



Introduction to Interview Research

In: Doing Interviews

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Introduction to Interview Research

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Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you should

- be familiar with some examples of research interviews;
- know about interview research in a historical and social context; and
- understand methodological and ethical issues related to interviewing.

Three interview sequences

If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk with them? Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction. Human beings talk with each other, they interact, pose questions and answer questions. Through conversations we get to know other people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings and hopes and the world they live in. In an interview conversation, the researcher asks about, and listens to, what people themselves tell about their lived world, about their dreams, fears and hopes, hears their views and opinions in their own words, and learns about their school and work situation, their family and social life. The research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Below follow interview sequences from three research projects, treating Danish pupils' views on grading in high school in Denmark, Canadian teachers' views on their work situation in a postmodern society, and the views of the downtrodden on their living conditions in a French suburb, respectively.

The passages serve here to give a first impression of what a qualitative research interview may look like, and they will be returned to throughout the book in discussions of interviewing and of analyzing interviews.

Box 1.1 An interview on grading

Interviewer: You mentioned previously something about grades, would you please try and say more about that?

Pupil: Grades are often unjust, because very often – very often – they are only a measure of how much you talk, and how much you agree with the teacher's opinion. For instance, I may state an opinion on the basis of a tested ideology, and which is against the teacher's ideology. The teacher will then, because it is his ideology, which he finds to be the best one, of course say that what he is saying is right and what I am saying is wrong.

Interviewer: How should that influence the grade?

Pupil: Well, because he would then think that I was an idiot – who comes up with the wrong answers.

Interviewer: Is this not only your postulate?

Pupil: No, there are lots of concrete examples.

The first interview sequence (Box 1.1) is taken from a study I conducted on the effects of grading in Danish high schools, and was conducted by one of my students. The overall design of the study is presented later (Box 4.3). Here we see how the pupil, in a response to an open question from the interviewer, himself introduces an important dimension of his experience of grades – they are unfair – and then spontaneously gives several reasons why they are unfair. The interviewer critically follows up the answers, asks for specifics, and tests the strength of the pupil's belief through counter-questions where he doubts what the pupil tells him. This rather simple form of straightforward questioning contrasts with the reciprocity of everyday conversations. The interviewer is in a power position and sets the stage by determining the topic of the interchange; it is the interviewer who asks and the interviewee who answers. The researcher does not contribute with his position on the issue, nor does the pupil ask the interviewer about his view of grades.

The next sequence (Box 1.2) is from Hargreaves's study of the work situation of Canadian teachers with changes of forms of school leadership in a postmodern society. Hargreaves interviewed Canadian teachers about their work situation in the transit from a modern to a postmodern age. One key theme that emerged was the tension between individualism and collegiality. The teacher quoted in Box 1.2 is thus rather critical of the school administration's requirements of teamwork, which he regards as a control counteracting creative teaching by the individual teachers. The interviewer does not merely register opinions, but is also asking for elaborations, and receives the teacher's arguments for why he does not think that anybody should have to participate in the form of teamwork he is subjected to. Hargreaves interpreted this and other interview sequences on team work as expressions of a 'contrived collegiality' (see chapter 9 in the present book).

Box 1.2 An interview on team work

Teacher: It's being encouraged more and more. They've been through all the schools. They want you working as a team.

Interviewer: Do you think that's good?

Teacher: So long as they allow for the creativity of the individual to modify the program. But if they want everything lock-stepped, identical – no, I think it would be disastrous, because you're going to get some people that won't think at all, that just sit back and coast on somebody else's brains and I don't feel that's good for anybody.

Interviewer: Do you feel you're given that space at the moment?

Teacher: With [my teaching partner] I am. I know with some others here, I wouldn't ... I'd go crazy.

Interviewer: How would that be ...?

Teacher: Basically controlled. They would want – first of all it would be their ideas. And I would have to fit into their teaching style, and it would have to fit into their time slot. And I don't think anybody should have to work like that.

Source: Hargreaves (1994, pp. 178–9).

The next sequence (Box 1.3 overleaf) is from a large interview project on the conditions of the downtrodden by the French sociologist Bourdieu and his co-workers. The sequence in Box 1.3 is taken from one of the many interviews reported at length by Bourdieu et al. in their book on the situation of the immigrants and the poor in France. The two young men in the interview sequence in Box 1.3 are living in a suburban housing project in the north of France under dismal living conditions (when editing the present book in late 2005, there were in France large uprisings among the youth in these suburbs, protesting against their miserable situation and harassment by the police). In the interview more than a decade earlier Bourdieu is not a neutral questioner, but expresses his own attitudes and feelings towards the situation of the young men, as well as taking a critical attitude towards their account.

Box 1.3 An interview with two young men

– You were telling me that it wasn't much fun around here, why? What is it, your job, your leisure time?

François: Yeah, both work and leisure. Even in this neighborhood there is nothing much.

Ali: There's no leisure activities.

François: We have this leisure center but the neighbors complain.

Ali: They're not very nice, that's true,

– *why do they complain, because they....*

François: Because we hang around the public garden, and in the evening here is nothing in our project, we have to go in the hallways when it's too cold outside. And when there's too much noise and stuff, they call the cops, (...)

– *You are not telling me the whole story....*

Ali: We are always getting assaulted in our project; just yesterday we got some tear gas thrown at us, really, by a guy in an apartment, A bodybuilder. A pumper,

– *Why, what were you doing, bugging him?*

François: No, when we are in the entryway he lives just above, when we are in the hall we talk, sometimes we shout.

– *But that took place during the daytime, at night?*

François: No, just in the evening.

– *Late?*

François: Late, around 10, 11 o'clock.

– *Well you know, he's got the right to snooze. The tear gas is a bit much but if you got on his nerves all night, you can see where he's coming from, right?***Ali:** Yeah, but he could just come down and say. ...

– *Yes, sure, he could come down and merely say 'go somewhere else'. ...*

Ali: Instead of tear gas.

Source: Bourdieu et al. (1999, pp. 64–5).

These three interviews address important issues of the subjects' life world, such as grades in school, changes in school leadership, and deplorable suburban living conditions. They are not merely 'tape-recording sociologies', in Bourdieu's expression, but the interviewers actively follow up on the subjects' answers,

and seek to clarify and extend the interview statements. This concerns obtaining reasons for the teacher's rejection of teamwork, posing critical questions to the pupil believing in a biased grading by his teachers, and challenging the young men's presentations of themselves as innocent victims of harassment. I shall return to the knowledge production in these interview sequences throughout the book.

Interview research in history and in the social sciences

Conversations are an old way of obtaining systematic knowledge. In ancient Greece, Thucydides interviewed participants from the Peloponnesian Wars to write the history of the wars, and Socrates developed philosophical knowledge through dialogues with his Sophist opponents. The term *interview*, is, however, of recent origin; it came into use in the seventeenth century. An interview is literally an *inter-view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest. The first journalistic interview is dated to 1859 with the interview with the Mormon leader Brigham Young published in the *New York Herald Tribune* (Silvester, 1993).

Systematic literature on research interviewing is a new phenomenon of the last few decades. Qualitative interviews have, however, previously been extensively employed in the social sciences. Anthropologists and sociologists have long used informal interviews to obtain knowledge from their informants. Within education and the health sciences, the interview has become a common research method in the last few decades. Turning to my own discipline, I shall give some examples of how qualitative interviews throughout the history of psychology have been a key method for producing scientific and professional knowledge.

- Freud's psychoanalytic theory was to a large extent founded on therapeutic interviews with his patients. His several hundred interviews, an hour long with each patient, were based on the patient's free associations and on the therapist's 'free-floating attention' (Freud, 1963). These qualitative interviews produced new psychological knowledge about dreams and neuroses, personality and sexuality, knowledge that after a hundred years still has a prominent position in psychological textbooks. Psychoanalysis continues to have a professional impact on psychotherapy, to be of interest to other disciplines and the general public, and to represent a challenge to philosophers.
- Piaget's (1930) theory of child development was based on his interviews with children in natural settings, often in combination with simple experimental tasks. He was trained as a psychoanalyst, and what he termed his 'clinical method' was inspired by the psychoanalytic interview. He let the children talk spontaneously about the weight and size of objects and noticed the manner in which their thoughts unfolded, using a combination of naturalistic observations, simple tests and interviews.
- Experiments on the effects of changes in illumination on production at the Hawthorne Chicago plant of the Western Electrical Company in the 1920s had led to unexpected results – work output and worker morale improved when the lighting of the production rooms was increased, as well as when it was decreased. These unforeseen findings were followed up in what may have been the largest interview inquiry ever conducted. More than 21,000 workers were each interviewed for over

an hour and the interview transcripts analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The authors were inspired by therapeutic interviews; they mention the influence of Janet, Freud, Jung, and in particular Piaget, whose clinical method of interviewing children they found particularly useful quantitatively (*Management and the Worker*, Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939).

- The design and advertisements of consumer products have since the 1950s been extensively investigated by individual qualitative interviews, and in recent decades by interviews in focus groups. One pioneer, Dichter, reports in *The Strategy of Desire* (1960) an interview study he conducted in 1939 on consumer motivation for purchasing a car, with more than a hundred detailed conversational interviews. One main finding was how the importance of a car goes beyond its technical qualities to also encompass its 'personality', which today is commonplace knowledge in marketing. Dichter described his interview technique as inspired by the diagnoses of psychoanalysts and termed it a 'depth interview', and also, inspired by the therapist Carl Rogers, a 'non-directive interview'.

These four historical interview studies have influenced the way we think about men, women and children today, and they have had a major impact on social practices such as therapy, and on techniques for controlling the behaviour of workers and consumers (Kvale, 2003). Freud and Piaget, whose main empirical evidence came from interviews, are still among the psychologists most quoted in scientific literature, and their interpretations of their interviews with patients and children have had a major impact on how we understand personality and childhood today. Thus in *Time Magazine's* (1999) selection of the hundred most influential people of the twentieth century, the only social scientists among the twenty leading 'Scientists and Thinkers' were the economist Keynes and the psychologists Freud and Piaget. The Hawthorne investigations have had a major impact on the organization of industrial production by instigating changes from a 'human engineering' to a 'human relations' mode of managing workers. The marketing of consumer products today rests heavily upon qualitative interviews, in particular in focus groups, to secure maximum prediction and control of the consumers' purchasing behaviour.

In the social sciences today, qualitative interviews are increasingly employed as a research method in their own right, with an expanding methodological literature on how to carry out interview research. Glaser and Strauss's sociological study of hospitals, reported in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967), pioneered a qualitative research movement in the social sciences. They used qualitative interviews integrated in their field studies of the hospital world. Two important early books systematically introducing research interviewing were Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979) and Mishler's *Research Interviewing – Context and Narrative* (1986). For an overview of the present scope of research interviewing, the reader is referred to Gubrium and Holstein's *The Handbook of Interview Research* (2002), and for qualitative research more broadly to Denzin and Lincoln's *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2005).

Qualitative methods – ranging from participant observation over interviews to discourse analysis – have since the 1980s become key methods of social research. The rapidly growing number of books about qualitative research is one indication of this trend; thus for one leading company – Sage Publications – there was a

growth in qualitative books from 10 books in 1980–7 to 130 books in 1995–2002 (Seale et al., 2004). An opening of the social sciences to the humanities has also taken place, drawing on hermeneutics, as well as narrative, discursive, conversational and linguistic forms of analysis (see, e.g., Schwandt, 2001).

Technical, epistemological and cultural reasons may be suggested for the growing use of qualitative research interviews. The availability of small portable tape recorders in the 1950s made the exact recording of interviews easy. In the 1980s, computer programs facilitated the qualitative analyses of transcribed interviews. Broad changes in current thought, reflected in philosophy, emphasize key aspects of interview knowledge. With a linguistic turn in philosophy, conversations, discourses and narratives are regarded as essential for obtaining knowledge of the social world. In addition to this there are phenomenological descriptions of consciousness and of the life world, hermeneutic interpretations of the meaning of texts, and a postmodern emphasis on the social construction of knowledge (see Gibbs, 2007; Rapley, 2007).

Interviews have also become part of the common culture; the current age, as visualized by the talk shows on TV, has been termed an 'interview society' by Atkinson and Silverman (1997), where production of the self has come in focus and the interview serves as a social technique by construction of the self. The authors attribute the prevalence of interviews to the spirit of the age; we may add that in an experiential economy of a consumer society, where the sale of experiences and lifestyles is essential for the economy, qualitative interviews become a key approach in market research to predict and control consumer behaviour.

Methodological and ethical issues

The interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose determined by the one party – the interviewer. It is a professional interaction, which goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge. The qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge. One form of research interview – a semi-structured life-world interview – will be in focus throughout this book. It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena.

Within the social sciences the closeness of the research interview to everyday conversations may have implied an illusory simplicity, which has contributed to the popularity of research interviewing – it is too easy to start interviewing without any preceding preparation or reflection. A novice researcher may have a good idea, grab a tape recorder, go out and find some subjects, and start questioning them. The recorded interviews are transcribed and then – during the analysis of the many pages of transcripts – a multitude of problems about the purpose and content of the interviews surface. The likelihood that these spontaneous interview studies lead to worthwhile information is meagre; rather than producing new substantial knowledge about a topic, such interviews may be reproducing common opinions and prejudices. This being said, interviewing can be an exciting way of doing strong and valuable research. The personal interrelationship with the unfolding of stories and new insights can be rewarding for both parties of the interview interaction. Reading the transcribed

interviews may inspire the researcher to new interpretations of well-known phenomena. And interviewing can produce substantial new knowledge to a field. Some examples are given throughout this book.

A novice researcher who is methodologically oriented may have a host of questions about technical and conceptual issues in an interview project. For example: How do I begin an interview project? How many subjects will I need? How can I avoid influencing the subjects with leading questions? Can the interviews be of harm to the subjects? Is transcription of the interviews necessary? How do I analyze the interviews? Will my interpretations only be subjective? Can I be sure that I get to know what the subjects really mean? How do I report my extensive interview texts?

If corresponding questions were raised about, for example, a questionnaire survey, several would be fairly easy to answer by consulting authoritative textbooks on standard techniques and rules of survey research. As will appear from the present book, the situation is quite the contrary for the little-standardized craft of qualitative interview research, for which there are few standard rules or common methodological conventions. The reading of this book may then be frustrating, as in lieu of standard procedures and fixed rules, the answers to questions such as those posed above will be in the form 'It depends upon ... the specific purpose and topic of an investigation'.

Ethical issues permeate interview research. The knowledge produced depends on the social relationship of interviewer and interviewee, which again rests on the interviewer's ability to create a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk of private events for later public use. This again requires a delicate balance between the interviewer's concern of pursuing interesting knowledge and ethical respect for the integrity of the interview subject. The tension of knowledge and ethics in research interviewing is well expressed in Sennett's book *Respect* (2004, pp. 37–8):

In-depth interviewing is a distinctive, often frustrating craft. Unlike a pollster asking questions, the in-depth interviewer wants to probe the responses people give. To probe, the interviewer cannot be stonily impersonal; he or she has to give something of himself or herself in order to merit an open response. Yet the conversation lists in one direction; the point is not to talk the way friends do. The interviewer all too frequently finds that he or she has offended subjects, transgressing a line over which only friends or intimates can cross. The craft consists in calibrating social distances without making the subject feel like an insect under the microscope.

Key points

- The qualitative interview is a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world. It provides a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions.
- Qualitative interview research has a long history in the social sciences, whereas systematic literature on interview research is a new phenomenon of the last few decades.
- The interview is a powerful method of producing knowledge of the human situation, as demonstrated

by historical interview studies, which have changed the ways of understanding the human situation and of managing human behaviour throughout the twentieth century.

Further reading

The following sources will extend this brief introduction to interviewing and qualitative research in more detail:

Edited by: **Denzin, N.K.** and **Lincoln, Y.S.** (eds) **(2005)** *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Edited by: **Fielding, N.** (ed.) **(2003)** *Interviewing, Vols. I-IV*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Flick, U. **(2006)** *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Edited by: **Gubrium, J.F.** and **Holstein, J.A.** (eds) **(2002)** *Handbook of Interview Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Edited by: **Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F.** and **Silverman, D.** (eds) **(2004)** *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.

Edited by: **Silvester, E.** (ed.) **(1993)** *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*. London: Penguin Books.

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