

knowledge. The moral aspects of an interview inquiry are brought up in Chapter 6, where ethical issues that may arise throughout the stages of an interview investigation are discussed.

The interview situation is treated in Chapter 7, with the aim of improving the quality of the knowledge produced. Preparing for and carrying out a research interview is discussed, and an interview about grades is reproduced to illustrate forms of questioning. Quality criteria for qualitative interviews are suggested in Chapter 8, where also ethical aspects of the interview situation and the issue of leading questions are also addressed.

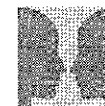
The structuring of the interviews for subsequent analysis is addressed in Chapter 9. Technical questions of transcribing raise principal issues about the differences between oral and written language. The chapter concludes by outlining the use of computer programs for handling interview texts.

The next three chapters focus on the analysis of interviews. A discussion of "the 1,000-page question" in Chapter 10 highlights some key issues of interview analysis. Chapter 11 provides an overview of approaches to analysis, such as meaning condensation and categorization, narrative structuring and interpretation. In Chapter 12, the plurality of interpretations is related to the hermeneutic primacy of the question, and questions posed to interview statements about grading are discussed, drawing on different contexts of interpretation and validation. Finally, a modern quest for meaning is contrasted with a postmodern deconstruction of reified meanings.

Verification of the knowledge produced in interviews is treated in Chapter 13, where generalizability, reliability, and validity in qualitative research are discussed. Validation as a social construction is treated in some detail, and philosophical conceptions of knowledge as conversation and action are included and communicative and pragmatic forms of validation outlined.

With the emphasis on validation as communication and action, the reporting of interviews comes into the foreground. Purposes and forms of interview reports are discussed in Chapter 14. Writing is discussed as a social construction, and in order to get beyond the often boring interview-quoting reports, modes for enriching the reports are suggested.

# 5



## Thematizing and Designing an Interview Study

This chapter attempts to design an interview investigation that goes beyond the no-method or all-method dilemma by emphasizing the expertise and craftsmanship of the interview researcher. It starts by describing a contrast between the formal reports of social science studies and the openness of the semistructured interview. An emotional account of the hardships of an interview journey is given, showing how things can go wrong when the overall design of an interview investigation is not considered. Then a more structured, seven-stage route for investigating is discussed—thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, interpreting, verifying, and reporting. The stages are illustrated by my study of the effects of grades on learning. The first two stages of an interview study, thematizing and designing, are then treated in some detail. Finally, going beyond method by conceiving of research as craftsmanship is suggested.

### Openness and Emotions in Interview Studies

Articles in social science journals give rather formalized pictures of the research process. Editorial requirements promote a distorted technical picture of scientific research as a logical, linear process—which is far from the continually changing actual research process with its surprises, design changes, and reformulations of concepts and hypotheses. In a realistic presentation of designing qualitative re-

search, Marshall and Rossman (1995) discuss how the formalistic outlining of an interview investigation might also be required on applications for research funding, where the emphasis is on clear and well-structured proposals.

One example of a more valid description of the vicissitudes of actual scientific research is "A Case History in Scientific Method," by the radical behaviorist Skinner (1961). He dismisses the formalistic way of presenting research and describes the many chance happenings and surprises from his own experimental research on behavior that led to significant discoveries of animal and human behavior. Thus, happenings such as the breakdown of feeding apparatuses and the experimental rats having babies led to discoveries of new contingencies of reinforcements for learning. Such realistic descriptions of scientific research behavior can be a solace to students mystified by the neat formal presentations of research publications and textbooks on methodology.

The very virtue of qualitative interviews is their openness. No standard techniques or rules exist for an interview investigation based on unstandardized qualitative interviews. There are, however, standard choices of methods at the different stages of an interview investigation. They include questions such as: How many interviews will be needed? Should the interviews be taped, and should they be transcribed? How should the interviews be analyzed? Should the interpretations be given to the interviewee?

Rather than prescribe standardized procedures and techniques, the present approach calls attention to standard methodological choices arising at the different stages of an interview investigation. The aim is to make decisions about method on a reflective level, based on knowledge of the topic of the study and of the methodological options available, and their likely consequences for the interview project as a whole. The very openness and flexibility of the interview, with its many on-the-spot decisions—for example, whether to follow up new leads in an interview situation or to stick to the interview guide—put strong demands on advance preparation and interviewer competence. The absence of prescribed sets of rules creates an open-ended field of opportunity for the interviewer's skills, knowledge, and intuition. Interviewing is a craft that is closer to art than to standardized social science methods.

The common term *unstandardized* may pertain to the interview situation, but an entire interview investigation tends to be a rather standardized affair, often going through five characteristic emotional phases.

Box 5.1 describes the emotional dynamics of an interview investigation. The empirical basis for the descriptions involves observations from colleagues and students undertaking interview studies as well as recollections from my own study of grading. The intensity of the emotional phases varies. Moments of enthusiasm, common at the beginning, can also occur in the later phases, such as when discovering new meanings through interpretation. The five phases can also be encountered through the use of other research methods. It seldom happens, however, that the contrast between an initial enthusiasm and the later hardships is as distinct as in interview studies.

#### Box 5.1

#### Emotional Dynamics of an Interview Study

*Antipositivist Enthusiasm Phase.* An interview project usually starts with enthusiasm and commitment. The researcher is strongly engaged in a problem and wants to carry out realistic natural life research. It is to be meaningful qualitative research of people's lives, and not a positivist, quantified data gathering based on abstract theories.

*The Interview-Quoting Phase.* By now the researcher will have recorded the initial interviews and is intensively engaged in what the interviewees have said. Forming a contrast to the ideological enthusiasm in the antipositivist phase, there is now personal engagement and a solitary identification with the subjects, who have revealed so much of their often oppressive life situation. At lunch the interviewer entertains his colleagues with a wealth of new quotations. Although exciting at first, it may after a while be difficult for the colleagues to remain fully involved in the interview stories.

(continued)

## Box 5.1 Continued

*The Working Phase of Silence.* After a time, silence falls upon the interview project. The researcher no longer brings up interview quotations at lunch. A colleague now asking about the project receives a laconic answer: "The interviews are being transcribed" or "The analysis has just started." This working phase is characterized by sobriety and patience.

*The Aggressive Phase of Silence.* A long time has passed since the interviews were completed and still no results are presented. A colleague who now inquires about the project would run the risk of being met with distinct annoyance: the researcher bristles and more or less clearly signals "it's none of your business." As for the researcher, this midproject crisis is characterized by exceeded time limits, chaos, and stress.

*The Final Phase of Exhaustion.* By now the interview project has become so overwhelming that there is hardly any time or energy left for reporting the originally interesting findings. One version of this phase is that "nothing is reported"—the many hundred pages of transcribed interviews remain in the files. In a "lecture version," the researcher conjures up some entertaining quotations in lectures, but the final report remains postponed. In a common "save what can possibly be saved" termination, the interviews appear as isolated quotations without methodological and conceptual analyses. In cases where a more systematic "final report" does appear, the researcher may feel resigned because he has not succeeded in passing on to the readers in a methodological justifiable way the original richness of the interview stories.

The depicted emotional phases of an interview project need not be an exclusively Danish phenomenon, nor are they unavoidable. The

late Renata Tesch—who ran a consultation firm for qualitative research in the United States—read the description of these emotional hardships. She then wrote for permission to quote the descriptions in an advertising folder for her firm, and added after the five hardship phases: "There is one way to avoid this state of affairs, call Qualitative Research Management!"

Perhaps the description of the emotional hardships of interview research is becoming outdated; with many qualitative research milieus and courses and with an abundance of method literature, the novice researcher will have a good starting point for better getting through the stages of an interview investigation.

### The Seven Stages of Interview Research

In this section I outline ways of designing an interview investigation that may assist the interviewer through the hardships of the research process and help to contribute to retaining the initial vision and engagement throughout the investigation. As a first step toward invalidating the description of the emotional hardships, seven stages of an interview investigation are outlined.

Box 5.2 shows the course of an interview investigation through seven stages, from the original ideas to the final report. In order to provide some structure to an open and flexible interview study, I will emphasize a linear progression through the seven method stages for an interview inquiry. In contrast, the interactive nature of qualitative research comes through quite well in Strauss and Corbin's (1990) presentation of the procedures and techniques of the grounded theory approach, which is less formal than the present focus on seven stages of an interview investigation. Strauss and Corbin depict a continual interplay among conceptualization, field studies, analyses, and new contacts with the field, which is downplayed in the present simplified linear presentation that attempts to structure the often chaotic field of interview studies.

The emotional dynamics of an interview study can now be related to the seven stages outlined here. The antipositivist enthusiasm dominates the usually quickly bypassed thematizing and designing stages. The engaged interview quoting covers the interviewing stage. The

## Box 5.2

## Seven Stages of an Interview Investigation

1. *Thematizing.* Formulate the purpose of an investigation and describe the concept of the topic to be investigated before the interviews start. The *why* and *what* of the investigation should be clarified before the question of *how*—method—is posed (Chapter 5).
2. *Designing.* Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages of the investigation, before the interviewing starts. Designing the study is undertaken with regard to obtaining the intended *knowledge* (Chapter 5) and taking into account the *moral* implications of the study (Chapter 6).
3. *Interviewing.* Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought and the interpersonal relation of the interview situation (Chapters 7 & 8).
4. *Transcribing.* Prepare the interview material for analysis, which commonly includes a transcription from oral speech to written text (Chapter 9).
5. *Analyzing.* Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation, and on the nature of the interview material, which methods of analysis are appropriate for the interviews (Chapters 10, 11, & 12).
6. *Verifying.* Ascertain the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. *Reliability* refers to how consistent the results are, and *validity* means whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated (Chapter 13).
7. *Reporting.* Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspects of the investigation into consideration, and that results in a readable product (Chapter 14).

working and the aggressive quiet phases accompany the transcription and, in particular, the analyzing stage. The verifying stage is often skipped, and exhaustion comes to dominate the reporting stage. The root of these ordeals is in the quick bypassing of the stages of thematizing and designing, which are particularly important in a method as open as an interview inquiry.

The treatment of an interview investigation in a single book entails rather brief treatments of each of the seven method stages. My main purpose is to give an overview of an entire interview investigation, to outline the interactions among the stages, and to trace the interconnectedness of the practical issues of method and the philosophical conceptions of knowledge and truth.

Some books with more extensive treatments of the stages of qualitative investigation are depicted in Box 5.3. Thematizing is bound to specific subject areas and is not covered by any general book; several of the chapters in Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) handbook, however, do treat general conceptions of the subject matter of interviews. For designing qualitative research, interviewing, analyzing, and reporting there now is a rich method literature. Little literature is available on verification, however, and the ethics and transcription of interview research are barely treated.

## Interviews About Grades

The slightly exaggerated emotional hardship phases are to some extent based on my own interview study of grading in Danish high schools; examples from this investigation are used throughout this book. The overview presented below illustrates the seven stages of an interview investigation. Thereafter I will return to more general outlines of the thematizing and designing stages.

1. *Thematizing.* Thematizing refers to a conceptual clarification and a theoretical analysis of the theme investigated, and the formulation of research questions. The grade study, which took place in 1978, was instigated by a public debate about the effects of grading in connection with a new policy of restricted admission to college based on grade point averages from high school (Kvale, 1980). A hypothesis

## Box 5.3

## Literature on Qualitative Research

## 1. Thematising

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## 2. Designing

*Research Design*

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research*. London: Falmer.

Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for professionals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

*Ethics*

Eisner, E. W., & Peshkin, A. (Eds.). (1990). *Qualitative inquiry in education*. New York: Teachers College Press. (see the chapters by Lincoln, by Smith, & by Soltis)

*Guidelines for the protection of human subjects*. (1992). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kimmel, A. J. (1988). *Ethics and values in applied social science research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mathison, S., Ross, E. W., & Cornett, J. W. (1993). *A casebook for teaching about ethical issues in qualitative research*. Unpublished manuscript. (Available from: American Educational Research Association, Qualitative Research SIG, Washington, D.C.)

## 3. Interviewing

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Yow, V. R. (1994). *Recording oral history*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

of a grade perspective was formulated: Grading influences the process of learning and the social situation where learning occurs. A second

## Box 5.3 Continued

## 4. Transcribing

Mishler, E. G. (1991). Representing discourse: The rhetoric of transcription. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1, 255-280.

## 5. Analyzing

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. London: Falmer.

Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## 6. Verifying

Eisner, E. W., & Peshkin, A. (Eds.). (1990). *Qualitative inquiry in education*. New York: Teachers College Press (see the chapters on generalization by Donmoyer and by Schofield).

Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kvale, S. (Ed.). (1989). *Issues of validity in qualitative research*. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.

## 7. Reporting

American Psychological Association. (1989). *Publication manual* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Richardson, L. (1990). *Writing strategies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

hypothesis stated that the prevalence of the grading perspective would increase with a restricted admission to college based on grade point averages.

Though hardly new, the hypotheses—which were based on common sense as well as on research literature on grading in other countries—were contested in the public debate in Denmark. I had been involved in a newspaper debate with the Danish minister of education, who maintained that there would be hardly any educa-

tional or social impact from a restricted university admission based on grade point averages. The purpose of the interviews was to test the two hypotheses, which also included an exploration of the main dimensions of the effects of grading on the pupils. A third hypothesis postulated an instrumentalization of learning through grading: Learning for grades in school socializes pupils to work for wages in occupational life.

2. *Design.* Because the influence of grades was a controversial topic when the interview study was begun, special care was therefore taken to have a methodologically well-controlled design. As one way of investigating the influence of grades, 30 high school pupils were interviewed about their experiences with grades. This number was a compromise between obtaining a representative sample and the resources available for the study. In order to counteract possible special circumstances at a single high school, pupils from three schools were interviewed. They came from one class at each school and were selected by their alphabetical name order. Six teachers were also interviewed, to gain an alternative perspective on the effects of grading. To counteract special interviewer bias, the 30 pupils were distributed among four interviewers, three student assistants and myself.

The remaining five stages of the grade study are treated in more detail in the following chapters and only outlined briefly here.

- *Stage 3: Interviewing.* A detailed guide was used for the individual interviews, each of which lasted about 45 minutes and was taped.
- *Stage 4: Transcribing.* All 36 interviews—with pupils and teachers—were transcribed verbatim, resulting in about 1,000 pages of transcripts.
- *Stage 5: Analyzing.* The 30 pupil interviews were categorized with respect to different forms of grading behavior. The interviews with the pupils and the teachers were also subjected to more extensive qualitative interpretations.
- *Stage 6: Verifying.* Reliability and validity checks were attempted throughout the project, including interviewer and scorer reliability, and validity of interpretations.
- *Stage 7: Reporting.* The project resulted in a book, *Spillet om karakterer i gymnasiet (The Grading Game in High School)* (Kvale, 1980). The thematic and methodic aspects of the study were also treated in subsequent articles in professional journals.

The actual course of the investigation was less neat than that schematized here. The transcription and analysis of the 36 interviews, which were conducted in January, took far more time than planned. The preliminary results were not ready to be reported back to the pupils and teachers, as promised before the interviews, until June. By then most of the pupils were too busy with their final exams to be interested in discussing research about the effects of grades.

*Interviews and Questionnaires.* Two psychology students later used the interviews as a basis for constructing a questionnaire on grades (Hvolbøl & Kristensen, 1983). They included statements from the interviews in their questionnaire and asked new groups of pupils for their degree of agreement or disagreement with these statements. The questionnaire consisted of more than 150 questions and was administered to more than 200 pupils from six high schools across the country. The purpose was to obtain representative and generalizable findings. The results were analyzed by computer programs, which had been prepared in advance.

The two students were so confident of how quickly the analysis would be done that they had submitted a presentation to a Nordic educational conference to take place in Finland 2 weeks after the last questionnaire was scheduled to arrive. They actually managed to have the major findings from the questionnaires ready for presentation at the conference, with statistical computations of correlations and significances in neatly arranged tables and figures. A corresponding predictability and speed of analyzing and reporting for a qualitative interview study would have been out of the question. With the standardized structures and techniques for questionnaire construction and quantitative analysis, the likelihood of delays and of getting lost is less than with the little structured interview studies.

One of the statements included in the questionnaire was an assertion about a connection between talkativeness and grades from an interview passage quoted earlier (Chapter 1, Conversation as Research). The statement, depicted in Table 5.1, was split into two items in the questionnaire. The percentage of agreement among the 239 pupils on the two items is indicated in Table 5.1. It turned out that a majority of the pupils agreed with the first part of the statement—that grades are an expression of how much one talks, whereas a majority

TABLE 5.1 From Interview Statements to Questionnaire Items

Interview Statement	Percentage of 239 Pupils			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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.				
Questionnaire Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Grades are often an expression of how much one talks in class	20	62	15	3
Grades are often an expression of how much one follows the teacher's opinion	4	20	57	19

disagreed with the second part—that grades are often an expression of how much one goes along with the teacher's opinion.

The example points out strengths and weaknesses in the two methods. The interview brought out interesting beliefs about which behaviors lead to good grades, whereas the questionnaire made it possible to test how prevalent these beliefs were among a large number of pupils. The questionnaire did not follow up on the pupils' statements, but an interviewer could closely question the strength of a pupil's belief and might also obtain concrete examples supporting the claims (see the context of this statement in Chapter 1, *Conversation as Research*).

In retrospect, the interview study of grades would probably have yielded more valuable knowledge with fewer but longer, more intensive interviews. The questionnaire developed on the basis of the interviews could be used to test the generality of the interview findings and the smaller number of qualitative interviews could have been subjected to more penetrating interpretations.

### Thematizing

The key questions for planning an interview investigation concern the what, why, and how of the interview:

- *what*: obtaining a preknowledge of the subject matter to be investigated
- *why*: clarifying the purpose of the study
- *how*: acquiring a knowledge of different techniques of interviewing and analyzing, and deciding which to apply to obtain the intended knowledge

*Method* originally meant the way to the goal. In order to find or to show someone else the way to a goal, one needs to know what the goal is. When designing an interview project, it is necessary to know the content and the purpose of the study in order to make reflected decisions on which methods to use at the different stages of the study. Consultations on interview projects sometimes take the form of an explorative "counter"-interview. The counselor first needs to explore, by carefully questioning the investigator, what the research topic and basic questions of the interview study are before the specific questions asked about methods can be addressed. There is a standard reply to the questions of design of qualitative interviews—the answer depends on the thematic content and the purpose of the investigation. The thematic questions of "what" and "why" have to be answered before the "how" questions of design can be posed meaningfully.

### CONTENT

Interview studies today often start without a theory of the themes investigated, and also without a review of the research literature in the area. One definition of science is the systematic production of new knowledge (Chapter 4, *The Scientific Status of the Interview*). Without any presentation of the existing knowledge about the topic of an investigation, it is difficult for both researcher and reader to ascertain whether the knowledge obtained by the interviews is new, and thus what the scientific contribution of the study is. The theoretical naïveté common in the many applied interview projects is not necessarily confined to qualitative research. The contributions of Freud and later psychotherapists testify to the potentials of theorizing on the basis of qualitative interviews.

A significant part of any interview project should take place before the tape recorder is turned on for the first actual interview. This involves developing a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the phenomena to be investigated, to establish the base to which new

knowledge will be added and integrated. The thematic understanding of the topic of the study—the “what”—will further influence the “how” of the study: the many decisions on method that must be made. Knowledge of a phenomenon is required to be able to pose significant questions, whether they are on the essence of beauty, truth, and goodness in a Socratic dialogue, the tactics of a master chess player, or trends in rock music in a teenage interview.

Familiarity with the content of an investigation is not obtained only through literature and theoretical studies. Just hanging out in the environment where the interviews are to be conducted will give an introduction to the local language, the daily routines, and the power structures, and so provide a sense of what the interviewees will be talking about. Particularly for anthropological studies, a familiarity with the foreign culture is required for posing questions:

One of the reasons for doing field trips is that you are presented with how abstract is the most concrete of your concepts and questions when you are at home in the library. When I first went to Brazil I made my way 2,000 miles into north central Brazil and I arrived in a small town. I heard that there were Indians who actually were in town. And I can remember an incredible sense of excitement. I rushed out and walked around town until I found this group of Indians and walked straight up to them—and then I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to ask: “Have you got moiety systems?” (a special kind of kinship relations). And it didn’t make sense to do that. In fact it took four months to find a way to ask a question with which I could discover from people whether they did have moiety systems. (Lave & Kvale, 1995, p. 221; slightly abbreviated)

The influence that theoretical conceptions of the content have upon method choices may be exemplified by an imagined interview with a pupil about the *meaning of teasing*. Different theories will lead to different emphasis on such phenomena as feelings, experiences, behavior—as well as on the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. Say a school psychologist is interviewing a pupil who—the teacher complains—is continually teasing the other pupils and thereby disturbing the class. The interview might be conducted from a Rogerian client-centered approach, a Freudian psychoanalytic approach, and a Skinnerian behavior modification approach, respectively.

From a Rogerian perspective, the important questions would concern what the pupil experiences and feels when he is teasing the other

pupils, and the questions would attempt to elaborate and differentiate the meaning of these experiences and help the pupil to express his feelings about them. From a Freudian perspective, the questions would be directed toward the pupil’s interpersonal emotional dynamics and family situation. Relevant questions might address whether the teasing in school related to similar episodes in the family and to sibling rivalry. From a Skinnerian approach, the important information would concern the contingencies reinforcing the teasing behavior; that is, what happens after the teasing occurs. The reactions of others to a behavior are essential reinforcers of social learning, and the questioning would focus on what responses the teaser gets from the other pupils and the teacher; in short, What are the immediate consequences of the teasing behavior?

Different kinds of interview questions are required to obtain the kinds of information necessary to interpret the meaning of teasing with respect to the different theories. The three approaches, simplified here, would focus on present experiences and feelings, on family history and emotional dynamics, and on future behavioral consequences, respectively. These theoretical approaches highlight different aspects of the meaning of teasing. If they are not introduced until the analysis stage, after the interviews have been conducted, the relevant information for the theoretical interpretations may be lacking.

#### PURPOSE

Thematizing an interview study also involves clarifying the purpose of the study—the “why.” Some common purposes of interview studies will be discussed here. Implications of different purposes will be addressed by the concrete decisions of design.

Interviews can be explorative and hypothesis testing: An *exploratory* interview is open and has little structure. The interviewer in this case introduces an issue, an area to be charted, or a problem complex to be uncovered, such as in the interview on the experience of learning reported by Giorgi. The interviewer follows up on the subject’s answers and seeks new information about and new angles on the topic. Interviews that *test hypotheses* tend to be more structured. This can take the form of a comparison of interviews from different groups, for example, by testing a hypothesis that boys will express more



competition about grades than will girls. When investigating group differences, it is best to standardize the wording and sequence of questions in order to compare the groups. The testing of hypotheses may also occur within a single interview, with the interview questions designed to test hypotheses about, for example, the structural similarities of learning for grades and of working for money.

The main purpose of an interview can be either empirical or theoretical. An investigation can be designed to gather *empirical* information about, say, the effects of grading. Or an investigation might also be designed to test the implications of a *theory* or, as in the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), to develop an empirically grounded theory through observations and interviews.

There are more specific uses. Interviews are often applied in *case studies*. The purpose may be to develop knowledge about one specific person or institution or to use the case to illustrate more general phenomena. Interviews can also serve as an *auxiliary method* in conjunction with other methods. In studies of participant observation and in ethnographic studies, less or more informal interviews are important sources of information. Through the construction of questionnaires, pilot interviews can be used to chart the main aspects of a topic and to test questions for the questionnaire. In postexperimental interviews, subjects are questioned on how they understood the experimental design. Interviews may also be used as *background material* for other studies. In order to write a theoretical analysis of grading, one might interview pupils and teachers about grades, listen to the taped interviews, and then theorize. Here the interviews are not subjected to methodical analysis, but serve instead as background material for the theoretical work and to provide illustrations of the phenomena discussed.

### Designing

After the first stage of thematizing an interview investigation—clarifying its content and purpose—the second stage, designing, consists of overall planning and preparing the methodical procedures for obtaining the intended knowledge. Procedures of design in the sub-

sequent stages of interviewing—transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting—are treated in detail in later chapters. In this section, I call attention to the temporal dimension of an entire interview inquiry from the first thematizing of the study topic to the final reporting. I also discuss some of the overall aspects of the design, such as interview types, number of interview subjects, and resources available for the study, as well as projects for which interviews are not particularly suitable.

### THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION

The temporal dimension of an interview design should be kept in mind from the first thematizing to the final reporting, taking into account the interdependence of the seven stages. The final report should be envisaged from the start, and much of the analyzing and verifying tasks should be pushed forward to earlier stages. The implications of a researcher becoming wiser during the interviewing should also be considered.

*Overview.* A key factor is to develop a view over the entire investigation before the interviews start. When using the more standardized methods, such as experiments, questionnaires, and tests, the very structure of the instruments requires advance decisions about the way in which the study will be conducted. Methodological alternatives are in this case already built into the instruments, for instance by the response alternatives of questionnaires and by computer programs for statistical analysis and presentation of the numerical findings. In open and unstandardized interview studies, however, the choices of method can tend to make their first appearances throughout the investigation, often when it is too late to make decisions appropriate to the content and purpose of the study.

*Interdependence.* There are strong interconnections among the choices of method made at the different stages. A decision at one stage has consequences that both open and limit the alternatives available at the next stage. For example, generalizing the findings of an interview study to larger groups will require that certain criteria—regarding size and representativity of the sample of subjects—already be met at the

design stage. If one were to make a linguistic analysis of interviews this would not be possible, or would require a time-consuming retranscription if the interviews had been edited into normal English by the transformation from oral to written language.

*Keep the Endpoint in Sight.* From the start of the investigation keep the endpoint in view. What is the study's purpose and how is the final product envisaged? Will a publication result from the study? A short article? A book? For a scientific forum or for a general audience? The answers to such questions can serve as guidelines throughout the stages of the research project, assisting the informed decisions made throughout the investigation and keeping it on track toward the goal. The nature of the final report is decisive for decisions at earlier stages on such issues as: Informing the interviewees about later use of what they say; obtaining written permission to quote extensively from their interviews; and handling any controversial and conflictual themes that might arise in the interviews. How personal and critical can the interpretations of the interviewees be in a public report?

*Push Forward.* Attempt to do much of the work of the later stages at earlier stages. Although the problems of an interview project tend to surface in the later stages, more often than not they originated in the earlier stages. The solution is to improve the quality of the original interviews. Thus, clarifying the meanings of expressions used during an interview will facilitate later analysis; asking control questions during the interview will facilitate the validation. Improving interview quality is not simply a question of better interview techniques or design; it also involves a reflective conception of the topic and purpose of the inquiry from the very beginning.

*Getting Wiser.* An interviewer may learn throughout an investigation: The conversations with the subjects may extend and alter the researcher's understanding of the phenomena investigated. The interviewees bring forth new and unexpected aspects of the phenomena studied; and during analysis of the transcribed interviews new distinctions may be discovered. One of the main purposes of an exploratory study is the discovery of new dimensions of the subject matter. In hypothesis-testing studies, however, realizing significant new insights

during the study may well create problems for the interviewer. Novel dimensions of a phenomenon may be discovered in the middle of a series of interviews testing, for example, differences among pupils' learning motivations in a public versus an experimental school. The dilemma will then be whether to improve the interview guide to include in the new dimensions, and not have comparable groups, or to refrain from learning more about the new dimensions uncovered during the study. No easy solution to the dilemma of becoming wiser as a threat to standardized conditions is offered, except to be as clear as possible about the main purposes of a study from its inception.

## INTERVIEW FORMS

There are many different forms of interviews and interview subjects, requiring different approaches, and a few will be mentioned briefly. Individual interviews vary according to content, such as seeking factual information, or opinions and attitudes, or narratives and life histories (see Flick et al., 1991). The interviewees can also be regarded as informants for recording oral history (Yow, 1994). Group interviews today are often referred to as focus groups and are frequently used in market research. The interaction among the interview subjects often leads to spontaneous and emotional statements about the topic being discussed. The group interaction, however, reduces the interviewer's control of the interview situation and the price may be a relatively chaotic data collection, with difficulties for systematic analysis of the intermingling voices (see Morgan, 1988). Different groups of subjects require different interview approaches. Interviews with elites thus involve problems of access to the interviewees, and generally require that the interviewer has a good grasp of the interview topic in order to entertain an informed conversation (see Hertz & Imber, 1995).

## HOW MANY INTERVIEW SUBJECTS DO I NEED?

To the common question, "How many interview subjects do I need?" the answer is simply, "Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know."

The number of subjects necessary depends on a study's purpose. In qualitative interview studies, the number of subjects tends to be either too small or too large. If the number of subjects is too small, it is not possible to make statistical generalizations or to test hypotheses of differences among groups. If the number of subjects is too large, then it is not possible to make penetrating interpretations of the interviews. If the goal is to predict the outcome of a national election, a representative sample of about 1,000 subjects is normally required, so qualitative interviews would be out of the question. If the purpose is to understand the world as experienced by one specific person, this one subject is sufficient.

If the purpose is to test hypotheses about the different attitudes of boys and girls toward competition for grades, the necessary sample may be as small as three boys and three girls for conducting a Fisher test of significance. Depending on the distribution of the findings, a test of statistically significant differences between the two groups can be made at a probability level of  $p < .05$  (Siegel, 1956). If, however, the purpose of the study is to explore and describe in detail the attitudes of boys and girls toward grades, new interviews might be conducted until a point of saturation, where further interviews yield little new knowledge. In current interview studies, the number of interviews tend to be around  $15 \pm 10$ . This number may be due to a combination of the time and resources available for the investigation and of the law of diminishing returns.

A common critique of interview studies is that the findings are not generalizable because there are too few subjects. A paradoxical answer, from the history of psychology, is that if the aim of a study is to obtain general knowledge, then focus on a few intensive case studies. The contribution of Freud's case studies to the general knowledge of pathology and personality is one instance. Less attention has been given to the fact that a pioneer study of a natural science psychology, Ebbinghaus's experimental-statistical investigation of learning and remembering nonsense syllables, was a case study with a single subject—himself. Piaget's innovative studies of children's cognitive development originated with psychoanalytically inspired interviews with his own children. The radical behaviorist Skinner (1961) argued in "A Case History in Scientific Method" against the frequent use of large groups and statistics in psychology: Statistical averages are excuses for

researchers who do not work hard enough to find the specific reinforcement schedules controlling the behavior investigated.

Taking into account the differences among the pioneering studies mentioned above, two reasons for obtaining significant knowledge from a few subjects, which has later been found generalizable to larger groups, may be suggested. Quantitatively, each case contained an immense number of observations of single individuals. Qualitatively, the focus on single cases made it possible to investigate in detail the relationship of a specific behavior to its context, to work out the logic of the relationship between the individual and the situation. The specific kind of relationship varied from transference of a psychoanalytic therapy to the reinforcement schedules of learning. What they have in common is the working out of consistent and recurrent patterns through intensive case studies.

#### RESOURCES AVAILABLE

*Time and Money.* The amount of resources necessary for an interview study can be easily overlooked at the design stage; that is when one should ask such questions as: How much time does the researcher have available for the study? How much money is available for assistance—for example, for typing the interview transcripts? Conducting the interviews themselves is generally not time-consuming; transcribing them requires much more time and is therefore expensive. The subsequent analysis of the transcripts is usually the most time-consuming part of the interview study.

*Quality Versus Quantity.* A general impression from current interview studies is that many of them would have profited from having fewer interviews in the study, and from taking more time to prepare the interviews and to analyze them. Perhaps as a defensive overreaction, some qualitative interview studies appear to be designed on a quantitative presupposition—the more interviews, the more scientific. In contrast, the present approach emphasizes the quality rather than the quantity of the interviews.

*Expertise.* Good interviews require expertise—in both subject matter and human interaction. If assistants are to be hired to conduct some

of the interviews, intensive training of these “new” interviewers may be required to obtain interviews of good quality. Specific forms of analysis, say, of the linguistic aspects of the interviews, also require a special competence.

#### WHEN NOT TO INTERVIEW

In recent social research there has been an inflationary use of interviews; also in areas better covered by other methods. In some instances, the primary motive for using qualitative interviews appears to be a flight from statistics. When planning an interview study, it may be useful to consider whether other methods might be more appropriate for the topic and the purpose of the investigation. Marshall and Rossman (1995) offer a clear discussion of different methods of doing qualitative research for different purposes and topics.

Here, it may be pertinent to mention some topics and purposes to which qualitative interviews are little suited. If a study seeks to predict the behavior of larger groups, such as voting behavior, larger samples of respondents are necessary than would be possible to cover with time-consuming qualitative interviews; in such cases, survey questionnaires with precoded answers are the relevant method. Also, when there is little time available for a project, questionnaires will usually be faster to administer, analyze, and report than interview studies.

If you want to study people’s behavior and their interaction with their environment, the observations of field studies will usually give more valid knowledge than merely asking subjects about their behavior. If the research topic concerns more implicit meanings and tacit understandings, like the taken-for-granted assumptions of a group or a culture, then participant observation and field studies of actual behavior supplemented by informal interviews may give more valid information.

If the purpose of a study is to obtain deeper knowledge about a person, focusing on personal emotional conflicts, then this may best be obtained through the trust developed in the close, personal interaction developed through a long and emotional therapy process. The challenges to a person’s established self-image and the strong feelings provoked are necessary parts of therapy, as in the session reported by Rogers (Chapter 2, *A Therapeutic Interview on Hate*). Creating these

kinds of strong emotional dynamics merely to serve research purposes would be unethical.

One purpose of the present book is to lead some readers *away* from using research interviews, by pointing out that other methods may be more appropriate for the subject matter and purpose of their research. This being said, it should not be forgotten that interviews are particularly suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world.

#### From Method to Craftsmanship

Chapter 4, on qualitative research, concluded with an outline of the dilemma of therapeutic research as caught in a narrow strait between the monsters of a no-method Charybdis and an all-method Scylla. The present guidelines for designing an interview investigation may appear to steer an interview inquiry into the dangerous vicinity of an all-method monster. The systematic planning may, invoking the introductory metaphors, remind one more of an interviewer as a mining engineer than as a conversing traveler.

In order to develop the qualitative interview as a form of research it is necessary to go beyond the dichotomy of all method versus no method. I will discuss a craftsmanlike approach that bypasses this opposition of rigid formalism or naive spontaneity. Craftsmanship here includes a shift from method to the person of the researcher, relating science to art, a skill model of transition from novice to expert, and the learning of research through apprenticeship.

Interviewing is a craft: It does not follow content- and context-free rules of method, but rests on the judgments of a qualified researcher. For the therapeutic as well as the research interview, the interviewer is the instrument. The outcome of an interview depends on the knowledge, sensitivity, and empathy of the interviewer. Its relation to the survey questionnaire and therapy can again be mentioned: Because there are explicit and standard rules for administering questionnaires, new interviewers can be fully trained in a matter of hours or days. In contrast, the qualifications for conducting an open psychoanalytic

interview require years of academic training and one's own psychoanalytic therapy over several years.

When the person of the qualitative researcher takes on a methodological dimension, a broad spectrum of qualifications is desirable. In a discussion of validity in qualitative research, Salner (1989) proposes requirements for the human science researcher—such as an acquaintance with philosophical analysis, an understanding of the development of rational thought in Western culture, a critical perspective on society, training in the formal analysis of everyday language, expertise in a variety of research methods, an awareness of the ethical dimension of human science, and an aesthetic sensibility.

An emphasis on the crucial role of the person of the researcher does not imply a neglect of techniques and knowledge. For an artist, a mastery of the different techniques of oil painting, watercolors, and pencil drawing, as well as knowledge of the laws of perspective and of color contrast, are preconditions for a mastery of the art of painting. A work of art cannot, however, be produced by merely following methodical rules; the primary instrument remains the artist, with his or her sensitivity and creativity. Art is a genre that can serve as an inspiration for interview inquiries. Eisner (1991, 1993) has looked at educational practice and research from the viewpoint of an artist. He pointed out that the connoisseur's sensitivity to qualitative distinctions and the critic's ability to communicate new perspectives and to evaluate the quality of a work of art are qualifications equally desirable for the educational researcher.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) have presented a model of skill learning with a temporal solution to a dichotomy of learning either by explicit rules or by intuition. The road to the mastery of a skill leads from a rule-guided "knowing that" to an experience-based "knowing how." Drawing on examples from driving, playing chess, making medical diagnoses, and nursing, they outline five qualitatively different stages of adults' skill acquisition through instruction and experience: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. What stands out is a progression from the analytic behavior of a detached subject, of a novice learning through instruction of "context-free" elements and combining the facts by "context-free rules," to emotionally involved intuitive skillful behavior. The expert "sees" or "feels" solutions by relying on an intuitive knowledge generalized from extensive case experience.

The novice-expert model of the learning of skills as developing from explicit rule following to intuitive mastery is not the only mode of acquiring skillful behavior. Learning by means of an apprenticeship is usually more informal and has little verbal rule-governed behavior at either the novice or the expert level. The novice participates in communities of practice; learns through hands-on practice, with observation and imitation of expert performances; and gradually acquires a mastery of the craft (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Relational, tacit, and pragmatic aspects of professional knowledge, including research, can hardly be presented verbally in the form of explicit rules. Altheide and Johnson (1994) have addressed the implications of tacit knowledge when assessing interpretative validity in qualitative research. They point to a bias of communication when the tacit knowledge is transformed into the logic of a more shareable textual communication form. Important aspects of the therapeutic knowledge is best communicated by exemplars, anecdotes, case stories, narratives, and metaphors and is tested by its implication for practice (Polkinghorne, 1992). Such forms of transmission of knowledge come closer to craftsmanship and art than to formal bureaucratic models of research design, and are best transmitted by participation in local forms of practice. Today there is an increasing recognition of indirect and context-bound forms of communicating knowledge through such practices as apprenticeship and mentoring, not only in the crafts, but also for the higher professions, including scientific research (Kvale, 1993a; Mishler, 1990).

Formal apprenticeship in a trade, where students learn interviewing through the interaction of research communities with masters of the craft, are not commonly available. When the option is to be self-taught, a manual may be better than nothing. The present book spells out guidelines for the practice of interview research, provides cases and examples of the methods discussed, and gives examples of breaking the rules—which tend to be as numerous as the exceptions in German grammar. Knowledge of interviewing is less embedded in determinate rules of methods than in examples of the method in use. The aim is to arrive at a transparency of the technical equipment, where the proficient craftsman does not focus on the methods but on the task—in Heidegger's analysis of craftwork it is not the hammer the carpenter focuses on, but the nail and the table.

The present outlines of methodical stages and specific guidelines are substitutes for learning in practice, they are preliminary tools for the gradual mastering of the craft of interviewing. In order to navigate safely through difficult waters it is, however, not sufficient simply to steer one's vessel; an extensive knowledge of the waters and the coastline, through drafts or personal experience, is also necessary. In an interview inquiry, a substantial familiarity with the theme and context of the inquiry is a precondition for the expert use of the interview method. In conclusion, method as rule following is replaced in qualitative interview research by the researcher's expert knowledge of the theme to be investigated and by mastery of the techniques required throughout an interview inquiry.

The issue of research as resting on rule following versus on qualified personal judgment pertains not only to the knowledge dimension of the interview inquiry, but to its moral dimension as well. This will be addressed in Chapter 6 on ethics in interview research.

# 6



## Ethical Issues in Interview Inquiries

An interview inquiry is a moral enterprise: The personal interaction in the interview affects the interviewee, and the knowledge produced by the interview affects our understanding of the human situation. In Chapter 5, an interview design was treated with regard to acquiring knowledge of the human situation. In this chapter, the moral implications of an interview inquiry will be addressed.

Explicit rules or clear solutions to ethical problems that may arise during an interview study can hardly be provided, but contexts will be suggested for the researcher's reflection on the normative and value themes involved. First, some ethical issues that may arise at the different stages of an interview project are outlined and discussed in relation to the ethical guidelines of informed consent, confidentiality, and consequences. Thereafter, the three ethical theories of duty, utility, and virtue are presented as broader contexts for reflection on moral dilemmas encountered in interview inquiries.

A central aim of social science is to contribute knowledge to ameliorate the human condition and enhance human dignity. The preamble to the American Psychological Association's ethical principles states,

Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of the individual and strive for the preservation and protection of fundamental human rights. They are committed to increasing knowledge of human behavior and of people's understanding of themselves and others and to the utilization of such knowledge for the promotion of human welfare. (American Psychological Association [APA], 1981, p. 633)