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The qualitative interview in IS research: Examining the craft

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Abstract

The qualitative interview is one of the most important data gathering tools in qualitative research, yet it has remained an unexamined craft in IS research. This paper discusses the potential difficulties, pitfalls and problems of the qualitative interview in IS research. Building on Goffman's seminal work on social life, the paper proposes a dramaturgical model as a useful way of conceptualizing the qualitative interview. Based on this model the authors suggest guidelines for the conduct of qualitative interviews.

1. Introduction

The qualitative interview is used in qualitative research of all kinds, whether positivist, interpretive or critical. It is used in case studies, in action research, in grounded theory studies, and in ethnographies (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2006; Klein & Myers, 1999; Myers, 1997, 1999; Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). Rubin and Rubin (2005) say that qualitative inter-

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views are like night goggles, "permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii). The qualitative interview is the most common and one of the most important data gathering tools in qualitative research.

What we find rather surprising, however, is the fact that the qualitative interview is treated as unproblematic in the IS research literature and in many PhD programs. The qualitative interview is essentially taken for granted and seen as a relatively straightforward means of gathering data. Most IS research articles that report on the use of interviews simply state how many interviews were conducted, who conducted them, and who the interviewees were. It is an unexamined craft.

We suggest that the qualitative interview is not as straightforward as it appears at first sight. The qualitative interview is an excellent means of gathering data, but it fraught with difficulties. These difficulties, problems and pitfalls are often ignored in the final write-up of the research.

For example, the interview is a very artificial situation – it usually involves a researcher talking to someone who is a complete stranger. The researcher is essentially asking the interviewee to answer (or to create an answer), often under time pressure. The researcher is also intrusive – the interviewer intrudes upon the social setting and potentially interferes with peoples' behaviour. It is also possible for interviews to "go wrong" (Hermanns, 2004). Although there has been some discussion of the difficulties and problems of the qualitative interview in the social science literature (e.g. Kvale, 1987, 1996; Mason, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Silverman, 2000), there has been very little discussion of these in the IS research literature.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to discuss the features, potential problems and pitfalls of the qualitative interview in IS research, and to suggest how these difficulties and problems might be addressed. We propose a model of the qualitative interview where the interview is seen as a drama. The dramaturgical model has been suggested by Hermanns (2004) and others and builds on Goffman's seminal work on social life more generally (Goffman, 1959, 1961). From this model we also derive a set of guidelines for those wishing to use the qualitative interview in their research. We evaluate a set of articles selected from four of the premier research journals in information systems in the light of our proposed guidelines.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2 we review the state of the art in qualitative interviewing. Here we explore the major features, problems and pitfalls of the qualitative interview and provide an overview of current interview practices in IS research. In Section 3 we propose a dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview. In Section 4 we provide recommendations for the conduct of the qualitative interview. In Section 5 we revisit current interview practices in IS research in the light of the recommendations. Section 6 evaluates the usefulness of dramaturgical model. The final section is the conclusion.

2. State of the art

2.1. Types of qualitative interviews

There are various types of qualitative interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Some of these are as follows:

(a) *Structured interview.* In a structured interview there is a complete script that is prepared beforehand. There is no room for improvisation. These types of interviews are often used in surveys where the interviews are not necessarily conducted by the researcher.
(b) *Unstructured or semi-structured interview.* In an unstructured or semi-structured interview there is an incomplete script. The researcher may have prepared some questions beforehand, but there is a need for improvisation. The interviewer is the researcher or is one of a team.
(c) *Group interview.* In a group interview two or more people are interviewed at once by one or more interviewers. This type of interview can be structured or unstructured.

In this paper we focus mostly on the second type of interview i.e. the unstructured or semi-structured interview, as this is the type that is used the most in qualitative research in information systems. However, most of what we say is also applicable to the other types of qualitative interview. There are some additional complications with the group interview owing to the social interactions between subjects. We do not discuss the use of focus groups in this paper.

2.2. Problems and pitfalls

There are many potential difficulties, problems and pitfalls in using the qualitative interview. Webb and his colleagues claim that interviews "intrude into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit atypical roles and responses, they are limited to those who are accessible and will cooperate..." (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). We can summarise some of the problems and pitfalls as follows:

- *Artificiality of the interview* – The qualitative interview involves interrogating someone who is a complete stranger; it involves asking subjects to give or to create opinions under time pressure.
- *Lack of trust* – As the interviewer is a complete stranger, there is likely to be a concern on the part of the interviewee with regard to how much the interviewer can be trusted. This means that the interviewee may choose not to divulge information that he or she considers to be "sensitive". If this is potentially important information for the research, the data gathering remains incomplete.
- *Lack of time* – The lack of time for the interview may mean that the data gathering is incomplete. However, it can also lead to the opposite problem – of subjects creating opinions under time pressure (when these opinions were never really held strongly to start with). In this case more data are gathered but the data gathered are not entirely reliable.
- *Level of entry* – The level at which the researcher enters the organization is crucial (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988). For example, if a researcher enters at a lower level, it may prove difficult if not impossible to interview senior managers at a later date. In some organizations, talking to union members can bar access to management and vice versa. Additionally, gatekeepers may inhibit the researcher's ability to access a broader range of subjects.

- *Elite bias* – A researcher may interview only certain people of high status (key informants) and therefore fail to gain an understanding of the broader situation. Miles and Huberman (1994) talk about the bias introduced in qualitative research by interviewing the "stars" in an organization. Elite bias concerns overweighting data from articulate, well-informed, usually high-status informants and, conversely, under-representing data from intractable, less articulate, lower-status ones (Heiskanen & Newman, 1997).
- *Hawthorne effects* – Qualitative interviews are intrusive and can potentially change the situation. The interviewer is not an invisible, neutral entity; rather, the interviewer is part of the interactions they seek to study and influences those interactions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The researcher may intrude upon the social setting and potentially interfere with peoples' behaviour.
- *Constructing knowledge* – Naïve interviewers may think that they are like sponges, simply soaking up data that is already there. They may not realise that, as well as gathering data, they are also actively constructing knowledge (Fontana & Frey, 2000). In response to an interviewer, interviewees construct their stories – they are reflecting on issues that they may have never considered so explicitly before. Interviewees usually want to appear knowledgeable and rational, hence the need to construct a story that is logical and consistent.
- *Ambiguity of language* – The meaning of our words is often ambiguous, and it is not always clear that subjects fully understand the questions. Fontana and Frey (2000) say that "Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task that it may seem at first. The spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions or how carefully we report or code the answers" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 645).
- *Interviews can go wrong* – Interviews are fraught with fears, problems and pitfalls. It is possible for an interviewer to offend or unintentionally insult an interviewee, in which case the interview might be abandoned altogether (Hermanns, 2004).

In the final analysis, the qualitative interview is a negotiated accomplishment shaped by the social and cultural context of the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000). When used to its full potential, the qualitative interview is a very powerful data gathering technique. However, we believe it is advisable for researchers to be more aware of the potential problems and pitfalls in its use. The qualitative interview is a powerful tool, but those using it should have an appreciation of its strengths and weaknesses.

2.3. Current practices in information systems research

As a first step in understanding the current state of qualitative research interviewing (QRI) in the IS field, we examined the research methods section of qualitative studies from four IS research journals. These are MIS Quarterly (MISQ), Information Systems Research (ISR), Journal of AIS (JAIS), and Information and Organization (I&O). We focussed on the publication years 2001–2005 inclusively. Because of space limitations we randomly selected a maximum of six articles from each journal for a total of 22.[1]

[1] In the case of ISR and JAIS, five articles were published in each journal in the period 2001–2005 that employed qualitative research methods, so we included all of these. In total there were 42 articles that we analysed from the four journals, 5 from ISR, 16 from MISQ, 5 from JAIS and 16 from I&O.

Table 1
Overview of JAIS articles 2001–2005

Article	2 #Subjects/ #interviews	3 Period of interviews	4 Interview model	5 Description of process	6 Type of interview	7 Recording technique	8 Thick/thin description	9 Anon/ revealed	10 Feedback
Sherif and Menon (2004)	30/30	Not reported	Not clear	Very little	SS based on structured questions	All recorded and transcribed	Some thick description – quotes	Anon	None or not reported
Shim et al. (2002)	23/23 faculty/staff and students	Not reported	Existential phenomenology	Some	SS based on structured questions	All recorded and transcribed	Some quotes	Anon	Not reported
Geissler et al. (2001)	20 telephone interviews and 10 face-to-face	Not reported	Ethnographic	Little	US and SS questions	Not clear	Some quotes	Anon	Not reported
Sarker and Lee (2002)	17/28 plus informal interviews	Not reported	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Some recorded and transcribed	Good use of quotes	Anon	Some
Silva and Backhouse (2003)	Not reported/35	Six weeks	Not reported	Some	SS questions	Note taking and then transcribed	Some quotes	Anon	Not reported

Table 2
Overview of ISR articles 2001–2005

Article	2 #Subjects/ #interviews	3 Period of Interviews	4 Interview model	5 Description of process	6 Type of interview	7 Recording technique	8 Thick/thin description	9 Anon/ revealed	10 Feedback
Sussman and Siegal (2003)	40/40	Summer 1997	Used an interview guide	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed	Thin	Anon	Not reported
Choudhury and Sabherwal (2003)	25/25	9 months for first project. Not reported for the second	None	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Koh et al. (2004)	15/15	First half 1999	Critical incident technique	Some	SS	Not taped at request of interviewees – notes taken	Some thick	Anon	Yes
Kirsch (2004)	17/20	April–May 1997	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Yes
Levina (2005)	40/40 but some interviewed twice	8 months in 2000	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Not reported

Table 3
Overview of MIS quarterly articles 2001–2005

Article	2 #Subjects/ #interviews	3 Period of interviews	4 Interview model	5 Description of process	6 Type of interview	7 Recording technique	8 Thick/thin description	9 Anon/ revealed	10 Feedback
Ang and Slaughter (2001)	12/12	Not reported	None	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed or extensive notes	Thin	Anon	Not reported
Lamb and Kling (2003)	48/48	Not reported	Not reported	Interview instrument included	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Subramani (2004)	27/27	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	SS	Not reported	Thin	Anon	Not reported
Garud and Kumaraswamy (2005)	?/56	Over a three year period	None	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Yes
Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2005)	17/17	Not reported	None	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Mårtensson and Lee (2004)	?/105	Two years	"Reality constructing, meaning-making occasions"	Some	SS	Hand-written notes typed up afterwards	Thin	Anon	Yes

Table 4
Overview of I&O articles 2001–2005

Article	2 #Subjects/ #interviews	3 Period of interviews	4 Interview model	5 Description of process	6 Type of interview	7 Recording technique	8 Thick/thin description	9 Anon/ revealed	10 Feedback
Nicholson and Sahay (2004)	21/21	2–3 years	None	Extensive	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Some
Elmes et al. (2005)	60/70 plus some group and informal interviews	Three years	Glaserian model	Extensive	SS plus free-form Qs	Mostly taped and transcribed	Extensive	Anon	Not reported
Ellington and Monteiro (2003)	34/34	Not reported	Followed Klein and Myers (1999)	Some	SS	Not reported	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Schwarz (2002)	35/102	Three waves over two years	Not reported	Some	SS	Taped and transcribed	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Hayes and Walsham (2001)	33/54 plus informal	Two and a half years	Not reported	Some	SS/ structured	Notes	Some thick	Anon	Not reported
Nicholson and Sahay (2001)	?/42 plus informal	Two years	Not reported	Extensive	SS	Taped and transcribed	Mainly thick	Anon	Not reported

An overview of the articles is shown in Tables 1–4 ordered by journal name, with the full bibliographic details of each article listed in the references section (Ang & Slaughter, 2001; Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2005; Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003; Ellington & Monteiro, 2003; Elmes, Strong, & Volkoff, 2005; Garud & Kumaraswamy, 2005; Geissler, Zinkhan, & Watson, 2001; Hayes & Walsham, 2001; Kirsch, 2004; Koh, Ang, & Straub, 2004; Lamb & Kling, 2003; Levina, 2005; Mårtensson & Lee, 2004; Nicholson & Sahay, 2004; Nicholson & Sahay, 2001; Sarker & Lee, 2002; Schwarz, 2002; Sherif & Menon, 2004; Shim, Shin, & Nottingham, 2002; Silva & Backhouse, 2003; Subramani, 2004; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). What we were looking for here was a picture of current practices in reporting about the qualitative research interview. Where data were missing we note it as "Not reported". This does not mean that the researchers did not engage with a particular issue but rather that their reporting of it, for whatever reason, was absent.

The first column of each table identifies the article. The second column gives the number of subjects interviewed along with the number of interviews which may be greater of course if subjects were interviewed more than once. Column three reports the period covered by the interviewing.

The fourth column describes any explicit interviewing model used. For example, one article described it as a critical incident technique; another as a "reality constructing, meaning-making occasion". These are not comprehensive models of the interview process as such, but represent the general approach of the researchers. Mostly, the model used was not reported. Column five summarises how the interview *process* was described (from very little to extensive). Here we were looking for evidence of the context and content of the interviews and whether the researchers were aware of the potential impacts on disclosure such issues might have. Column six describes the type of interview that the researchers used (unstructured (US), semi-structured (SS), or structured). The seventh column reports on the recording technique and the use of transcripts and or notes. Column eight refers to the use made of the interview data in the paper. Thick description means the researchers used verbatim quotations from their recorded data; thin description means that they used little or no such quotations. Finally the ninth and tenth columns refer to the anonymity of the interviewees and the feedback offered to the companies/subjects, respectively. In every case the name of the company was withheld and the interviewees were disguised. Feedback (articles, reports, seminars etc.) was rarely reported and the same applies to any general ethical considerations such as security and confidentiality.

The first features of the tables that stand out are the variety of reporting practices and the general lack of reporting. The most frequent result we note is "Not reported" where very little data was given in the article. The most common practices were to report the number of interviewees and interviews, the type of questioning (mainly semi-structured interviews), the use of recording technology (if any) and transcripts, anonymity, and the period during which the interviews were conducted. The least reported issues were the interview model employed, a description of the interview process including contextual features, and feedback offered to the company/interviewees. We could detect little difference in the level of reporting between the journals.[2]

[2] There were some notable exceptions in I&O. This may be related to the journal encouraging longer, case-based material which enables researchers to report on the above issues in greater depth.

3. The dramaturgical model

Erving Goffman developed a general theory of face-to-face interaction, a theory that can be used to interpret any social exchange. This theory uses the metaphor of the theatre to explore social life (Goffman, 1959, 1961; Manning, 1992). Social interactions are seen as a drama where there are actors (individuals and groups) who perform on a stage (a variety of settings and social situations) using a script (norms, rituals, expectations of how one should behave). During the performance, the actor's appearance, manner and props are very important (Manning, 1996).

We believe this theory is especially applicable to one particular type of social interaction: the qualitative interview. The interview is a social interaction. Goffman defines interaction as "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence." He defines a performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959, p. 26).

The qualitative interview as a drama

Concepts	Description
Drama	The interview is a drama with a stage, props, actors, an audience, a script, and a performance
Stage	A variety of organisational settings and social situations although in business settings the stage is normally an office. Various props might be used such as pens, notes, or a tape recorder
Actor	Both the interviewer and the interviewee can be seen as actors. The researcher has to play the part of an interested interviewer; the interviewee plays the part of a knowledgeable person in the organisation
Audience	Both the interviewer and the interviewee can be seen as the audience. The researcher should listen intently while interviewing; the interviewee(s) should listen to the questions and answer them appropriately. The audience can also be seen more broadly as the readers of the research paper(s) produced
Script	The interviewer has a more or less partially developed script with questions to be put to the interviewee to guide the conversation. The interviewee normally has no script and has to improvise
Entry	Impression management is very important, particularly first impressions. It is important to dress up or dress down depending upon the situation
Exit	Leaving the stage, possibly preparing the way for the next performance (finding other actors – snowballing) or another performance at a later date (e.g. perhaps as part of a longitudinal study)
Performance	All of the above together produce a good or a bad performance. The quality of the performance affects the quality of the disclosure which in turn affects the quality of the data

"Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the *performer* on a series of occasions to the same kinds of *audience* or to an audience of the same persons" (Goffman, 1959, p. 27).

The dramaturgical perspective can be usefully applied to the qualitative research interview, as has been suggested by Hermanns (2004) and others (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Using a dramaturgical model of the interview, the individual interview is treated as a drama. The drama has a stage, props, actors, an audience, a script, an entry and an exit, all of which affect the overall quality of the performance. The quality of the performance in turn affects the extent to which the interviewee discloses important information which in turn affects the quality of the data. The various dramaturgical concepts as applied to the qualitative interview are summarized above. We will discuss each of these concepts in turn.

3.1. The drama

The entire qualitative interview can be seen as a drama with a stage, props, actors, an audience, a script, and a performance.

As a drama, impression management by the interviewer is important (impression management is discussed in more detail below). First impressions, for example, are of crucial importance in determining the success of the interview. It is also important to try to avoid *faux pas* (saying or doing things that might be sources of embarrassment and dissonance to the interviewee).

In the interview it is important for the interviewer (the actor) to show empathy, understanding, and respect to the interviewee. The interviewer also has to create space for the interviewee to reveal their personality and identity. An interviewer who talks too much is likely to stifle the interviewee and restrict the amount of data disclosed.

The interviewer also has to give stage directions and pay attention to stage management. This means that the interviewer should clearly explain the purpose of the interview and what he or she hopes to achieve. If the interviewee digresses too far from the original purpose or the questions, then the interviewer may need to steer the interview more carefully. However, the interviewer has to avoid the opposite problem of over-directing the performance; the interviewer has to allow for development of the plot and has to give the drama an opportunity to develop. In fact this is one of the main benefits of the semi-structured or unstructured interview, as the whole idea is to delve more deeply into the social situation.

The interviewer has to overcome various potential problems in the interview, for example, the fear of embarrassment, the fear of exploitation (on the part of the interviewee), or the fear of silence (the interviewee does not talk, or the interviewer does not know what to say).

The interviewer also has to learn to deal with different types of behaviour from interviewees. Interviewees may show off (the subject exaggerates their importance to you or their company), on the other hand they may be shy (the subject that answers in mono syllables) or awed (e.g. may perceive a high social gulf between the researcher and themselves). Interviewees may treat the interview as a confessional/cathartic experience (some subjects reveal sensitive, confidential information either about themselves or their company), on the other hand they may be bored (with a disinterested subject, it may be impossible to penetrate their front) or fatigued (e.g. over-researched subjects). Lastly, interviewees may try to reverse roles and probe the interviewer for information about others in the organisation. They may also adopt deceptive behaviour and lie (particularly about commercially sensitive matters, or matters which may concern their personal affairs or performance in the organization).

3.2. The stage

The stage is the location in which the interview takes place. The stage can be a variety of organizational settings and social situations, such as a café, bar or restaurant, although in business settings the stage is normally an office.

The first thing that needs to be done is to set the stage. Setting the stage involves finding interviewees (e.g. key informants, stars etc.), and agreeing the time, place and theme of the interview with them. It is important to correctly set expectations as to what the interview is about. The setting usually involves the office furniture, décor, the physical layout of the office; it also involves the person's dress, rank, role, sex, and age. These are the stage props for the drama that is about to unfold, and all of these together can affect disclosure. Other props that might be used are pens, notes, or recording equipment (voice or video).

It is important that the stage is set to help create a productive atmosphere. There may be little that the interviewer can do to change the physical layout, particularly if the interview takes place in the interviewee's office. However, the interviewee may offer the interviewer a choice between conducting the interview at a desk or around a coffee table. A more informal quieter setting is often better. The interviewee should also be aware of the difference between the front stage and back stage. The back stage is all the informal activity and chatting that happens before or after the interview per se (e.g. if a tape recorder was used, the informal chats would normally not be taped). Once the interview begins, and the tape rolls, then both parties are front stage. The trick is to ensure that all the backstage activities beforehand help both parties to move seamlessly into a solid performance once the tape starts to roll.

3.3. The actor(s)

Both the interviewer and the interviewee can be seen as actors. The researcher has to play the part of an interested interviewer; the interviewee plays the part of a knowledgeable person in the organisation. Of course, both have to understand their roles and play their part. As Goffman notes, "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (Goffman, 1959, p. 28). For this reason, and to ensure adequate disclosure, it is very important for the interviewee to take the researcher seriously. The researcher can increase the chances of being taken seriously by dressing appropriately, making sure that they are knowledgeable about the organization beforehand, and by conducting the interview in a professional manner. In the role of interviewer, it is especially important for the researcher to show empathy, to listen to the interviewee in an interested yet relaxed manner, and to respond appropriately to answers (e.g. by nodding, smiling or a shrugging of the shoulders).

3.4. The audience

Both the interviewer and the interviewee can be seen as the audience (depending upon which is acting at the time). The researcher should listen intently while interviewing; the interviewee(s) should listen to the questions and answer them appropriately.

More broadly, the academic community and the readers of the research paper(s) produced may be seen as the audience. In some situations (e.g. interviewing someone working in a very competitive industry) it would be advisable for the researcher to explicitly mention that the results of the interview will not be divulged to trade magazines or to other third parties (even if an explicit non-disclosure agreement has already been signed). If the interviewee is told that research findings will only be published in an academic journal, and the article is unlikely to be published in the immediate future, this may allay the fears of the interviewee of the possible leaking of sensitive information to a competitor or a senior manager in the same organization.

3.5. The script

The interviewer has a more-or-less partially developed script with questions to be put to the interviewee to guide the conversation. The interviewee normally has no script and has to improvise.

In a semi-structured interview, the interview is scripted beforehand. Many of the questions are prepared earlier, and the interviewer's role is to ensure that all questions are covered. In an unstructured interview, only a few key questions are prepared beforehand. In this case much more improvisation is required by the interviewer. One of the challenges is to ensure that there are no long pauses during the performance. One of the trickier skills is to both listen to the interviewee and at the same time construct the next comment or question (see below for more on this in mirroring).

In either case (semi-structured or unstructured interview), preparing the script should involve at a minimum:

- Preparing the opening – introducing yourself etc.
- Preparing the introduction – explaining the purpose of the interview.
- Preparing the key questions.
- Preparing the close – if needed, asking permission to follow-up, or asking who else the interviewee recommends might be interviewed. This is a technique known as snowballing, where interviewing one person leads to another which in turn leads to another. Snowballing helps the researcher to obtain a critical mass of interview data.

However, the researcher should be careful not to over-prepare the script - the qualitative interviewer should always use an incomplete script. Thus interviewing requires openness, flexibility and improvisation. The interviewer should be prepared to explore interesting lines of research, and should look for surprises. The interviewer should also look for subjects' differing attitudes: awed, bored, deceiving, fatigued, show off, shy, or confessing, and respond accordingly. For example, if an interviewee becomes bored, the interviewer needs to become more animated, perhaps speed up the interview process, and ask more interesting or provocative questions. If none of these actions works, it is probably best to finish the interview early out of respect for the interviewee.

3.6. The entry

Impression management is very important, particularly first impressions. It may be important to dress up or dress down depending upon the situation. Some qualitative researchers go as far as to say that one should "go native" and dress in exactly the same fashion, and speak in exactly the same way, as the interviewee. For example, if the interviewee wears a suit, then the interviewer should do likewise; if the interviewee speaks with an Australian accent, then the interviewer should do likewise; if the interviewee uses certain jargon, then the interviewer should do likewise. However, this approach tends to deny that the data is gained by the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Klein & Myers, 1999). The interviewer is not simply a sponge soaking up data, but is a person with their own personality, personal attributes and so forth. We therefore suggest that impression management is important, but not to the extent of creating a "false impression" of the researcher's background and experience. The key point is to make the interviewee feel comfortable, not uncomfortable, and to minimise social dissonance.

This leads us to point out that the data from interviews are idiographic. The background, experience, gender, age, and nationality of the interviewer should not be denied, but acknowledged in helping to situate the actor. It is sometimes useful to mention some of these personal characteristics in the write up, sometimes referred to as situating the researcher.

3.7. The exit

The exit involves leaving the stage, possibly preparing the way for the next performance (finding other actors) or another performance at a later date (e.g. perhaps as part of a longitudinal study).

The researcher may want to mention at this point that he or she will provide feedback to the subjects. Also, it might be a good idea to ask if it would be possible to call back to check on factual matters if needed. Lastly, it is always a good idea to ask who else should be interviewed, as per the snowballing technique mentioned above.

3.8. The performance

All of the above together produce a good or a bad performance. The quality of the performance affects the quality of the disclosure which in turn affects the quality of the data.

It is important to recognize that the subjects (the interviewees) are creative interpreters of their worlds as we are of theirs. Interviewing is usually an artificial/rare event for most subjects. However, interviewing focuses on the subject's world and uses their language rather than imposing one's own. The role of the interviewer is to be listening, prompting, encouraging, and directing. Overall, the more comfortable interviewees are, and the more they are prepared to open up and talk, the better the disclosure is likely to be. From the perspective of qualitative research, the more interesting the story, the better it is (as long as it does not move into the domain of fiction, of course).

4. Recommendations for qualitative interviewing

Using the dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview explained in Section 3, we derive seven guidelines for qualitative interviewing. These guidelines are depicted

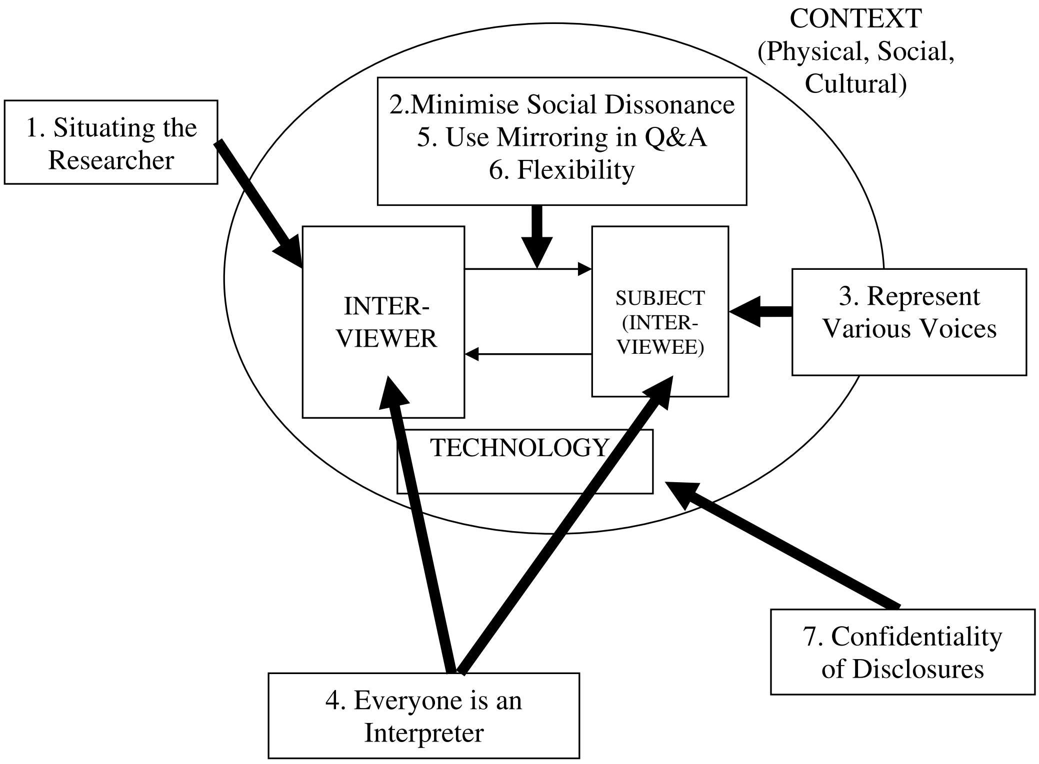

Fig. 1. Guidelines for the qualitative research interview.

graphically in Fig. 1. The model presupposes that the interview is a drama, and therefore interviewers should prepare themselves with that in mind. In other words, they should aim for an excellent performance.

Our suggested guidelines for the researcher/interviewer are as follows:

1. *Situating the researcher as actor*. Assuming that the researcher is the interviewer, it is important for the researcher to "situate" themselves before the interview takes place. That is, because the interview is a social encounter and the data gathered from interviews are idiographic, the interviewer should situate themselves as well as the interviewee. The following questions might be helpful: Who are you? What role are you playing? What is your background, experience, gender, age, and nationality? As the interviewer is not just a sponge, this information may be useful in the writing up, so that readers can assess the validity of the findings.
2. *Minimise social dissonance*. As the interview is a social encounter, it is important to minimise social dissonance i.e. minimise anything that may lead to the interviewee to feel uncomfortable. This is generally thought of as a way to improve the quality of disclosure. This usually involves trying to manage first impressions, dressing appropriately, and using the appropriate language/jargon. Playing a part may mean playing different parts for different subjects (e.g. compare interviewing a CEO vs. a shop floor worker). Playing a part also means dressing up or dressing down as appropriate. Gender, age and culture may be important in some situations, depending upon the research topic. For example, a man might find it difficult to do research on some women's organisations if the interviewees perceive that the social dissonance is too great (i.e. the access to informants and disclosure might be minimal); in some cultures a male would not

be permitted to interview a female staff member; someone who is very young with little business experience might find it difficult to gain the respect and trust of a CEO of a large corporation.

3. *Represent various "voices"*. In qualitative research it usually necessary to interview a variety of people within an organisation. Finding different subjects is called "triangulation of subjects" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 67), where the idea is to try not to force one voice to emerge. Not all respondents are the same (e.g. some are guides, some are stars, others are gatekeepers). In this vein it is important to try to avoid elite bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
4. *Everyone is an interpreter*. This guideline recognises that subjects are creative interpreters of their worlds as we are of theirs. Interviewing is usually an artificial/rare event for most subjects. This means that the interview leads to creating and reading one or more texts (the initial text being the transcript of the interview).
5. *Use Mirroring in questions and answers*. Mirroring is taking the words and phrases the subjects use in constructing a subsequent question or comment: mirroring their comments. This allows the researcher to focus on the subjects' world and uses their language rather than imposing yours. The idea is for the interviewee to describe and explain their world in their own words. It is usually good practice to use open rather than closed questions, and to focus on common, vividly-held events and stories. It is also advisable to move from the general to the specific. The role of the interviewer involves listening, prompting, encouraging, and directing the conversation.
6. *Flexibility*. Semi-structured and unstructured interviewing uses an incomplete script and so requires flexibility, improvisation, and openness. The interviewer should be prepared to explore interesting lines of research, and look for surprises. As mentioned earlier, the interviewer should take account of subjects' differing attitudes (awed, bored, deceiving, fatigued, show off, shy, confessing) and respond accordingly.
7. *Confidentiality of disclosures*. It is important for researchers to keep transcripts/records/ and the technology confidential and secure. It may be advisable sometimes to provide early feedback to subjects and organisations and to check with them about factual matters if needed.

5. Re-visiting the interview in IS research

Earlier we noted that there was a general lack of reporting in the four major IS research journals that we examined and where details were reported there was a large variety of reporting practices. In this part of the paper we take the same articles from the four journals but this time we benchmark them according to the seven guidelines that we identified above. Our findings are presented in Tables 5–8, which shows many boxes where we had to use the "Not reported" category. Below we analyse the data by each 'guideline'.

Guideline 1. Situating the researcher. In 13 out of 22 cases, there were no details reported about the researcher(s) and their relationship to the subjects and the organization. In other cases the reporting was minimal. The one exception is the article by Mårtensson and Lee (2004), where there is an extensive discussion of the relationship between the researcher and the subject.

Table 5
JAIS articles 2001–2005 as benchmarked against the seven 'Guidelines'

Article	1 Situating the researchers	2 Minimising social dissonance	3 Representing variety of voices	4 Everyone is an interpreter	5 Using mirroring etc. in Q&A	6 Flexibility	7 Confidentiality of disclosures
Sherif and Menon (2004)	Not reported	Not reported	Yes. Actors at various levels	Not reported	Not reported	Some use of off-the-sheet questioning	Not reported
Shim et al. (2002)	Not reported	Not reported	Some Attempt	Not reported	Hermeneutic circle	Not reported	Not reported
Geissler et al. (2001)	Not reported	Not reported	Some attempt	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Sarker and Lee (2002)	Some	Not reported	Yes. Actors at various levels	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Silva and Backhouse (2003)	Not reported – used Klein and Myers (1999) as a benchmark	Not reported	Yes. Actors at various levels	Not reported	Interviewees could express their views freely	Not reported	Not reported

Table 6
ISR articles 2001–2005 as benchmarked against the seven 'Guidelines'

Authors	1 Situating the researchers	2 Minimising social dissonance	3 Representing variety of voices	4 Everyone is an interpreter	5 Using mirroring etc. in Q&A	6 Flexibility	7 Confidentiality of disclosures
Sussman and Siegal (2003)	Not reported	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Not reported	A little	Yes
Choudhury and Sabherwal (2003)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Koh et al. (2004)	Not reported	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Yes
Kirsch (2004)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Levina (2005)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported

Table 7
MISQ articles 2001–2005 as benchmarked against the seven 'Guidelines'

Article	1 Situating the researchers	2 Minimising social dissonance	3 Representing variety of voices	4 Everyone is an interpreter	5 Using mirroring etc. in Q&A	6 Flexibility	7 Confidentiality of disclosures
Ang and Slaughter (2001)	Minimal	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Not reported	Very little	Not reported
Lamb and Kling (2003)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Very little	Not reported
Subramani (2004)	Not reported	Not reported	Some	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Garud and Kumaraswamy (2005)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Not reported
Beaudry and Pinsonneault (2005)	Not reported	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Mårtensson and Lee (2004)	Yes	Not reported	Little	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Not reported

Table 8
I&O articles 2001–2005 as benchmarked against the seven 'Guidelines'

Article	1 Situating the researchers	2 Minimising social dissonance	3 Representing variety of voices	4 Everyone is an interpreter	5 Using mirroring etc. in Q&A	6 Flexibility	7 Confidentiality of disclosures
Nicholson and Sahay (2004)	Minimal	Not reported	Extensive	Some	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported
Elmes et al. (2005)	Some	Not reported	Extensive	Not reported	Not reported	Some	Not reported
Ellington and Monteiro (2003)	Some	Some	Extensive	Some	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Schwarz (2002)	Not reported	Not reported	Yes – some	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Hayes and Walsham (2001)	Minimal	Not reported	Not clear	Not reported	Not reported	Some informal interviews	Yes
Nicholson and Sahay (2001)	Some	Not reported	Yes – some	Not reported	Not reported	Some informal interviews	Not reported

Guideline 2. Minimising social dissonance. This refers to reducing the social distance between the subject and the interviewee so as to improve disclosure. Apart from the Ellington and Monteiro (2003) example, no articles reported on this.

Guideline 3. Representing a variety of voices. Here the argument is that to overcome various biases (e.g. the so-called elite bias) researchers should include a variety of subjects in their sample at various organizational levels if this is appropriate. A table of interviewees with their organizational positions would be good practice here. All the articles satisfied this guideline but there was a large variety of reporting from little to extensive. In the case of Hayes and Walsham (2001), it was not clear to us from reading the paper that this guideline was followed. Given the number of interviewees (33 in total) it is most likely that there were a variety of voices represented, but this is not reported in the article.

Guideline 4. Everyone is an interpreter. This guideline is to sensitize the researchers to the interpretive world of the subjects, the researchers themselves, and the audience they write for. Only four out of our sample mentioned this issue and mainly in passing. For example, to quote Nicholson and Sahay (2004):

> "(in) Interpretive research . . . the aim is to understand the complexity of the human sense making processes, and the processes by which inter-subjectivity is obtained as the situation is constantly changing."

Guideline 5. Use of models (such as mirroring) in questions and answers. In order to improve disclosure in the qualitative interview and to reduce the chances of imposing the researchers' world view on the subjects (i.e. by use of leading questions) techniques such as the waterfall and mirroring can be used to access the subjects' world in the subjects' language. We found only two examples out of 22 that mentioned this issue. For example, Shim et al. (2002) reported on using the hermeneutic circle as a questioning approach.

Guideline 6. Flexibility. Here the dramaturgical model talks of scripts. In semi-structured interviews the researcher has a minimal script and has to improvise most of the time, listening carefully and at the same time constructing the next question or prompt based on the subject's response. The subject generally has no script and has to improvise completely; hence the guideline of flexibility. In 12 out of the 22 examples there was no reporting on this guideline. In the other cases, there was a large variation in what was reported from minimal (some use of "off-the-sheet questioning" (Sherif & Menon, 2004)) to extensive (Nicholson & Sahay, 2004).

Guideline 7. Confidentiality of disclosures. We were looking here for reports on security, confidentiality, and feedback. Again we found little reporting on these issues (three cases out of 22). For example, Hayes and Walsham (2001) reported:

> "The initial part of the interview would be spent explaining the identity and purpose of the researcher(s), and reassuring interviewees that no attribution would be given to their views in any subsequent discussion or reports."

6. Evaluating the dramaturgical model

We believe that the dramaturgical model may help qualitative IS researchers to address some of the potential problems and pitfalls of the qualitative interview in IS research. The model focuses the mind on the aim of the qualitative interview, which is fuller disclosure and to discover "their world in their own words." The guidelines encourage openness and improvisation. They should help to ensure that researchers do not close down the conversation prematurely.

However, we acknowledge that there are some weaknesses of the model. These weaknesses and limitations are common to the dramaturgical model more generally, and are not restricted to the dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview.

The first weakness of the dramaturgical model is that it can potentially encourage manipulative and cynical behaviour for one's own ends. Manning suggests that the dramaturgical model sees the world as one in which "people, whether individually or in groups, pursue their own ends in a cynical disregard for others." The individual can be seen as "a set of performance masks hiding a manipulative and cynical self" (Manning, 1992, p. 44).

Another weakness of the model is that it potentially "reduces the person to a manipulator behind changeable masks and facades" (Manning, 1992, p. 45). The interviewer becomes an actor whose sole aim is to manipulate the interviewee into disclosing important information.

We acknowledge that, if taken to extremes, the dramaturgical model could lead to unethical behaviour. Therefore we propose a revision of guideline 7 for the qualitative interview. The new version of guideline 7 is below and explicitly mentions ethics.

(*New*) *Guideline 7: Ethics of Interviewing*. It is important for researchers to maintain ethical standards. This involves:

(A) Permissions – obtaining ethics approval from the appropriate ethics committees, obtaining permission from interviewees (and if appropriate, their manager).
(B) Respect – treating people with respect (before, during, and after the interview), respecting their time, respecting their position within the organization, respecting their knowledge.
(C) Fulfilling commitments to individuals and organisations. This may involve
   (a) Keeping confidences, keeping transcripts/records/and the technology confidential and secure.
   (b) Presenting findings and results – it may be advisable sometimes to provide early feedback to subjects and organisations and to check with them about factual matters if needed.

We believe that this revision of our original guidelines goes a long way towards mitigating the potential downside of the dramaturgical model.

7. Conclusion

The qualitative interview is a powerful research tool. It is an excellent means of gathering data, and has been used extensively in IS research. Until now, however, the qualitative interview has been a largely unexamined craft. In our review of current practices in IS research, we found a general lack of reporting about the interview process and considerable variety in those that did report. We find this surprising, given that we chose four of the best journals in the field. The interview process was taken for granted and treated as rather unproblematic, even though there are many difficulties, problems and pitfalls for the unsuspecting.

In an attempt to solve some of these potential problems and difficulties, we have suggested a dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview. As long as the model is not used mechanistically as a simple checklist, we believe that the dramaturgical model can help researchers prepare for interviews, can aid disclosure, and should improve the amount and quality of the data gathered. Having a model of the qualitative interview is a considerable advance over the present situation in IS research, where there is no generally accepted model at all.

Providing the dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview is used with care, and in particular, taking ethical considerations seriously, we believe that the model is a very useful one. It has various benefits. Used appropriately, we suggest that the benefits of the model are that it:

- Sensitises the researcher to the complexity of the interview process (the metaphor of interview as drama).
- Explores the many difficulties with the interview and what can be done to reduce the potential pitfalls and problems in order to ensure a good performance.
- Depicts the interview as a social interaction in which there are various actors.
- Describes how the interviewer must play a part in order to minimise social dissonance.
- Shows the need for interviewers to be flexible and for them to improvise, especially when there is an incomplete script.
- Reveals the powerful effect of words (e.g. leading questions, mirroring) and actions (first impressions) of the interviewer on the perception of respondents.
- Exposes the difficulty of constructing questions and responding to answers and shows how the subjects' words and phrases can be used more effectively (mirroring).
- Significantly improves the potential for greater disclosure which in turn leads to data being gathered of a greater quantity and quality.

Of course, we readily agree that the value of the dramaturgical model of the interview should not be over-emphasized. To some extent the qualitative interview is simply a practical exercise that one learns by doing. We also agree that the dramaturgical model of the interview has its limitations. We are not suggesting that a person is always hidden behind a mask or set of masks. Nor are we suggesting that researchers should be cynical manipulators of the interview situation by putting on a good performance. On the contrary, IS researchers conduct research with real people in real organizations. The qualitative interview is not just a contrived illusion on a stage. Nevertheless, providing that interviewers respect people and act ethically, we believe that the dramaturgical model of the qualitative interview is valuable.

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