'Ultimate Introvert' to the 'Touchy-Chummy': Using Simulation to Teach Interviewing Skills.

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Introduction

How can we cultivate students' skills for the real world? To understand human behaviour, in-depth interviewing represents one of the best and most important methods used in the social sciences. Interviews can provide a more nuanced understanding of individual experiences, thoughts, beliefs, values etc. and it is essential for the creation of ethnography. It is not surprising therefore, that in-depth interviewing is a skill often included in research methods education at the undergraduate and graduate levels in sociology and anthropology. However, despite its centrality in qualitative methods use and instruction, very little literature specifically addresses best practices for teaching this important skill. While there is a clear emphasis on a need to practice interviewing before going in the field, there is less specific guidance about how to teach both interview process and the skills needed to acquire high quality data. In short, there is much showing and telling, but less doing. In this paper, we propose an easy way to use simulation to improve student training in this important area. By engaging with Structured Interview Participants (SIPs), students gain valuable real life skills for ethnographic research that translate beyond the classroom.

Background

To determine how teaching to interview is addressed in the classroom, we first reflected on our own courses. Then, we examined publicly available qualitative methods and interview course syllabi from top ranked 2017 anthropology and sociology graduate programs identified by *U.S. News & World Report* and www.topuniversities.com. Although our search was not exhaustive or inclusive of all relevant courses, it nevertheless hints that instructors tend to draw upon a mixture of textbooks, book chapters, articles, lectures, and ethnographies to instruct students in interview methodology. While textbooks often cover the gamut (for example, Rubin and Rubin's 2011 *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* discusses qualitative design, sampling, constructing an interview guide, building rapport, and analysis), other books, book chapters and articles are used to focus on unique aspects of interviewing (e.g. Dexter's 1970 edited text *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*, the Ethnographer's Toolkit Series title *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach* by Schensul and LeCompte from 2013 or Naples 1996 much cited article about insider/outsider roles). Readings that delve specifically into how to interview tend to offer advice (e.g. Hermanowic's 2002 popular *Qualitative Sociology* article 'The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed') and often employ the tactic of demonstrating what not to do or what to do through stories from the field (e.g. Bernard, 2011; Seidman, 2013; Berg, 2004; and Weiss, 1994).

One of the few articles that deals explicitly with teaching students how to interview is Healey-Etten and Sharp (2010). Healey-Etten and Sharp describe twelve handy tips for teaching undergraduate students best practice for conducting an in-depth interview. In addition, they suggest having students interview the instructor who could "…actively perform the various behaviours that interviewees often do that, if not noticed and handled carefully, can result in low-quality data" (Healey-Etten and Sharp, 2010: 160). Thus, Healey-Etten and Sharp's (2010) echo the "learn by doing" advice which is common in pedagogy concerning ethnography and agree with Mills (2011) that the classroom setting can be an effective site of knowledge acquisition. However, the classroom is a dichotomous space which is both "real" and "unreal." On the one hand, it is a safe supportive space where students can experiment with ideas and experiences in the classroom and engage in peer-to-peer learning. However, this kind of space does not represent reality. Nor does the classroom space prepare them for novel experiences or unpredictable situations that arise when existing cultural norms and power structures are upended. To solve this duality of space, we explored the usefulness of simulation and incorporating real-world elements into the classroom environment.

We turned to classroom simulation as a pedagogical strategy, after noting its use for teaching interviewing skills in health professions (e.g. Wallace, 1997) and social work (e.g. Logie, Bogo and Katz, 2015). The use of simulations occurs widely across different educational settings as they can be an effective means of knowledge transfer (Schuck, 2010). Indeed, simulations and simulation games are used in both sociology and anthropology. In sociology, simulations are used to improve understanding of social stratification (Norris, 2013; Prince et al., 2015), gender stratification (Paino et al., 2016; Smith, 2016), secularization (May, 2015), poverty (Steck, Engler, Ligon, Druen and Cosgrove, 2011; Bramesfeld and Good, 2015), research ethics (Kraus, 2008) and to develop the sociological imagination (Simpson and Elias, 2011). In anthropology classroom simulation is used to improve student learning in cultural (Podolefsky, 1985; Rice, 1985a; Kuehling, 2014; Spielvogel and Spielvogel, 2014) archaeological (Rice, 1985c; Smith and Burke, 2005) and physical anthropology (Rice, 1985b). Building on these examples, we use a simulation approach to teach students about the process of conducting in-depth interviews with a variety of different kinds of participants. In the next section we describe how to incorporate simulation effectively into a methods course.

Recommendations and Reasons for Introducing a Performance Aspect Through the Use of a Simulated Interview Participant (SIP)

We developed SIPs at the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at University of Nebraska Omaha, which is a mid-sized metropolitan university populated with a high percentage of first generation, military, and/or non-traditional students. We have used SIPs in a small-sized seminar (8-12 students) comprised mostly of advanced undergraduate and graduate students from diverse social science fields (anthropology, sociology, psychology, criminal justice, communication and urban studies). While we have not tried SIPs out in larger classes, in courses that contain lower-level undergraduates, or at universities with different student-body composition, it is likely that SIPs could be used effectively in these learning environments as well.

The authors (a sociologist and an anthropologist who are both ethnographers) each teach qualitative methods to undergraduate and graduate students who study both disciplines. In our classes, students conduct brief semi-structured interviews for their individual research projects. Like other research skills, it is important for students to have practice before they actually begin to collect data. When students practiced their interview guide inside the classroom setting, they learned to manage time and cover all the questions in an interview schedule. However, they were not really challenging each other. At first, we believed it was because they wanted to be kind to their classmates. However, digging a bit deeper we realized that they could not be hard on each other because they did not really know how. That is, they were simply too inexperienced to play the role of a challenging interviewee.

Their classroom hesitancy concerned us given the larger patterns present in contemporary U.S. society. There has been a marked rise of anti-intellectualism and backlash against the academy, and hostility toward scientific methods and knowledge. This can be coupled with wariness from the community, who may wonder if they will be harmed or humiliated through research participation. Globalization and social media increases awareness of past and present historical injustices. Additionally, budding interviewer errors and participant misunderstandings could be rapidly broadcast via social media on the world stage. As social scientists, we teach our students to be ethical, protective of our participants' well-being, and to convey their voice. Willen, Mulligan and Castaneda (2011) caution that we need new ways of listening to diverse voices, especially those who feel powerless in some way, and be vigilant against confirmation bias:

> If we hope to understand the dynamics of both exclusion and connection, or contribute meaningfully to public and policy conversations, then we need to listen to a wider range of informants than usual. We also need to listen without assuming that we already understand actors' motivations, personal histories, or political investments. Overall, perhaps we would do better to think of our work as 'engaged listening,' rather than 'giving voice (2011:343).

Teaching in the current environment gives pause, as we contemplate the ramifications to the academy and educational institution if students make inadvertent mistakes as they engage with diverse communities. These pressures are juxtaposed with concerns about preparing our students for an uncertain employment market, and a climate where a degree is viewed as a commodity (Narotzky, 2016). It is more important than ever, that we prepare students thoroughly for the uncertain world they face, and create a classroom environment to strengthen their interviewing skills.

To dispel student hesitancy, we decided to take a page from health professions and social work education and create simulations that portray some common problems we have each experienced as working qualitative
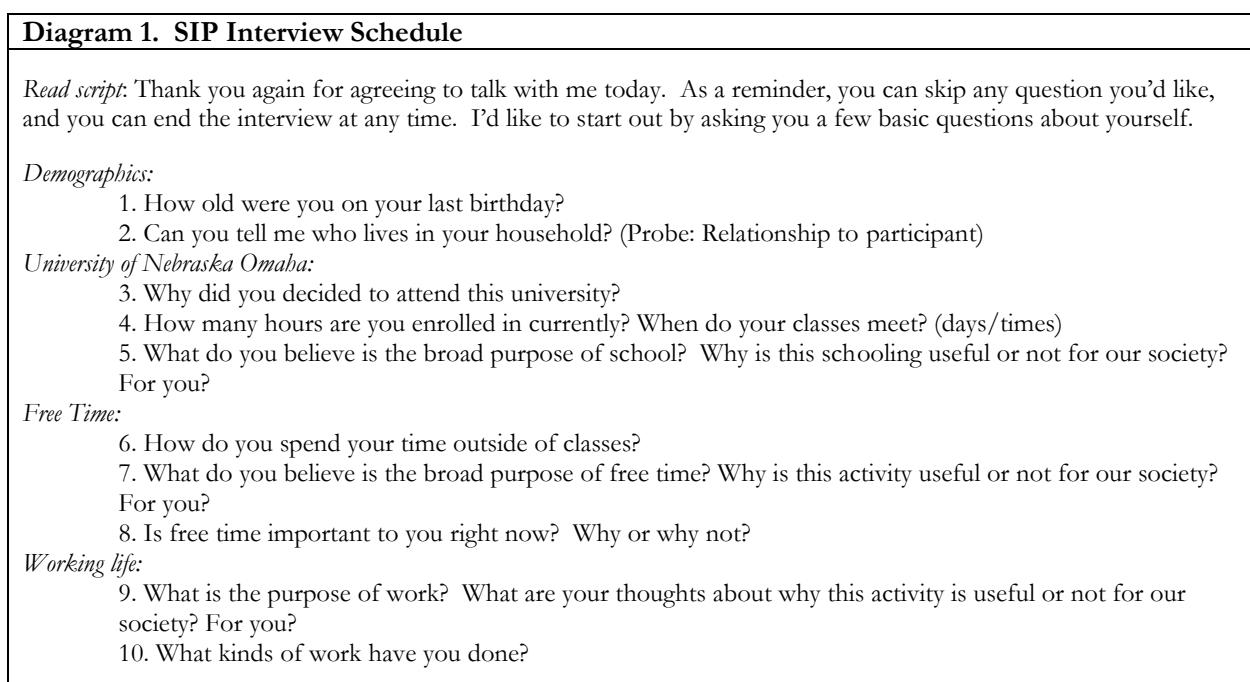
researchers in the United States. We started with exchanging stories about our most difficult interviewees, how we handled the situation at the time, and what we might do differently now. We collaboratively wrote brief sketches of the "best" examples to try in class and then put the examples into action. Each semester one of us taught the class, beginning in fall 2013, we brainstormed about new possibilities and refined older descriptions. Over time, we have developed 12 Simulated Interview Participants or SIPs.

1. ***Ultimate Introvert:*** This is a person who agrees to the interview, but it very shy and soft-spoken. They rarely make eye contact, fidget with whatever they have: hair, clothing, watch band etc. to avoid looking at the interviewer. The Ultimate Introvert has closed body language and they get smaller, quieter and more visibly closed-off as the interview goes on. They may let a long pause occur before they answer and may mumble a response or provide ambiguous noncommittal answers.

2. ***Backtracker:*** This is a person who provides long rambling answers to questions that involve barely connected topics. As they talk, it should become clear to the interviewer that the information they provide in one answer often contradicts the answer to a previous question. They backtrack and add additional information continually to previous interview questions.

3. ***Distracted:*** This person agreed to the interview previously and planned to do it. However, on the day of the interview they have an event (lost keys or phone, waiting for important call/text/email) that leaves them entirely distracted. They are not focusing on what the interviewer is saying but does not necessarily want to admit it. So, their demeanour and answers appear scattered and disorganized. They may keep looking at their phone, or keep checking their pockets. It is not impatience they project, it is distraction. NOTE: In some situations, it has taken a long time to get the interview scheduled, so the interviewer must persevere.

4. ***Echo and Repeat:*** This person is not entirely comfortable with the interview, possibly because they worry about not knowing much about the subject, but they agreed anyway. So, when the interviewer asks a question, they will echo it back to them, possibly multiple times as they try to figure out how to answer. They may also repeat or fixate on a particular word included in the interviewer's questions. They are concerned about answering in a way that shows they are knowledgeable or concerned that their answers will be a source of embarrassment. NOTE: Repeating and fixating can be very distracting to the interviewer—it affects focus.

5. ***Hostile & Paranoid:*** This person agreed to do the interview under duress. They are impatient and defensive, and this results in hostile and occasionally paranoid answers. This person should challenge the interviewer about the purpose of the study initially, and then relent with enough detail. They should challenge questions in a random way with "Why do you want to know?" "How is this information being used?" "Did [insert someone's name here] put you up to this?" As the interview goes forward their anger should increase, and they may demand to see the recording device, any study paperwork, and/or ask about a hidden camera. NOTE: One manifestation could be suffering a personal loss of status and believing that everyone is talking about it.

6. ***The Cryer:*** This person has suffered a loss shortly before the interview that is significant to them, but not recognized as a significant loss by the wider culture. Examples could be the death of a pet, the loss of a sports team in a tournament, no invite to a social event in their social circle. The Cryer knowingly displays immature behaviour. They are sad and easily moved to tears and anything in the interview could remind them of their loss and set them off. As the interview proceeds, they could dab tears or appear to be visibly holding them back—eventually breaking down briefly. Even as the interviewer may reassure them or tries to end the interview, the thought that they cannot even get this done causes a new wave of sorrow.

7. ***Correcto Reflecto:*** This person is insecure, so they look to the interviewer for reassurance and confirmation throughout the interview. They should frequently add to any answer: "Is that right?" "Is my answer okay?" "Is that what you need?" "Is that how other people answer the question?" In addition, they should try to co-opt the interviewer in order to gain reassurance. This could include asking "How would YOU answer the question?" And/or "What would you say?"

8. ***Shock and Gone***: This person behaves in a norm violating manner that feels vaguely threatening to the interviewer. Norm violations could include leaving the room while talking and then re-entering the room as they finish answering the interviewer's question—and becoming hostile if asked to repeat. Other norms violations could include answering questions by putting their face too close to the interviewer, odd gaze or body movements, and including "odd, vaguely threatening" information in answers to questions without actually stating a threat. Shock and Gone creates an ambiguous and uncomfortable situation.

9. ***Oversharer***: This person is purposeful in their oversharing and does so because if the interviewer asks a question, then they need to understand the *ENTIRE* context. For them, *IT IS* part of the answer. They are excited to share what they consider important or essential information. Oversharers provide information in an amount and manner which causes the interviewer to become entirely lost regarding the purpose of the question. It is almost a stream of consciousness triggered by the initial question.

10. ***The You Know***: This person wants to identify with the interviewer in a constructive manner, and they do so by assuming shared knowledge. This manifests in answers like "you know what I'm talking about" or "you know how it is" or "you know what I mean" instead of providing an answer with content. The person will resist providing actual content until explicitly asked by the interviewer. They tend to revert to their previous behaviour after a few minutes.

11. ***Dr. Clipboard***: This person feels threatened and to mask their insecurity they behave like the interviewer. They engage in mirroring behaviour with the interviewer and may bring their own clipboard or notebook and take notes as props to complete the mirror image. They frequently stop the interview to explain why the question or study is flawed or useless. They may try to turn the tables and are condescending in attitude. Their focus on discussing the research process results in answers lacking content and little useable data (which is their intent).

12. ***Touchy-Chummy:*** This person sits too close and may repeatedly touch the interviewer in a non-sexual manner (e.g. touching a hand or lower arm). This comes from being too friendly, rather than flirtatious. It is a bit ambiguous. At minimum, this person wants to befriend the interviewer and sees the interview as an opportunity to make that happen.

Classroom Procedure:

The authors both attend the SIP session(s). Students use a brief 10 question interview schedule on balancing work, leisure, and educational demands at our institution for the exercise (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1. SIP Interview Schedule

Read script: Thank you again for agreeing to talk with me today. As a reminder, you can skip any question you'd like, and you can end the interview at any time. I'd like to start out by asking you a few basic questions about yourself.

Demographics:
        1. How old were you on your last birthday?
        2. Can you tell me who lives in your household? (Probe: Relationship to participant)
University of Nebraska Omaha:
        3. Why did you decided to attend this university?
        4. How many hours are you enrolled in currently? When do your classes meet? (days/times)
        5. What do you believe is the broad purpose of school? Why is this schooling useful or not for our society?
        For you?
Free Time:
        6. How do you spend your time outside of classes?
        7. What do you believe is the broad purpose of free time? Why is this activity useful or not for our society?
        For you?
        8. Is free time important to you right now? Why or why not?
Working life:
        9. What is the purpose of work? What are your thoughts about why this activity is useful or not for our
        society? For you?
        10. What kinds of work have you done?

Students learn that they will each take a turn interviewing one of us in front of the class. We ask all students to watch and listen and be prepared to discuss what happens during interviewing. We then place two chairs facing each other at the front of the room. Students come up one at a time and the authors take turns performing a SIP as the student works through the interview questions on their sheet.

Interviews between the SIP and student take 5-10 minutes and could occur during a single class period. After a student has finishing interviewing a SIP, we write the name of the SIP dilemma on the board before progressing to the next so that the class can keep track of the scenarios as they progress. Depending on class dynamics and time limitations, a full debriefing and class discussion about SIPs can either happen immediately after each SIP or once all SIP scenarios are complete. During discussion, we ask the class what worked and what did not in the interview process and provide information on ways to handle the situation created in the SIP. For example, in *Dr. Clipboard* SIP, we walk through different approaches that could be used: 1) Students could ask the interviewee to save their criticisms until the end of the interview, but this tactic could result in the interviewee becoming increasingly frustrated and hostile, 2) work through each of the critiques together as they occur, with the awareness that this could quickly become tedious and time consuming, or 3) once a pattern of critique emerges, the student could thank the interviewee for their comments and end the interview early, telling the SIP that interview guide revisions are needed.

The twelve SIPs can be distilled into two broad themes concerning threats to the integrity of a project. The first theme is threat to data quality. This includes situations where the interviewee provides low quality data or engages in distracting behaviour adversely impacting the interviewer's ability to maintain focus. SIPs which fall into this category include: *Ultimate Introvert, Oversharer, The You Know, Backtracker, Distracted, Echo and Repeat*, and *Correcto-Reflecto.*

Students quickly grasp that there may not be one right answer to eliciting quality data in in-depth interviews, but careful practice can prepare one to adapt productively to diverse participants and situations. However, just as important is that SIPs are designed to help students learn how to identify a non-productive situation and when (and how) to end the interview. We touch on various reasons participants might agree to an interview when actually reluctant to do so—and that this reluctance can emerge in the low-quality answers they provide. After training students with SIPs, we are more confident as instructors that our students will maintain professional composure as they interact with members of diverse communities. One student's reflections echoed this point:

> [SIPs were] useful because real-life interviews are just as unpredictable. Reflecting on each scenario and providing feedback were good tools for teaching interviewing skills. It was valuable to learn appropriate probes, ways to redirect, and what types of interviews might be counter-productive. (From student comments to authors).

The second SIP theme represents threats to the interviewer or interview participant. This includes situations where the interviewer encounters ambiguous or clear-cut threats to their safety and well-being or where similar concerns arise for the interview participant. These scenarios include: *Touchy-Chummy, Dr. Clipboard, Shock and Gone, The Cryer*, and *Hostile & Paranoid.*

SIPs thus provide an opportunity to discuss issues of safety and security when engaged in in-depth interviewing in a local community setting. Textbooks often discuss safety and security matters in the context of scheduling and location but fall short on describing ways to gracefully exit an uncomfortable or unsafe situation. Teaching with SIPs provides a natural opening to discuss "trusting your gut" and helping students realize that no data is worth endangering their safety.

Our SIPs build upon and expand Healey-Etten and Sharp's (2010) interviewing tips in two ways. First, while SIPs could teach students about potential problems with their question design and ordering, we feel that it is better to separate these two activities, since they fine-tune different skill sets. Because SIPs only address rapport and the interview process, class discussions are quite focused which allows for more nuanced discussion. By anchoring the interview guide so that it is uniform amongst all the SIPs, discussion does not drift off into interview guide construction issues. Second, we add nine scenarios not addressed by Healey-Etten & Sharp (2010) with some overlap in *The You Know, Ultimate Introvert,* and *Shock & Gone* SIPs as they relate to building rapport and interview process. We further divide our SIPs into two categories which deal with rapport. The first, leads to threats to data quality and includes *Ultimate Introvert, The You Know, Backtracker, Distracted, Echo and Repeat,*

Correct-Reflecto, and *Oversharer*. The second rapport and process category addresses potential threats to interviewer or participant. These SIPs are *Shock & Gone*, *Hostile & Paranoid*, *The Cryer*, *Dr. Clipboard*, and *Touchy-Chummy*.

Conclusion

Our SIP activity contributes to the pedagogical literature in several ways. First, although the SIP performer is the class instructor, students quickly engage with the persona portrayed. This contributes to a more authentic tone in the practice interview. As one student remarked: "I think that the closer the approximation to the so-called 'real world' a classroom experience is, the more informative it tends to be.... [SIPs were] convincing, which made it instructive."

Several of our SIPs involve inverted power dynamics (*Dr. Clipboard*), internalized oppression (*Ultimate Introvert*, *Correcto-Reflecto*), or efforts to seek approval from those in power (*The You Know*). The simulation environment provides the opportunity for us to teach students how to recognize these dynamics on the spot, and disrupt the pattern. This enables more valid data to be collected and contributes in a minor way toward dismantling power structures (Freire, 1970).

Additionally, SIPs allow students to refine their interview skills in a learning environment where failure is the norm. For students who are over-confident about their ability to elicit information in an interview, they quickly learn through the SIPs that interviews require constant vigilance and flexibility. Even the most mundane of topics may result in unexpected conversations and difficulty maintaining rapport. For example, one of our graduate students who had the *Backtracker* SIP told us:

> The experience was very... illuminating in that it demonstrated a big barrier I needed to overcome if I wanted to be a proficient interviewer, especially with older adults. I was brought up to respect elders to the extent that I was corrected if I attempted to interrupt an older person. I trained myself to just let them ramble, as anything less was "impolite". The simulation helped me recognize the need to "get over it", and to have phrases or re-directs at the ready to nudge participants back on track, without limiting their ability to tell me what they think I need to know. (From student comments to authors).

For students fearful of interviewing, role-playing and discussion of strategies helps them to feel more prepared and confident. One student reflected "The whole experience was out of the ordinary which made it fun, memorable and granted the opportunity to evoke some innate tools from my interview toolkit I didn't know I possessed." Through SIPs, students may feel as though their worst imagined interview experience is behind them and things can only improve going forward. They also viscerally learn that ethnographic skills are embodied. Discomfort, uncertainty, and fear can be a normal part of interviewing.

Finally, the SIP concept allows for flexibility given the needs of a particular class or context. The SIPs included in this article reflect our local context in Omaha, Nebraska. However, they can be localized and altered to reflect particular communities for specific research projects. As presented here, we do not include information on specific identifying demographic factors in the SIPs, but individual instructors could add these dimensions as needed for curricular requirements. Ideally, instructors could develop and share SIPs across place and context so that the next generation of interviewers is more broadly trained.

While we use SIPs to teach interview methodology, similar simulations could be developed which cultivate ethnographic sensitivities (McGranahan, 2014). Technology represents another pathway to using simulation and SIPs, as its incorporation into an augmented reality environment in the future could easily occur. In an interdisciplinary environment, theatre faculty could perform SIPs or even advanced theatre students as a form of peer learning between disciplines. SIPs are a flexible pedagogical technique that strengthens qualitative skills and encourages methodological adaptability in an uncertain world.

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