

# **Interviewing in Depth: The Interactive-Relational Approach**

**John T. Chirban, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks California, 1996**

## **I Identifying the Interactive-Relational Approach**

Chirban bases his interactive-relational approach on many years of interviewing famous and not so famous people, often in long series of in-depth interviews. His approach emphasizes how the interviewer gains a deeper understanding of the interviewee through self-awareness, authenticity, attunement, personal characteristics and the forming of a new relationship. To achieve this the interviewer should possess self-awareness and have access to and knowledge of his or her own feelings and disposition, needs, motives and perspectives. The interviewer needs to recognize his own values and beliefs but maintain a certain degree of openness. The interviewer monitors authenticity through his attentiveness to roles, professionalism and concern for genuine communication. With attunement, Chirban means attending and extending to the interviewee while maintaining professional boundaries. Personal characteristics should be incorporated into the interview by recognizing how they can enhance, resonate and affect the interviewee. The interviewer also supports actively the new relationship and the new 'shared space' between the interviewer and interviewee. The interactive-relational approach is based on interaction of the interviewer and interviewee. They communicate on the basis of what is shared in their relationship. The interaction that is so important includes five standard aspects: The posturing of the interviewer and interviewee determines the course of an interview. The level of engagement describes the contact permitted in an interaction. There must also be collaboration toward a balance of power, and this power balance may affect the quality of the interaction. An interaction can be enhanced with the stance of the interviewer, his monitoring and managing transference and counter transference. And finally, the way in which participants move from their own point of view toward a shared perspective establishes his or her new stance towards a new relationship. This relationship includes professional and personal alliance, reciprocal engagement and a certain person orientation and quality of attunement to each other. Things like common reference points, shared interests or mutual confirmation can be 'potentials for action': opportunities in an interview to enhance the communication and connectedness. Potentials for action strengthen the relationship and the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The more one seizes these opportunities, the deeper the relationship can develop. A deepening of an interview is likely to occur when the participants try to share, appreciate and experience each other's characteristics.

## **Components of the Interactive-Relational Approach (Adapted from Chirban 1996, p. 14-16)**

- The interviewer understands what his position means and has clarity about his purpose through his interactive-relational way of thinking
- The interviewer implements personal attributes and values that he or she brings to the interview and avoids masking personal views.
- Collaboration occurs in the interaction and the relationship. The interviewee can model the interviewer's open manner and a collaboration may develop.
- The interactive-relational interview concentrates on the present moment, not on past events.
- Potentials for action, opportunities to move towards a shared experience, can be seized to create a new relationship and gain greater understanding.
- The energizing pulse is the moment that follows potential for action and draws the participants into the new relationship. Enhancement of this connectedness is crucial in the interactive-relational approach.

## **II Placing the Interactive-Relational Approach in Context**

In the interactive-relational approach the growing interaction and relationship between interviewer and interviewee is very important. This is stimulated by mutual engagement. The interactive-relational approach also assumes that the interviewer employs effective listening skills. The exchange should be authentic and truly based on personal characteristics and qualities. Empathy should be genuine. When the interviewer assumes a false role, he or she loses the important 'personhood'. The interactive-relational approach does however not encourage self-disclosure, but rather uses self-awareness, authenticity and attunement. The interactive-relational approach requires that the interviewer identifies his personal qualities and considers how he may share these in the relationship with the interviewee. In the final analysis of the interview material it will be crucial to recognize and acknowledge the designer of the interview, so that the personal factors don't stay hidden. The interactive-relational approach also assumes that the interviewer employs effective listening skills.

## **III Creating the Interactive-Relational Interview**

Through his own personal characteristics and through anecdotes about the interviews that he has done, Chirban demonstrates the importance of identifying and incorporating personal characteristics to obtain a more authentic interaction. He discusses the relevance of characteristics like integrity, motivation, trust, openness, empathy, insight, truth, respect and faith. The book also contains a self-evaluation test that helps to identify your qualities that you might use in the interactive-relational approach.

An interactive-relational approach progresses in four stages. Stage 1 is the initial contact, where purpose, goals and expectations are introduced and the interviewer engages in interactive-relational thinking. Stage 2 is the first encounter, where the interviewer attempts to engage the interviewee into participating through potential for action. Stage 3 is the engagement where interaction evolves and the energizing pulse confirms the realization of the potential for action. Stage 4 is the new space, where there is a new relationship and the in-depth interview is obtained.

## **IV Posturing for the Interview and Conducting the Interviewing**

The interaction of the interviewer is basically formed through his posture. Chirban suggests different ways to establish this posture, the interaction and the exchange, and shows the different ways in which they can influence the result of the interview. In the interactive-relational way the interviewer and interviewee leave the comfort of their own world views to think through the other's perspective. The interactive-relational model is based on the dynamic model of posturing. Here the topic that is discussed by interviewer and interviewee is separated from the communication between them. The interactive-relational model goes further by drawing on the participants who serve as resources for identification, revelation and understanding, thereby deepening the relationship. It emphasises the importance of the growing interaction and relationship through mutual sharing. An exchange of thoughts, beliefs and emotions creates a "new space" and through their relationship interviewer and interviewee gain understanding.