NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

BOOK REVIEW

Ruthellen Josselson. *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Relational Approach.* New York: The Guilford Press, 2013. 203 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4625-1000-9.

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When I received a phone call from the editors of *Narrative Works* asking if I would be interested in reviewing a book on interviewing by Ruthellen Josselson, I jumped at the opportunity. I had read pieces by her on narrative research. I was eager to read a book she had written about interviewing. I was not disappointed.

The enduring impression one gets from reading *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry* is that the author has a deep knowledge of interviewing and writes from extensive and thoughtful experience, both with interviewing people herself and with helping students to become good interviewers. To be honest, I could not put the book down. As someone who has written a text on qualitative research myself (van den Hoonaard, 2012), I am always on the lookout for books that succeed in delivering a clear, theoretically rich discussion along with concrete suggestions that are useful to the novice researcher. Josselson achieves both goals.

Chapter One, "The Foundations of Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry," provides an explanation of the purpose of an interview, "to create a conversation that invites the telling of narrative accounts" (p. 4). It emphasizes the distinction between interviewing to discover "contextualized account," and interviewing for information. In our "interview society" (Silverman 1997), most people are likely more familiar with journalistic interviews that seek information. Josselson explains that in a good narrative interview, the research participant is treated like "a full human being rather than as a repository of facts" (p. 5). In this chapter, Josselson introduces the metaphor of a dance to communicate her sense of what the research relationship should be like

between the interviewer and interviewee. In her metaphor, it is the interviewee who leads and the researcher who "mirrors" the steps to move with the research participant. The point is for the researcher to stay open to possibilities that the participant might bring to the dance.

Chapter Two, "Introduction to the Research Relationship," discusses the importance of how the research relationship develops in the interview. The research relationship begins well before the actual interview takes place. Not only will the researcher have an image in her or his mind about the kinds of people whom she or he will interview, but the participant also has an image of the researcher and what the interview will be like. I particularly appreciated Josselson's referring to interview participants as "experts" in their own experience. This discussion may be particularly useful for those who are planning to interview individuals who are different from themselves in meaningful ways and/or who might be worried about what is safe to reveal to the interviewer.

In Chapter Three, "Planning the Interview," Josselson explains the differences among what she terms the "Big Q question," the "Recruitment Question," and the "Little q question." The Big Q question is the conceptual question that "links you to you academic colleagues" while the recruitment question is more general and uses non-technical language. The "little q" provides the "launching point" of the interview. It "must orient the interviewee and engage him or her with your research interest, but must not color the interview in a direction that doesn't fit the interviewee's experience" (p. 41).

It is often difficult for students to distinguish between the research question and interview questions. Josselson does a lovely job here of showing how to move from the "Big Q" to the recruitment question, and finally on to the "little q" question. She provides many concrete examples from actual studies that capture the subtleties of the three different types of question.

In Chapter Four, we arrive at the "Beginning of the Interview." This chapter moves between very concrete practical issues, such as making sure you have the right equipment and extra batteries, to more substantial issues, such as the importance of the first exchanges during the interview. Here Josselson brings us back to the dance metaphor. She explains that starting the interview is like "trying to dance with a new partner" (p. 64). Both the demeanour of the interviewer and his or her ability to ask follow-up questions that connect to what the participant has said in previous questions influence the extent to which the participant feels like the leader in the dance. As Josselson notes, "The best interviews

have the fewest questions" (p. 65). This chapter discusses how listening, remaining silent, seeking clarification, and offering empathetic responses encourage the interviewee to narrate her or his experience with rich stories. Josselson rejects the term "probes" to refer to follow-up, or as she says, "extending questions." Now that I think about it, using the term *probe* does make it sound as if the interviewer is doing surgery and locating what is already inside the participant, rather than encouraging the interview participant to tell her or his story through the process of interaction.

Chapter Five introduces the idea of "The Empathetic Attitude of Listening." Empathetic responsiveness includes the standard in-depth interviewing practices of summarizing and paraphrasing the interviewee's answers. The empathetic attitude also includes mirroring, which "involves reflection of feeling [to] try to match the feeling, not declare it" (p. 84). Josselson includes examples of good and not-so-good attempts at developing an empathetic attitude among her students that model how the interviewer can integrate empathetic responsiveness into his or her research practice.

Chapter 6, "The Research Relationship, Part II: Ethics and Humanity," discusses the ethics and dynamics of the research interview. Josselson's thoughtful approach to ethics transcends the fill-out-the-forms approach that often dominates discussion of research ethics today. Qualitative researchers have always given much thought to the ethical considerations of our work. The introduction of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the US and Research Ethics Boards (REBs) in Canada has resulted in many discussions of ethics becoming reduced to "doing ethics," that is, going through the bureaucratic exercise of filling in forms and receiving permission to carry out one's research (see van den Hoonaard, 2011, for an analysis of the impact of research-ethics review on the social sciences). In contrast, Josselson's focus is on humanity and research ethics rather than ethics review.

Nonetheless, Josselson does not shy away from issues on which it is worthwhile to take a stand in dealing with an IRB or REB. As the first qualitative researcher who had to negotiate with an REB at my university, I was impressed with Josselson's discussion. In my own negotiations, I was able to convince my REB that using a signed "informed consent" form, a term borrowed from biomedical research, was neither necessary nor appropriate. Instead, I use an "information letter" that I sign and my research participants keep. Their "consent" is on the recording of the interview when I say, "shall we start?" In contrast, Josselson and many

others are forced to ask their participants to sign a consent form. As she notes, this form adds an unwelcome layer of formality to the research relationship, and she suggests a strategy to minimize its potential negative effect on the research relationship. Josselson also provides a particularly cogent argument against the requirement of including a statement on the form that participants who get upset will be referred to a counsellor or for therapy. She asks, "What does it mean to warn participants ahead of time that they 'might become upset,' or that if they do so, the researcher will conclude that they need therapeutic intervention? Such a statement is demeaning, disrespectful, and potentially destructive of the interview enterprise" (p. 116).

I have interviewed many widows and widowers about their experiences. In 20 years of interviewing, I have found that, although research participants may get emotional during the interview, not one has ever been traumatized by the experience of being interviewed. In fact, most appreciate the opportunity to share their stories.

Chapters 7-9 focus on the brass tacks of interviewing. Chapter 7 comprises three examples of what Josselson refers to as "The Good Interview." These examples come from real interviews carried out by her students. The text includes segments of interview transcripts that Josselson has annotated with observations about what the students did right in a variety of situations. The examples are long enough to make the point and short enough to hold the reader's interest.

In Chapter 8, Josselson discusses "Learning from Bad and Difficult Interviews." Just as a good interview is one in which the research participant does most of the talking, a bad interview is one which has turned into a "question-and-answer" session. This chapter highlights common simple mistakes, such as asking yes/no questions, as well as the challenges an interviewer may face in finding the empathetic stance. Later in the chapter, she gives advice about dealing with difficult interviews.

Chapter 9 provides a simple list of "Dos and Don'ts of Interviewing." A novice—or even not-so-novice—interviewer would benefit from reading these brief pointers before heading out to an interview.

In Chapter 10, Josselson discusses transcription and analysis and the research relationship "After the Interview." This brief chapter just skims the surface of what comes after the interview, with good reason. I would welcome a companion book focussed solely on analysis.

Throughout *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry* are exercises intended to help students develop the empathetic approach that Josselson encourages. They comprise things like having partners spend a minute looking directly at each other to help them get a sense of the possibility that interviewees might be self-conscious in an interview situation. I have not tried out any of these exercises, but I suspect that they would be useful.

A particular strength of the book is Josselson's refusal to jump on bandwagons of trends or fads in the practice of qualitative research. I have already talked about her insightful discussion of consent forms. She includes an equally thoughtful discussion of "member checking" in her discussion of transcription and analysis. Her reasoning that an interviewee is unlikely to be able to remember enough about the interview to check for accuracy and that the researcher's analysis is "a truth" rather than "the truth" is astute. Further, Josselson observes that most participants do not want to be "bothered" with checking the interview and have only agreed to be interviewed—not to do the sometimes onerous work of member checking. Discussions like this one appear throughout the book. They not only add nuance to the practice of qualitative inquiry but also alert students to the fact that they need to think deeply about the decisions they make when preparing for and carrying out research.

In conclusion, I find *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry* to be a delight from start to finish. It is both practical and theoretically sophisticated. Novice interviewers will find the concrete nature of the examples very useful. While they are specific enough to provide real direction to students and others who need to figure out what to do in an interview situation, they also demonstrate that there is no one right way to do an interview. This book is a welcome addition, one that I will find useful both in my teaching and in my own practice of qualitative interviewing.

References

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