Chapter 1

The Need for a New Perspective on Interviewing

ABSTRACT

Interviews are defined as communicative exchanges whereby an interviewer asks questions and an interviewee answers them. The purpose of this chapter is threefold: to provide a brief description of the received understanding of research interviews, interview protocols, and interview practices. Interviewing in general is also described. It is argued that the basis of interviewing is an informational theory of communication deficit. The suitability of applying this theory to interviewing is critiqued. The critique replaces information theory with a specific functional theory of communication. The result is a wider view on interviewing as a collection of completed acts of communication (texts), accounting for the interviewing process and its artifacts (audiovisual records, transcripts) as well as related texts associated with the ethical, legal, and managerial conditions and requirements under which it occurs.

INTRODUCTION

The Background section of this chapter provides a summary of some important concepts concerning interviews and interview protocols generally, and research interviews in particular. It is argued that what is known about interviewing is based, for the most part, on an informational perspective developed in Shannon’s (1948) A Mathematical Theory of Communication. This theory informs much of social science research and so it is understandable that it
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appears to offer a kind of scientific rigor at the same time as appearing to be applicable to human communication.

The main focus of the chapter is identifying a “new approach” to interviews, and interviewing, advocated in the remainder of the chapter. The alternative proposed here is to consider “Interviews as Communication” by employing a functional theory of communication, one that emphasizes how language is used in social settings. Two examples of failed interviews provide some insights into the motivations for adopting a new theoretical perspective to interviews and interviewing by revealing the complex nature of context in relation to interviewing practices. Note that informational approaches to interviewing preclude the possibility of context playing any role in the developing interview. The chapter also lays the foundations for a communicative approach to interviewing practices based on the work of Halliday (1985a, 1985b) called Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

BACKGROUND

Interviews and Interview Protocols

Interviews

Usually interviews involve a single interviewee and interviewer and are referred to as one-on-one interviews, but it is not uncommon in business contexts to have one interviewer and several interviewees. These are static interviews often conducted across a table as a kind of dialogue. Interviews where sets of topics, and specific questions within each topic, are sequenced in a specific order, are referred to as structured interviews. This ordering of topics and questions is typically mandated using an interview protocol that provides a “plan of action” for the interview (more on this later).

It is also possible to conduct unstructured interviews in which question order is determined by references to participants, objects and phenomena. For example, an interviewer uses a reference to the existence of a given manager, mentioned in an interviewee’s answer, to ask a follow-up question about the role responsibilities of that manager. As the questions depend on the answers, the question and answer ordering cannot necessarily be determined in advance. An interview protocol can still be used to ensure that the topics presumed
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