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## When Research Interviews are More Therapeutic Than Therapy Interviews

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## When Research Interviews are More Therapeutic Than Therapy Interviews

### Abstract

This brief report presents some preliminary results of part of a study currently being conducted (Gale, 1992, May). The study is a qualitative analysis of a couple's and therapist's perspective of meaningful moments in therapy using Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) (Elliott, 1986). The methodology of this study involved the collaborators (aka: subjects) in a manner that was self-reflexive and recursive (see Steier, in press). The impact of the study was such that the research interviews themselves were reported to have greater therapeutic impact than the therapy. Following eight sessions of marital therapy, the couple reported that therapy was not helpful, and they were together only because of the children. Following the second IPR interview, which was post-therapy, the couple reported that the interview was very useful and therapeutic. This seemed to occur, in part, from three different factors. These factors include: the relationship of the couple to the researcher; the contextualization of the research talk; and clarifying procedures used by the interviewer.

### Keywords

qualitative research

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### Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the efforts and assistance of Mark Odell, Paul Gallant, Ph.D., Jennie Manders, Chandra Nagiereddy and Cheryl Williams in their work on the study.

# When Research Interviews are More Therapeutic Than Therapy Interviews

by Jerry Gale

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This brief report presents some preliminary results of part of a study currently being conducted (Gale, 1992, May). The study is a qualitative analysis of a couple's and therapist's perspective of meaningful moments in therapy using Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) (Elliott, 1986). The methodology of this study involved the collaborators (aka: subjects) in a manner that was self-reflexive and recursive (see Steier, in press). The impact of the study was such that the research interviews themselves were reported to have greater therapeutic impact than the therapy. Following eight sessions of marital therapy, the couple reported that therapy was not helpful, and they were together only because of the children. Following the second IPR interview, which was post-therapy, the couple reported that the interview was very useful and therapeutic. This seemed to occur, in part, from three different factors. These factors include: the relationship of the couple to the researcher; the contextualization of the research talk; and clarifying procedures used by the interviewer.

## Methodology and Procedures

A couple seeking therapy at the University MFT Clinic was elicited to participate in the study. Reimbursement was offered for each IPR interview. The couple was interviewed 48 hours following their first marital therapy session. At this time, the IPR interviewer and couple watched the video of their therapy session. The husband and wife were told that during this time, either one of them could stop the tape when he or she identified a moment as meaningful, either in a positive or negative manner, to therapy. At that point, both the husband and wife would describe that event and rate it on a scale of 1 to 5 for him/herself, as well as how he/she thought the other person perceived it (1 being very negative, 3 being neutral and 5 being very positive). When they finished writing down their comments, they were then interviewed together in order to further elaborate on that event and the implications of that event to their therapy. When the discussion was finished, they would again observe the video until the next moment was identified.

An IPR interview was conducted with the therapist 72 hours after the session. A similar procedure as above was followed, with the therapist identifying moments and rating them, and then being interviewed. Four months after completion of therapy, the couple again were interviewed. At this time the IPR interviewer questioned them about their experience of therapy and their thoughts on the first IPR interview. Additionally, at this time, the couple was given a summary of the first session and a summary of first IPR interview with them. A discussion then followed with the couple sharing their comments on the reports. The couple identified eight meaningful moments in their therapy session, while the therapist identified six moments from the first session.

## **Various Factors that Contributed to the Research Talk Being Therapeutic**

In presenting the following factors that seemed to have some impact on the therapeutic effectiveness of the research activity, it is important to mention that these factors are interactive. They are presented in no particular order, as each has a recursive bearing on the others.

### **Research Relationship**

It appears that the relationship of the couple (Dan and Sally) was different to the researcher than to the therapist. Both Dan and Sally looked to the therapist to direct them in the process of therapy. There was a hierarchical arrangement where they each wanted the therapist to be an "objective referee" of their issues. The therapist was seen as someone who would fix things.

In the IPR interviews there was a different relationship and a different agenda. The agenda of the interviewer was not to fix problems, but to better understand each person's perspective. There was a rotating triadic relationship with the interviewer. That is, by the nature of the questions asked, both Dan and Sally became the expert of their own phenomenological perspective. There were not questions of blame or truthfulness, but rather, a probing quest or curiosity (see Heath, 1992) of understanding each person's perspective of the issues. The meta-message of relationship between Dan and Sally could be different in the IPR interviews. Each person could have the acknowledged opportunity of being the holder of knowledge. This collaborative relationship was further highlighted, when during the second IPR interview, the report of the first IPR interview was shared with Dan and Sally. The researcher asked Dan and Sally to improve on the document, in that they had the authority from which to know best what each understood.

### **Context Distinction Framed by the Interviewer**

In the first IPR interview, the interviewer requested that the couple not "do therapy" during the interview. The project task for them was to look at their first session and share their thoughts and feelings about the session, and not to deal with any of these issues. If issues arose during the interview, they were told they could talk about it with their therapist later. The context of the IPR interview was constrained to limit certain types of talk and interactions. That this was understood by the couple can be noted by the times both Dan and Sally would stop what they were saying and comment that they were "getting into therapy." At those self-reflexive times, they would then change the intensity or focus of their comments. This also occurred in the second IPR interview, where again Sally and Dan constrained their talk in a particular manner.

This was significant in that Dan noted that during therapy, whenever he and Sally argued, he felt discouraged about their progress. During the IPR interview, there was a constraining mechanism set up such that points of disagreement could be examined without Sally and Dan needing to argue about who was right. Both Sally and Dan did comment that they thought that the playback element of the interviews was very helpful. It is likely that the ability to watch themselves, without having to defend their position, or try to fix it, allowed them to gain flexibility in viewing the other's position. In a sense, this seemed to help them achieve multiple descriptions of their story.

## **The Interviewer's Analogies**

Several times in the first interview, and even more times in the second IPR interview, the interviewer would offer analogies to better describe Dan and Sally's situations. While on one hand, these might be seen as therapeutic reframes or therapeutic metaphors, they were presented not to change the couple, but to clarify understanding. Dan and Sally even participated in helping to clarify the analogies to better describe their situation. This seemed to lead to a collaborative telling of their story, that allowed for new chapters or punctuations to emerge. In a sense, the unsaid of the therapy session could be explored and rewritten through the collaborative effort of developing new descriptions (see Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; and de Shazer, 1991).

## **Implications**

The benefit of the IPR interviews can be noted in several ways. During the interviews, both Dan and Sally were able to laugh at their own interactions, they both acknowledged new appreciations and responsibilities for their behaviors, and Dan even considered returning to therapy. Additionally, when the interviewer was set to pay them for their time in doing the interview (which lasted about 90 minutes), Dan and Sally refused to be paid and Dan stated, "you don't need to be worrying about it. I think we should be paying you. We got something out of this."

It is important to add that doing these IPR interviews was more than simply adding an activity to therapy to help with stuck cases. If the research element is framed as still being therapy, the dynamics are very different. Elements of relationship, context delineation and the interviewer's talk need to be considered. The interviewer has his/her own agenda, and this agenda does impact the development of the talk. Additionally, the interviewer's communication skills will also influence the weave of the talk. Research is not neutral or non-interactive. It is necessary to consider how one presents the ideas and creates the context between the different settings. It should also be added that the data from this study is still being analyzed and the results are preliminary. The nature of the project itself has been that each stage has influenced the next level of study. Another follow-up interview with the couple will be conducted as well as interviewing the therapist.

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### Author Note

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