Reflective Interviewing—Increasing Social Impact through Research

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Abstract

Scholars are increasingly calling for research that “makes a difference” through theoretical, practical, societal, and educational impacts. Recognizing that academic research lags behind practitioners’ issues and that most academic writing is inaccessible to those who need the knowledge, some scholars are calling for embedding social impact in the research process itself. We argue that participant reflection can increase social impact by changing the way individuals think, behave, and perform. Research interviews can be interventionist with the potential to facilitate participant reflection; however, the current literature on the topic is fragmented. We combine this fragmented literature with discussions of social impact and interview techniques to propose interview principles to facilitate participant reflection toward social impact. We hope to stimulate researchers across a broad range of disciplines to think more intentionally about the impactful role of a common qualitative methodological tool, interviews, to support research participants and engage in socially meaningful research.

Keywords

impact, research impact, social impact, interviews, reflection

Introduction

The world is facing an increasing number of grand challenges, problems that are complex, uncertain, and evaluative (Ferraro et al., 2015). Moreover, these challenges are compounding, making each new crisis more challenging (Wickert et al., 2020). The latest challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic, expanded political polarization, exposed economic fragilities, and deepened social inequities (Blundell et al., 2020; Kim & Bostwick, 2020). These developments have made the preoccupation with social usefulness (Willmott, 2012) and the impact of research (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010; Pettigrew, 2011; Wickert et al., 2020) urgent and prominent.

Wickert and colleagues (2020) define impactful research as “that which influences through multifaceted forms and channels how organizations and individuals think, behave, or perform” (p. 2). They argue that research impact can take five forms: scholarly, practical, societal, policy, and educational, and advocate for problem-driven research to address issues facing practitioners and policymakers. We follow this tradition to move away from typical and limited conceptions of social impact in research.

Scholars typically conceive of impact as a process of translation and communication of research findings to those that can apply the knowledge (knowledge mobilization). The implicit assumption is that by the end of the research, individuals and organizations will be exposed to new knowledge and will think, behave, and perform differently. Recognizing that academic research moves slowly and that most academic writing is inaccessible to those who need the knowledge, scholars are increasingly calling for embedding social impact in the research process itself (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Frey, 2009; Rossetto, 2014) in addition to the dissemination of results.

Action research in management and other participatory research approaches in the broader social sciences are problem-focused and aim to increase social impact throughout the research process. Action research involves the pursuit of practical solutions to the problem facing an organization or community (Lusché & Lewis, 2008; McNiff, 2017). Participatory research approaches—including community-based participatory research

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and participatory action research—encompass communities and academics working together to define a problem, learn how to study it, design the research, analyze the outcomes, and design and execute actions that address injustices and redress social inequalities (Schubotz, 2019). These approaches not only generate impact post-research by mobilizing knowledge but they also impact research participants by involving them directly in problem-solving. To broaden the scope of the social impact at the individual level, we explore the role of interviews as a tool for intervention.

Qualitative researchers recognize that interviewers influence the process and the content of interview data (e.g., Josselson, 2013). Feminist researchers, for example, have stressed the need for a fuller understanding of the researcher, the researched (participants), and the research context (e.g., Chase, 2003). All interviews involve social relations and negotiations of power. Therefore, the knowledge gained from interviews is both contextual and interpersonal. Thus, current theorizing of interview research rejects the notion that interviews are neutral influences the participants’ sensemaking process (Cunliffe, 2002), create self-reflection opportunities in which new understandings are made possible (Way et al., 2015), may have therapeutic effects (Nelson et al., 2013; Rossetto, 2014), and encourage reflexivity (Cassell et al., 2020). Thus, through their ability to foster reflection, interviews can be interventional and support participants’ development of new understandings.

There is growing recognition that reflection has the potential to increase learning and performance and build individuals’ confidence in their ability to achieve a goal (Di Stefano et al., 2014). Reflection acts as a bridge between experience and learning (Gray, 2007) and supports individuals in revisiting assumptions (Kayes, 2002) and identifying new paths forward. Thus, reflection can be a powerful tool for social impact as it allows research participants the opportunity to learn, revisit assumptions, make sense of their problems, and find new solutions. This paper contributes to the overall discussion toward increasing social impact in research, by highlighting the potential of interviews, a common qualitative methodological tool, for facilitating participant reflection and changing the way individuals think, behave, and perform, and in turn, shaping their social lives and worlds.

To achieve this, we combine insights from the literature on interview-based research and scholarly discussions of reflective practice to identify tools and techniques to facilitate participants’ reflection during interviews to incorporate social impact throughout the research process from data collection to end results. We start by providing an overview of the highly fragmented literature on interviews as an intervention tool. We then provide a brief overview of reflection as a tool for learning and change. Next, we present a framework for conducting interview-based research that supports participants’ reflections.

We acknowledge that the literature we are drawing from often uses the terms reflection or reflexivity based on individual researcher’s disciplinary canons and methodological practices. In this project, we use the terms reflection and reflexivity interchangeably to speak across the various disciplinary traditions we seek to combine in our assessment of the potential for interview design to incorporate social impact. Nonetheless, we find Bolton’s (2010) demystification of the terms a valuable frame of reference to include. Bolton (2010) defines reflection as the process of learning and developing perceptions of events and situations outside of oneself, which can be open to the scrutiny of others. This process can be solitary or with critical external support. Reflexivity involves finding strategies “to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions to understand our complex roles in relation to others” (Bolton, 2010, p. 13). Based on this distinction, our framework incorporates both the reviewing and reliving that leads to insights (reflection) in conjunction with recognizing our active role in shaping our surroundings, circumstances, and relationships (reflexivity). We define participant reflection as requiring that the details of actions, events, and experiences be reviewed and revised in ethical ways of being and relating (Bolton, 2010; Cunliffe, 2009).

**Interviews as an Intervention Tool**

There is a wide variety of interview approaches following different paradigms and disciplines; each review uses and introduces different categories and terms to describe and organize them. We started our exploration of interviews as an intervention tool with Roulston’s (2010) categorization of transformative approaches to interview, where the “researcher intentionally aims to challenge and change the understanding of participants” (p. 220). Interventionist or transformative approaches to interviewing draw on “critical, emancipatory, and psychoanalytical theoretical perspectives including critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis” (Roulston, 2010, p. 221). Common to these approaches is conceiving the relationship between the researcher and the research participant to be less asymmetrical. The interview interaction is conceived as a transformative dialog (Roulston, 2010) with the potential to challenge the social order and situate social justice at the forefront of the research inquiry (Farias et al., 2017).

Research designed to be transformative or interventionist (Roulston, 2010; Li & Ross, 2021) can take many forms. A comprehensive review of all possible forms is beyond the scope of this paper. Using Roulston’s (2010) key categories, we engaged in an iterative and structured review of the available literature and identified three types of interviews that were most prominent: therapeutic (Birch & Miller, 2000; Nelson et al., 2013), emancipatory (Brinkmann, 2007; Curato, 2012; Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006) and dialogic (Cunliffe, 2002; Denzin, 2001; Tanggaard, 2009).
**Therapeutic Interviews.** Scholars have argued that qualitative research interviews can be therapeutic through the act of sharing. For participants, this serves as a meaning-making space. Speaking out loud about their experiences can bring emotional release, positive feelings and facilitate a recrafting of their narratives to help them better understand their situations (Birch & Miller, 2000; Rossetto, 2014). The term therapeutic represents an individual’s process of reflection toward understanding their previous experiences differently, which encourages a “changed sense of self” (Birch & Miller, 2000, p. 190). In most therapeutic approaches, the researcher is characterized as a listener to whom the participant can reveal intimate personal feelings. Thus, the researcher acts as a “therapeutic mediator” who witnesses and listens to participants’ disclosure of their personal narratives (Birch & Miller, 2000, p. 194).

Such therapeutic encounters can be more accidental than intentional (Ortiz, 2001; Rossetto, 2014). Whether or not therapeutic encounters are set as a research goal from the start of the project, the researcher is positioned to help participants reach a greater understanding of their lived experiences; “participants may look to the interviewer for guidance as to how to navigate the process of reaching this greater understanding” (Minikel-Lacocque, 2019, p. 1044). The well-being of the interviewee is a central focus of the therapeutic interview processes, enabled in large part by the researcher-participant relationship, as therapeutic outcomes are prompted by the participants’ level of comfort in the interview setting (Birch & Miller, 2000; Minikel-Lacocque, 2019).

For example, Ortiz’s (2001) sequential interview describes two overarching reasons the qualitative interview process was therapeutic for participants. The first is that the participants, wives of professional athletes, were able to “unload their pent-up feelings, innermost thoughts, private experiences, and often their conjugal secrets in the context of their marriages to public men” (Ortiz, 2001, p. 214). This process was described as providing relief and assisted them in dealing with the negative emotions that arose from their husband’s careers. The second overarching reason described by Ortiz is the form of self-renewal and personal growth that they observed the participants having because of the interviews. These interviews allowed participants to engage in introspection and self-revelation, which was interpreted as leading to transformation in their identity and self.

**Emancipatory Interviews.** In emancipatory interviews, social change is enabled by engaging participants to question their assumptions and beliefs and challenge their previously articulated views during the interview process through prompts and questions (Brinkmann, 2007; Curato, 2012; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006; Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016). Emancipatory interviews adopt a postmodern understanding of subjective agency. Typically, they are motivated strongly by the desire to destabilize normative practices and behaviors, enact social justice, redress inequities, and break “prisons of received identities and discourses of exclusion” (Best and Kellner, quoted in Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006, p. 1024).

Interventionist intent is the most explicit in this form of research interview, and scholars describe varying approaches to achieving their goals. For example, the researcher can enter the study with a predetermined agenda to facilitate and guide the participant to have a personal transformation (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006), or work to encourage participants to question their identifications, performances, attitudes, and behaviors through the interview process (Marn & Wolgemuth, 2016). In addition, emancipatory interviewers focus on fostering critical dialog with participants (Johnston, 2016). Knowledge outcomes of emancipatory interviews are generated by the process of contesting the respondent’s beliefs in dialog debate (Curato, 2012). This approach reframes the interview as a democratic debate where conversation partners question and justify each other’s opinions through confronting questions, challenging their assumptions and beliefs, and encouraging the respondent to articulate and defend their positions (Brinkmann, 2007) instead of sharing uncontested opinions. It is important to note that scholars stress ethical considerations when adopting emancipatory practices to ensure participants can have the most beneficial outcomes (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006).

For example, Curato (2012) utilized emancipatory aspects in her epistemic interviews with junior military officers who had led a failed uprising in the Philippines in 2003. The interviews were described as a dialog with participants in an engaged demeanor (instead of observant or passive). The researcher actively invoked clarifications or further explanations from the participants. Furthermore, Curato (2012) built off participants’ responses by asking short critical questions to challenge or clarify their assumptions and beliefs to provide opportunities for their justification. These characteristics helped support the outcomes of the epistemic interviews described by Curato (2012) as a shift away from participants’ telling their narratives to uncovering the participant’s implicit assumptions and making them explicit. The participant and the researcher informed one another in the conversation, as supported by Curato’s (2012) description of the outcomes of one of the interviews: “our own individual standpoints came across and engaged each other. The lieutenant proposed an alternative approach for my research, particularly the way the principle of chain of command is conceptualized. I contributed to the development of his argument by describing the link between the presidents’ power and popular support” (Curato, 2012, p. 575).

**Dialogic Interviews.** The literature on dialogic interviews focuses on the intersubjective knowledge created through dialog between the researcher and participant (Cunliffe, 2002; Denzin, 2001; Tanggaard, 2009). The goal is not to uncover the objective “truth,” but rather explore the variety of socially constructed truths that participants hold. Scholars have approached this notion in various ways and propose methodological tools either in the form of research guides (Cunliffe, 2002; Denzin, 2001) or interview strategies and techniques.
supplemented with empirical examples (Tanggaard, 2009; Way et al., 2015). The form of dialog adopted for interviews can vary; dialogic approaches to interviewing cover a range from personal narratives to dissenting opinions. Regardless of the form of the dialog, all dialogic interviews focus on how multiple truths can be achieved through the dialog between the researcher and participant (Tanggaard, 2009). Social impact in dialogic interviews is conceived through the co-creation of knowledge. For example, Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017) propose that dialogic interviews expose “situated knowledge,” which can be socially useful to reevaluate commonly accepted understandings. The relevance of situated knowledge to research is that it reflects lived experiences embedded in a cultural, political, historical, and social place and time.

For example, Tanggaard (2009) describes how the interview itself is a context that reveals how language “makes” people, as well as how it changes or produces social life, where the “truth” that researchers find in interviews are “narrative truths,” not “historical ones.” Tanggaard’s study with psychologists about their work practices with children supports this notion. The qualitative interview employed in their study acted as a site where different discourses about what psychological work should look like were similar in some circumstances but not in others. These discrepancies between discourses in the study were explained as polyphonic dialog that is “replete with the use of many different voices that reveal the diverse ideas of children’s problems” (Tanggaard, 2009, p. 1503).

This brief overview of the fragmented literature on therapeutic, emancipatory, and dialogic interviews reveals the need to organize and systematize the practices to better enable researchers at various stages in their career and who have varying levels of knowledge and comfort with intervention through interviews to design their projects across disciplines to be socially impactful. Taken together, these disparate approaches exemplify the potential for interviews as a tool for social impact. All three interventional interview approaches share the assumption that encouraging participants to reflect on how they think, behave, and perform, can be a catalyst for change. However, there is limited cross-disciplinary discussion on how to modify qualitative interview methods to achieve these aims regardless of disciplinary origins and individual research training, goals, and preferences. We aim to synthesize this disparate and multidisciplinary knowledge on facilitating research participants’ reflections during interviews to support researchers in designing interview studies toward social impact. Before discussing principles of reflective interview design, it is important to review the literature that connects reflection and transformative learning, which is central to our discussion of social impact.

**Reflection as a Tool for Learning and Change**

Transformative learning theory suggests that learning is a process of revising our mental models, which results in changes in our interpretation of experience and action (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor, 1994). A mental model is used for reasoning (Johnson-Laird, 1983) and consists of a picture in our mind of how the world works (Hill, 1996). To develop new mental models, individuals need to become “aware of specific assumptions (schemata, criteria, rules, or repressions) on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based and, through a reorganization of meaning, transforming it” (Mezirow, 1985, p. 23 cited in Kitchenham, 2008). This transformation is expected to be difficult as it “involves a comprehensive and critical reevaluation of oneself” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 112). In accordance with transformative learning theories, reflection facilitates the process of evaluating assumptions and changing perspectives.

Reflection is a thinking process focused on examining a thought, event, or situation to make it more comprehensible and learn from it (Bolton, 2010; Nardon, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2003). Reflection supports the organizing, clarifying, and sequencing of thoughts, facilitating a sense of coherence (Bolton, 2010; Gray, 2007) and acts as a bridge between experience and learning (Gray, 2007). Reflection involves both thoughts and feelings (Boud et al., 1985) and supports individuals to reevaluate their assumptions (Kayes, 2002), organize their experiences, understand what they think, and predict future events and outcomes (Glanz et al., 2001; Weick, 1995).

Reflection has been conceived of as a process of dialog with oneself, with one’s narratives and insights, and with others as one’s ideas and beliefs are validated or questioned (Johns, 2013). Research interviews are dialogical contexts, “a setting in which dissenting opinion, diverse discourses, and personal narratives are produced through the social, dialogical context of the interview” (Tanggaard, 2009, p. 1498). Research interviews, therefore, may aid reflection by “making the lived experience of research participants sensible in collaborative researcher–practitioner conversations by surfacing, questioning, and exploring multiple meanings and imaging new possibilities for moving on” (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017, p. 29). Through self-questions and self-talk, the research interview enables a reevaluation of sedimented beliefs or scripts, leading to deeper understanding and new meanings, described as “flickers of transformation” (Way et al., 2015).

**Reflective Interviewing**

This section draws on multi- and inter-disciplinary literature to connect interview design and methods with the well-established literature on reflection and learning summarized above. Connecting these otherwise disparate bodies of literature allows us to synthesize and integrate this existing knowledge toward a framework of principles for researchers to design interviews to facilitate participant reflection toward social impact during the research process. These principles are akin to “simple rules for a complex world” (Sull & Eisenhardt, 2012). We aim to provide simple guidelines that can be adapted to support research design while also recognizing that our intervention is not comprehensive.

We acknowledge that applying these principles must be accompanied by researchers’ reflexivity (positionality and
others). There is guidance available on how to be re-
considerations (consent, anonymity, con-
researchers (Etherington, 2004; Roulston et al., 2008; Skeggs,
personality), access to the
research goal for all researchers across many disciplines.
The literature on re-
adjust, constantly learning from each research interaction.
Although the principles are numbered, researchers engaging
in these practices are encouraged to think beyond a linear or
chronological approach. Instead, we suggest that researchers
take steps forward and then back to pilot tools, adjust, and re-
adjust, constantly learning from each research interaction.

Our framework is illustrated in Figure 1 and explained below.
The spherical design accounts for the iterative nature of research.

Figure 1. Principles of research design.

Principle #1: Give Time to Think. The literature on reflective
practice (e.g., Bolton, 2010; Nardon, 2017) suggests that it is
beneficial to allocate time for reflection, the process of critically
thinking and examining experiences to extract lessons from it.
Learning and performance are enhanced when individuals
deliberately take time to think about situations and intentionally
focus on synthesizing, abstracting, and articulating lessons
learned through the experience (Di Stefano et al., 2014). Studies
exploring research participants’ reflexivity (Cassell et al., 2020)
also suggest that longitudinal design in which there is an in-
teraction with participants before and after the main interview
prompt participants to reflect on the topic and the interview
experience in more depth. Thus, it follows that research designs
intending to facilitate participant reflection need to provide
space for participants to think before, during, and after the
interview. We discuss each opportunity below in greater detail.

Pre-interview. It is beneficial to provide participants with
an opportunity to understand the aims of the research project,
including the potentially reflective aspects of the interview and
the nature of the relationship between researcher and partic-
This pre-interview opportunity affords participants the
time to understand the purposes of the interview and consent
to participate. It also allows them the opportunity to think
more about the topic and their own goals for participating.
This time to think also allows for a more comparable level of
knowledge and readiness between interviewer and participant
(Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020).

A pre-interview intervention may include requesting par-
ticipants to prepare something to share during the interview.
For example, Cassell and colleagues (2020) asked participants
to identify photos to explore work-life balance and conflict.
Other studies have used assessment instruments or ques-
tionnaires as pre-interview material to be discussed during the
interview. For example, Marn and Wolgemuth (2016) study
exploring participant’s biracial identity had participants take a
Black–White Implicit Association Test (IAT) before the in-
terview to identify their implicit biases. In the first interview,
participants were asked questions based on the results from the
pre-test. In the second interview, the researchers called at-
tention to possible contradictions between the participants’
answers in the first interview and their IAT test scores to
promote reflection and facilitate “flickers of transformation.”
They deliberately constructed opportunities for prompts, self-
questioning, and possible contradictions in participant nar-
ratives to create spaces for “ambiguous subjectivities” and
new understandings.

During the interview. During the conversation, pauses and
listening without interruption can be helpful tools to facilitate
introspection and reflection (Kline, 2016). The interview
pacing can influence participants’ ability to reflect, giving
them more time to think. Talking free of interruptions allows
participants to fully explore their ideas and make sense of them
(Way et al., 2015). Additionally, allowing periods of silence
benefits participants by giving them time to explore whether
there is more to say. For example, in Birch and Miller’s (2000)
study on participants experiences of personal transition to
motherhood, the researcher was characterized as a “listener” to
whom the participant can reveal intimate personal feelings and
who acts as a “therapeutic mediator” as the researcher wit-
tesses and listens to their personal narratives being told (Birch
& Miller, 2000). This study was longitudinal and included
multiple interviews over an extended period. Birch and Miller
(2000) describe how the process of reconstructing narratives
in qualitative interviews produces new understandings of these
events for participants as they transform and are transformed
through their narratives. These shifts in understanding hap-
pened during the interviews and between them as participants
considered and compared their responses from different
interviews.

In addition to techniques such as pacing, silences, pauses,
and listening without interruptions, Tosey and colleagues
(2014) identified Clean Language as an advantageous tech-
nique to conduct interviews. Clean Language is an approach
of questioning that facilitates the exploration of a person’s inner world. It uses questions that are “clean” or free of metaphors and encourages participants to describe their inner world symbolically and in greater detail. Tosey et al. (2014) used the clean language approach to elicit metaphors and provide an in-depth understanding of a participants’ symbolic world. Clean questions such as “and is there anything else about that?” invite participants to go deeper and consider additional information beyond what is obvious to them. When using clean language, practitioners’ pace is slow, and questions are repetitive to allow participants to explore their thoughts fully (Dunbar, 2017).

Post-interview. Once the interview is completed, it may continue to raise new questions, thoughts, and feelings for participants. This can only be identified if participants are allowed adequate time to process the interview and researchers re-connect with them after some time apart from the actual conversation. In this time, participants can be encouraged to think about what transpired in the interview, which researchers can pick up through post-interview interventions. A post-interview intervention may include a debrief in which researchers share the preliminary findings of the study and request feedback, critique, and collaboration (Nelson et al., 2013; Way et al., 2015). Time post-interview also allows for a consolidation of reflection for participants and provides an opportunity for closure. Nelson et al. (2013) argue that summarizing the interview process can promote therapeutic transformation through a greater understanding of oneself, one’s attitudes, ways of knowing, behaviors, practices, and actions.

Wolgemuth and Donohue’s (2006), in an example of post-interview intervention, openly challenged participants’ assumptions, pointing out paradoxes, highlighting ambiguities in their responses, and asking the participant hard questions. Specifically, they challenged male heterosexual graduate students’ assumptions and beliefs about gender and sexual identities. Probing questions were used to lead participants to explore the ambiguous parts of their sense of self based on what was shared during the interview. Following a multiple-interview design, the researchers asked participants in the last interview to reflect on their experience of the previous interviews to promote ongoing self-reflection of their gender performances, attitudes, and behaviors (Wolgemuth et al., 2015).

Principle #2: Develop a Relationship of Trust. Critical to the success of any of the tools and techniques suggested above and, more generally, to the interview experience is a relationship of trust between participants and researcher. This relationship is essential to create openness, invite reflection and reflexivity, and for participants to feel supported (Johnston, 2016; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). There are different perspectives, however, on how a relationship of trust can be established. Some researchers have argued for paraphrasing and instead repeat participants’ words back to them. Regardless of the specific techniques, all researchers would agree that what is most important is demonstrating attentive listening to establish a relationship of trust.

Researchers have also discussed the critical role of the researcher in the interview interaction. Again, there are some disagreements as to how researchers should position themselves in relation to participants. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) invite researchers to share information about their own lives and experiences to create an open sharing environment and eliminate power discrepancy. Similarly, Johnston (2016) invites researchers to disclose their experiences related to the subject matter. Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) propose that researchers should follow an “ethic of friendship” promoting participants’ “comfort” as a prerequisite for the “discomfort” involved in challenging participants’ assumptions and asking difficult questions. Yet others argue for a more therapeutic posture (Birch & Miller, 2000; Minikel-Lacoeque, 2019; Nelson et al., 2013) in which researchers attempt to stay “out of the way” and create opportunities for participants to express themselves freely. Kline (2016) reminds us that a relationship of trust includes the trust that the participant will not be interrupted so they can pause and reflect, knowing they are listened to and can take the time to think.

Despite variations in how researchers should position themselves in the interview, researchers agree on the importance of active empathy as a bedrock of interventionist interview approaches (Wolgemuth et al., 2015; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006). Researchers are encouraged to take a non-judgmental instance toward the participant and empathize with their situation and points of view (Johnston, 2016).

Principle #3: Invite Reflection. Reflection is more than just thinking about something. Reflection to support learning and change involves a critical reassessment of one’s mental models (Bolton, 2010). Mental models are uncritically constructed through time and informed by life experiences. While essential for organizing experience and guiding actions, mental models are often below awareness and operate as filters, limiting one’s perception and understanding of situations (Nardon, 2017). A critical reevaluation requires questioning the structure of the mental model, including assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Researchers aiming to invite reflection may ask questions that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, inviting participants to question what is ordinary and taken for granted to see things in a different way (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017). This may be achieved by adopting a position of not knowing (Nelson et al., 2013), where the research brackets their assumptions and beliefs not to contaminate the dialog and asks participants to explain their assumptions, making it explicit. Alternatively, researchers may adopt a more challenging posture and question the accuracy or validity of the assumption, prompting participants to explain or adapt their statements and asking them to talk through alternative perspectives. (Way et al., 2015). Inviting alternative perspectives supports participants
learning by seeing their situations from different angles. Participants are encouraged and invited to present their dissenting views, adopt new lenses, explore other points of view, admit wrongdoings, and empathize with another, particularly those in different positions and social identities, to see, understand, and perhaps also adopt alternative perspectives (Johnston, 2016).

**Interviewing tools.** Multiple tools can be used to facilitate reflection. A comprehensive review of tools is beyond the scope of this paper. Below, we present a few examples based on the authors’ preferences and positive experiences with invoking participants’ reflection across a few different studies.

*Narrative interviews:* Narrative inquiry is a well-established research method to capture participants’ storied ways of knowing (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). As a form of communication, narratives have many purposes, including remembering, arguing, justifying, persuading, and engaging others (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are an essential tool for sense-making (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives allow individuals to coherently hold different elements, make sense of their situations, and guide future action (Weick, 1995). Narratives have been used in coaching (Drake, 2018) and in therapy (Birch & Miller, 2000) for their potential to support clients in revisiting and reconstructing the narratives that inform their feelings and actions. In a research context, a narrative-style interview involves asking explicit questions about internal dialog and supporting participants’ sensemaking and emotional awareness (Birch & Miller, 2000; Cassell et al., 2020; Gemignani, 2014). Gemignani’s (2014) study of refugees in the US focused on participants’ narratives and memories when becoming refugees, their experience with resettlement, and their identity development in the new country. The interview was described as a relational event where the memories were co-constructed as “the active and socio-cultural process of constructing, remembering, and telling memories” (Gemignani, 2014, p. 132) was taking place for the participants. Responses to questions, such as the meaning of home, produced complex narratives in which meanings were created given the “unique relational, cultural, and historical setting of the interview” (Gemignani, 2014, p. 133).

*Metaphor Elicitation:* Metaphors are figures of speech that allow understanding one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and are central to human discourse and understanding (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Metaphors facilitate sensemaking and are used as a tool to stimulate new understandings and actions (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). For this reason, organization development practitioners and coaches have long used metaphors to help clients gain insights into their situations (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006; Hunt, 2009). Researchers have elicited participants’ metaphors of a topic or experience to gain insight into their understandings (e.g., Cassell & Lee, 2012; Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Nardon & Aten, 2012; Tracy et al., 2006). A few studies have used metaphors as a way to gain research insight and support participants simultaneously. Tosey and colleagues (2014) used Clean Language techniques to elicit naturally occurring participants’ metaphors around work-life balance. Through the interview process, participants were able to gain insight into their own thinking. Nardon and Hari (2021) used imaginative metaphor elicitation to study international students’ experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Through metaphor elicitation, they gained insight into international students’ issues and also supported participants in finding ways to cope with their challenges.

*Photo elicitation:* Photographs brought by the researcher or taken by the research participant (Ortega-Alcázar & Dyck, 2011, p. 108) are used by interviewees to introduce themselves, explain their lives, and stimulate memories (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). Participants can contribute to the research in a deeper way by taking an active role in the research (Kolb, 2008) and making visible sensory experiences that they cannot verbalize (Ortega-Alcázar & Dyck, 2011). The knowledge is produced through negotiation and reflexivity (Orobitg Canal, 2004, p. 38). Photos prompt a discussion of real places, lives, and experiences, can evoke deeper elements of human consciousness, and might reveal issues that escape spoken word (Kolb, 2008; Richard & Lahman, 2015). This method sees participants as experts (Kolb, 2008), making it a strong choice when working with vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalized groups (Parkin & Coomber, 2009). A powerful example is Frith and Harcourt (2007) use of photo-elicitation interviews to give women enduring chemotherapy a way to document their lives with control. A more recent study used participants’ photos to facilitate conversations with international students making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their mobilities and post-study lives (Hari et al., 2021).

**Principle #4: Support the Identification of Solutions.** As researchers, we are often interested in understanding participants’ problems and hope that our research will contribute to better solutions. However, an interview focused on exposing problems or only macro-level solutions may leave the participant feeling disempowered and distressed. Therefore, as the interview comes to a close, it is crucial to support participants in finding personal solutions to alleviate their situations in addition to discussing broader solutions and approaches. Empowering individuals to find solutions to cope or solve their problems does not mean denying external forces or barriers but instead supporting individuals in taking an active role in their lives.

Solution-focused interventions are prevalent in therapy and other helping professions (Warner, 2013), such as coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018). Solution-focused approaches emerged from positive psychology and encourage adopting a positive outlook by emphasizing what an individual wants and what can be done to achieve their goals. Solution-focused techniques assist participants to “articulate and define a desired future state and then helps them develop thinking and action pathways that result in the client achieving of approaching their desired future” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018, p. 36).

The solution-focused approach emerged in therapy based on dissatisfaction with problem-based approaches that may...
leave clients further entrenched in their problems (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018; Warner, 2013). In contrast, solution-focused approaches emphasize what is wanted and how to achieve what is wanted. Underlying this approach, there is the assumption that change will happen and that clients are capable of solving their problems. The relationship is thus one of equals, in which the therapist or coach is not an expert providing a diagnosis but a facilitator who supports a change in perspective. The focus is on doing more of what works well and is tailored to the individual.

A few studies have adopted a solution-focused approach to interviewing. For example, Mesman et al. (2019) use Video-Reflexive Ethnography (VRE) for a semi-fictitious case study on the sterile procedures of hospital health care workers (before and after patient care). Video recordings of colleagues putting on gloves were viewed by a select cohort of nurses and doctors. Based on their experiences, the solution was to select one particular brand of gloves to be disseminated across all departments to ensure the standardization of optimal sterile procedures for patient care. This solution-focused approach helped participants identify and improve their practices and demonstrate “what went right” (Mesman et al., 2019).

Solution-focused questioning in interviews is recommended to respect the participants’ expertise and leverage the responses to improve quality in practice while also informing research. The types of questions include goal-defining questions such as: “what is your best hope (goal) for the intervention or change?”; scaling-questions such as: “on a scale of 1–10 ...” and “what would you need to do to make it a 10?”; and miracle questions beginning with “Imagine a miracle has occurred...” and exception questions that focus on the exceptions when a situation went right instead of wrong, to promote further learning (Mesman et al., 2019, p. 5). Nardon and Hari (2021), in their study of international students coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, dedicated part of their interview to support participants in identifying a goal and action steps to achieve that goal. Each student identified a unique and achievable solution to their problem, such as seeking out specific student services, calling loved ones, and even looking at the problem differently.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we argue that participants’ reflection can be a catalyst for social impact as reflection can change the way individuals think, behave, and perform. We then proposed a guiding framework for researchers to design interventional interviews to facilitate participants’ reflection toward enhancing social impact. We sought to reimagine social impact beyond knowledge transfer or mobilization at the end of the research to encourage, and emphasize participants’ voices in various formats (verbal, visual, and silences).

learn and think about their situations in different ways and identify workable solutions (Nardon & Hari, 2021).

Our primary contribution is a guiding framework to facilitate participant reflection that draws on interventionist approaches to interviews and researcher success in studies across various disciplines. In our view, reflection involves both reviewing and reliving details of actions, events, and experiences, in conjunction with recognizing our active role in shaping our surroundings, circumstances, and relationships.

We proposed four principles to guide research design: (1) give time to think, (2) develop a relationship of trust, (3) invite reflection, and (4) support the identification of solutions. This framework is in no way comprehensive. The tools and techniques identified under each principle offer only a glimpse into the many paths researchers and participants could take in co-producing knowledge while actively changing their social worlds. In this section, we wish to emphasize that intervention with intention requires researchers to be clear about their goals and beliefs while remaining flexible in their approach to achieving their goals. We offer a process that encourages both participants and researchers to engage in active empathy and learn in discomfort by challenging assumptions, beliefs, practices, and behaviors. To achieve this, we think it necessary to highlight some ethical considerations. The list offered below is not intended to be comprehensive but is representative of our experiences.

**Ethical Principles for Conducting Reflective Interviewing**

**Ongoing consent:** It is incumbent on researchers to clearly explain the intent of the interview and seek participant consent. We recommend many tools and techniques that can be adopted at any stage of the interview. In line with the cyclical design of our guiding framework, we encourage ongoing explanation and continuous consent as an ethical requirement of any research design that engages in participant reflection toward social impact. There is promising literature available through decades of feminist scholarship and activism on recognizing the complex role of researchers and practices of researcher reflexivity to conduct ethical research (England, 1994; Mullings, 1999; Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007).

**Participants are experts in their own lives.** Our principles are informed by the basic assumption that participants are experts in their own lives. Despite the debate on exactly how to achieve it, many of the suggestions to establish trust between the researcher and participant work to view research relations as symmetrical while understanding that research relations are imbued with power. Although equal power relations in research interactions may be impossible, inviting reflections and empowering participants to find solutions works from the notion that they know best. The tools and techniques discussed under these principles seek to reveal, encourage, and emphasize participants’ voices in various formats (verbal, visual, and silences).
Belief in participants’ abilities and resources. Our principles reflect an unwavering belief in participants’ capacity to address their issues, exercise agency, and take an active role in interpreting their environments and changing their social worlds. Several examples cited in our discussion evoke consensus and dissent, ask the hard questions, and find comfort in the discomfort of inquiry (Wolgumuth & Donohue, 2006).

Recognize researcher’s skills. Our model of reflective interviewing is driven by the desire to support participants to consider their situations and find solutions for their problems on their own terms. However, researchers must also reflect on their own ability to conduct this type of interview to do this effectively. Our guiding framework is a point of departure and understands that many researchers might lack the training to support research participants in the ways we suggest. This might be especially true for researchers working with marginalized and vulnerable populations. We urge researchers to consider their readiness to engage in interventionist research, seek training and support to do so, and take the time to think and reflect. We encourage researchers to consider redirecting interviews to topics they feel qualified to address and view interview research as a process of lifelong learning. Research is a collaborative effort not only concerning participants but also with the larger scholarly community. Social impact should be a community goal, and each researcher at any level can play a small and important role in it. Researchers are encouraged to exercise reflexivity and continually consider the impacts of interviews on participants and themselves.

Conclusion

This paper aims to broaden the understanding of social impact to include individual sensemaking of behaviors, practices, and performances, which can be achieved through guided participant reflection. Toward this end, we hope to stimulate cross-disciplinary conversations about the potential for interviews with intention. We pull together a fragmented multidisciplinary engagement with interview-based research and the potential for social impact when designing research involving participants. We sought to identify tools and techniques to conduct interviews that enable crossing the messy interface between theory and action (research and praxis) that action research and participatory community-based research have done exceptionally well. To this end, we drew on professional strategies for supporting individuals to reflect and change (therapy, counseling, and coaching).

Our framework is a work in progress; it is part of an ongoing effort to think through social impact and speak across disciplinary siloes. We see this review and our “simple rules” as a first step and call researchers to reflect and build on our work to form a community of shared practices. We encourage other researchers to write about their experiences with the various tools and techniques, combine knowledge from various sectors and professions (therapy, counseling, and coaching) and view academic research as part of a broader effort to produce and consume collaborative knowledge toward social change.

With this paper, we hope to broaden the understanding and scope of social impact in the research process beyond knowledge translation, transfer, and mobilization to recognize the significance of research relations of trust and an ethic of empathy to respond to grand challenges.

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