

CLEAN LANGUAGE INTERVIEWING



Principles and applications for
researchers and practitioners

Edited by

**HEATHER CAIRNS-LEE
JAMES LAWLEY
PAUL TOSEY**

Clean Language Interviewing

Being able to conduct interviews as effectively as possible is a vital skill in 'the interview society'. This accessible and ground-breaking book supports practitioners and academics to minimise their assumptions to produce authentic data from interviewees when it is important to do so.

- Tawfik Jelassi, Professor of Strategy and Technology Management at IMD, Switzerland

If you are a qualitative researcher, or curious about how to conduct interviews in a variety of contexts, you will be intrigued by this book. Starting with an introduction to the epistemological foundations of clean language, each chapter examines how clean language principles can help interviewers gain deep insights into individuals' experiences. Even if you are an experienced interviewer or researcher, you will find yourself returning to this book to learn more about how clean language can help you approach interviews in a qualitatively distinct way.

- Carole Elliott, Professor of Organisation Studies, Sheffield University Management School, UK

This book reminds us that the most useful data for a variety of purposes including research, diagnosis or evaluation are, as much as possible, untainted by external categories and schemas. What sociologists call first-order perceptions can be accessed through the clean language interviewing approach described here. Interventions or other types of initiatives based on such an approach are more likely to hit the mark since they are informed by valid data and understandings.

- Loizos Heracleous, Professor of Strategy and Organisation, Warwick Business School, UK

Asking good questions is an art which we should never take for granted. This thought-provoking book helps us develop our skills by inviting us to understand the experiences of others in their words, without judgement. A must-read for any researcher or practitioner.

- Professor Almuth McDowall, Assistant Dean, Department of Organisational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

When reading my post-graduate students' transcripts of the semi-structured interviews in their qualitative research, I noticed that they paraphrase the participants' words into their own. This bothered me, and when Prof. Heather Cairns-Lee introduced me to 'Clean Language' interviewing, I was delighted. This book comes for me at an opportune time as it offers a solution to the problem I identified in the credibility of our qualitative research. We realise that qualitative research studies rarely found space in our high-level journals in Management and Leadership studies, unless, as a colleague of mine described it – the methodology and findings 'are glowing in the dark'. I think that this book on 'Clean Language' would offer us as qualitative researchers practical guidelines on securing a home for our research output in highly respected journals. As an executive coach, I was struck by the enormous potential of this work on 'Clean Language' to augment our coaching mindset on non-directive facilitation of growth of our clients. Prof. Heather Cairns-Lee's work on metaphors to crystallise leadership identity, using clean language, offers 'how to' practical guidelines for executive coaches, and I am inspired to use it in my work, and confident that other coaches would find it useful too. Congratulations on the publication of this relevant and rigorous work on 'Clean Language'. We are grateful for your contribution to enhance the credibility of our qualitative research and coaching practice.

- Professor Caren Brenda Scheepers, Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa

If you gather information through interviews, put this book on your must-read list. Packed with insights from a collaboration of top experts around the world, this text is a treasure of guidance to improve the competency for cleaning the interview of the interviewer's assumptions, frames, and worldviews. Thanks to these authors, my clean interviewing competency increased in a range of academic and organization practice interview applications including exemplar modelling, evaluation, recruitment, specification, and phenomenological interviews.

- Pamela Ey, Adjunct Professor at McColl School of Business at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Gathering insight from people and not only data is essential to understanding the business performance. Yet the way that questions are framed is often highly leading, which constrains the ability to gather insight. This book on clean language

interviewing describes the principles and practices of asking questions with minimal assumptions that can support business leaders to gain relevant information.

- Natasha Sandoval, Senior Vice President Marketing,
Scandit, Switzerland

Lots of professionals *think* they avoid leading questions when wanting to uncover people's actual knowledge, thoughts and feelings. *Clean Language Interviewing* is a game-changer because it spells out why you might be mistaken about the quality of your questioning, and how you might be unintentionally skewing the information you gather. It demonstrates how to upgrade your approach so that the decisions you make are based on a much stronger foundation. Essential reading for anyone who gathers information through conversations.

- Judy Rees, Partner Rees McCann, UK

Clean Language Interviewing is a learnable skill that can help with truly listening such that people feel heard, and establishing authentic connection. There is no better predictor of outcome in therapy than the relationship between the therapist and client – using Clean Language interviewing can help establish this critical connection. In the world of safety, where incident investigations tend to mimic courtrooms (without the necessary checks and balances), Clean Language can begin to make a real difference – changing the way data are collected. If interviews can be done using Clean Language in an investigation process, we have a game-changer – we will learn far more than we ever have about how work is actually done because we will truly listen and be aware of how our presence as an interviewer can influence the outcome of the interview. I feel this is the way forward – there is a massive move towards authenticity and genuine connection that Clean Language interviewing can support.

- Tanya Hewett, PhD, Owner of Beyond Safety Compliance, USA

Clean Language Interviewing offers a unique, powerful and insightful method of conducting interviews that keeps your stuff out and gathers their stuff in. This is the most useful and available training for investigatory interviewing I have come across in my career.

- Dick Swanson, President at Performance Management
Initiatives Inc., USA

I see a growing usefulness of Clean Language Interviewing in the business world, especially as leadership practices evolve for the digital age. We introduced Clean Language into our company two years ago to increase collaboration. Then we saw its benefits in detecting and managing conflicts. Now, we are taking the next step in the use of Clean Language Interviewing: uncovering hidden assumptions. Without bringing out hidden assumptions into the open, we are missing out on 'people-data' important to assure project success.

- Shail Jai, Chief Executive Officer and Cofounder,
Farragut Inc., USA

As a qualitative scholar, I know just how important effective interviewing skills can be to generating impactful research. This book provides a comprehensive treatment of clean interviewing, a technique that helps interviewers avoid allowing their own assumptions to colour their subjects' responses. The editors have drawn together a diverse spectrum of up-to-date and practical perspectives on the subject to help guide readers in applying the technique knowledgeably and effectively, through all stages of the interview process. I would highly recommend it to anyone seeking to improve their interviewing skills.

- David Oliver, Associate Professor,
The University of Sydney Business School, Australia

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Clean Language Interviewing: Principles and Applications for Researchers and Practitioners

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr Karen Hanley.

Karen approached me with the idea of a book about the application of clean language to research five years ago. She shared the idea with James Lawley, a leading authority on clean language, who supported it. Sadly, Karen passed away in 2020 before work could begin. The book has come to fruition in its present form thanks to the caring and careful curation and editorial work of clean language experts, Heather Cairns-Lee, James Lawley and Paul Tosey and the contributions from the chapter authors.

Karen was a keen and enthusiastic activist in community, democratic and spiritual circles. This commitment extended to her belief in the value and usefulness of clean language in many personal and professional areas of life. She applied clean language interviewing within her doctoral work as the first researcher to use this approach in the Danish language.

Karen's study aimed to increase understanding of older workers' experiences through examining the factors enabling and hindering older workers to remain longer in the labour market in Denmark. To produce individual case histories, data were collected from 18 people aged 60+ who had not already retired, through in-depth semi-structured interviews about their perception of working life and a detailed written questionnaire administered at the end of the interview, which captured the timing of the participant's key life events. Karen was diligent about data collection and its application and enthused by the potential for applying clean language within these interviews.

With its deliberate removal of the metaphors or hooks from interview questions, clean language enabled Karen to liberate each individual interviewee's inner knowledge. She used clean language questions crafted in English, translated into Danish and checked by a native Danish speaker so that the meaning would remain the same for Karen's participants. This approach meant that she could obtain participant's own experience and understandings and not those imposed or projected by the interviewer/researcher. Complemented by her innate ability to facilitate people and situations, Karen enabled these older people to have a voice through eliciting their life histories.

By comparing these individual case studies, Karen identified factors that either enable or hinder longer working. Her findings emphasised a mismatch between national and employer policies and the lived experience of the participants. The study suggests that employees need a lifelong, holistic and integrated approach to employment based on an understanding of the working life course.

Karen is remembered by many with great affection, and especially by her husband Peter and me, for the insights she helped people to perceive. Karen, like her mother, was always ready to strike up a conversation. A natural skill, which made her a great researcher and facilitator.

Anthony Chiva

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About the Contributors

Heather Cairns-Lee is adjunct professor at IMD, a visiting scholar at the University of Surrey and president of Business Professional Women Lake Geneva. She focuses on developing leadership, understanding group dynamics and sense-making in organisations. Her teaching, writing, research, facilitation and coaching concentrate on the development of self-awareness and authenticity; communication, enquiry and clean language; the role of metaphor in sensemaking and creativity; and diversity and inclusion. Her research and programme designs have won awards for innovation and impact.

Heather's PhD study was the first large-scale application of clean language interviewing in a managerial setting. Her 2017 thesis on how leaders make meaning through metaphor won the Emerald/EFMD award for outstanding doctoral research for leadership and organisational development. She aims to make clean language accessible to the academic and managerial communities.

Lynne Cooper is among the pioneers of the use of clean language in coaching, training and facilitation over the last 20 years. She is an accredited Master Executive Coach and an Honorary Life Fellow of the Association for Coaching. Specialising in performance improvement, she coaches senior leaders, high potential individuals and teams to improve effectiveness and transform outcomes. She co-developed the Five-Minute Coach Clean Coaching methodology and trains clean language approaches to coaches and managers. Lynne's publications include two books (*Business NLP for Dummies*, Wiley, 2008; and *The Five Minute Coach*, with Mariette Castellino, Crown House, 2012) plus book contributions and articles.

Nancy Doyle, PhD, is a Chartered Psychologist who has specialised in neurodiversity at work for over 20 years. She is the Chief Research Officer for Genius Within, a non-profit company that provides assessment, coaching, training and HR consultancy for neurodifferent adults and their employers. Genius Within also works with those who are unemployed and incarcerated, and created the Blooming Genius Foundation for supporting neurodifferent young people. Alongside Prof. Almuth McDowall, Nancy is the Co-Director of the Centre for Neurodiversity Research at Work at Birkbeck, University of London. Nancy is a neurodifferent entrepreneur and researcher, working in teams which are majority neurodifferent, promoting neurodiversity inclusion. Nancy's work includes

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Tania Korsak is a freelance facilitator based in Brussels. She has degrees in Anthropology and Social Research Methods and has trained in pedagogies of gesture and speech including Feldenkrais somatic education, the Montessori method and Process Orientated Psychology. Tania worked closely with, and was supervised by, David Grove, originator of clean language. Tania is a clean language supervisor, trainer and an active member of the Core Group France.

Tania's research in social anthropology aims to empower parents through enabling them to make sense of their encounters with medical systems. She uses clean language to support parents facing their child's rare disease and currently is facilitating focus groups and collaborating with teams of medical experts on how to better include families in caring for their sick ones. Tania has written about her work in a variety of publications (Dulac et al., n.d.; Korsak et al., 2017; Korsak et al., 2018; Korsak, 2021).

James Lawley is an independent researcher and a partner at The Developing Company. He has cooperated with and conducted training for a number of universities and organisations involving the application of clean language, metaphor and symbolic modelling to qualitative research, resulting in the publication of several academic articles. James qualified as a psychotherapist in 1993 after a career as a senior manager in large corporations. His twelve-year study of David Grove, originator of clean language, has resulted in two co-authored books, *Metaphors in Mind* (2000) with Penny Tompkins, and *Insights in Space* (2017) with Marian Way, and over 100 articles freely available on cleanlanguage.co.uk.

Margaret Meyer is a clean language-trained therapist, community projects facilitator and director of Brave New Words, a mental health charity specialising in writing for well-being. She uses clean language and symbolic modelling across the span of her work. With Wendy Sullivan and Paul Tosey she has developed numerous applications of clean language for use in a wide range of contexts including coaching, addiction recovery and ex-offender mentoring, market and social research, and organisation development.

Jan Nehyba, PhD, Mgr., works as a researcher in the faculty of Education at Masaryk University. His research focuses on psycho-phenomenology and embodied metaphors. He co-edited the book *Becoming a Teacher: The Dance Between Tacit and Explicit Knowledge* (Švec, Nehyba & Svojanovský, 2017), which is based on using clean language interviewing in researching tacit knowledge by teacher candidates. He has also authored other articles related to clean language interviewing in social science.

Wendy Nieuwland is co-owner of Gewoon aan de slag (literally translated: 'Just do it'). Based in the Netherlands, she facilitates organisational change processes in

both public and private organisations. She has an academic background in social studies, communication science and languages and is driven to translate desired changes into daily (behavioural) practice. Since her introduction into clean language and symbolic/systemic modelling, she has been applying these methodologies in the context of her work in organisational change. Amongst others is the application of Modelling Shared Reality (MSR), an approach to systemic change in organisations about which she published a book with her business partner Maaïke Nooitgedagt, *Change 3.0: Seven Essential Principles for Organisational Change from Within* (Van Lindonk & De Bres, 2018).

Maaïke Nooitgedagt is co-owner of Gewoon aan de slag (literally translated: ‘Just do it’). Based in the Netherlands, she facilitates organisational change processes in public and private organisations. She has an academic background in clinical psychology and sees her role in change processes as ‘the desired outcome staunch supporter’. Since her introduction to clean language and symbolic/systemic modelling in 2004, she has applied this in the context of her work in organisational change, and in her previous work in personal therapy and coaching. She is a certified clean language trainer and assessor, and uses clean language in various applications, such as Modelling Shared Reality (MSR), an approach to systemic change in organisations about which she has published a book with her business partner Wendy Nieuwland, *Change 3.0: Seven Essential Principles for Organisational Change from Within* (Van Lindonk & De Bres, 2018).

James Ramirez is an authority on nuclear safety, corrective action programme development, and serious injury and fatality investigations (SIF). James began his career in 1976 in the United States Navy Nuclear Power Program. He went on to a 35-year career with Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) working in a management role in nuclear operations, radiological controls, gas distribution and the corporate safety organisation. He later managed, provided oversight and direction for the corporate safety team, developing their SIF investigation programme and team through the application of clean language interviewing methodology. The group conducted root cause analysis for all SIF incidents for PG&E’s 25,000 employees.

James holds a BS in Business, an MBA and is currently working on a doctorate of management in organizational leadership. He is a certified clean language facilitator and a national trainer for the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI).

Sharon Small is an international authority on clean language interviewing (CLI). Sharon is the founder and CEO of the Clean Language Institute, with 14 years’ experience in nuclear power generation, holding a BSc in professional studies and a master certification in Neuro-Linguistic Programming. In 2006, Sharon introduced clean language questions and principles to a major nuclear power facility, focusing on interactions between field personnel, management and leaders. Sharon has trained others on symbolic modeling and clean methodologies since 2008. In 2013, she introduced clean language to Japan and has been training CLI since 2017. She works with James Lawley to develop clean language interviewing

and bring it to global participants while focusing specifically on safety and root cause investigations where serious injuries or fatalities have occurred. Sharon is the co-editor of *Who is Using Clean Language Anyway 2015*.

Martin Snoddon has worked in the field of conflict resolution since the early 1990s using peace-building approaches to address the legacy of violent conflict and to support victims of violence. His background includes extensive work in Northern Ireland and intensive work in the Balkans, later journeying into the battle-scarred West Bank, Gaza City's danger zones, Nicaragua and the Ukraine.

Martin was director of the Conflict Trauma Resource Centre in Belfast for 11 years and is currently director of Northern Spring, an independent training and consultancy. He has used clean language interviewing skills throughout his research and facilitation, often combining the two roles in a form of participatory action research. Clean language interviewing was a key part of his research resulting in the publication of *Legacy of War: Experiences of members of the Ulster Defence Regiment* (Snoddon, 2005) and *Mental Resilience Through Violent Conflict Project – Personal Stories* (Snoddon, 2014).

Wendy Sullivan has worked in the field of clean language for around 20 years and is one of the most experienced trainers in the field. Her career experience includes coaching, training, facilitation and consultancy within the public and private sectors. In addition to work within organisations, her business, Clean Change Company, delivers extensive open trainings in clean language internationally. Together with Judy Rees, Wendy authored a highly successful introduction to the field, *Clean language: Revealing metaphors and opening minds* (Crown House, 2008). She is also a clean language assessor, certifying clean language facilitators, and delivers an Association for Coaching certificated coach training called *Professional Clean Coach*.

Jacqueline Ann Surin, before becoming a full-time clean language coach, facilitator and trainer, was an award-winning and widely published journalist in Malaysia for 20 years. Before leaving journalism, she was the co-founder and chief editor of www.thenutgraph.com. Currently, she is a certified clean language facilitator and systemic modeller, and has a level 5 coaching and mentoring certification from the UK-based Institute of Leadership and Management. She has been training teams and organisations since 2005, and currently trains internationally both in-person and online. She has written for the Association for Coaching in the UK on her coaching and facilitation practice. She continues to contribute to the development of clean language and its applications through her writings at the UK-based Training Attention, Clean Learning and Clean Collection websites. Jacqueline gained an MA from Sussex University in the UK as a Chevening Scholar. She was also a Hubert Humphrey Scholar in the US.

Paul Tosey, PhD, is a freelance consultant and researcher. He first undertook training in clean language in 2006 and participates in the field as a coach, author and research supervisor. His career experience includes public sector organisation development and university roles, most recently as Senior Lecturer and Head of

PhD programmes in the Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. He has a long-standing research interest in exploring and understanding people's experiential worlds and in qualitative research methods for that purpose. Paul has published widely in academic journals, authored *NLP: a Critical Appreciation for Managers and Developers* (with Jane Mathison, Macmillan 2009) and co-edited the *Handbook of Research Methods on HRD* (with Mark Saunders, Edward Elgar 2015).

Di Tunney is a consultant with over 25 years' experience in market research. She uses clean language and Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques in qualitative research to provide clients with a deeper understanding of customer values, beliefs, behaviours and buying motivations than can be achieved using traditional research methodologies. Di's clients have ranged from SMEs to large corporates across a wide range of market sectors. Di is also an industry skills coach at Nottingham Trent University, where she designs and delivers Chartered Institute of Marketing accredited training programmes for SMEs in the East Midlands of the UK.

Caitlin Walker, PhD, is an educational and business consultant who has been using a form of clean language interviewing since 1997 to engage participants in reflectively co-designing their own change processes. This work is written up in *From Contempt to Curiosity: Creating the conditions for groups to collaborate* (Walker, 2014). Caitlin uses this approach in a wide range of projects including facilitating teenagers outside of the school system to develop sustainable paths to education; helping police interviewers to gather prima facie evidence and supporting corporate and community sector organisations through systemic, sustainable change processes. In 2021 she earned her doctorate from Liverpool John Moores University: *Using Clean Language Interviewing to Model Curriculum Design in Higher Education: Curriculum Design is Like What?* Together with James Lawley and Marian Way, Caitlin is designing and delivering clean interview training and assessment programmes to standardise the practice.

Uzma Waseem, MSc, is a trainee psychologist specialising in organisational behavior, and currently working towards a doctorate in occupational psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. Her full-time work at Genius Within CIC involves providing consultancy, coaching and psychological assessments to a range of organisations and working adults. Her interests lie predominantly in leadership and team development at work and augmenting organisation-wide neurodiversity, equity and inclusion (N-DEI) efforts. As a neurominority herself, she is using her academic, practitioner and lived experience to work closely with key stakeholders and optimise N-DEI strategy design, development and implementation.

Marian Way is a clean language facilitator, coach and trainer who has developed and delivered clean language-based training across the world. She is the author of *Clean Approaches for Coaches* Clean Publishing, 2013, co-author, with James Lawley, of *Insights in Space* Clean Publishing, 2017 and co-author, with Caitlin Walker, of *So you want to be ... #DramaFree*. Marian was previously a leading

innovator within the Weight Watchers organisation, which included developing the ‘points’ strategy, a local idea that went on to become a global innovation. More recently she has worked with James Lawley and Caitlin Walker to develop an assessment process for students of clean interviewing and is currently using clean language interviewing herself to research for a new book as well as for new training programmes.

Yuji Yamagami is the chief executive officer and sole owner of the consulting firm Ennovation Incorporated, in Japan. He attended the University of Oregon, in the US, graduating from Sophia University Japan with a degree in comparative culture. In 2001, he left his position as executive vice president of Yamagami Construction Co., Ltd. In 2012, he trained in clean language and symbolic modeling with Sharon Small, CEO and founder of Clean Language Institute. In 2013, he was the first to apply the clean language methodology, devised by David Grove, to quality management systems for internal auditors.

Yuji is a member of the Super ISO Research Group, a member of JIS Q 9005/9006 Revisions Review Committee (2014), Japan Quality Management Society Regular member, and JAB Management System Study Group. Yuji has published five ISO books, over 50 articles, and worked with over 50 companies conducting audits and training over 1500 auditors in ISO 9001.

Acknowledgements

In compiling this book we have been very fortunate to work with a large number of experts, friends and colleagues in the field. We are very grateful to all our contributors for their role in the development of clean language interviewing and for sharing their expertise in this book. Without exception the authors have been diligent, dedicated and responsive to our editorial requests and suggestions.

We thank Tony Chiva for helping to initiate the development of this book, which we believe to be a milestone in the development of the principles and practice of clean language interviewing. We echo his thoughtful dedication to Karen Hanley, who we each had known personally.

We are grateful to colleagues at Emerald Publishing for their support and prompt and helpful responses to our questions. Especial thanks go to Penny Tompkins and Fran Byrnes, who kindly commented on draft chapters.

It is probably easy from the outside to underestimate the work involved in editing a volume such as this. This work has been a true collaboration, and we are fortunate to have been able to share the tasks between three of us. We discovered numerous ways in which our respective strengths complemented each other, and we are very glad to have co-created this book together.

Last but not least, our respective partners and families have been highly supportive and understanding of the time we have spent with the book and away from them. Thank you.

Heather Cairns-Lee
James Lawley
Paul Tosey
12.12.2021

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Part 1

Principles

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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Clean Language Interviewing for Research

Paul Tosey, Heather Cairns-Lee and James Lawley

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we state the aims and scope of the book and its intended audience. The chapter describes clean language, explaining its origins and how it has developed from a psychotherapeutic approach into a practice with an international presence in varied fields of application such as coaching, business and education. We introduce the focus of this book, which is the use of clean language for the purpose of research interviews. Clean language questions, which are fundamental to this approach, are presented, and we describe four levels at which clean language interviewing can be applied. Issues of ethical practice are addressed. The chapter concludes with an outline of the applications of clean language interviewing that feature in the chapters in Part II.

NB: In this book the terms ‘clean language’ and ‘clean language interviewing’ are written using lower case, according to the convention of the American Psychological Association (sixth edition). ‘Clean language interviewing’ is sometimes abbreviated to CLI.

Keywords: Clean language interviewing (CLI); classically clean questions; epoché; ethics of interviewing; levels of CLI; theories of research interviewing

The Aims and Scope of This Book

We are delighted to present this introduction to the innovative practice of clean language interviewing for research. The aim of the book is to inform research practice through explaining the principles and methods of clean language and how they apply to research interviewing, illustrated by a variety of application cases.

The key contribution of CLI is to improve researchers' ability to obtain data that are faithful to the experience of the interviewee, particularly by minimising the introduction of the interviewer's assumptions and by avoiding leading questions. This is a vital skill for researchers working in settings such as academia, business, market research, healthcare, education and more – therefore the book is intended for both academic and applied researchers.

The book aims to be a landmark publication that defines the 'state of the art' of the field. It is authoritative, written by pioneers and leading practitioners of CLI and is informed by international, real-world experience from a variety of fields that include academic research, market research, journalism and conflict resolution. It complements existing volumes on clean language and its applications such as [Lawley and Tompkins \(2000\)](#), [Sullivan and Rees \(2008\)](#), and [Walker \(2014a\)](#), among others.

This book does not address non-research applications of interviewing, although its contents may still be of interest to interviewers more generally. Nor is it a primer on all aspects of research interviewing, such as how to arrange and manage interviews. For a general introduction to that subject we recommend other sources including Brinkmann and Kvale's *InterViews* (2014) and Patton's *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (2015).

What Is Clean Language? Origins and Description

In essence, clean language is an approach that aims to minimise the introduction of the questioner's own terms and assumptions in order to elicit another person's meanings in a way that is authentic to their experience. This broad purpose is relevant to facilitators in many contexts – psychotherapists, counsellors, law professionals, managers and so on.

Clean language originated in the 1980s through the work of counselling psychologist David Grove (1950–2008) with trauma victims ([Grove & Panzer, 1989](#)). Grove, a New Zealander, realised that 'many clients naturally described their symptoms in metaphor. He found that when he enquired about these using their exact words, their perception of trauma began to change' ([Lawley & Tompkins, 2000](#), p. xiii). Grove developed a way of asking questions that maintained fidelity to the client's metaphors. This approach became known as 'clean language' because it was predicated on keeping the psychotherapist's language 'clean' or free from their own words and assumptions.

To some people, clean language sounds rather like the 'nondirective' method devised by the American psychotherapist, Carl [Rogers \(1945\)](#). It departs from Rogers' approach in two important ways. First, any question or intervention from a facilitator (whether using clean language or not) is inevitably directive, in the sense that it entails a choice about where to direct the client's attention. Second, clean language avoids introducing the facilitator's own words through apparently innocuous questions such as 'How do you feel' and 'What is bothering you' which, as [Owen \(1989, p. 190\)](#) identifies, feature in the nondirective method. In particular, the nondirective approach uses paraphrasing which,

again, by introducing the facilitator's own words, can lead the client's response and alter the meaning and trajectory of the interaction. Chapter 2 explains in more detail the difference between 'clean' and 'leading' questions and how these can be identified.

Grove devised and continually developed his approach through his practice. A constant innovator, Grove was passionately devoted to experiential research and showed little interest in pausing to articulate his ideas in writing. His one book was initiated by his co-author, who persuaded Grove to verbalise his approach and wrote up the resulting 30 hours of audio recordings (Grove & Panzer, 1989, p. xii). Grove continued to innovate therapeutic methodologies that made use of and extended the various forms of clean language until the day he suddenly passed away in 2008.

While Grove was influenced by many ideas – about metaphor, systems theory, emergence and more – clean language was not derived from theoretical principles. It does, nevertheless, have strong correspondences with established theories, in particular, its conception of metaphor resonates with theories of embodied cognition developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Chapter 3 will go into more depth about the role of metaphor.

In the 1990s psychotherapists Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, who were among many inspired and intrigued by Grove, set out to observe his distinctive approach in detail. From this, they developed behavioural models and explanations of Grove's methods that enabled other people to learn them (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). The approach to interviewing described in this book largely reflects the way that clean language has been codified and systematised by Lawley and Tompkins and others (e.g. Sullivan & Rees, 2008; Walker, 2014a). These interpretations of Grove's practice have articulated principles that explain how and why it works.

The practice and theory of clean language have continued to expand and develop. In the twenty-first century it has burgeoned through applications within the arts (e.g. Calderwood, 2017), coaching (e.g. Cooper & Castellino, 2012; Dunbar, 2016), education (e.g. McCracken, 2016) and more. That it has an international presence is illustrated through Small and Chiou's (2014) compilation, which includes practitioners in North America, Europe, Asia and Australasia.

It is important to emphasise that, while its origins are psychotherapeutic, its principles and methods are independent of that context. At its core, clean language is a method of relating to a person, their observable behaviour and their inner world.

Clean Language Interviewing

Interviewing is a specific application of clean language that has been explored and developed over the last 20 years or more; Tompkins and Lawley (2006) listed several contexts in which clean language was being used as a research and interview tool by a variety of practitioners.

One of the earliest known examples of using clean language for interviewing was a training programme for a police force to help interviewers avoid leading vulnerable witnesses (Walker, 2014b). This had come about after several high-profile cases were dismissed when judges decided that witness testimony had been unfairly led.

Ian Owen (1996) appears to have been the first to acknowledge the potential of clean language as a method of enquiry into subjective experience. Its potential as a method of interviewing for research was investigated in 2010 through a project that explored the metaphors used by a sample of managers to represent their experiences of work-life balance. The project was written up for an academic audience in the *British Journal of Management* (Tosey, Lawley, & Meese, 2014) and is the subject of Chapter 5. CLI has since been used as the central research method in doctoral theses, including those by Cairns-Lee (2017) and Walker (2021), which are the basis of Chapters 6 and 11 respectively in Part II.

One important distinction between the application of clean language in research interviewing and in contexts such as psychotherapy and counselling is that, in the latter, it is the client's purpose that gives the interaction its *raison d'être*. In research interviewing, typically it is the researcher's purpose that gives rise to the interaction and defines the situation. In other words, the researcher has a need or desire to find something out and initiates the encounter.

This distinction is not absolute, however. There are participatory forms of research (Pant, 2014) in which the interviewees are co-researchers. In action research, too, the difference between researcher and participants may be fluid. These forms of research are illustrated in Chapters 9, 12 and 13 in Part II.

The core contribution that clean language can offer to the activity of research interviewing is the capacity to elicit data that are authentic to the interviewee. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to show that interview data and findings originate with interviewees and are not introduced or led by the interviewer.

Varieties of Interviewing in Research

In this section we briefly locate CLI in relation to some other approaches to research interviewing.

Interviews are used ubiquitously as a method of data collection in qualitative research (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011; King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019). Yet interviews are hard to do well because they are complex social situations that involve impression management, meaning-making and identity work (Alvesson, 2003).

There are many approaches to research interviewing encompassing a broad range of theories and methods based on a variety of ontological and epistemological assumptions. This means that different approaches to interviewing hold varying assumptions about the nature of reality, the status of interview data and the type of knowledge produced (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020).

Various authors offer typologies of qualitative research interviews, for example Alvesson (2003), Roulston (2010), and Langley and Meziani (2020). Alvesson's

categorisation outlines three fundamental positions on interviews, which he calls neo-positivist, romantic and localist.

According to Alvesson, the neopositivist position regards the interview as an 'instrument' for obtaining reliable data from the informant and strives to reduce interviewer bias in order to make objective knowledge claims. The romantic position regards the interview as a human encounter and prioritises the creation of a close relationship with the interviewee through rapport in order to gain privileged access to their authentic inner world. From the localist position, an interview is a kind of performance that is likely to proceed according to social norms. Interviews are local in that they are assumed to provide data about how people orientate to and act within this type of situation. Thus interviews 'should not be treated as a tool for collecting data on something existing outside this empirical situation' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 16).

The stance of clean language differs subtly but significantly from all three. Clean language interviewers are certainly concerned not to introduce bias, yet (in contrast to the neopositivist stance) they regard data as descriptions of the interviewee's perceptual reality, not as some objective truth. The interviewer inevitably influences the interaction through topic selection and directing the interviewee's attention, yet aims to avoid shaping the content of the interviewee's account.

Although clean language interviewers do relate to interviewees in a human way, they differ from Alvesson's romantic position in that they do not regard rapport as a means of encouraging the interviewee to 'confess' or disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings. Primarily, clean language interviewers aim to enable interviewees to become aware of, attend to and describe their own perceptual reality. In effect, interviewers seek to be in rapport with that perceptual reality.

Unlike Alvesson's localist position, the clean language interviewer does assume that interviews can provide valuable data about an interviewee's inner experience and perceptions. This is not inevitable, however, as it requires the permission and willingness of the interviewee, together with skill on the interviewer's part. It is worth adding that a clean language interview is regarded as local in the sense that it co-creates emergent meaning in the interview context. That meaning is neither pre-formed, merely being extracted by the interviewer, nor does it arise wholly anew from a 'blank slate'. In CLI we presuppose that the interviewee's expressions and descriptions remain congruent with, and reflect the organisation of, their current mental models (Antonovsky, 1993; Maturana & Varela, 1992).

This indicates theories of interviewing from which CLI differs. To what is CLI more akin? Like Owen (1996), we argue that CLI most closely resembles, and is particularly relevant for, phenomenological research (Conklin, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). This approach typically involves guiding introspection (Vermersch, 2009) in order to investigate a person's lifeworld and subjective meaning (Eberle, 2014). The name 'phenomenology' refers to the study of people's lived experience of a phenomenon. Phenomenology takes a number of forms which are the subject of many books and papers that we are simplifying here.

A notable similarity with CLI is that phenomenological interviewers are encouraged to practise ‘epoché’. Adopted from Greek philosophy by Edmund Husserl, the originator of phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought (Husserl, 1982), it refers to suspension of judgement and involves setting aside or ‘bracketing’ (LeVasseur, 2003) the researcher’s assumptions about a phenomenon.

Phenomenological researchers such as Conklin (2007) acknowledge that practising epoché can be very challenging because the researcher’s questions inevitably create structures and categories that influence the participant’s response. Few guidelines exist for how to achieve epoché. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004, p. 22), for example, suggest ‘letting the preconceptions and pre-judgments enter and leave my mind freely’, but this is notable for its lack of behavioural specificity. One benefit of CLI is that it is more behaviourally specific, particularly with regard to the wording of questions, and so can help researchers know how to implement the principle of epoché in practice. This is exemplified in many chapters in this volume.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that we are not advocating CLI as the one best way to interview. As this section has explained, the aims and principles of CLI are more congruent with some philosophies and theories of interviewing than others. A key issue for researchers to consider is the fit between the approach to interviewing and the aims and knowledge claims of the research. CLI is likely to be suitable for inquiries that aim to explore people’s lifeworlds and subjective meanings and that intend to minimise the interviewer’s influence on the findings.

Clean Language Questions

Interviews have a deceptive simplicity, yet we argue that keeping the researcher’s world view out of the interaction is more difficult than it first appears. Most interviewers, even those with experience, despite their best intentions are likely to be unaware of the degree to which they include their own assumptions in their questions. This makes them prone to ‘leading’ the interviewee, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Central to CLI is the use of ‘clean questions’ that were originally developed by David Grove. These questions are ‘clean’ in the sense that they are probably as free from the questioner’s terms and assumptions as it is possible to be. They can therefore direct attention to the participant’s verbal and non-verbal content without ascribing meaning or suggesting answers.

While it is impossible to eliminate the questioner’s terms and assumptions entirely from the wording of a question, the language used in clean questions is mostly confined to ‘semantic primes’ – concepts that cannot be expressed in simpler terms and that appear in every language studied (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014). These terms are near-universal in the sense that they entail constructs of time, space and form commonly used to organise experience cross-culturally.

Table 1.1 shows a fundamental set of 11 ‘classically clean’ questions. These are not the totality of possible clean questions; they represent those that are most