

Rubin, H. J., and. Rubin, I. S. (2005): **Qualitative Interviewing – The Art of Hearing Data**. 2. Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, New York.

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Designing, planning and writing a book about qualitative interviewing can be done from several different perspectives. Many books have focused on “how to do interviews”, e.g. practical approaches, some of them presenting virtual manuals that can be followed in a step-by-step way. Other writers have presented practical interview methodologies, arguing that the different nature of research situations and research topics require basically different approaches to interviewing and analysis of data. However, fewer writers have taken a philosophical approach to discussing the whole field of qualitative interview projects and what these involve. There is a great difference between that and a “how-to-do-interviews” approach. The common understanding is that there is no fixed way of doing qualitative interviews or other kinds of qualitative research, only a general consensus about what such a project should roughly cover. The basic question of qualitative interview research is that of how we think about and approach our research topics. Another consideration is the role of the researcher and how that role is influenced by his or her life situation and personal experiences. Qualitative research does not see the writer/researcher as something that is objectively or subjectively unrelated to the research topic and the research process. On the contrary, qualitative research often produces lasting experiences that may even affect an author’s life and ways of thinking. Rubin & Rubin emphasize this in their book, and what they have to say about it is especially important to new researchers or students because it prepares them in a way for interview experiences.

Rubin and Rubin are highly experienced in qualitative interviewing, both as teachers and researchers. There is a lot of important material covered here, especially practical considerations. This is done in simple and straightforward language, without the unnecessary academic jargon sometimes found. This makes the book particularly useful for students embarking on their first major qualitative interview project, or as a textbook in a graduate level qualitative methodologies course. More experienced researchers will probably also find the book useful.

In the first chapter, “Listening, Hearing and Sharing Social Experiences” there is a general introduction to qualitative interviews and a useful classification of basic interview approaches. The definition of a qualitative interview on p. 4 is that of “...conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion. The researcher elicits depth and detail about the research topic by following up on answers given by the interviewee during the discussion.” This definition is both simple and clear, and I mention it here because it is a good example of how Rubin & Rubin come to the heart of the matter in a way that everybody can understand. This chapter also includes a general outline and scope of the book and a first presentation of a specific model used for interviewing called “responsive interviewing.” Rubin & Rubin base their approach to interviewing on this model, and a

prospective reader would rightly ask what it is all about. The authors say that “... responsive interviewing is intended to communicate that qualitative interviewing is a dynamic and iterative process, not a set of tools to be applied mechanically.” “Qualitative research is not simply learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied” (p. 15).

The title of the second chapter is “Why Do We Do What We Do.” This chapter briefly introduces and discusses basic philosophical issues of qualitative interview research, for example critical theory, feminist theory, postmodernism and interpretive constructionist theory. In a good synthesis of the philosophical basics, Rubin & Rubin explain that their chosen method, ‘Responsive interviewing’, draws a lot on interpretive constructionist philosophy, “...mixed with a bit of critical theory and then shaped by the practical needs of doing interviews” (p. 30). Responsive interviewing aims at solid, deep understanding rather than breadth. ‘Depth is achieved by going after context; dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes; and paying attention to the specifics of meanings, situations, and history’ (p. 35). One could say that there is nothing new about going after depth rather than breadth but the main contribution of Rubin & Rubin is the method they offer. At the risk of some oversimplification, one can say that the method is based on iterative questioning and follow-ups. The method is not hermeneutic in a strict sense, as that concept refers directly to the interpretation of texts and the hermeneutic circle of text interpretation. A more appropriate term would be social and situational interpretation, where one goes after depth of understanding.

Depth of understanding must always be associated with breadth. To go very deeply into an issue always entails the risk of losing one’s way if the total situation is not considered. There is, however, little risk of this because ‘common sense’ (whatever that exactly means) would tell the researcher when to stop going deeper. One useful benchmark is that of the research questions: When one feels or can argue that they have been adequately answered, then that is the point where one stops asking interview questions. The balance between research questions, design, data analysis and level of interpretation is not always easy to find. Rubin & Rubin offer one possible way to establish that balance in this book.

Of the many important topics of the book, two stand out: ‘Conversational partnerships’ (covered in chapter 5) and ‘the responsive interview as an extended conversation’ (chapter 6). The two are closely associated and could have been covered under one and the same topic. As a researcher and interviewee go through the interview process, a relationship between them gets established. The personality and the emotions of the researcher affect the conversational exchange in many ways, with gender, ethnicity and social class also being important factors. Ethical issues and the necessary social skills are discussed, as well as research roles and social boundaries. This chapter contains a lot of practical advice and descriptions of typical potentially problematic situations a researcher may run into. In chapter 6, the Responsive interview is considered from the perspective of an extended conversation. The similarities and differences between ordinary conversation and a research interview are highlighted, and basic issues such as recording techniques are discussed. This chapter goes through the basic matters

of keeping a focus on the topic, the linked stages of an interview, asking easy and difficult questions, showing empathy closing the interview. At the end of the chapter there is a short guideline to evaluate interviews. The emphasis here is on a researcher's personal feelings and understanding of what the interview has disclosed. Again, typical interviewee responses and a mutual understanding are of prime importance.

In chapters 7, 8 and 9 the structure of interviews is addressed. The three chapters actually answer the question of how to design the interview phase of a qualitative interview study. Familiar topics are encountered here: main questions, follow-up questions, probes and preparing conversational guides. For many beginners, there is a lot of uncertainty when it comes to formulating the main interview questions. From a traditional standpoint, research questions evolve from theoretical questions. In grounded theory, however, this is not at all the case. Research questions may change as the researcher gains more knowledge in the field, and realizes that his or her original conception of a problem was more or less erratic. One problem that is commonly met with is the formulation of questions in such a way that they can be easily understood by interviewees. At the end of chapter 8, there is a particularly useful discussion of 'probes'. This term covers verbal as well as non-verbal responses to interviewee statements, and is aimed at facilitating a further flow of information. When to say "Could you tell me more about this" or "Go on, you are doing great" is a question of intuition as well as of experience. The novice researcher will benefit much from the advice given here. In chapter 9, the important topic of follow-up questions is covered, and various possible pitfalls in the interview process at this stage are described. One main function of follow-up question is their use for future interviews. We can follow up on concepts as well as themes, or follow up on our understanding and thoroughness of the interview material. In some interviews, certain questions may be avoided or even not answered at all. What one can do in such cases is of course highly dependent on the whole situation, but on the whole this is a topic that has not been discussed very much and is therefore very welcome in a book about qualitative interviews.

In the last three chapters, the authors address the problems of interview analysis, coded data analysis and how to present the results. The three chapters naturally form a whole, and cover their topics well, especially the chapter about the first phase of analysis (chapter 10). The coverage is, however, naturally limited by space, and each of the topics actually requires extensive reading. Considering that Rubin & Rubin's book is only intended as an introduction to this field, and not the final word, their coverage is quite good. Interview analysis is usually the most difficult stage of the interview research project, and especially beginners need to experiment a lot with methods and techniques before they can tackle any larger project. The most positive effect of reading the three final chapters is that the reader is left with a sense of optimism that is often needed at this stage and a key to analyze his or her data. However, nothing in the world can help a researcher, who has not clearly planned the whole research project beforehand, with a clear connection between research questions, data collection methods and methods of analysis. If badly planned, a researcher must eventually face the well known 'thousand pages question'.

This book raises some fundamental questions. What does “conversational partnership” mean and what does “responsive interviewing” actually refer to? In what way are they different from other interview methods? Much of the practical advice given by Rubin & Rubin is not new or fundamentally different from what many other authors have said before about qualitative interview methods. The main angle here is how Rubin & Rubin ask us to look at and think about the whole interview project. Conversational partnerships and responsive interviewing are not new labels attached to old concepts; they are keys to getting results from deep interviewing.

Rubin & Rubin emphasize two things, the art of hearing data and the partnership involved in the interview process. As a concept, art refers to individual appreciation and effort, with no two persons appreciating a work of art in precisely the same way. The partnership involved in interviewing can equally well be called a relationship, and that is basically what it is. The partners create the interview text together during a process. What Rubin & Rubin have done here is to take a traditional hermeneutic approach between a reader and a text and change it so that it is replaced with a more social relationship between two people, e.g. the interviewer and the interviewee. The meaning that comes out of the interview process is directly created by two people, instead of being created between the researcher and the text in a classical hermeneutic sense. Understanding between two persons takes place in a direct social context, whereas understanding between one person and a text take places on a more individual level. A researcher has to do both, it may be difficult to find a balance and Rubin & Rubin do not attempt to resolve this, admittedly, problematic issue. There is no question that meaning is always contextual and historically defined, and that a sense of the whole is derived from the parts in a conversation as well as in formal text interpretation. What I find doubtful is Rubin & Rubin’s emphasis on meaning being created more by a direct social partnership than by a purer hermeneutics textual approach. What is the difference between interpretation of what is said in a partnership and an interpretation of an interview text that is the result of such a relationship? Rubin & Rubin partly answer this by asking us to go for depth. They advocate a method of repeatedly going back to the interviewee for more information and deeper understanding, but in my opinion they underestimate one important factor, namely that repeated deep interviews may easily change the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the person being interviewed. This can also happen – although the danger is less marked - in more traditional interview designs, where a researcher would for example only meet each interviewee twice: First for the collection of the “main” interview data, and a later meeting involving issues of verification, validity and reliability. One question stands out: What kind of information is the researcher going after? Is he or she trying to extract “pure” personal information that has not been tainted in any way by new ideas or preconceptions introduced by the researcher? Or is the researcher inviting the interviewee to a social relationship (partnership) where both of them address the research topics and collectively create a meaning? If the latter is the case, it should be explained to the interviewee for ethical reasons before the latter agrees to participate in the research.

As the title of this book suggests, it is concerned with the ‘art’ of hearing data. Art is a concept that is fraught with difficulties. From one angle, it could be argued that mastery of art in any sense is something that can only partially be taught or trained by others. In the end, experience,

ability and personal commitment will distinguish between good and poor interview researchers. A second difficulty is the nature of the interview partnership presented here by Rubin & Rubin, and the emphasis on interpretation of meaning taking place in such a partnership rather than being created in a hermeneutical circle between a researcher and his or her texts. Both approaches are certainly possible, but as explained above, going after depth involves greater dangers than more traditional textual analysis followed up by simple strategies of verification.

This book addresses many important topics in qualitative interview research, but it does so more from the point of a manual than from a solid philosophical basis. As a general introduction and as an explanation of a simple and straightforward method for deep interviewing it can definitely be recommended.