**INTRODUCTION TO YARNING**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Over the years, researchers have utilized a variety of formats and approaches to interview and to observe participants. Examples include

* dyadic interviews, in which researchers interview two participants simultaneously
* semi-structured interviews, in which researchers ask prepared questions, but also prompt or probe participants to explore the answers further, and
* narrative interviews, in which the researchers invite the participants to recount a story about their lives.

**Key features of yarning**

Yarning is another format that researchers often utilize, especially when they interview Indigenous peoples, in Australia and elsewhere. Yarning is similar to narrative interviews but entails many features of conversation and storytelling that typify Indigenous communities. In their seminal article, Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010) delineate some of the features, kinds, and benefits of yarning. For example, they argue that

* yarning is an **informal, relaxed conversation** between participants and researchers
* researchers prompt the participants to recount **stories** that may be relevant to the topic; researchers transport themselves into the places, events, and topics the participants recount
* as they transport themselves into these stories, the researchers strive to appreciate the lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, and ideas of participants on the research topic

As several researchers underscore, yarning is a natural practice in many Indigenous communities. In Indigenous cultures, yarning is intimately connected with spirituality and thus is a powerful means of connection between people (Towney, 2005).

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| **Kinds of yarning** |

Researchers have differentiated several kinds of distinct, but overlapping, kinds of yarning. Typically, researchers begin with the first kind—social yarning—and then shift periodically between the three other kinds. The following table defines these four kinds of yarning and also characterizes the features as well as illustrates each kind.

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| Definition | Features | Illustration |
| **Social yarning**: Unstructured conversation before the research is discussed | * The aim of social yarning is primarily to develop trust, rapport, and understanding * The conversation, although to some extent guided by the topic, is typically unstructured and will often meander * Social yarning might include gossip, humor, or recent events | * If Indigenous, the researchers might converse about their community, family, and language group * Alternatively, researchers might ask participants about their day, events in the community, or their family |
| **Research topic yarning**: A conversation in which the researcher gathers stories from participants about the research topic | * The conversation is usually unstructured or semi-structured * The conversation is relaxed and interactive * Nevertheless, the start and end of this conversation is defined clearly—and the conversation revolves around a specific purpose or topic * The researchers thus tends to behave slightly more formally at this time: They will thank the participants and discuss the research question. | * Tell me your story—such as how you felt growing up as a girl in your family |
| **Collaborative yarning**: The researcher and participant actively and cooperatively share, explore, and exchange information about a topic or idea | * Sometimes, the researchers and participants will switch between research topic yarning—in which the participant is relating stories about the topic—to collaborative yarning—in which both individuals are sharing and exploring their perspectives |  |
| **Therapeutic yarning**: After the participant discloses information that could be emotional or even traumatic, the researcher helps this participant understand, reframe, and affirm their experience | * The researcher might prompt the participant to contemplate the experience from another perspective—to derive meaning from this experience * To illustrate, researchers might encourage participants to discuss these stories over an extended period rather than close the discussion prematurely; the researchers will not shift to another topic until they feel the participant can readily disengage from this topic * Participants could be prompted to contemplate why they feel these events unfolded | * Do you feel your violent response could be something you learned from your family? |

Some researchers have distinguished other variants of yarning. The following table illustrates these variants

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| Definition | Features | Illustration |
| **Family yarning**: Researchers and participants discuss where they are from, where their family are from, and their position within the community (Walker et al., 2014) | * Although intimately connected to social yarning, family yarning helps researchers understand the family and hierarchical protocols—and thus can facilitate their connection to the community | * “Where are your mob from?”, assuming the researcher is Indigenous |
| **Cross-cultural yarning**: The Indigenous researchers or participants might adapt to accommodate Westernized norms and protocols, such as university practices (Walker et al., 2014) | * This variant of yarning emerges during conversations between indigenous and non-indigenous people * During these interactions, individuals devote attention to protocol and cultural respect—and, typically, both indigenous and non-indigenous forms of communication prevail. | * Shaking hands |

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| **Benefits and drawbacks of yarning** |

Yarning diverges from other interview techniques. Consequently, yarning generates several benefits and drawbacks relative to alternative methods. The following table outlines these benefits and drawbacks

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| Benefits | Drawbacks |
| Yarning facilitates **candid** and **extensive** conversations and stories about a topic—and thus enables thick, deep, and nuanced descriptions (see also Dean, 2010) | Data collection can be **time consuming**. Researchers may need to inform participants they can dedicate only a limited time to the conversation. Indeed, researchers need to appreciate that Indigenous participants are often occupied with many activities and obligations—and thus might appreciate this limit in the conversation |
| Yarning fosters a **sense of comfort** in many Indigenous communities. That is, yarning matches the cultural activities of many Indigenous communities (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). Likewise, yarning matches Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Leeson et al., 2016) | Data management and analysis can also be time consuming, because yarning can generate copious amounts of data. |
| Yarning **supersedes the division** between researchers and communities with a natural interaction between two humans. Thus, yarning is more collaborative (e.g., Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2012); the researcher mainly positions themselves as a learner (Leeson et al., 2016). Similarly, yarning confers Indigenous peoples more control over which information is divulged (Dean, 2010) | Because yarning is embedded within the culture of communities, participants might not differentiate research from personal lives. They may continue to discuss the topics after the research ends. Although not always a problem, these discussions might diverge from the ethical constraints of the project—such as attempts to promote confidentiality. |

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| **Key practices** |

To utilize yarning effectively, researchers need to be cognisant of several challenges. The following table outlines these challenges.

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| Challenge | Considerations and solutions |
| **When to end conversations.** If researchers are too rigid about time, they might stifle the stories prematurely. If researchers are too flexible about time, the procedure might be too time consuming | * When participants begin to repeat themselves frequently, the researcher might initiate attempts to shift or close the conversation |
| **Maintaining relevance**. Participants might stray considerably from the initial topic of interest. Researchers need to decide whether to embrace these diversions or prompt the participant to shift to the topic of interest | * Whenever possible, researchers should grant participants the license to recount the story how they would like but, nevertheless, also occasionally interject with questions or prompts that shift the discussion towards the topic |
| **Definition**. The precise definition and features of yarning are hard to articulate, because the characteristics of yarning vary across different settings and communities (Dean, 2010) |  |

Researchers can embed yarning within many paradigms or methodologies. For example,

* Fredericks et al. (2011) demonstrated how yarning can be utilized in action research—research that is designed to generate some change in policies or practices.
* Leeson et al. (2016) argued that yarning could be combined with appreciative enquiry, in which participants are primarily prompted to discuss the best features of some intervention or setting

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| **Compatible philosophies: Slow science** |

Many of the sensibilities of yarning are compatible with the philosophy of slow science and slow research (see Adams et al., 2014). The philosophy of slow science emanated from other slow movements (e.g., Horore, 2004), such as slow food, slow travel, and slow parenting. This movement, emanating from a reaction against fast foods, promulgates the benefits that people experience when they slow their life. That is, this perspective challenges the assumption that rapid activity is invariably preferable. Rapid activity impedes many of our fundamental needs, such as the need to belong, to be loved, and to be appreciated. Hence, the slow movement priorities quality over quantity, contemplation over haste, and savouring life over merely completing tasks as swiftly as possible.

**Examples of slow movements**

This slow movement has manifested in many spheres of life. The following table illustrates some examples of slow movements.

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| Movement | Assumptions |
| Slow food | * A reaction against fast food * Encourages traditional foods, regional produce, and growing food organically |
| Slow living | * Advocates a more balanced life around meaning and fulfillment * Embraces mindfulness while completing daily tasks to diminish ruminations about the future |
| Slow medicine | * Champions the notion of fostering a relationship between the practitioner and client * Increases the likelihood that decisions are tailored to the distinct features of each person |
| Slow parenting | * Encourages parents to refrain from imposing too many expectations on children * Reduces the likelihood that parents schedule too many activities and prevent children from exploring their world at a suitable pace |

**Slow science and slow research**

Emanating from this movement is slow science (Frith, 2020; Hunsinger, 2019; Stengers, 2018; Stoevenbelt, 2019) also called slow research (see Adams et al., 2014). The slow science movement advocates the benefits that society enjoy whenever researchers are granted time to think and to read—rather than publish too frequently and haphazardly. Frith (2020) stipulated some of the practices that could foster this slow science. The following table outlines these practices

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| Practice | Examples |
| Restrict output | * Restrict the number of grants academics can pursue and the number of papers they publish every year to improve quality * Research could then explore the level of output that optimizes quality and productivity |
| Prolong timescales | * Reward the researchers who pursue ongoing programs—programs that might not attract significant funding or citations in the first couple of years * That is, consider how to enable researchers to sacrifice their immediate needs to pursue a more inspiring vision of the future * To achieve this goal, perhaps offer these researchers modest but stable rewards, provided they demonstrate their efforts and develop effective strategies to pursue these goals rather than achieve outputs. |
| Compare rapid and slow science | * Compare the benefits of fast science and slow science empirically—to establish whether or when slow science is actually beneficial |
| Recognise teamwork more effectively | * Because many of the greatest innovation emanate from blends of diverse skills, research institutions need to introduce better approaches to foster teamwork over extended periods of time * One approach in the future might be to replace authorship with contributors—analogous to film credits. |
| Improve techniques that are designed to assess quality | * Existing techniques to evaluate quality are deficient—and do not align to intuitive perceptions * Perhaps authors themselves can contribute by ranking the quality of their own works, consistent with the tenets of unconscious thought theory (Dijksterhuis, 2004) * Other authors can also rate the perceived quality of works they read. |
| Model slow science | * Experience scientists should not only model these practices but disseminate their insights about the benefits of quality over quantity in their careers * They may, for example, recount their regrets about publishing some articles prematurely or failing to pursue a program of research over time |

Other authors underscore other features of slow science or slow research. Adams et al (2014) advocate the importance of localised research projects that are responsible to the social needs of a community.

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