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## The Impact of a Qualitative Research Interview on Workers' Views of Their Situation

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore whether qualitative research interviews impacted participants' views of their situations. Forty-five workers who reported handling well changes that affected their work were interviewed to explore their experiences of change, factors that helped and hindered their ability to handle change, and assess the impact of the interview. Using a pretest/posttest design, participants rated their view of themselves in their situations on a scale from 0 to 10 at the beginning and then the end of a semi-structured interview. Statistical and practical significance were found, suggesting the research interviews had an impact. Research and ethical implications for researchers are discussed.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche avait pour but d'étudier si les entrevues de recherche qualitative avaient un effet sur les visions qu'avaient les participants de leurs situations. Quarante-cinq travailleurs qui avaient rapporté bien s'adapter aux changements affectant leur travail ont été interviewés pour étudier leurs expériences du changement et les facteurs qui aidaient ou diminuaient leur capacité de s'adapter au changement et pour évaluer l'effet de l'entrevue. Utilisant un concept prétest-posttest, les participants ont évalué leur vision d'eux-mêmes dans leur situation sur une échelle de 0 à 10 au début et à la fin d'une entrevue semi-structurée. On a constaté une signification statistique et pratique, ce qui suggère que les entrevues de recherche avaient un effet. Les répercussion pour les chercheurs au plan de la recherche et de la déontologie sont discutées.

The issue of informed consent in research is important and multifaceted. Virtually any book or article that discusses ethical research, and all ethical codes or codes of conduct themselves, include principles related to entering into a fair and clearly communicated agreement with a prospective research participant prior to conducting research (American Psychological Association, 2002; Canadian Counselling Association, 2007; Canadian Psychological Association, 2000; College of Psychologists of British Columbia, 2007). A common component in these codes is the requirement to protect participants from harm, both mental and physical, as a result of participating in the research project.

According to the *Canadian Counselling Association Code of Ethics* (Canadian Counselling Association, 2007), counsellors "are ethically responsible for protecting the welfare of their research subjects during research, and avoid causing

injurious psychological, physical or social effects to persons who participate in their research activities” (p. 16). Furthermore, counsellors are ethically required to ensure “subjects are made aware of any experimental procedures, possible risks, disclosures and limitations to confidentiality” (Canadian Counselling Association, p. 16). If harm is anticipated, it is the researcher’s ethical responsibility to fully inform the participant and “take all possible measures to minimize distress” (Palys, 1997, p. 91).

Upon review of several standard textbooks devoted to behavioural research methods and ethical issues in counselling, it appears the concept of “distress” as it relates to research is applied primarily to the physical or emotional impacts arising from the use of deception in experimental studies (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007; Cozby, 2007; Creswell, 1998). None of the books we reviewed discussed impacts on participants of qualitative research interviews, either positive or negative. A literature search in six psychology and counselling databases (ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, and PsycINFO) yielded no articles addressing the impact of qualitative research interviews on participants. It strikes us that to meet these ethical obligations it is imperative for researchers to understand whether research interviews have an impact on participants, and if they do, to ensure participants are fully briefed during the informed consent process about the possible effects of the interview itself, over and above any possible effects of the intervention being researched.

Our interest in this topic arises from 20 years of conducting research interviews, within the discipline of counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia, using a variety of qualitative research methods. During this time, we often received anecdotal information from participants who stated they felt relieved, happier, or better, or had more perspective about their experiences after the research interviews (Amundson, Borgen, Jordan, & Erlebach, 2004; Borgen & Amundson, 1987; Borgen, Amundson, & McVicar, 2002; Borgen & Maglio, 2004; Butterfield & Borgen, 2005). In several cases, participants stated that the research interview was the best assistance they had ever received regarding their situations.

There are other reasons why it is important to understand the impact of research interviews on participants. The psychological thriving (O’Leary, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), transition (Butterfield & Borgen, 2005; Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006), and positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) literature believe in the importance of allowing people to tell their stories, both the positive and negative aspects, as a way of helping them develop personally meaningful narratives. These researchers encourage clinicians not to rush into interventions, but rather to look at both what is working and what is not working when exploring an individual’s experience.

Narrative (White & Epston, 1990) and constructive (Omer, 1998) theorists address the way stories are constructed and how they are understood and told by individuals to shape their lives. These researchers suggest that often the best strategy is to let people tell their stories, that simply listening can be equally or more important than problem solving, and that “the narrative mode leads not to certainties, but to

varying perspectives” (White & Epston, p. 78). If such is the case, then we would expect at least some qualitative research interviews to have an impact, as many qualitative research methods (e.g., phenomenology, enhanced critical incident technique, biography, and grounded theory) are designed to invite participants to tell their stories to the researcher while the researcher listens attentively (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Creswell, 1998). In addition, postmodern scholars have been suggesting for some time that the research process is likely not a neutral event (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000; Charmaz, 2000), and thus its impacts on both participant and researcher need to be managed.

For all of these reasons, we were interested in knowing whether or not participants’ perceptions of situations are being affected by the experience of sharing their stories with a qualitative research interviewer. The scaling questions reported in this article were asked within the context of a study utilizing the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT), conducted to explore helping and hindering incidents or factors reported by workers who had experienced changes affecting their work, and who felt they were doing well with them. We wanted to see if the research interview experience using a pretest and posttest research design had an impact on participants by asking the question: Is there a statistically significant difference between the first and second scaling question scores for the participants in the study? Our working hypothesis based on previous anecdotal reports was that participants would benefit from the experience of sharing their stories with the researchers, and higher scores on the second scaling question compared to the first would reflect this.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

To be eligible for the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) they had experienced changes that affected their work, (b) these changes had occurred in the last six months, (c) they felt they were doing well with the changes, (d) they were willing to make a time commitment of approximately three hours over a period of about six months, (e) they were willing to talk about their experiences, and (f) they were able to converse in English.

The purposive sample consisting of 45 individuals (11 men and 34 women) was recruited in a variety of ways, including professional association e-mails, academic and corporate e-mail listservs, flyers, and word of mouth. Participants’ ages ranged from 20 to 59 years (mean age = 44;  $SD = 10.7$ ). The majority were married or living common-law (60%); the rest were single, separated, divorced, or widowed. Sixty-nine percent of participants were born in Canada, 11% were from the United States, with the remainder from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. One participant declined to provide this information. Those not born in Canada had resided in Canada for an average of 16.7 years. Household income ranged from \$12,000 to \$300,000 (median = \$90,000), with three participants declining to provide this

information. Forty-four percent of participants had an undergraduate or college degree, 31% had graduate degrees, 16% had some university or college, and 9% had graduated from high school.

The participants worked in 17 different industries, with education (22%), health care (13%), mental health (9%), nonprofit (9%), public sector (7%), college/university (7%), oil and gas (4%), transportation (4%), self-employed (4%), and high tech (4%) being the most frequently cited industries. The remaining seven industries, represented by a single participant each, were energy, engineering, warehousing, leisure and recreation, communications and human resource management, sports management, and human resource consulting. Participants resided in British Columbia (BC), Canada, with the majority (76%) living in the Greater Vancouver area, 13% living on Vancouver Island/the Gulf Islands, 8% living in the east-central part of the province, and 3% living in north-central BC.

### *Procedure*

Three counselling psychology student research assistants conducted the interviews using a structured interview guide. The interview was organized to first obtain informed consent, then collect contextual information using open-ended, semi-structured questions (Cozby, 2007) by asking participants to describe their current work situations, what doing well meant to them, what changes they had experienced, and the impact of those changes. Participants were then asked the first scaling question: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is doing very poorly, 5 is okay, and 10 is doing very well, where would you place yourself?"

The interview then progressed to the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) component, following established procedures for conducting CIT research interviews in counselling psychology (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). Participants were asked, "What has helped you in doing well (or not doing well) with the changes that have affected your work?" Probes were used as needed, such as, "What was the incident/factor? How did it impact you?" For each factor participants were prompted to provide examples and the ways in which these factors helped (or would have helped) or hindered them. At the end of the CIT section, participants were again asked the same scaling question as described above. If the participant's pre- and post-scaling question scores were different, they were asked what made the difference.

Demographic information was then gathered for all participants and the interview concluded. The interviews lasted an average of two hours. Asking the post-interview scaling question at the end of the same interview greatly reduced the potential for intervening factors to affect the posttest scores that is often cited as a difficulty associated with this design (Cozby, 2007).

When conducting the research interviews, the interviewers were instructed to maintain a curious, interested, yet professional stance. This included using active attending and listening skills, probing for clarity or additional information if something was unclear, summarizing, paraphrasing, and following up on participant comments made earlier in the interview. A review of the transcripts during

data analysis confirmed all 45 interviews adhered to these parameters. A referral list for counselling was made available to all participants, but none required it.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0. The difference between responses to the first and second scaling questions was computed by subtracting the first score from the second score, the result of which is referred to as the “doing well difference” throughout the remainder of this article. A content analysis following procedures established by Krippendorff (2004) was conducted for the non-statistical contextual data obtained from participants. ATLAS/ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to aid in data management as we grouped the data according to themes arising from the participants’ reports. Wherever possible we used participants’ words to label the themes.

## RESULTS

Data related to the impact of the interview came from three sources: (a) the results of the pre- and post-interview scaling questions, (b) participants’ responses to the question about what made the difference if their pre- and post-interview scaling question scores were different, and (c) unsolicited participant comments made throughout the interview. Each is discussed below.

### *Scaling Question Results*

To test the hypothesis that participants’ perceptions of their situations would be influenced by the experience of sharing their stories with the researchers and thus higher scores would be obtained on the second scaling question compared to the first, data analysis investigating the statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-interview scaling question scores was conducted using SPSS. In addition to calculating statistical significance, practical significance was also computed using Cohen’s  $d$ , which is a standardized metric that allows researchers to describe the magnitude of an effect by calculating the difference between two sample means in terms of standard deviation from the null (Thompson, 1997). The “Effect Size Calculator” available at <http://web.uccs.edu/lbecker/Psy590/escalc3.htm> was used to calculate effect size.

Of the 45 participants, 22 (49%) had post-interview scaling question scores that were different from their pre-interview scaling scores. Seventeen of the doing well differences were higher; five were lower. The range of both the pretest and posttest scores was 4 (a low of 6 to a high of 10), with no extreme scores. Using a paired sample  $t$ -test ( $t(44) = 2.037, p = .048, d = .61$ ), statistical significance was found between participants’ first and second scaling question scores. In addition, the effect size of .61 indicates a medium difference between the sample means according to Cohen’s (1992) criteria, where .20 indicates a small, .50 indicates a medium, and .80 indicates a large difference between two sample means. Thus, according to Cohen’s criteria, these findings appear to have practical as well as statistical significance. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient ( $r = .77, p = .0001; r^2 = .59$ ) suggested a strong positive relationship with a 59%

shared variance between these two variables (Huck, 2004). This suggests that those who initially scored high on the first scaling question tended to score high on the second question. An alternative explanation is that the overall trend was toward the interviews having resulted in participants viewing themselves in their situations more positively.

To determine if there were any significant differences between the doing well difference scores for male and female participants, Levene's test for equality of variances was computed with no significant differences being found. Therefore, homogeneity of variance was assumed. An independent samples *t*-test ( $t(43) = .165$ ,  $p = .87$ ,  $d = .05$ ) revealed no statistically significant difference in the doing well scores between men and women in the sample. The effect size of .05 suggests the difference between the sample means would be considered trivial according to Cohen's (1992) criteria and of no practical significance.

#### *Reasons for the Difference in Pre- and Post-Interview Scale Scores*

All 22 participants who reported different pre- and post-interview scaling question scores were asked what made the difference. These data were analyzed following content analysis procedures established by Krippendorff (2004). The 17 who reported higher post-interview scores stated several reasons for the differences that fell into three broad themes, using the participants' own words to label the themes: (a) new perspectives (e.g., participants reported being closer to their goals than they thought, realizing they had listed more helping than hindering items, and recognizing that much of what happened was due to events outside their control); (b) connection (e.g., reported the importance of staying in touch with people, having supportive friends/family, and realizing how good their supports were and the importance of having someone listen to them); and (c) realizing they were doing better than they had thought (e.g., reported increased spirituality, feeling happier, and having a sense of release and/or increased confidence). Some participant quotes highlight these themes:

I feel better about where I'm at by having someone listen to me. It highlights for me the importance of connection. (Participant 12)

Focus goes off me and onto other things, like outside factors. Looking back, I've gone through lots of ups and downs, probably way more than I realize. So it gave me perspective. Everything affects everything. (Participant 23)

Although 17 of the participants had higher post-interview scores, 5 had post-interview scores that were lower. Two participants' scores went down by 2 points; two scores went down by one half point; and one score went down by 1 point. In response to the question, "What made the difference?" one participant whose score went down by 2 points offered this comment:

Maybe thinking about it, just realizing all of the worrying and stress that I have been going through in the last couple of years. So even though I feel like I have adapted well with my environment and I've been able to perform and succeed

and still have a job despite what has been going on, at the same time I think it has taken a toll on my energy, my sleep patterns. So definitely I think there has been this underlying stress that has been there. (Participant 4)

This participant reported that she had not been aware of the toll the changes had taken on her until she had a chance during the research interview to think about what had helped and what had hindered her ability to handle the changes. Another participant spoke about “listing some of the limitations” (Participant 2), including physical and aging issues, that led to her think about them more and to realize she could no longer ignore them but had to find a way to deal with them.

#### *Unsolicited Comments by Participants*

Ten participants (22%) at different times throughout the interview provided unsolicited information about the impact the interview questions had on them. These were spontaneous remarks offered by participants after reflecting on the structured questions asked during the interview and their responses to them. One participant whose pre- and post-interview scaling question scores remained unchanged stated, “It’s funny [be]cause having this discussion with you ... I’ve never really taken a big picture look at it, at my life, and ... I just find this conversation interesting actually [be]cause it does help me to put things into perspective” (Participant 7).

A second participant, who also had no difference in pre- and post-interview scaling question scores, gained some insight into his way of prioritizing how he was going to deal with situations as they arose. After reflecting on one of his own comments, he stated, “I hadn’t really thought of that but I think that is probably really important” (Participant 8). In response to being asked whether he had always handled change well, a third participant said, “I’ve never thought about that before” (Participant 20). One other participant with a higher score on the post-interview scaling question also articulated ways in which the interview had an impact:

I recognize that I do like being in control and I have always just said that to people, but nobody has actually asked me why and I’ve never given it a lot of thought, but it is something that I will think of now. (Participant 17)

Overall, the comments of the participants indicated that the interview had prompted them to look at things in a different way, often gaining insight into issues they had either not thought about before or about which they had a fixed view that had now shifted.

## DISCUSSION

This was intended to be an exploratory study to see if, indeed, participants were being affected in some way by the qualitative research interviews being conducted. With the results showing both statistical and practical significance, and an overall finding that participants viewed their situations more positively at the end of the interview than at the beginning, it appears that there is some empirical support for the anecdotal comments that were reported earlier. This result was obtained despite

the fact that all participants had self-reported as doing well at the beginning, eight of the participants started out at “10,” and no participants rated themselves as lower than “6” on the pretest scaling question, thereby affording little room on the scale to measure positive changes.

For those 22 participants whose posttest scores were different than their pretest scores, either higher or lower, certain themes arose when they were asked what made the difference: (a) having a chance to step back for the first time and take a look at how well they have done (some described this as “seeing themselves through another’s eyes”), in other words, getting a new perspective; (b) seeing the whole range of incidents or factors that had occurred or that they had used for the first time; (c) talking about the changes and resulting issues they have faced; and (d) seeing more clearly the balance (or lack thereof) between their work lives and their personal lives. This last point is critical.

Although the intent of this study was to focus on helpful incidents or factors with people who felt they were doing well, five participants reported lower post-interview doing well scores, and many of the five were visibly upset at the end of the interview when describing what accounted for the differences in their pre- and post-interview scores. These participants reported that during the research interview they came to see there had been a personal cost to them and that some things, such as health and aging issues, could not be ignored or reversed. It should be noted again that these participants were offered counselling referrals once the interviews concluded, but none accepted them.

We were left with a question about the 23 participants who reported no difference between their pretest and posttest scaling question scores and whether the interview had any effect on them. Although we did not formally ask these participants why their scores had not changed, some offered comments when giving their second scaling question score. Some participants, whose initial scores were ten, indicated that the interview helped them gain more perspective on their situations. Others, with initial scores less than 10, often made similar comments but did not see the interview as changing their overall views of their situation.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Future research could build on this initial exploratory study by randomly selecting participants and using a larger sample size that is balanced for age, gender, education, occupation, and socio-economic status. It would be interesting to see if the results of the male-female comparisons hold up with a larger sample. The scaling question could include operational definitions of the mid (5) and end points (0 and 10) to allow participants room to report small changes as well as to facilitate consistency in meaning of the scale intervals across participants. In addition, it is not clear from these results to what extent the doing well difference scores were affected by the content of the interview versus the interview process itself, a question that further studies could address.

It would also be interesting to see how the results would differ if the sample was not made up entirely of people who had self-reported as doing well, but rather

consisted of a mix of people experiencing different levels of success in dealing with change. That might provide more manoeuvring room for actual changes to be reported by participants. Finally, it would be important to ask all participants after the second scaling question why their pre- and post-interview scaling question scores changed or did not change. This would further our understanding of all participants' experiences during the interview, not just those who reported a change in score.

### *Implications*

The findings offer initial support for postmodern contentions that the research process is not a neutral experience, but rather one that potentially engages and changes the participant in ways that cannot always be anticipated (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000; Charmaz, 2000). They are also consistent with the narrative and constructive therapy literature that suggest letting people tell their stories and listening attentively can make a difference in counselling settings because it helps them change their perspective on their lives (Omer, 1998; White & Epston, 1990). In addition, the results suggest that even a research interview focusing on positive incidents or factors can affect participants in negative or distressing ways that need to be attended to by researchers. This has ethical implications for both the informed consent process (Kitchener, 2000) and the requirement for researchers to ensure participants are not psychologically harmed as a result of their participation in a research study (Canadian Counselling Association, 2007).

As discussed earlier in this article, the concept of "distress" as it relates to research appears to be primarily applied to the physical or emotional impacts on participants that arise from the use of deception in experimental studies (Corey et al., 2007; Cozby, 2007; Creswell, 1998) or coercion in recruitment (Kitchener, 2000). This study was not experimental, we did not attempt to use deception of any kind, and there was no coercion involved in recruiting participants. Given the results, we believe that this study offers initial support for the idea that research situations other than experimental designs utilizing deception may cause participants to experience discomfort or distress. If researchers have an ethical requirement to protect participants from mental, physical, and emotional harm by taking "all possible measures to minimize distress" (Palys, 1997, p. 91), then we would argue that researcher awareness of the *potential* for harm during a qualitative research interview becomes the first step.

This has implications for the informed consent process and ensuring the participant's well-being throughout the research experience, and we offer a number of suggestions in these areas arising from the results of this study. First, during the research design phase researchers could develop strategies to deal with participant reactions arising during the interview. This step would not only ensure that the researcher is prepared and participant distress appropriately dealt with, it would also provide a consistent approach to handling such situations across interviews.

Second, during the pre-screening process, researchers could advise potential participants that no negative effects are anticipated, but introduce the possibility

that changes in perspective or new insights might occur. Third, this possibility could be addressed again and expanded upon during the informed consent discussion at the start of the interview in keeping with the full disclosure spirit of informed consent and respect for the autonomy of the individual (Kitchener, 2000). The researcher could let participants know they might experience insights that could be either welcome or unwelcome, describe what steps will be taken to assist the participants should these occur, outline any resources to which they will have access, and reiterate the participants' right to end their participation at any time without any adverse consequences. Finally, we suggest that researchers remain watchful throughout the interview for any changes in a participant's demeanour and deal with such situations in accordance with the guidelines established by the research team.

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