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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.

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## 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 interviews 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.

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

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

36 For example, the interview is a very artificial situation – it usually involves a researcher  
37 talking to someone who is a complete stranger. The researcher is essentially asking the  
38 interviewee to answer (or to create an answer), often under time pressure. The researcher  
39 is also intrusive – the interviewer intrudes upon the social setting and potentially interferes  
40 with peoples' behaviour. It is also possible for interviews to “go wrong” (Hermanns,  
41 2004). Although there has been some discussion of the difficulties and problems of the  
42 qualitative interview in the social science literature (e.g. Kvale, 1987, 1996; Mason,  
43 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Silverman, 2000), there has been very little discussion of these  
44 in the IS research literature.

45 The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to discuss the features, potential problems and  
46 pitfalls of the qualitative interview in IS research, and to suggest how these difficulties and  
47 problems might be addressed. We propose a model of the qualitative interview where the  
48 interview is seen as a drama. The dramaturgical model has been suggested by (Hermanns,  
49 2004) and others and builds on Goffman's seminal work on social life more generally  
50 (Goffman, 1959, 1961). From this model we also derive a set of guidelines for those wish-  
51 ing to use the qualitative interview in their research. We evaluate a set of articles selected  
52 from four of the premier research journals in information systems in the light of our pro-  
53 posed guidelines.

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

## 62 2. State of the art

### 63 2.1. Types of qualitative interviews

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

- 66 (a) *Structured interview*. In a structured interview there is a complete script that is prepared  
67 beforehand. There is no room for improvisation. These types of interviews are  
68 often used in surveys where the interviews are not necessarily conducted by the  
69 researcher.
- 70 (b) *Unstructured or semi-structured interview*. In an unstructured or semi-structured  
71 interview there is an incomplete script. The researcher may have prepared some  
72 questions beforehand, but there is a need for improvisation. The interviewer is the  
73 researcher or is one of a team.
- 74 (c) *Group interview*. In a group interview two or more people are interviewed at once by  
75 one or more interviewers. This type of interview can be structured or unstructured.  
76

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

### 83 2.2. *Problems and pitfalls*

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

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

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

135  
136 In the final analysis, the qualitative interview is a negotiated accomplishment shaped by  
137 the social and cultural context of the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000). When used to its  
138 full potential, the qualitative interview is a very powerful data gathering technique. How-  
139 ever, we believe it is advisable to researchers to be more aware of the potential problems  
140 and pitfalls in its use. The qualitative interview is a powerful tool, but those using it should  
141 have an appreciation of its strengths and weaknesses.

### 142 2.3. *Current practices in information systems research*

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

<sup>1</sup> 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



149 An overview of the articles is shown in Tables 1–4 ordered by journal name, with the  
150 full bibliographic details of each article listed in the references section (Ang & Slaughter,  
151 2001; Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2005; Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003; Ellington & Monte-  
152 iro, 2003; Elmes, Strong, & Volkoff, 2005; Garud & Kumaraswamy, 2005; Geissler, Zink-  
153 han, & Watson, 2001; Hayes & Walsham, 2001; Kirsch, 2004; Koh, Ang, & Straub, 2004;  
154 Lamb & Kling, 2003; Levina, 2005; Mårtensson & Lee, 2004; Nicholson & Sahay, 2004;  
155 Nicholson & Sahay, 2001; Sarker & Lee, 2002; Schwarz, 2002; Sherif & Menon, 2004;  
156 Shim, Shin, & Nottingham, 2002; Silva & Backhouse, 2003; Subramani, 2004; Sussman  
157 & Siegal, 2003). What we were looking for here was a picture of current practices in  
158 reporting about the qualitative research interview. Where data were missing we note it  
159 as “Not reported”. This does not mean that the researchers did not engage with a particu-  
160 lar issue but rather that their reporting of it, for whatever reason, was absent.

161 The first column of each table identifies the article. The second column gives the num-  
162 ber of subjects interviewed along with the number of interviews which may be greater of  
163 course if subjects were interviewed more than once. Column three reports the period cover-  
164 ed by the interviewing.

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

181 The first feature of the tables that stands out is the variety of reporting practices and the  
182 general lack of reporting. The most frequent result we note is “Not reported” where very  
183 little data was given in the article. The most common practices were to report the number  
184 of interviewees and interviews, the type of questioning (mainly semi-structured interviews),  
185 the use of recording technology (if any) and transcripts, anonymity, and the period during  
186 which the interviews were conducted. The least reported issues were the interview model  
187 employed, a description of the interview process including contextual features, and feed-  
188 back offered to the company/interviewees. We could detect little difference in the level  
189 of reporting between the journals.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 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.

### 190 3. The dramaturgical model

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

198 We believe this theory is especially applicable to one particular type of social interac-  
 199 tion: the qualitative interview. The interview is a social interaction. Goffman defines inter-  
 200 action as "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one  
 201 another's immediate physical presence." He defines a performance as "all the activity of a  
 202 given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other  
 203 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 and 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

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

208 The dramaturgical perspective can be usefully applied to the qualitative research inter-  
209 view, as has been suggested by Hermanns (2004) and others (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002;  
210 Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Using a dramaturgical model of the interview, the individual  
211 interview is treated as a drama. The drama has a stage, props, actors, an audience, a script,  
212 an entry and an exit, all of which affect the overall quality of the performance. The quality  
213 of the performance in turn affects the extent to which the interviewee discloses important  
214 information which in turn affects the quality of the data. The various dramaturgical con-  
215 cepts as applied to the qualitative interview are summarized in Table 1. We will discuss  
216 each of these concepts in turn.

### 217 3.1. The drama

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

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

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

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

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

240 The interviewer also has to learn to deal with different types of behaviour from interview-  
241 ees. Interviewees may show off (the subject exaggerates their importance to you or their  
242 company), on the other hand they may be shy (the subject that answers in mono syllables)  
243 or awed (e.g. may perceive a high social gulf between the researcher and themselves). Inter-  
244 viewees may treat the interview as a confessional/cathartic experience (some subjects reveal  
245 sensitive, confidential information, either about themselves or their company), on the other  
246 hand they may be bored (with a disinterested subject, it may be impossible to penetrate their  
247 front) or fatigued (e.g. over-researched subjects). Lastly, interviewees may try to reverse roles  
248 and probe the interviewer for information about others in the organisation. They may also

249 adopt deceptive behaviour and lie (particularly about commercially sensitive matters, or  
250 matters which may concern their personal affairs or performance in the organization).

### 251 3.2. *The stage*

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

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

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

### 274 3.3. *The actor(s)*

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

288 3.4. *The audience*

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

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

301 3.5. *The script*

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

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

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

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

321  
322 However, the researcher should be careful not to over-prepare the script - the qualita-  
323 tive interviewer should always use an incomplete script. Thus interviewing requires open-  
324 ness, flexibility and improvisation. The interviewer should be prepared to explore  
325 interesting lines of research, and should look for surprises. The interviewer should also  
326 look for subjects' differing attitudes: awed, bored, deceiving, fatigued, show off, shy, or  
327 confessing, and respond accordingly. For example, if an interviewee becomes bored, the  
328 interviewer needs to become more animated, perhaps speed up the interview process,  
329 and ask more interesting or provocative questions. If none of these actions works, it is  
330 probably best to finish the interview early out of respect for the interviewee.

331 3.6. *The entry*

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

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

349 3.7. *The exit*

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

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

357 3.8. *The performance*

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

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

368 4. **Recommendations for qualitative interviewing**

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

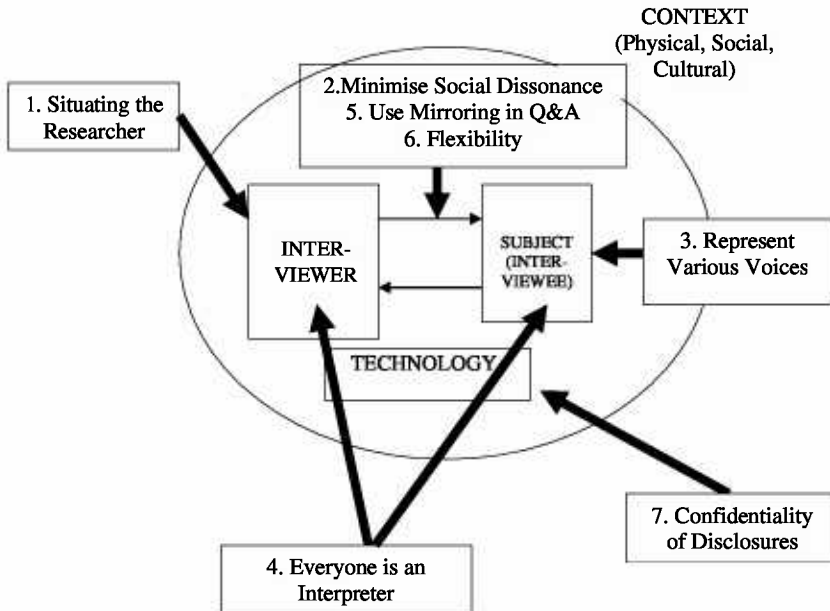


Fig. 1. Guidelines for the qualitative research interview.

371 cally in Fig. 1. The model presupposes that the interview is a drama, and therefore inter-  
 372 viewers should prepare themselves with that in mind. In other words, they should aim for  
 373 an excellent performance.

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

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

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

- 397 3. *Represent various “voices”*. In qualitative research it usually necessary to interview a  
398 variety of people within an organisation. Finding different subjects is called “triangula-  
399 tion of subjects” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 67), where the idea is to try not to force one  
400 voice to emerge. Not all respondents are the same (e.g. some are guides, some are stars,  
401 others are gatekeepers). In this vein it is important to try to avoid elite bias (Miles &  
402 Huberman, 1994).
- 403 4. *Everyone is an interpreter*. This guideline recognises that subjects are creative interpreters  
404 of their worlds as we are of theirs. Interviewing is usually an artificial/rare event for  
405 most subjects. This means that the interview leads to creating and reading one or more  
406 texts (the initial text being the transcript of the interview).
- 407 5. *Use Mirroring in questions and answers*. Mirroring is taking the words and phrases the  
408 subjects use in constructing a subsequent question or comment: mirroring their com-  
409 ments. This allows the researcher to focus on the subjects’ world and uses their lan-  
410 guage rather than imposing yours. The idea is for the interviewee to describe and  
411 explain their world in their own words. It is usually good practice to use open rather  
412 than closed questions, and to focus on common, vividly-held events and stories. It is  
413 also advisable to move from the general to the specific. The role of the interviewer  
414 involves listening, prompting, encouraging, and directing the conversation.
- 415 6. *Flexibility*. Semi-structured and unstructured interviewing uses an incomplete script  
416 and so requires flexibility, improvisation, and openness. The interviewer should be pre-  
417 pared to explore interesting lines of research, and look for surprises. As mentioned ear-  
418 lier, the interviewer should take account of subjects’ differing attitudes (awed, bored,  
419 deceiving, fatigued, show off, shy, confessing) and respond accordingly.
- 420 7. *Confidentiality of disclosures*. It is important for researchers to keep transcripts/records/  
421 and the technology confidential and secure. It may be advisable sometimes to provide  
422 early feedback to subjects and organisations and to check with them about factual mat-  
423 ters if needed.  
424

## 425 5. Re-visiting the interview in IS research

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

432 Guideline 1. *Situating the researcher*. In 13 out of 22 cases, there were no details  
433 reported about the researcher(s) and their relationship to the subjects and  
434 the organization. In other cases the reporting was minimal. The one excep-  
435 tion is the article by Mårtensson and Lee (2004), where there is an extensive  
436 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

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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

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

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

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

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

459 Guideline 5. Use of models (such as mirroring) in questions and answers. In order to  
 460 improve disclosure in the qualitative interview and to reduce the chances  
 461 of imposing the researchers’ world view on the subjects (i.e. by use of lead-  
 462 ing questions) techniques such as the waterfall and mirroring can be used to  
 463 access the subjects’ world in the subjects’ language. We found only two  
 464 examples out of 22 that mentioned this issue. For example, [Shim et al.  
 465 \(2002\)](#) reported on using the hermeneutic circle as a questioning approach.

466 Guideline 6. Flexibility. Here the dramaturgical model talks of scripts. In semi-struct-  
 467 ured interviews the researcher has a minimal script and has to improvise  
 468 most of the time, listening carefully and at the same time constructing the  
 469 next question or prompt based on the subject’s response. The subject gen-  
 470 erally has no script and has to improvise completely; hence the guideline of  
 471 flexibility. In 12 out of the 22 examples there was no reporting on this  
 472 guideline. In the other cases, there was a large variation in what was  
 473 reported from minimal (some use of “off-the-sheet questioning” ([Sherif &  
 474 Menon, 2004](#))) to extensive ([Nicholson & Sahay, 2004](#)).

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

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

482

## 483 6. Evaluating the dramaturgical model

484 We believe that the dramaturgical model may help qualitative IS researchers to address  
485 some of the potential problems and pitfalls of the qualitative interview in IS research. The  
486 model focuses the mind on the aim of the qualitative interview, which is fuller disclosure  
487 and to discover “their world in their own words.” The guidelines encourage openness and  
488 improvisation. They should help to ensure that researchers do not close down the conver-  
489 sation prematurely.

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

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

498 Another weakness of the model is that it potentially “reduces the person to a manipu-  
499 lator behind changeable masks and facades” (Manning, 1992, p. 45). The interviewer  
500 becomes an actor whose sole aim is to manipulate the interviewee into disclosing impor-  
501 tant information.

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

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

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

519 We believe that this revision of our original guidelines goes a long way towards mitigat-  
520 ing the potential downside of the dramaturgical model.

## 521 7. Conclusion

522 The qualitative interview is a powerful research tool. It is an excellent means of gather-  
523 ing data, and has been used extensively in IS research. Until now, however, the qualita-  
524 tive interview has been a largely unexamined craft. In our review of current practices in IS  
525 research, we found a general lack of reporting about the interview process and consider-

526 able variety in those that did report. We find this surprising, given that we chose four of  
527 the best journals in the field. The interview process was taken for granted and treated as  
528 rather unproblematic, even though there are many difficulties, problems and pitfalls for  
529 the unsuspecting.

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

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

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

555  
556 Of course, we readily agree that the value of the dramaturgical model of the interview  
557 should not be over-emphasized. To some extent the qualitative interview is simply a prac-  
558 tical exercise that one learns by doing. We also agree that the dramaturgical model of the  
559 interview has its limitations. We are not suggesting that a person is always hidden behind a  
560 mask or set of masks. Nor are we suggesting that researchers should be cynical manipu-  
561 lators of the interview situation by putting on a good performance. On the contrary, IS  
562 researchers conduct research with real people in real organizations. The qualitative inter-  
563 view is not just a contrived illusion on a stage. Nevertheless, providing that interviewers  
564 respect people and act ethically, we believe that the dramaturgical model of the qualitative  
565 interview is valuable.

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