.* Indirect questions often take an open-ended form with the intention to open up the opportunity for the interviewees to elaborate on things that they see as important and meaningful to their life (McCracken, 1988). Indirect questions are more projective and attempt to get at the interviewee's attitudes by discussing similar attitudes in others. Such indirect questions may open up a new avenue of inquiry, and will usually require further questioning to interpret the answer.

*Silence.* Silence allows pauses in the interview, which can offer the interviewee time to reflect and gather energy for more disclosure. It should be noted that not all cultures are equally talkative and expressive. Some are much more so (such as North America), while others are taciturn and may even use silence as an integral part of their language, especially in formal meetings. As Doyle (2004, p. 11) notes:

Qualitative interviewers have to learn to tolerate silence. It is important not to get impatient, but to give participants a chance to think about what they want to say. It is a natural human tendency to fill in pauses in conversation, and if the researcher can avoid doing so the interviewee will often fill the silence with more information.

An important critical reflection from a pragmatic localist perspective is the ability to recognize what interviewees do not tell in an interview setting. It is critical for the interviewer to read between the lines and pay attention to hidden messages or ambivalence. Thus, silences can be revealing about what interviewees do not intend to tell and/or try to push into the back stage. Both neopositivists and romanticists will likely ignore using silence as a technique, assuming the interviewees as truth tellers who are capable of sharing their inner world. A localist will argue that it is naive to assume that relevant issues are always on the surface and that interviewees will always offer the truth on the front stage.

*Structuring questions.* Structuring questions refer to the interviewer's management of the experience and the use of key questions to complete one part of the interview and open up another. For example, they can be used when a theme is exhausted by breaking off long irrelevant answers with comments such as "I would now like to introduce another topic [...]" (Kvale, 1996).

*Interpreting questions.* Interpreting questions are similar to some forms of probing questions in their rephrasing of a respondent's answer. Here, however, the purpose is clarification and interpretation rather than exploration and mining of new information. Some examples could be "You then mean that [...]" , "Is it correct that you feel that [...]" , or "Does the expression [...] cover what you have just expressed?" (Kvale, 1996).

*Throw away questions.* Throw away questions serve a variety of purposes, including the aforementioned rapport building and, on occasion, these questions can be used to relax the subject whenever the interviewee indicates that sensitive areas have been breached (Berg, 1998). Berg (1998) suggests that the interviewer casually return to a previous line of questioning, for example by saying something like "Oh, I forgot to ask you [...]" , thus giving the interviewee a few moments to calm down.

In addition to this typology of questions, Kvale (1996) suggests that other considerations are also necessary for interviewers in preparing and conducting interviews, including being knowledgeable about the research theme, structured in disposition and nature, clear and articulate in conversation, gentle and sensitive so as to not intimidate interviewees. The interviewer should also be open and receptive to new ideas but steady in steering the interview in the desired research direction. Despite a gentle disposition and openness, the effective interviewer should also exercise critical



judgment, and test the reliability and validity of the interviewee's story. Finally, the interviewer can add extra value by always seeking to interpret, clarify and extend the interviewee's responses.

### *3.5 Some ethical considerations*

In applying a localist perspective to gain insights into the interview method, the eventual aim is for interviewers and interviewees to become equals, with both of them being involved in the production of situated accounts through complex interpersonal interaction. This differs drastically from neopositivists, who treat interviewees as truth tellers, and romanticists, who are empathetic listeners who explore the inner world of the interviewees. Contention may arise in areas where politically sensitive issues are exposed by research whose objective is to produce truthful and objective accounts of daily events. For example, through the publication of the results of a specific study, disclosure of certain information could "blow the whistle" for the researched, especially for those whose primary purpose is to expose people and institutions (Punch, 1986). Most of the time, research dilemmas occur due to a lack of awareness and/or proper procedures designed to establish mutual understanding and trust. Therefore, it would be useful if we possessed a readily available body of knowledge to guide us in qualitative research in order to avoid frustration.

Moreover, with a greater social emphasis on human rights and the protection of personal information, it is necessary to consider ethical issues when it comes to the practice of conducting interviews. These embody general principles related largely to the dignity and privacy of individuals, the avoidance of harm and the confidentiality of research findings (Punch, 1986, p. 35). For example, there are well-established ethical guidelines for research with human subjects in most university research settings, such as in Canada, Australia and the UK. Ethical issues occur in every aspect of a research project and researchers have obligations to their profession, colleagues, employers, the world at large and especially the interviewee (Berg, 1998). In exploring ethical considerations, we identify four specific ethical issues which deserve careful consideration before embarking on an interview project. Each of these is discussed in turn.

*Impose no harm.* The general ethical principle with regard to the interviewee is to impose no harm. To ensure this outcome, research is normally carried out under the auspices of some governing body or research board. Although some variations exist across boards, typically these boards consider the costs and benefits of the research to ensure the interviewee will not suffer harm. Therefore, to protect the interviewee, almost all boards follow similar ethical guidelines. For example, below is an excerpt of the ethics statement established by the Tri-Council, which represents the three major federal research funding agencies in Canada involving natural, medical and social sciences (Government of Canada, 2010, p. 1):

The cardinal principle of modern research ethics is respect for human dignity. This principle aspires to protecting the multiple and interdependent interests of the person – from bodily to psychological to cultural integrity. This principle forms the basis of the ethical obligations in research that are listed below. It is unacceptable to treat persons solely as means (mere objects or things), because doing so fails to respect their intrinsic human dignity and thus impoverishes all of humanity.

Foremost is assuring that the interviewee has freely volunteered and was not coerced into participating in the research, and knows the intended outcomes (Kvale, 1996).

Thus, researchers need to obtain the interviewees' informed consent to participate in the interview. Interviewees do not need to be informed about the full study, but they need to be informed about the interview process, the roles of the researchers (e.g. covert versus overt roles) and how the interview data will be used. In general, interviewees should be informed of their basic rights, including the fact they may withdraw their consent at any time or may refuse to answer any particular questions.

Additionally, interviewees must be informed of all dangers and risks. The risks for interview research may seem small at first, but awareness of the impact of dangers and risks is sobering. Because of the behavioral nature of business research, guidelines similar to practicing psychologists may be necessary to ensure the interviewee suffers no subtle injury, such as diminution of self-esteem, nor experiences undue stress during the interview. Exposure to disturbing lines of questioning, making the interviewee aware of disturbing facts, or coercing the interviewee to make moral choices can have an impact on their self-esteem, unwarranted by the benefits of the research, and in some cases, imminent danger to the researcher may warrant a disguise or some other form of deception (Punch, 1986). However, it is difficult to imagine how participation in such a study is ethical.

*Relationship-based ethics.* The interviewer enters into a relationship with the interviewee implying certain obligations. First is not to use the data gathered to harm the interviewee. The nature of the relationship can variously be described as ranging from exploiter ("just give me the data") to friend, advocate or even reformer. For example, the interviewer could befriend the interviewee. Such a relationship, although perhaps not unethical *per se*, runs the risk of becoming so. If the researcher does a favor for one interviewee, does this imply any obligation to befriend other interviewees? Indeed, should there be ethical guidelines, such as a professional code of ethics (Punch, 1986, p. 37) concerning the relationship an interviewer can enter into with an interviewee? Although no formal rules exist, such consideration may alert researchers to the ethical dimensions of their work, particularly prior to entry into the field. Thus, there may exist a power differential between the interviewer and the interviewee because of their relative social status, for example an esteemed professor interviewing a student. The interviewer must manage the power differential judiciously so as to not exploit it for personal gain or to unduly influence the responses of the interviewee.

*Disclosure of research intent.* A fundamental balance needs to be struck between interviewer and interviewee in terms of how much about the study's intent should be disclosed by the interviewer. As the interview's discourse develops, it might seem to be advantageous to have disclosed beforehand the research intent in order to build trust and clarify for the interviewee the objectives of the research project. Alternately, prior knowledge about the research might create demand characteristics altering the interviewee's responses. Thus, prior knowledge of the researcher's intent may cloud the subject's response. Therefore, ethically, interviewers should debrief interviewees after the interview so they can put some closure on the experience, especially where they were not briefed beforehand.

In most circumstances, researchers are required to get written approval from the interviewee stating the purpose of the research, and any assurances about potential risks to the interviewee. A widely employed practice is to use informed consent forms by which "the subjects of research have the right to be informed that they are being researched and also about the nature of the research" (Punch, 1986, p. 35).

It is very important that there is no deception on the part of the researcher in presenting the informed consent form. This may be more common than imagined, given the policies of research boards. For example, as one of the authors experienced in relation to an interview-based research study, the research board insisted that the only way that accountants in an auditing firm could be approached was through a poster on the company bulletin board. The research board had stated guidelines that any recruitment of interviewees by managers would constitute coercion. Under such strict policies, researchers may be inclined to withhold information from their research board or even to change methodologies whereby open-ended questions are substituted for close-ended, more specific questions that may not have been approved on an individual basis.

*Right to privacy and confidentiality.* This right to privacy and confidentiality should be inviolate, especially when interviewees are employees talking about their work life, where the interviewer should enter into an agreement with the interviewee not to disclose anything to the employer. As Bulmer (1982, p. 225) suggests, “identities, locations of individuals and places are concealed in published results, data collected are held in anonymized form, and all data are kept securely and confidentially”. In cases where small numbers of interviewees are involved, the interviewer should design interview protocols, assuring the interviewee’s personal details are kept secret. Conundrums can exist in extreme cases where, for example, an interviewee confesses a crime or intention to commit a crime to the researcher. Does the researcher have an obligation to disclose this? Galliher (1982, p. 162) draws on the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) Code of Ethics[1], which proposes that “the revelation of wrongdoing in positions of public trust shall not be deemed “confidential information” within the meaning of this rule”.

Galliher (1982, p. 162) also proposes the ASA ethical code be changed to read: “when actors become involved in government and business or other organizations where they are accountable to the public, no right of privacy applies to conduct such roles”. Thus, he advocates the interviewer-interviewee relationship should not be protected like a doctor-patient or a priest-confessor relationship. If legal status is the guideline, then the rights of the employer and/or the state and its citizens to security should take precedence over individual rights. Otherwise, as in most aspects of life, one’s moral compass and common sense is a good guide for ethical behavior. Thus, partly because of the ethical complexity of specific cases, the intuitive choice may not always be the ethically correct one defined by research boards’ ethical guidelines.

Thus, key issues confronting researchers are the protection of subjects and the freedom to conduct research and publish research findings. The conduct of interviews involves a potentially vast range of social settings that can lead to unpredictable consequences for both the researcher and the researched. In those cases, even established codes of ethics fail to solve “situational ethics” issues (Punch, 1986). As a word of advice, Punch (1986) suggests that researchers may consider the possibility of conceding the right to interviewees to be consulted prior to publication, however they should never sign away the rights of researchers to publication. Possibilities include, for example, providing the opportunity for interviewees to read the transcript and sending the resultant research paper to them. Although researchers are solely responsible for any interpretations, interviewees shall be given the opportunity to read the research output from the interview process.

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Summary. The focus of our paper so far has been on the research interview, starting from the more established views on interviewing primarily as a pipeline of knowledge about the internal life world of interviewees or the external life of their environment within the context of the research project. We drew on the neopositivist, romanticist and localist perspectives to understand the key features of structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews and some considerations of forms of questioning available based on the advice-giving literature on the interview method. We now turn to a more critical reflection of how our discussion of the neopositivist, romanticist and localist positions will shed light on a productive use of the research interview method.

#### 4. Toward a reflective approach to interviews

Despite growing pressure to encourage new ways of thinking about research methodology, only recently have interview methodologists begun to realize that “we cannot lift the results of interviewing out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached” (Fontana and Frey, 1998, p. 663). The benefit of the research interview lies in its unique ability to uncover the private and sometimes incommunicable social world of the interviewee, to gain insight into alternative assumptions and ways of seeing. Thus, Alvesson (2003, p. 13) defines qualitative interviews as “relatively loosely structured and open to what the interviewee feels is relevant and important to talk about, given the interest of the research project”. As noted at the outset, it is easy to take the research interview for granted because it seems so simple. Moreover, as Alvesson (2003, p. 16) notes, “an interesting feature of the advice-giving literature on interviews is that it often recommends different, even opposite moves, which supports a nontechnical view on this subject matter”.

The aim of our paper is to provide reflexive insight into the different types of interview methods, drawing on Alvesson’s three perspectives in terms of neopositivist, romanticist and localist viewpoints. Conventional discussions on interviews on a continuum from structured to unstructured focus on the functional perspective, including ways of perfecting these methods. A critique of the use of interviews from a post-structuralist perspective yields insights into the limitations and potential of this field. Therefore, as Alvesson also argues, instead of relying on the researcher to optimize the interview as a technique or tool, or to work hard to get interviewees to be honest, clear and consistent, the researcher should spend more time reflecting on the process of questioning and on the meaning of the results. This is in line with increased attention to the use of a reflexive approach in management research (Baxter and Chua, 1998; Nadin and Cassell, 2006; Dumay, 2010). Specifically, Alvesson (2003, p. 14) proposes a reflexive pragmatic view on the interview method because “this approach means working with alternative lines of interpretation and vocabularies and reinterpreting the favored line(s) of understanding through the systematic involvement of alternative points of departure”.

More importantly, our paper illustrates how alternative views on the interview method contribute to our understanding of the method, recognizing the subjectivity of both the interviewer and the interviewee, and the socially constructed nature of interview accounts. Our paper sheds light on how different conceptualizations of the interview method lead to new thinking about its use. As Alvesson (2003, p. 14) continues to explain:

Reflexivity operates with a framework that stimulates an interplay between producing interpretations and challenging them. It includes opening up the phenomena through exploring more than one set of meanings and acknowledging ambiguity in the phenomena and the line(s) of inquiry favored, and it means bridging the gap between epistemological concerns and method.

A more reflexive, pragmatic approach to the research interview needs to be developed in which reflexivity is encouraged as the conscious and consistent effort to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid “a priori privilege [of] a single, favored angle and vocabulary” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25). Alvesson (2003, pp. 27-30) argues this will result in three different sets of implications: methodological, reflexive and novel, as summarized in Table IV. These implications bear a strong relationship to the traditional issues of the research interview that we have discussed in the paper.

The first concerning methodological practice and technique (Alvesson, 2003, pp. 27-8) highlights the need for interviewers to be aware of the interviewee as a person who may be influenced by the politics of the organization and not just as a source of objective truth. For example, the interviewee may not want the truth to be disclosed because of concerns with confidentiality or the interviewee might only disclose what they think the interviewer wants to hear. By utilizing different questioning techniques and continued reassurance of confidentiality, it may be possible to reduce the risk of attaining politically-guided interview accounts.

The second proposes a rigorous and reflexive approach to conventional uses of interview materials (Alvesson, 2003, pp. 28-9). The implication here is that through reflection the interviewer can be skeptical about (without rejecting) the transcripts of the interview. In this case, the interviewer realizes that the interview transcript is not a mirror of reality but rather a text that needs to be subjectively evaluated. Therefore, the claims that can be made from interpreting the interview data must be tempered with a disclaimer about the objective truth of the empirical findings. While we can reflect on and ambitiously analyze the data in sophisticated ways, we will always need to understand and disclose how the interpretation is ours and can never be an exact mirror of reality.

The third implication re-conceptualizes interviews as offering novel research questions and new lines of interpretation (Alvesson, 2003, pp. 29-30). Here, the interview becomes the focus of attention rather than the content. In this case, the interview process is designed to elicit an organizational discourse that is not a mirror of reality, but one constructed under the influence of the subjectivity of the interviewee. The interview account thus becomes a construction of the specific questions asked and as “what people think, feel and value, as well as do, in various everyday life situations” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 29). Thus, the dynamics of the interview situation are important and the accounts produced must be analyzed using an understanding of how the stories were told and how they work and how the interviewee may be giving an account of how they see themselves “mobilized” in a particular situation rather than offering a true account (Alvesson, 2003, pp. 29-30).

To illustrate the possible impacts outlined in Table IV, we offer an example of how Dumay (2010) deliberately utilized semi-structured interviews with individuals and a focus group during an interventionist research[2] project charged with developing a new strategy for a University Faculty. From the methodological perspective, Dumay outlines how he dealt with the politics of the organization by directly questioning the opinion

Implications	Impact on the interview process	Impact on the interviewer/interviewee	Impact on accounts
Methodological: practice and technique that strengthen conventional views on interviews	Doing interview restarts and returning to particular themes with different vocabularies Political distractions of the interviewee may be reduced if the interviewer assures that information will not be shared with management	Awareness of script following leads to actions to discourage traditional talk Improved dialogue between interviewer and interviewee	Less-script coherent expressions and use of jargon Reduce politically guided interview accounts
Reflexive: a more rigorous and reflexive approach to the use of interview materials for conventional purposes	Be skeptical (but not rejecting) of traditional claims that interviewee has provided the researchers with reliable data The quantity of empirical material may give misleading impression of robustness	Be more modest in claims about empirical support Interviewer needs to be aware that interviewees may be caught in the same discourse thus give similar accounts	The ability to mirror reality is limited Use interview data for inspirational or illustrative purposes rather than empirical purposes
Novel: research questions and new lines of interpretation	Reorient research questions to focus on the interview as the empirical situation rather than the content of the interview  Identification of organizational discourse: focus not on mirroring reality but on constructing a particular form of subjectivity	The researcher makes credible that a knowledge producing logic dominates the account and that social reality puts strong imprints on the accounts Extends the interview beyond the empirical situation to refer to something broader and "extrasituational" in the eyes of the interviewee	The dynamics of the situation are important to understand how stories are told and how they work  The interviewees' accounts are based on how they see themselves "mobilized" in a particular situation

**Table IV.**  
Some possible research  
implications of interviews  
from a localist  
perspective

**Source:** Adapted from Alvesson (2003, pp. 27-30)

of senior managers and faculty about the current implementation of strategy. Dumay (2010, p. 60) states he did this because Faculty middle management wanted to become involved in strategic conversations, to have access to the decision makers and to "make sense" of Faculty strategy (Westley, 1990, p. 350). Thus, when Dumay (2010, p. 60) involved academic and support staff in interviews and a strategic workshop the interviews became an invaluable part of developing the strategic plan because he developed a multidirectional (discourse and response) "strategic conversation" between himself as an interviewer and interviewees. This planted the seed for continued



“strategic conversations” over the ensuing time the strategy was being developed and served as a “sense-making” mechanism for the interviewees as it enabled greater understanding and confirmed the strategic issues relevant to the faculty.

Thus, when conducting the project, Dumay (2010) as the researcher, was able to reflect on the results of each interview which in turn influenced the probing questions he asked in subsequent interviews. As the interviews progressed, Dumay (2010, p. 60) demonstrated how more than one theoretical perspective was applied to the research, which is akin to how people and organizations operate in practice. Thus, the process of reflexivity allowed him to go inside the organization and gather the interview account, and then stand back to reflect and apply different theoretical frames to make sense of what the interviewees said. Thus, each interview built on how he made sense of the interview and in turn influenced how he conducted further interviews and interventions during the research.

The approach was also novel because it used the interventionist research methodology, which was applied in order to develop research as well as organizational outcomes. Thus, the focus was not on the content of the empirical data retrieved from the interviews, but rather on the situation at hand, which was to develop strategy. Here, Dumay was concerned with the subjective opinions and narratives of the interviewees as he sought to mobilise these to develop a cohesive outcome, i.e. a new strategy. The interviews were employed not only to gather empirical material, but to gather insights into how the interviewees viewed the future direction of the organization. Thus, the interviewees did not disclose a mirror of reality as much as they disclosed their vision of the future.

Thus, by using a more reflexive approach, we can better understand the differences underlying different interview methods in terms of how we view the method. By considering multiple perspectives, such as neopositivist, romanticist and localist viewpoints, we can gain insights into the roles of interviewers and interviewees during the interview process. Alvesson (2003) advocates a scaling down of expectations about how much we can rely on the interview method and to be especially aware of how language cannot perfectly mirror reality. Moreover, Alvesson (2003) develops the use of different metaphors (illustrated in Table V) that can be brought together as a repertoire

Metaphors	Interview	Interviewer	Interviewee	Accounts
Example 1: local accomplishment	As a social situation set up by researcher	As involved in the production of answers through complex interpersonal interactions	As providing different responses contingent on the traits of the interviewer	As an outcome of the situation
Example 2: moral storytelling	As a site for impression management	As an audience of the performance of the interviewee	As a performer interested in promotional activity (promoting oneself and one's group)	As the rationalized script of the interviewee
Example 3: play of the powers of discourse	As a location of a powerful discourse	As an observer of the discourse at play	As individuals constituted and responding within macro discourses	As indications of the discourse at play

**Table V.**  
Illustration of three metaphors of the interview

**Source:** Adapted from Alvesson (2003, p. 15)

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guided by a meta-theoretical framework in which the research interview is viewed as a socially, linguistically and subjectively rich and complex situation.

One example is to see the interview process as a local accomplishment in which there is a social problem of coping with an interpersonal relationship and complex interactions in a non-routine situation, namely the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Since the neopositivist view focuses mainly on the production of valid reporting of the phenomenon, it ignores or tries to minimize the impact of what takes place as a complex social interaction aimed at establishing a relationship between two people. This is because the neopositivist concentrates on asking structured questions and generally does not take into account interviewees and interviewers' differences in terms of gender, age, professional status, ethnicity and appearance, all of which can influence responses to questions.

A second example adopting a localist view allows us to see the interview process as impression management with moral storytelling and self-promotional activities. Sometimes interviewers try to push forth their own political agendas and personal interests within the organization in research interviews. A romanticist will try to counter the "moral storytelling" influence in interviews by trying to establish rapport and trust that hopefully will lead to depth and honest truth telling. Unlike a romanticist, who tends to ignore the fact that interviewees as members of the institution are motivated to want to give a good impression of themselves and their workplace, to express oneself in loyal terms, a localist will take into account such influence and empirically examine how it affects the outcome of the interview accounts.

A third example applying the localist view enables us to analyze the interview process as a play of the powers of discourse. Post-modern thinkers, particularly post-structuralists such as Foucault (1980) and Weedon (1987), challenge the notion of the individual as a conscious, autonomous individual bearing meaning. Instead, the individual is constituted within discourses determining the individual's conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and perceptions. There are multiple, changing discourses that challenge the stability of identity. Discourses position the person in the world prior to the person having any sense of choice. It is not the knowing subject but language that is supreme. Thus, a localist view permits us to focus on how the discourses are made present in the interview situation rather than how the interviewee constructs reality in light of the discourse.

Thus, the aim of applying a localist view and using metaphors is to aid our thinking about and understanding complex phenomena. The use of metaphor is to focus on an organizing gestalt that draws attention to its constituent aspects and may serve as a starting point for new ways of seeing. Morgan (1996, p. 228) goes further to suggest that the use of metaphor is "a primal generative process that is fundamental to the creation of human understanding and meaning in all aspects of life". These examples demonstrate, theoretically at least, the inadequacy of the two dominant perspectives of neopositivism and romanticism to cope with some of the complex issues underlying the interview process. Neopositivists and romanticists will either ignore the subjective nature of human beings or downplay the importance of power and discourses to the conduct of interviews.

## 5. Conclusion and practical implications

Above all, what can we gain from using a reflexive approach to understanding the interview method? There is often a misguided belief driving qualitative researchers

to imitate quantitative ideals for data collection and analysis such as stressing the avoidance of bias. It is important that we recognize the conflict between the elements of reflexive research, with its multiple points of view and angles, and what Alvesson (2003) terms as the traditional means of suppressing ambiguity and accomplishing pseudo-rationality. Thus, we now offer some practical implications, by way of suggested skills, based on our insights into the research interview method. Important for critically examining a phenomenon such as research interviews “is the development of critical, managerially relevant knowledge and practical understandings that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 19). While there are many specific skills we could list here, we limit our discussion to three particularly important skills.

*Stepping back from a particular viewpoint*

The first new skill a researcher needs is the ability to step away from either the neopositivist or romanticist viewpoints. Unfortunately, we have more than likely been conditioned to take either stance, but as we have outlined these positions are at opposing ends of a continuum. In support of our localist position, we advocate taking a middle-range position (Laughlin, 1995), situating our use of interviews with the semi-structured approach. However, we do not advocate using the semi-structured method exclusively. Rather, we advocate that by using the localist perspective, various interview methods can be used at various times depending on the purpose of the interview, the type of data being collected and, more importantly, the number of cases being considered.

Accordingly, Giddens (1984, p. 333), commenting on the divide between quantitative (neopositivist) and qualitative (romanticist) research, advocates that there is no obvious point where the division can be made but the decision to choose a research method depends on the number of “cases” being investigated: a large number of “cases” advocates the use of quantitative methods and a low number of “cases” advocates the use of qualitative methods. This concept was utilised by Dumay (2009) to develop a continuum of critical research which we have adapted here to outline how the choice between methods can be made. As such we are not advocating the use of a pure romanticist perspective should there be a single case, nor a neopositivist view at the opposite end of the continuum, but rather that the constraints of time and resources will impact researchers’ ability to choose specific interview methods. However, we do advocate taking a critical, localist perspective, in the process of collecting and examining interview data regardless of which end of the continuum you find yourself (Figure 1).

*Stepping in and out of the interview*

In taking the localist perspective towards interviews, researchers must also develop the skill of being able to step into and out of the research process. Jönsson and Lukka (2006, p. 3) describe this as “the need for the researcher to cross the border between

**Figure 1.**  
Interview research  
continuum

Structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Unstructured interviews
Large number of cases		A single case

**Source:** Adapted from Dumay (2009, p. 496)

the etic [outsider] and the emic [insider] perspectives, there and back again". We feel this is necessary because the localist understands that, as researchers, they are an integral part of the dyadic interactions and conversations between interviewer and interviewee. In essence, the researcher influences at every moment the resultant interview data. Thus, the researcher needs to be able to step back from the interview and reflect on how they, or other environmental factors, may have influenced the data collected. In this way, interviewers can pause between interviews to analyze their interview process before conducting further interviews.

This is where researchers must also review the ethical implications of their study as all too often ethical considerations are established at the beginning of a study and are either ignored or changed during the conduct of the research. The result should be an informed, reflective and ethical interviewer capable of understanding as much as possible from the interviewee's point of view, without intervening in the outcomes of the conversation.

### *Developing discourse*

The last skill we advocate is the ability of researchers to develop an open discourse about their use of a particular interview method in a particular situation. As we have demonstrated in our discussion and in advancing the localist perspective, researchers need to have the ability to self-critique their methods and approaches, and to critique others. The ability to be self-critical means that we, as researchers, can continually develop our skills and contribute to the knowledge and skills of others.

This is especially critical to the development of new researchers, especially those undertaking a PhD, as the discourse outlined in this paper is counter to the manner in which qualitative research methods are being taught. Currently, the focus of PhD education is on the ability of students to collect and analyze data from a distance. On the contrary, we have identified that the research process is an interactive one between interviewers and interviewees as dyadic relationships through discourse are developed. It is an inescapable fact of using interviews in the research process. By making PhD students aware of the realities of interviewing through the localist perspective, we are in effect opening up new horizons of understanding whereby the scope and validity of PhD and continued qualitative research is strengthened. Thus, in this paper, we have through our discourse challenged and developed the epistemological foundation of interviews as part of the qualitative research process. We hope as a result of your engagement with our paper you have now joined us on this journey.

### **Notes**

1. Available at: [www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm)
2. Interventionist research is a type of action research where researchers and practitioners are teamed together to jointly solve organizational problems.

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