HOW TO CONSTRUCT AN INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

by Jim Spickard
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My first research job was at Fordham University, where I was an assistant on a project evaluating two drug-treatment programs. I was not in charge of the research (thank God!), but I learned a lot about what one *shouldn't* do. The project produced no useable results, largely because the project director didn't know how to construct an interview protocol. He didn't know what to ask, and he didn't know that he didn't know this. So he fished for answers, hoping that he'd catch something useful. He didn't. Good fisher-folk know that you need some idea of where to fish before you cast your line.

The sad thing is, it is pretty easy to put together an interview protocol – the set of questions that you plan to ask your informants. The process has two steps. Tom Wengraf covers the first of these in Chapters 3 and 4 of his Qualitative Research Interviewing (Sage, 2001). The second step turns Wengraf's questions into an interview experience that flows.

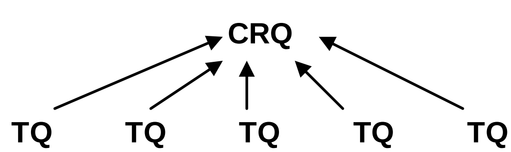
I'll describe these steps in brief, and then note a third step that helps you turn your interview results into useable data.

Step 1: Identify Central Research Question (CQ), Theory-Based Questions (TQs), and Interview Questions (IQs)

Wengraf starts by noting that every piece of research has a Central Research Question (CRQ). This is often a general question, such as "How do social activists use religious or spiritual resources to sustain their activist commitments?" In some cases, it can be rather practical: "How can the Children's Bereavement Center weather its current organizational crisis?" In either case, the CRQ identifies what you want to know

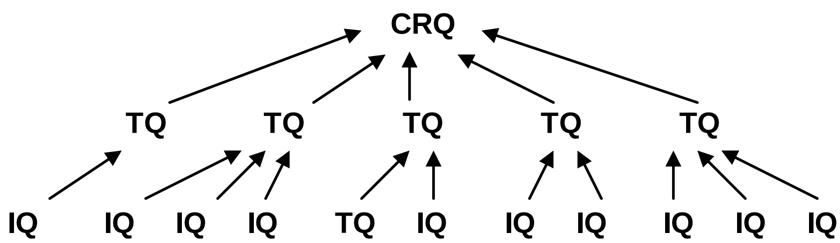
Any researcher, of course, has read a tremendous amount of literature on her or his research topic. Wengraf notes that this literature typically identifies possible answers to the CRQ – and often identifies several of them. The sociology of religion, for example, notes that people make use of (at least) two kinds of religious resources: "official" sources, endorsed by church authorities, and "nonofficial" ones, of which those authorities do not approve. Organizational development literature notes that all organizations – including non-profits – go through several predictable transitions in the course of their lives. If we knew whether our social activists look to official or to nonofficial religious resources, we would be a step closer to knowing how they sustain their activist commitments. And if we knew whether the CBC was in the midst of a predictable life-cycle transition, we would better know what actions to recommend.

Wengraf calls such questions Theory-Based Questions (TQ). After identifying one's CRQ, one needs to identify several TQs that, taken together, allow one to answer the CRQ. Schematically:



These TQs, however, are still too general. One needs to "operationalize" them – break them down into smaller parts that real people can understand and answer. It would not be a good idea, for example, for us to ask our social activists "Do you personally depend on official or on unofficial religious resources?" Few informants speak such academic jargon, and only some of those who don't will have the gumption to say, "Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" Most will say something that sounds like an answer, but they won't really tell us much. People need to understand clearly what they are being asked, if they are to provide details.

The researcher thus needs to create a series of Interview Questions (IQ) from each Theory-Based Question (TQ). Informants' answers to these IQs should, collectively, answer the TQ. The answers to the TQs, taken collectively, should answer the CRQ. Schematically:



We might, for example, ask our social activists about the kinds of religious services they attend, about their own private religious practices, what they do under stress, and so on. We might ask them about their feelings about their church leaders. We should definitely ask them if they ever achieve a feeling of transcendence and (if so) when and how. All these questions, taken together, let us answer our TQ about the official or non-official sources of religious support. The answer to this TQ, together with the answers to our other TQs, should let us answer our Central Research Question.

Step 2: Turn these Interview Questions (IQs) into a useable interview protocol

Wengraf stops here. Though he might not agree with me, I think that this is still one step short of the goal. Interviews need not only to be logical and clear; they also need to engage our informants. Asking a long string of rather specific questions seldom does so. Nor does it typically encourage informants to give us more than we asked for – the rich detail that enlivens their accounts and deepens our understanding of them.

Fortunately, this is relatively simple to correct. One takes the list of IQs generated above, and rearranges them so that both engage informants and flow cleanly. One may, for example, ask our social activists to tell us about a time when they were especially discouraged, and how they pulled themselves out of it. Depending on how the story unfolds, we might then probe about the usefulness of this or that religious resource. We would certainly want to know if such stories were typical of our informants' experiences – and we can ask this directly. The point is, one can call on our informants' imaginative creativity, as well as on their logic, to get a fuller picture of their experiences.

We just have to make sure that our protocol includes questions, stories, or reflections that elicit answers to all of our IQs. We need no one-to-one correspondence, but we need to make sure that we have everything covered.

One way to do this is to construct a table like the one on the next page. Put your TQs, IQs, etc. across the top, and your interview protocol down the left side. Go through the rows, putting check marks beneath the IQs that each interview question answers. Make sure that every column has at least one check mark in it; if it does not, you need to revise your protocol so that the IQ in question gets answered.

		TQ1		TQ2			TQ3		
		IQ1	IQ2	IQ3	IQ4	IQ5	IQ6	IQ7	…
1. Do you consider yourself religious?								X	
2. What does “being religious” mean to you?							X		
3. With which religious group do you identify?		X		X					
4. What do you get out of belonging to that group?			X			X			
5. Tell me about a time when …				X	X			X	
6. Was this typical? How or how not?					X				
7. Can you tell me about a less typical instance?					X				
…									

<u>Step 3: Interpreting the results</u>

As you can imagine, using this method would have greatly improved the Fordham project that I assisted many years ago. The method keeps things clear. It reminds you why you are asking each question. And it makes sure that you ask the right questions to get the response you need.

It has the further advantage of helping interpret your data. Remember that answering the IQs lets you answer the TQs, which (collectively) answer your Central Research Question. <u>To answer any IQ, just read down the proper column, pulling together all of the answers in the rows that you have checked</u>. In the chart above, for example, you would answer IQ3 by putting all of your informants’ answers to questions 3 and 5 in a pile, then reading through them. *Voilá* – one knows that one’s informants have to say about the matter. Do that for each column, combine the IQ answers to answer the applicable TQs, and you are well on the way to having answered the question with which your project started.

By the way: it makes no difference whether one sorts ones interview transcripts into actual piles on the living room floor, as one did in the old days, or with the help of qualitative analysis software like NVivo or NUD*IST. The sorting logic is the same.