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From coaching and therapy to research interviewing: reflections and recommendations from practice

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As a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) practitioner you are highly skilled at communicating with people and you will be adept at managing a coaching or therapy session to meet desired outcomes. So surely you can just get involved in research and begin conducting research interviews – right?

That was what one of us felt before a greater reality set in when it became apparent that while there were many similarities there were also many differences, which had to be taken into account to ensure good rigorous research.

This article shares the personal experiences of one NLP practitioner (Thora Rain) who, under supervision (by Suzanne Henwood), made a successful transition to researcher. It focuses on the adjustments practitioners need to make to become high-quality researchers. It also draws on the longer experience of two of the paper authors (James Lawley and Suzanne Henwood) and offers some guidance to those thinking about taking on a research role.

The transition – 3 core issues

We start by examining three issues central to the transition from the role of therapist-coach to researcher: Purpose, Expectations and Competencies.

Being clear on purpose

The first thing to consider is the purpose of the interaction:

1. While many forms of *therapy* exist, commonly the therapeutic session aims to support clients to explore their own subjective experience and deepen their understanding of their meaning-making process with the aim of improving their quality of life. One view is that “Therapeutic interviews move beyond

understanding and interpretation to intervention" (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1994, p. 306).

Coaching can also take many forms. The International Coach Federation code of ethics defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2015). Coaching is often about increasing effectiveness.

Research interviews on the other hand, can be described as an elicitation of the experience or interpretation of the research subject with the aim of understanding the topic from the interviewee's perspective. "The researcher is, first and foremost, an investigator interested in gaining understanding of a particular phenomenon" (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994, p. 305). It is usually not focused on improving the quality of the interviewee's life or his or her effectiveness (though some exceptions do exist for example in Action Research, which aims to research change as it occurs).

A simple definition of the research interview by Berg (1995) suggests it is a "conversation with a purpose", however, this could also be said of therapeutic and coaching sessions, and most researchers would agree that there is more to research interviews than that. Some examples of other definitions include:
"A purposeful conversation … essentially it is about asking purposeful questions and carefully listening to the answers to be able to explore these further" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012, p. 372)

"Two principles inform research interviews. First, the questioning should be as open ended as possible, in order to gain spontaneous information rather than a rehearsed position. Secondly, the questioning techniques should encourage respondents to communicate their underlying attitudes, beliefs and values, rather than a glib or easy answer" (Fielding & Thomas, 2001, p. 126)

"Unstructured interviews aim to delve deep beneath the surface of superficial responses to obtain true meanings that individuals assign to events, and the complexities of their attitudes, behaviours and experiences" (Bowling, 2002, p. 378)

Hutchinson and Wilson (1994) go further, outlining different interview approaches determined by the chosen research methodologies (e.g. Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Phenomenology), but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Looking more closely at the definitions we find that therapy and coaching are designed to move the client forward, and to assist with that change the therapist/coach may challenge beliefs and reframe perspectives. The research interview on the other hand aims to acquire data in relation to a specific topic, without attempting to change the interviewee in the process, or question the validity of his or her map of the world. However, in a postmodern epistemology (Wake, 2008) there can be no absolute differentiation, sometimes “the research interview benefits the participant, and the psychotherapeutic interview yields valuable scientific insight” (Hutchinson & Wilson, p. 301). Furthermore, the process of reflecting on a situation can in itself generate change. Etherington (2001) for example, shows how the process of participating in research enabled two of her ex-clients to gain therapeutically from reflecting upon and constructing their stories about recovery from childhood sexual abuse. Tosey (2013) also describes how “several participants reported that they had decided to make changes based on the awareness they gained through the first interview” (p. 45). In fact some research interviews with clients are reported to have more impact than the therapy (Gale, 1992). Nonetheless, we suggest that the main difference with therapy and coaching is that information gathering, not change, is not the primary purpose of research interviews.

It is worth delving into why this is the case. Firstly, if the focus shifts to facilitating change, there would be an ethical issue if the informed consent had not included permission to engage in change processes. Secondly, from that point on, the data collected may not be valid since the interview will not have explored what it was designed to explore – the interview participant’s experience prior to the interview. However, there are some exceptions to this. For example, in Action Research methodologies the researchers aim is to both investigate and improve a context with numerous cycles of progressive action and data collection over a period of time (Cardno, 2003). Appreciative Inquiry, a derivative of Action Research, also accommodates the ‘evolution’ of a study design over time to accommodate findings as they emerge. In Phenomenology too, it is common place to interview participants more than once, and changes over time, which may in part be due to involvement in the study, can be identified through repeated interviewing (Smith et al., 2009). The point remains though, that the purpose and scope of the interviews should be clear to both the participants and the researcher prior to starting data collection.

One final point we wish to raise regards the outcome of the interaction. With NLP and other outcome-orientated modalities it could be argued that the client owns their desired outcome and the therapist/coach supports the client to achieve that. In a research interview, the researcher owns the outcome (which is to elicit the data), and the interview participant agrees to help the researcher achieve that.

Taking time up front to explore the purpose of each encounter then is vital, and talking this through with other researchers and research supervisors can be beneficial in designing an effective, valid and ethical study.

Expectations

Having established a clear purpose, exploring expectations and potential challenges with a supervisor can be helpful to the researcher and therapist or coach alike. It can increase awareness of potential issues and provide the opportunity to develop strategies to address them. However, the difference between the two types of supervision is worth highlighting. A therapy/coach supervisor will have as a key focus the welfare of the client and the methods being used to achieve any changes. While a research supervisor will place more emphasis on research design, adherence to ethical guidelines, and much of the time will be spent on technical research issues of data collection and exploring the topic through analysis.

Involving the interview participant in an examination of the expectations of both parties can be conducive to a successful research interview as there will be a mutual understanding of the dynamics and limitations, enabling a more informed consent. This means that the research engagement is in line with ethical guidelines such as the General Principles of the WMA Declaration of Helsinki – Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/ or the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity www.singaporestatement.org.

Competencies

Although skills like quickly building rapport, active listening and calibration are shared and transferable from the therapeutic or coaching practitioner to a researcher, differences do exist which we believe need to be considered, again prior to starting data collection, and these are described below.

a) Holding the focus

In research it is the researcher's responsibility to hold the focus throughout the interview and to ensure the interview complies with the consent process and stays within the boundaries of the research topic. This can be done by running an ongoing internal relevancy check and having the research topics and questions clearly in view during the interview. It is easy to be distracted by an interesting story not related to the focus of the research question, especially if that diversion is something that may well have been usefully pursued in a therapeutic or coaching session. In a research interview the researcher must gently bring the research topic back into focus, without losing rapport.

b. Holding the space

Therapeutic and coaching sessions have a strong sense of "holding the space" (Miller, 2005), providing safety and support for the client to be able to talk freely, with the aim of working with information that arises and moving the client through a change process.

Research interviews have a distinctly different feel. Interviews are limited in number often to a single contact between researcher and participant and the researcher needs to retain a different kind of detachment and neutrality, yet still connecting sufficiently to encourage openness and full responses to questions.

Trust is still a key determinant of the quality of data you will collect and there is a fine balance between gaining trust and maintaining an appropriate distance. Research interviews require the interviewer to be as much information-focused as interviewee-focused and may well require a different relationship balance from a therapeutic session. This can lead the researcher in some instances to rule certain topics out of bounds and to suggest that the participant take such topics to a suitable coach or therapist following the interview.

Therapists and coaches who aim to conduct research need to be very clear about the boundaries between the roles and which role they are undertaking, particularly if they alternate between them .

c. Language and framing

NLP practitioners can often frame results and use ‘Well done, that’s great’ type of encouraging language. The tendency to reframe and in particular to use a feedback frame can be tempting, but doing so in a research interview is unhelpful since it potentially leads the interviewee and suggests a particular response is desired by the researcher. While leading or suggestive questions have a place in hypno-therapeutic approaches (Bandler & Grinder, 1975b) they jeopardise the authenticity and validity of the data collected in research. Similarly, some NLP therapists make use of ‘yes sets’ with the aim of increasing the willingness of clients to change (Andreas, 2006), however, in a research interview this may encourage ‘acquiescence bias’ a common methodological problem in qualitative research (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In research interviews it is appropriate that the researcher maintains a neutral, non emotional stance throughout the interaction; encouraging the participant to keep talking, with appropriate encouraging prompts, but without judgment of what is said and without imposing content on the conversation.

One helpful methodology in this regard is the use of Clean Language (Grove & Panzer, 1989, Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). It makes maximal use of the interview participant’s own words to explore and understand their inner world, while keeping the inclusion of researcher words and assumptions to a minimum. While Clean Language is only beginning to be included in qualitative methods text books, it has been recommended by some authors (Tosey, 2013; Tosey et. al, 2014) and has been used extensively by one of the authors of this paper with valuable effect (Linder-Pelz & Lawley, 2015).

It is important for researcher to be aware that certain questions can inadvertently lead an interview participant into a therapeutic encounter. For example, questions that are common in therapy/coaching such as, “And how do you want it to be?" or "What would you like instead?" can quickly turn an interview into a change session and should be avoided, unless it is explicit that this is part of the core aim of your interview design and it fits with the research question outlined in the informed consent.

Something similar can happen when using the Meta-Model (Bandler & Grinder, 1975a). We used the Andreas’ (1986) list of standard Meta-Model responses to create a table of 10 questions which would be suitable for a research interview and 10 that would likely not be suitable (Table 1).

Linguistic category	**Client / Interviewee Statement**	**Suitable Question for interviews**	**Less suitable question for interviews**
Unspecified Things			
	After seven years I’ve just lost contact.	With whom?	
	Now I don’t even talk to her.	About what?	
	The other one is better.	Better than what?	
	I have understood so much.	What (specifically) have you understood?	
	This one is the last.	Which one (specifically) is the last.	
	They are nice.		Compared with whom or what?
Unspecified Verbs			
	I can deal with it.	How (specifically) do you deal with it?	
	When he starts I’m compelled to finish.		Compelled, how?
Nominalizations			
	There is a lot of confusion	Who is confusing whom, and in what way?	

Universal Quantifiers			
	I'll never play again.		Never?
	There is nothing I need to add.		Nothing?
	All the children have been upset		All the children?
Modal Operators of Necessity and Impossibility			
	I can't do anything right.		What stops/prevents you?
	I'd really like to leave him but I can't.		What would happen if you did?
	I can't answer that question.		What if you could?
Cause — Effect			
	My family makes me mad.	How do they make you mad?	
	When she smiles I get all confused		How does her smiling make you confused?
Mind Reading			
	He doesn't like me.	How do you know he doesn't like you?	
Lost Performative			
	It is not good to be strict.	Not good (according to) for whom?	
	Failure is a necessary part of the system.		Who says it is?

Table 1: Guidelines for the use of the Meta-Model in a research interview.

The two columns of questions in Table 1 illustrate an important distinction. The 'suitable' questions can be used to request information without invalidating or trying to change the speaker's experience. "This is almost an impossible task. But it's one worth struggling to achieve" (Grinder, 2008). The 'less suitable' questions in one way or another risk leading, challenging or reframing the speaker's experience. This will unlikely meet the aim of a research interview designed to gather authentic descriptions of the participant's subjective experience from his or her perspective. In addition, if not asked with the right tonality, these questions are likely alienate the research participant and diminish that all important ingredient – rapport.

Sometimes it is the interview participant who consciously (or not) tries to steer an interview into therapy. This is particularly a risk where the participant has an existing relationship with the researcher as a therapist and is one reason why some researchers will not collect data from their own existing or previous clients. If however, as the researcher, you do collect data from your clients, you should be alert for any sign of this shift and advise the client that it is more appropriate to raise those issues in a therapeutic session or with another therapist, coach or counsellor at a later date.

Even when the interview participant is unknown to the researcher a confusion of roles can occur. One of the authors interviewed coaching clients for their evaluation of coaching sessions (conducted by someone else). One interview participant said she hoped the interview would "lock in" the gains of a recent coaching session. The researcher explained that this was outside the scope of the interview and reaffirmed the interview's purpose. As discussed above, interviewees may derive personal benefit from an interview as a by product of the interview, but change is not usually the purpose of a research interview.

We would recommend researchers have some words ready for any of these scenarios and to keep listening for any clues that either party is stepping out of the research interview frame. Should this arise in practice, we recommend overtly reestablishing agreement to the purpose and scope of the interview, or if needs be terminating the interview.

d) Taking care of emotions

Previous researchers have pointed out that it can be difficult for the researcher to make clear the boundaries between research and therapy when highly emotionally-charged material is shared, unresolved issues are revealed and advice is sought (Grafanaki, 1996; Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994).

An interview participant may get emotional if for example you are researching stress, redundancy, bereavement or some form of trauma. A skilled researcher can 'hold a safe space' to talk, even when the participant is upset, and give them time to compose themselves and to reflect on what is coming to the surface due to the questions being asked. Sometimes offering the participant a short break and a drink may be all that is required. However, if the participant is too upset to continue, the interview should be terminated and the person referred to appropriate support.

All good research will have considered the possibility of an interview participant getting so upset that intervention is required and will have outlined the actions to take in that scenario. A research supervisor is a valuable guide to developing strategies to handle such eventualities. For any research that goes through an ethics process this is an explicit requirement. However, all research, regardless of size, scope and design should take into account appropriate ethical considerations (for a brief overview on issues to consider see Table 2).

Unitec Research Ethics Committee emphasises eight guiding principles governing research involving humans: • Informed and voluntary consent • Respect for rights and confidentiality and preservation of anonymity • Minimisation of harm • Cultural and social sensitivity • Limitation of deception • Respect for intellectual and cultural property ownership • Avoidance of conflict of interest • Research design adequacy http://moodle.unitec.ac.nz/pluginfile.php/124949/mod_folder/content/0/Ethics_Policies_and_Guidelines/Research%20Ethics%20Policy.pdf

Table 2: Overview of Key Ethical Considerations for Research Studies

Practical tips

We have highlighted some significant differences between the roles and styles of interaction between researcher and therapist/coach. The following section offers 10 tips for the therapist or coach making the transition to researcher. These arise from our combined experience of interviewing for research over the last 25 years.

1. Preparation

Preparation is key. It should include a clear research question and study design, which directs the purpose of the interviews and informs the consent process. Managing expectations will aid the study's purpose as well as supporting both the researcher and the interview participants to remain within the boundaries of the research topic. We encourage you to seek support from a respected colleague or a research supervisor. Talk to others, explore your ideas and reach out for constructive conversations, which support you and your research.

2. The environment
As professionals we often do not recognise how anchored we are into our environment, conducting research interviews in the same space that we do client sessions can keep us anchored to being a therapeutic practitioner rather than a researcher. We strongly recommend doing research interviews in a different environment to your client sessions. If this is not practical, change how you use your environment, even sitting in a different part of the room and sitting in a different way than you normally sit will make a difference.

3. Timing
Booking client sessions and research interviews into the same day can mean that it is harder to separate out how we engage in each of those activities. Where possible arrange your research interviews for different days to your client sessions to keep the two separate and ensure there is no 'leakage' of one style of interaction or role into the other style.

4. Your state
As you prepare to undertake research interviews, notice how you are in client sessions and practice shifting your state to concentrate on eliciting and gathering data in a research interview. A comparison of video or audio recordings of yourself with clients and in a pilot interview would help to see those state shifts from a different perspective. Remember you always need consent. Even pilot participants must be made aware that they are being recorded and what the recording will be used for.

5. The notes
Although research interviews are almost always audio or video recorded, it can be helpful to take some notes during the interview. Research notes differ from client session notes. They usually mark semantically packed prose and highlight potential themes for further questions. Whereas notes about a client might comment on congruence, links to previous sessions, body language, emotional responses and linguistic patterns. Research notes can also help with the analysis of data, and any follow-up interviews and should be stored in a secure place for five years (or as per local ethics requirements) alongside the transcripts of the interviews.

6. The interview participants
Be mindful of any existing relationship since this can bias your interview participant to give you answers they feel you would like to hear rather than giving their own experience or interpretation. Power subtly and inadvertently asserted can jeopardise the validity of the data collected (Kvale, 2006) and an ethics application should show you have fully thought through the issue of power relationships.

If you are doing research interviews with your existing clients it is essential to make them aware of how the research interview is different from their usual sessions. A signed informed consent form is required prior to any data collection. This should include full details of exactly what is required and how the interview will differ from a therapeutic or coaching session. Having a clearly defined pre-frame at the start of the interview and in any preparatory communication will help to mitigate the risk of invalid data. In some instances the only way to ensure the boundaries are kept clear will be to employ someone else to collect the data.

Also, be mindful not to link the information that the interview participant provides in the research interview with other information that they have shared in client sessions (or vice versa). And similarly, be careful not to integrate previous knowledge into the interview analysis in the research study. Having a second person to oversee any analysis can help to avoid cross-domain leakage.

7. Pilot interviews

A pilot interview can be useful to reflect on your interview and questioning style and skills before moving further into the study. Which is why we strongly recommend you do a pilot interview (or as many as are required to be confident in the process). It is a great way to test your questions and to calibrate your own state and engagement. Use a research supervisor or someone who's knowledgeable about research interviews, to listen to the tape with you and to look at your analysis to ensure you have noticed any bias or leading. You can even interview yourself, or better still, get someone to interview you on the topic so you are clear what information and views you already hold (this is part of the reflexivity process in qualitative research). A good pilot, with supervisory support, will reduce the risk of confirmation bias – the unwitting seeking of information that matches your model of the world (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004).

A pilot study is part of the wider research design to ensure quality and rigour in your approach. It is not additional to the research design and should not be done prior to ethics approval being in place. If you are going through a formal ethics process, note that no data can be collected until an ethics statement is in place.

8. During the interview

Keep your questions clean. It is surprisingly easy to unconsciously introduce your own metaphors or to insert leading presuppositions or suggestions into questions and paraphrasing, especially in semi-structured or open interviewing techniques. Even the inclusion of a single metaphor can have a powerful influence and framing effect (Loftas & Zanni, 1975, Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011) Again, the use of pilot interviews (with supervisory support) will hugely assist with ensuring your questions stay clean as you get interested in what your interviewee is saying.

Even if you are familiar with the concept of not leading and being directive in questioning, for example through use of techniques such as Clean Language, have a list of the standard questions close by to refresh your memory.

Give yourself permission to not follow up on every lead that the interview participant introduces. Go back to your original research question(s) and remain true to the focus of your research. And whatever interview method you use, you must be transparent about it in your ethics approval, informed consent and write ups.

9. Keep a research journal

A research log or journal differs from interview notes in that it is about reflecting on your experience throughout the research process, from initial ideas, through research design, to data collection, analysis and to the dissemination of your results. You might for example jot down any reactions, thoughts or observations from each interview as well as from your associated reading and the research design. You may record your own thoughts as your knowledge of the context increases through the interviews and your ongoing reading. This reflexivity aims to increase validity of your method by reducing researcher bias and providing an audit trail of any thematic analysis and interpretation. It can prove invaluable in any discussion and later dissemination of the research process and findings.

A good example of using a research journal is outlined in Keeping and Using Reflective Journals in the Qualitative Research Process:
nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1579&context=tqr

10. Read, read, read

This article has looked specifically at the data collection process through interviewing, rather than explore the whole research process. One other area worthy of being mentioned here though is the use of literature. Literature can be used throughout the study in a number of ways.

a) To explore what is already known and to assess whether the research study is worth undertaking
b) To explore appropriate methodologies and approaches
c) To inform interview coverage, i.e. what questions to ask as your core interview dialogue
d) To check out issues as they arise through the research and compare what you are finding with what is already known

While some research methodologies such as Grounded Theory may argue for starting a study with a blank page and not doing a literature review prior to data collection (Glaser

& Strauss, 1967), the majority of qualitative researchers do a comprehensive literature review to establish what is known in the field and to inform the data collection process. The need for ongoing reading to ensure the latest literature is covered and new findings are incorporated is fundamental to high quality research. We strongly recommend you allow enough time for this and to consider how you will get access to good quality academic literature.

Summary

While many of the skills involved in therapeutic or coaching sessions are similar to research interviewing, this article discusses some clear distinctions to be aware of when making the transition to researcher. From initial planning, through design, data collection and beyond, it is essential to be clear which 'hat' you are wearing – and for your client or participant to also be clear. There is a real risk of leakage between roles, which would not be beneficial to either party and that would be detrimental to any study undertaken.

There is no definite or correct way to do qualitative research. Although this can feel daunting to the would-be-researcher, and demanding for even the experienced researcher, it allows for creativity and exploration. This can not only be deeply satisfying, it can also improve your therapeutic practice and craftsmanship.

Biography

Thora Rain (MA hons) is Founder and Director at The Helpful Clinic which specializes in working with Medically Unexplained Symptoms like Fibromyalgia, ME/CFS and Chronic pain. With over 3000 clinical hours under her belt she has a keen interest in research and social impact measures. Thora developed the First Aid Kit for Feelings methodology and delivers the workshops in Cambridge. Thora uses NLP, Clinical Hypnosis, Coaching and EFT in her work with patients and clients as well as Film Therapy. See www.thehelpfulclinic.com for more information.

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