

Reflexive advocacy: The role of the interviewer in presuppositional interviews in qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

The presuppositional interview in qualitative research requires the researcher to be interviewed about their thoughts, assumptions, and presumptions about their research. Its purpose is to recognise the impact of our thoughts, feelings, and actions in the ways in which we, as the researcher, exist in the research process. In earlier papers, we have discussed the purpose of the presuppositional interview, however, there is little attention in the literature about the person who interviews the researcher about their research, the presuppositional interviewer. The purpose of this paper is to discuss this unique role because the function and conversational structure differs from other types of interviewing. We propose the role of the presuppositional interviewer role is a reflexive advocate, as their engagement is intentionally directed toward supporting the researcher to develop insights about themselves, in the context of their research. The interviewer has no part in the interpretation. Instead, they are engaging in an activity which promotes the need to support and celebrate curiosity, but that remains in the domain of the researcher. To achieve this, we discuss the role and purpose of the presuppositional interviewer and offer practical guidance as to how to interview with presuppositional purpose.

Keywords: presuppositional interview, qualitative research, trustworthiness, reflexivity

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to develop the role of the presuppositional interviewer. However, before we do this, it is useful to revisit the overall underpinning assumptions of the purpose of the presuppositional interview. In previous papers (Barrett-Rodger et al., 2022; van Veggel et al., 2023) we forward that presuppositional interviews aid the researcher to identify their preconceptions to their research. This is founded on a set of ideas about how as researchers, we may be inattentive to the impact of our thoughts, feelings, and actions in the ways in which we exist in the research process (Barrett-Rodger et al., 2022). To increase our awareness, presuppositional interviews reposition the researcher from a bystander to an active interlocutor by taking a reflexive stance, peering into their experience, and placing themselves in the context of “becoming with phenomena *as* they are constituted *as* something manifest, graspable, or meaningful” (Freeman, 2021, p.276). In other words, according to van Veggel and colleagues (2023), noticing crucial, yet often overlooked facets of the researcher experience fosters further consideration about their place in their research. The connections between the researcher and their research swell in the wake of increasing consciousness to people, things, and events. Thus, prepositional interviews function as a method to examine how we holistically encounter and engage with the creation of empirical knowledge,

understanding and truth as it exists for us so that we may gain deeper insight into the meanings situated within human experience (Crowther et al., 2017).

However, as Finlay (2002a, p.12) cautions, “The process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails”. Therefore, the role of the pre-supposition interviewer is not straightforward; it involves an academic tightrope between enabling researchers to safely disclose their ready-made assumptions whilst keeping the focus on promoting high quality qualitative research. In qualitative research, trustworthiness and transparency are essential components for the integrity of the findings (Cope, 2014). Polit and Beck (2014) suggest that trustworthiness is directed towards the degree of confidence in the methodology and methods, the data, and the interpretation, and notions of trustworthiness are often expressed using criteria such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, reflexivity, and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Whilst useful, we argue that researchers may still compromise trustworthiness through their often hidden ontological, axiological, and epistemological situatedness. Indeed, the researcher's assumptions can remain lurking in the shadows (Finlay 2002a) of the research design and in the doing of the research. Our presumptions relating to the research, therefore, are often unintentionally covert and lie dormant until something happens to awaken them.

Whilst there are many types of qualitative research, the shared intention of applied research, particularly in health, social care and education is to undertake research that places value on nurturing and improving human well-being (Halling, 2020). Consequently, the researcher's position in high quality research is to not only contribute to an academic or theoretical concern but to use their research in the real world to deal with complex issues and overall, make a difference. By examining the factors motivating decision-making, the researcher can glean insights into their development as a researcher as well as the area of research interest. When combined, the presuppositional interviewer acting as a reflexive advocate seeks to help the researcher identify and unravel the appearance of their cognitions, affect and behaviours, as our past experiences can shape our present and future experience. The term reflexive advocate is deliberately chosen as it articulates supporting someone to examine their ‘self as researcher.’ The presuppositional interviewer places attention on the meanings and significance the researcher gives to their experiences and how these may play out in the lifespan of their research.

The presuppositional interviewer is positioned to support the researcher to discover more about their presence, including their approach, attitude, and responses as these are critical when undertaking qualitative research. In this way, the prepositional interviewer must tread carefully and recognise their own role in acting primarily as an advocate for reflexive thinking and appraisal. As such reflexive advocacy is simultaneously part of, but separate to, the research process. We therefore suggest that the presuppositional interviewer is not directly linked to the research activity (e.g., not a doctoral supervisor) as their role is to offer safe space for the development of self-knowledge as opposed to offering advice or directly assist with decision-making or problem-solving. To counter issues relating to the potential consequences of the power imbalance between the supervisor and the supervised, this intentional separation is important as Halling notes that, ‘the intrinsic distance amongst us also serves as a connection that draws us together’ (2009, p. 30). Though making themselves available to listen, the presuppositional interviewer enters the conversation without the requirement for response or reward. So, unlike other forms of interview, the presuppositional interviewer does not have their own agenda, instead the researcher sets the agenda, for themselves. For this reason, the presuppositional interviewer takes nothing from the interaction, and as a result, does nothing with the information received. The information acquired and

insights garnered are for the sole purpose of the researcher. Therefore, the motivation of the presuppositional interviewer is driven by academic generosity (Knowles, 2017; Martinovic et al., 2022) to offer opportunities to enable others to develop their researcher-self.

2 The presuppositional Interviewer

At the heart of presuppositional interviewing is the capacity and skill to be emotionally and physically present, earnestly listening, suspending judgement, promoting pondering, and encouraging self-facing dialogue. The presuppositional interviewer therefore must skilfully know how and when to enquire further and when to remain silent. This requires the considered management of affective reactions to enhance, but not push or persuade curiosity. Recognising the duality of empathy, from the perspectives of the interviewer and the researcher, acknowledges the lived experience of the researcher in terms of themselves and the research. Halling explains, empathy necessitates separateness to allow one person to pay attention to another, rather than claiming the experience for the self: 'We live in a world where it seems that everyone is rushing from one appointment to another and where we rarely give full attention to a fellow human being' (2009, p. 21).

This empathic reasoning highlights and models the ways in which self and others can influence the research process. During the presuppositional interview, the interviewer offers their full attention to the researcher, while the researcher is attending fully on themselves. Close attention and empathic engagement in the presuppositional interview aims to safety filter emotional reactions, so the researcher can realise, accept, and learn how to manage themselves during the research process. As such, we suggest that the presuppositional interviewer creates a nurturing environment, by respectfully responding to the researcher's past, to their present and to their future. However, this is different from a therapeutic milieu as the interviewer and interviewee both firmly place their attention to the influence of what they notice in the context of the research process (Rolls & Relf, 2006). This is an important distinction and one that needs to be at the forefront of the shared understanding as to the purpose of the presuppositional interview. When we enter conversation, Spence (2017) reminds us that we are likely to be absorbed by the dialogue and uncertain as to where the exchange might take us. The translation of thoughts into language can lead to unintended and unknown avenues and the presuppositional interviewer needs to have both the awareness and the skills to appropriately manage psychological discomfort when required.

The presuppositional interviewer role is not simply about asking questions and waiting for a response, instead it needs the ability to encourage the researcher to connect with their own sensations, emotions, and thoughts, while still being open to, and staying with, the other in empathy and without judgement. To support the researcher to move beyond their face-value appraisals and taken-for-granted thinking, the presuppositional interviewer tries to access the situatedness of the researcher by striving to leave their own world behind. Such ideas radiate from the humanistic tradition and Rogers' (1951) emphasis on empathy, whereby the presuppositional interviewer attentively enters the subjective world of the researcher while staying grounded in their own, embodied self. This momentary, relational process supports the researcher in developing their affective and intellectual understandings (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). Once the interview concludes, the presuppositional interviewer and the researcher part ways, their transitory exchange ending with each taking different reflexive avenues; for the researcher, new understandings for their researcher-self and for the interviewer, the meanings given to their part in researcher development

In addition, the presence of the presuppositional interviewer is underpinned by the attitudes of contemplative openness and wonder, espoused in the hermeneutic phenomenological notions of Heidegger and Gadamer, whereby the presuppositional interviewer tries to open possibilities for the researcher to see their world afresh. This attitude involves a type of care that savours the opportunity for insights to come to the fore and are described in a slow, meditative way that attends to, even magnifies all the details. Therefore, reflexive advocacy draws on the notion of care in the Heideggerian tradition, where understandings arise from the Latin *cura*, which refer to an attitude to other persons. Heidegger suggested authentic concern is founded on the premise of helping others to accept their own responsibility and find ways to care for themselves (1927, p. 123) and terms this as a way of “leaping ahead” to encourage others to discover how to overcome trials and achieve victories for themselves. In doing so, the uniqueness of the individual is upheld and valued (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). This stance is free from an external frame of reference and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the researcher’s experience.

By adopting a standpoint of purposeful naiveté (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the interviewer presents themselves as an independent, observational discussant, or in other words, they are holding a reflexive mirror toward the researcher (Finlay, 2002b). What is seen, heard, and felt belongs to the researcher and it is up to them to decide what to do with the information they have gained for, and about themselves. The presuppositional interviewer has no part in the interpretation. Instead, they are using their skills (see Table 1) to engage in an activity which promotes, and celebrates curiosity, but that content and utility ultimately remains in the domain of the researcher. In this way, openness is the mark of a genuine willingness to listen so that the researcher can begin to see and understand for themselves. The approach involves respect and humility toward another person’s attempts to unveil known and unknown insights, so the features of psychological sensitivity and cognitive flexibility are ever present in the dialogue, manifesting in the interviewer’s skills, attitudes, and behaviours. Furthermore, the purposeful intent of learning for the self, from the self, is consistent with how Di Cesare (2012) recognises Gadamer’s assertion for the implications of actioning new insights: ‘application does not simply come after, but is rather the cornerstone of, understanding’ (p. 97). Therefore, the presuppositional interviewer is using their questions to not only seek information, but for the integration of what is known, how it is known and when that knowing might (or might not) be used in the research context. However, an important distinction is needed here. Undertaking a presuppositional interview is not the same as conducting a research interview. There is no overarching question to be addressed, no aims or objectives to be met, instead this is a conversation of discovery, led by the researcher. Hence, the required skills are subtly different as the purpose of the interview is different as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Presuppositional interviewer skills

Skills	Use in presuppositional interview context	Checklist questions
Active listening	Showing a neutral interest with empathic recognition of responses	How do I present myself as an interviewer, what are my motivations and I do understand them?
Silence and waiting	Accepting space in the conversation, and not presenting verbal or nonverbal cues for the conversation to move on	How patient am and how is this communicated to other people?

Using open ended questions	Distinguishing that the questions are directed toward the researcher gaining knowledge, not the interviewer understanding	What examples do I have of generating questions which bring together description and underlying meanings to explore experience?
Seeking further detail / clarification / checking understanding	Recognising that the researcher is producing data for themselves, about themselves. So, more searching questions are not to be avoided but carefully crafted to encourage deeper levels of consideration and to encourage the researcher to identify what is said and not said.	How would I describe my experience and skills to support psychological safety?
Noticing and reflecting emotive points	Being attentive to encouraging others to describe what they are aware of, by understanding that our world view is influenced by our history, traditions, and values which may be known or unknown.	How easy is it for me to detect emotive signals in a conversation?
Holding own judgements / opinions	Appreciating that the conversation is directed toward gaining a first-person account from the researcher’s own perspective.	What experience can I draw on where I have preserved and paused my own interest whilst keeping focus on the other person?

3 Process

Flexibility is needed in the constructing and enacting of a presuppositional interview as the structure and types of questions are developed through a process of negotiation with the researcher. In the context of Barrett-Rodger et al. (2022), the research process guided the presuppositional interview questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) as the intention was to explore the researcher’s foundational ideas, expectations, and understandings. Whereas the two examples noted in van Veggel et al. (2023) are firstly using an adapted version of the researcher’s own research interview schedule and secondly exploring the researcher’s motivations for their area of research interest. Hence, the researcher figures out the focus of the interview, it is ‘their’ interview, the interviewer is there in a functional capacity, as someone to engage and encourage self-illuminating dialogue, whilst ‘holding’ the psychological space. The method for this type of interview is necessarily flexible but within this flexibility, there is an agreed and accepted central function of promoting transparent, reflexive research practice. As such, the parameters and intentions of the interview must be established, with the agreement that if required, the presuppositional interviewer will guide the researcher back to the intended focus. To prioritise psychological safety, this pre-work is important so that meaningful, adaptive, and innovative insights can appear and ripen for the researcher throughout the conversation and beyond. Furthermore, the researcher needs to decide if and how the interview is recorded and what happens to that recording. As the presuppositional interview belongs to the researcher, they must take responsibility for the ethical safekeeping of any recorded material. So, before the interview takes place the following issues need to be negotiated and agreed:

- Purpose and scope of the presuppositional interview

- The parameters of the interview
- The personal / professional boundaries
- Role and function of the interviewer and researcher
- Method of recording and storing recorded material

To articulate the above, Table 2 offers prompts in the form of questions to trigger thinking about in the three key stages of undertaking a presuppositional interview: arranging, actioning and afterwards.

Table 2: Process prompts

Stage	Presuppositional interviewer	Researcher
Arranging	What are my motivations for agreeing to function as a presuppositional interviewer?	In what ways might a presuppositional interview be of benefit to me and my research?
	What skills can I use for presuppositional interviews?	When might be a suitable time to undertake a presuppositional interview?
	Do I have a clear understanding of the researcher’s intentions from this interview?	Who might be a useful person to do a presuppositional interview with?
Actioning	In what ways can I hold the psychological space?	Is my attention toward learning about myself in the research process?
	How will I know when to explore further and when to hold back?	Am I allowing myself to be open and present to the conversation?
	What can I do to safely end the conversation?	Am I giving myself time and permission to move beyond previously rehearsed responses?
Afterwards	What is the agreement (if any) for follow up conversations?	What will I do with the information from the interview?
	What I have I learnt about myself as a presuppositional interviewer?	Is there anything I would have liked to talk about but did not?
	How can I use this experience to inform the process of future presuppositional interviews?	How will I continue to use this experience throughout the lifespan of this research (and, beyond)?

The uniqueness of each qualitative piece of research means that novice and experienced researchers must be constantly attentive to the newness of their position by finding, owning, and using their presuppositional interview (Barrett-Rodger et al., 2022) to draw nearer to the exploration of fundamental human concerns. Researchers who are exploring issues relating to health, social care and education knowingly or unknowingly enter the research frame with the richness of their everyday practice-based experience which evolves from the learning derived from that practice (Halling et al., 2020). When viewed as a learning process, the position of the researcher is based on the dynamic use of self, suggesting learning

and consequently, the research is part of the person (Dewey, 1938; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Without connecting primarily with the self, other connections such as those with theory, participants and the data are susceptible to being devoid of personal meaning. Consequently, the researcher self cannot be avoided as decisions and actions derive from the self, and as a result are self-initiated. Through empathic understanding, researchers can begin to recognise themselves as their most instrumental learning resource; they are in a privileged position of having the opportunity to be living their learning, habitually strengthening their self-connection to the research process by exploring their own perceptions and examining alternative perspectives. However, without careful attention and courage, the researcher may become swamped by their endeavours; navigating this complex and often confusing philosophical terrain is tricky. As such, it is useful for the interviewer to set up guidance in negotiation with the researcher, which can also be used to check in with themselves about the purpose of the presuppositional interviewer and their role in it. The scope of negotiated guidance may include the following:

- “The information that we generate today is yours and you will decide how to use it, I will keep no record of our conversation”
- “Take your time”
- “Try to offer detail and examples in your responses”
- “We can stop at any point”
- “Once we have finished, I will be available if you need to discuss anything further”
- “When you review our conversation, consider both what is said, but what also remains silent”.

This foundational work through negotiated dialogue is important because the conversation may expose uncertainty as the researcher travels beyond their current conceptualisations. The disruption to our assumptions and current ways of thinking can be disconcerting, but it can also be liberating. Hence, those undertaking the role of a presuppositional interviewer must be prepared and able to sit with discomfort as well as allow the researchers to recognise their own triumphs. Therefore, this is not a task either the interviewer or interviewee can take lightly or see as a tick box action as all stages need care and consideration.

The presuppositional interview is a reflexive method to illustrate what is known by the researcher and illuminate the unknown. As complex beings, this can be comforting as well as disconcerting. However, the aim of the conversation is not to solve problems or provide therapy, as such clarity of purpose is essential, with a mutual understanding of the parameters of the conversation. This collegiate encounter can only occur if both the interviewer and researcher are in agreement about the reasons for their interaction and what will happen if the conversation extends beyond that agreement. Overall, the conversation is held in the spirit of helpfulness, with expectations and assumptions brought to the fore and recognised as essential positions of learning for the researcher-self.

Conclusion

In this paper, we forward that an integral part of trustworthiness is the researcher's reflexive positionality which may overtly and covertly influence the research process. We suggest that presuppositional interviews are a useful means to illuminate the researcher's own reflexive insights and have focused on the centrality of the role of the presuppositional interviewer to help researchers situate themselves in their research frame. However, the aim of a presuppositional interview does not remove or negate the researcher's responsibility for their reflexive appraisal or to convey reflexivity as a singular activity, but to be a supportive catalyst to further self-appraisal throughout the research process. As a reflexive advocate, the presuppositional interviewer guides the conversation in ways which can infuse extended reflexive insights from newly informed critical perspectives. Hence, the conversation encourages the researcher to form deeper introspective observations of their ongoing research actions and reactions. We recognise the presuppositional interviewer as a transient yet essential part in the reflexive endeavour. Their temporary involvement can lead to a supportive reflexive dialogue in the here and now, while the outcomes can have a lasting impact for the researcher to gain and use different insights into their understandings and presumptions about their research. To be effective, the researcher must take ownership of the content of the presuppositional interview and consider how their nuanced awareness forms and informs their research purpose and process. This paper has therefore offered a flexible approach and suggested practical considerations for prospective presuppositional interviewers.

Biographies

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