

The Art of Qualitative Interview: Toward Attunement and Cognitive Companionship

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Abstract:

This article reconceptualises qualitative interviewing as a relational, cognitive process rather than a set of techniques. Drawing on interviews about silence, it proposes attunement, relational alignment, and cognitive companionship as key principles, highlighting timing, presence, and shared meaning-making in eliciting rich, emergent data from participants.

Qualitative interviewing is often taught as a set of techniques: ask open-ended questions, probe for detail, avoid leading prompts. These are useful starting points, but they do not fully capture what happens when we interview participants about complex, inward experiences—such as silence, hesitation, or moments of not speaking. In such contexts, I have found it more helpful to move beyond the familiar notion of “building trust” and to think instead in terms of *attunement*, *relational alignment*, and what I would call *cognitive companionship*.

When participants speak about silence, they are often articulating something that has not yet taken clear verbal form. Silence is rarely empty; it is dense with

thought, emotion, and decision-making. The interview, then, becomes a space where thinking is still unfolding. What matters is not simply whether participants feel comfortable, but whether they feel *met*—whether the interviewer is attuned to their pace, their hesitations, and their emerging meanings.

Attunement begins with timing. It is the ability to sense when to ask, when to wait, and when not to intervene. In my own interviews, some of the most meaningful data has come not from well-crafted questions, but from the decision to remain silent a little longer than feels natural. These pauses are not gaps to be filled; they are moments of active cognitive processing. When we allow

them to unfold, participants often arrive at insights that are more considered and more revealing.

Over time, this sensitivity develops into what I think of as *relational alignment*. Interviewer and participant begin to share a rhythm. The conversation is no longer driven by a predetermined set of questions but guided by a mutual orientation toward the topic. This does not mean losing structure; rather, it means allowing the structure to breathe. A question may open a path, but it is the participant's movement along that path that determines where the interview goes.

Within this alignment, the interview becomes a form of *cognitive companionship*. The participant is not simply responding to questions; they are thinking alongside the interviewer. This is particularly important when dealing with topics that require reflection or carry a degree of vulnerability. Instead of asking for immediate answers, I often invite participants into a moment: "Can you recall a time when you chose not to speak?" or "What was happening in your mind then?" These prompts create space for participants to dwell, to reconstruct, and sometimes to discover aspects of their experience that had remained unarticulated.

To sustain this process, the interviewer must learn the art of *holding space*. This involves resisting the urge to clarify too quickly, to interpret too early, or to move on too soon. It also involves listening beyond words—attending to tone, pacing, and what remains unsaid. A slight hesitation or a shift in rhythm can signal areas where meaning is still forming. Gentle, responsive follow-ups—grounded in the participant's own words—are often more productive than any pre-planned probe.

At the heart of all this is what I would call *dialogic presence*. The interviewer is not a distant observer but an engaged participant in the co-construction of meaning. Presence here is not about speaking more; it is about being fully attentive to the unfolding interaction. Even silence becomes part of the dialogue.

In this sense, qualitative interviewing is less about extracting data and more about creating the conditions in which data can emerge. When we shift our focus from "building trust" to cultivating attunement, alignment, and companionship, we begin to see the interview not as a method to be applied, but as a relationship to be carefully, thoughtfully enacted.

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research focuses on silence in language education, relational pedagogy, and the role of quietude in learning and

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