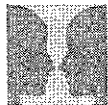


# 10



## The 1,000-Page Question

One may sometimes receive a question like this when teaching at workshops on qualitative research:

How shall I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcripts I have collected?

This chapter is a reply to this 1,000-page question. It includes some summaries of the stages of an interview investigation that have already been covered and prepares the ground for the analysis stage treated in more detail in the next two chapters.

### Dismiss or Interpret the 1,000-Page Question?

A first impulsive reaction to the 1,000-page question is to dismiss it—"Never pose that question!" When an interview project has been conducted in such a way that the 1,000-page question is asked, the question can no longer be answered. A more adequate reply would then be: "Never conduct interview research in such a way that you find yourself in a situation where you ask such a question."

The present approach goes further than merely dismissing the question; the conception of qualitative research implied by the 1,000-page question will be interpreted by taking a closer look at its wording. The question is not only posed too late, it is leading. Yet all questions are leading: They may be opening or closing, productive or counter-

productive. In interview research, too much emphasis has been placed on the influence of leading questions in the interview situation, whereas the leading influence of questions put to the interview texts through their analysis has been rather neglected. The 1,000-page question as it is formulated above leads in the wrong direction—it is closing and unproductive.

A lead for the analysis of the question is taken from Antonioni's movie *The Reporter*. In one scene, in which an African shaman is interviewed by the white reporter, the shaman replies something like this to one of the reporter's questions: "I will not answer your question. My answer would tell less about me than your question tells about yourself."

### What Does the 1,000-Page Question Mean?

The material for the present analysis is the 17 words of the 1,000-page question as formulated above. The purpose of the analysis is to uncover the meaning of the question, to make explicit its presuppositions and thereby the implicit conceptions of qualitative research it implies. The general interest is prophylactic; it is an attempt to outline modes of conducting interview research so that a researcher never gets into a situation where he or she feels compelled to ask the 1,000-page question. The method of analyzing the question will be discussed in the concluding section. The general form of the analysis is to select 7 key words from the 1,000-page question and analyze them separately:

How (3) shall I find a method (4) to analyze (7) the 1,000 pages (2) of interview transcripts (5) I have (1) collected (6) ?

"HAVE"—TOO LATE!

The answer is simple—the question is posed too late.

Never pose the question of how to analyze transcripts *after* the interviews have been conducted—it is too late to start thinking after the interviewing is done. The answer here parallels that of a statistician: Consult me about the data analysis before you collect your data.

Think about how the interviews are to be analyzed before they are conducted. The method of analysis decided on—or at least considered—will then direct the preparation of the interview guide, the interview process, and the transcription of the interviews. Every stage in an interview project involves decisions that offer both possibilities and constraints in later stages of the project.

The method of analysis should not only be planned in advance of the interviewing. The analysis may also, to varying degrees, be built into the interview situation itself. A clarification of the meaning of what is said may then take the simple form of “I understand that the meaning of what you just said is . . .” Further, the researcher may attempt to confirm or reject his or her hypothesis during the interview, similar to a job interview where the interviewer is continually testing the hypothesis about whether the interviewed applicant is qualified for the job.

In such forms of analysis—interpreting “as you go”—considerable parts of the analysis are “pushed forward” into the interview situation itself. The final analysis then becomes not only easier and more amenable, but will also rest on more secure ground. Put strongly, the ideal interview is already analyzed by the time the tape recorder is turned off. There are social and ethical restraints on how far the analysis of meaning can be undertaken during the interview itself, but this may serve as a methodic ideal for interview research.

An alternative reformulation of the 1,000-page question entails changing the temporal form: *How shall I conduct my interviews so that their meaning can be analyzed in a coherent and creative way?*

#### “1,000 PAGES”—TOO MUCH!

The answer to this quantitative part of the question is also simple—1,000 pages of transcripts is too much to handle in a meaningful way.

The precise meaning of the question may depend on its intonation. When posed in a despairing voice, it may indicate a situation of being overwhelmed by an enormous amount of qualitative data, of being completely lost in a jungle of transcriptions. The meaning of the question may then be: Rescue me from my 1,000 pages, I cannot find my way out of the labyrinth.

When posed in a more assertive voice the same question may have another meaning. A diligent young scholar has done his empirical duty and documented his scientific attitude by gathering large amounts of data. He now awaits the expert’s praise and advice about how to treat the data. The question may here involve a “reversed positivism”—a quest for scientific respectability by mirroring the positivist emphasis on large quantities of quantitative data with large quantities of qualitative data.

Whether posed in a despairing or in an assertive voice, the formulation of the question leads in the wrong direction. The emphasis is on the quantity—1,000 pages—rather than on the content and the qualitative meanings of what was said.

One thousand pages of transcripts is generally too much to handle. The material is too extensive to overview and to work out the depth of the meaning of what was said. The analysis is too time-consuming and is likely to lead to a superficial product, unfinished due to external time constraints. Should there be definite reasons for needing such a large amount of interview material—1,000 pages correspond to between 30 and 40 hours of interviews—the reasons for the large quantity should be explicitly formulated before the interviews are conducted. It may then turn out that fewer interviews are sufficient, or that the purpose of the investigation is better served by questionnaires.

A rephrasing of the 1,000-page question, involving a change in emphasis from quantity to meaning, could be: *How do I go about finding the meaning of the many interesting and complex stories my interviewees told me?*

#### “HOW”—ASK “WHAT” AND “WHY” FIRST

Do not pose the question of how to analyze interviews before the answers to the what and the why of an investigation have been given. Content and purpose precede method.

In analyzing an interview, what is not said may be just as important as what is said. In the question analyzed here, the question of “how” is posed without including the “what” and the “why” of the investigation. The term *method* originally meant *the way to the goal*. With no goal stated, it is difficult to show the way to it.

The mode of analysis depends on “what” is analyzed, on the subject matter of the interview, and on the “why,” the purpose of the interview. Thus the interpretation of Hamlet’s interview rested on a clarification of the topic and purpose of the interview—an exploration of the shapes of clouds or the testing of a hypothesis about Polonius’s trustworthiness (Chapter 8, Hamlet’s Interview). In general, the theoretical conceptions of what is investigated should provide the basis for making decisions of how—the method to be used for analyzing the content. Thus a psychoanalytic conception of an interview statement as an expression of unconscious forces will involve a different form of analysis than a behavioristic conception of the statement as an element in a chain of stimuli and responses. Further, if a research study purports to test a hypothesis about differences among groups of subjects, then the analysis should be systematic and conducted in the same way for each of the groups in order to test possible differences among them. For explorative purposes it will, on the contrary, be more appropriate to pursue the different interesting aspects of the individual interviews and to interpret them in greater depth.

The specification of the subject matter and the purpose of an interview study could be continued, elaborated further, or made in other ways than suggested here. What is important is that the what and the why of the investigation are clarified before a method of analysis is chosen.

The technical “how to” emphasis of the 1,000-page question can be reformulated to: *How do I go about finding out what the interviews tell me about what I want to know?*

#### “METHOD” VERSUS KNOWLEDGE

The methodological aspect of the 1,000-page question cannot be answered due to the way the question is formulated. There are no standard methods, no *via regia*, to arrive at essential meanings and deeper implications of what is said in an interview.

The demand for a method may involve an emphasis on techniques and reliability, and a de-emphasis on knowledge and validity. The search for techniques of analysis may be a quest for a “technological fix” to the researcher’s task of analyzing and constructing meaning.

There are no standard methods of text analysis that correspond to the multitude of techniques available for statistical analysis. This may be due in part to the relative novelty and the small extent of cross-disciplinary communication about qualitative analysis in the social sciences. The lack of standard techniques of qualitative analysis may, however, also be due to the richness and the complexity of the subject matter. Some general approaches to the analysis of qualitative material—involving different technical procedures—do exist. Five approaches to analyzing the meaning of interviews, to be outlined in the next chapter, are: categorization, condensation, narrative structuring, deeper interpretations, and ad hoc tactics for the generation of meaning.

*Method* may also be used in the sense of obtaining intersubjectively reliable results. The question then concerns how different readers can arrive at the same meanings when analyzing an interview. This may reflect the common concern that qualitative research leads to as many interpretations as there are researchers. When using a specific method with a specific purpose—for instance, categorization of the subjects’ statements in order to compare the attitudes of different groups of subjects toward an issue—then a high intersubjective reproducibility of the categorization is desirable; that is, the results of the comparison should not be influenced by who categorized the answers of the groups. A strict requirement of intersubjective reliability for all forms of interview analysis may, however, lead to a tyranny by the lowest possible denominator: that an interpretation is only reliable when it can be followed by everyone, a criterion that could lead to a trivialization of the interpretations. This may again involve a consensualist conception of truth: that an observation or an interpretation is only considered valid if it can be repeated by everyone, irrespective of the quality of the observation and the argumentation.

The emphasis on method—in the meaning of standardized techniques or of intersubjective reliability—may also involve a disregard of knowledge and expertise during the analysis of the interviews. The question may involve an “externalization” of the interpretation of meaning to fixed rules and criteria, rather than going beyond method and drawing upon the craftsmanship of the researcher, on his or her knowledge and interpretative skills. Psychological research has often

placed an empiristic emphasis on naive observers and unprejudiced interpreters as a condition for obtaining objective results. In contrast thereto, the present position emphasizes a knowledge of the subject matter, an expertise in the field studied, as a presupposition for arriving at valid interpretations. The importance of background knowledge for observations is evident in a variety of areas. When analyzing interviews with chess players, the researcher's knowledge of chess at a higher level than that of the interviewees is a precondition for seeing the solutions they did not see. In the psychoanalytical tradition, there has long been an emphasis on the training and the competence of the analyst for making psychoanalytical observations and interpretations.

The alternative to the methodical emphasis of the 1,000-page question is: *How can the interviews assist me in extending my knowledge of the phenomena I am investigating?*

#### "TRANSCRIPTS"—BEWARE!

Do not conceive of the interviews as transcripts: The interviews are living conversations—beware of transcripts.

The transcripts should not be the subject matter of an interview study, as implied by the 1,000-page question, but rather be means, tools, for the interpretation of what was said during the interviews. Although produced as an oral discourse, the interview appears in the form of a written text. The transcript is a bastard, it is a hybrid between an oral discourse unfolding over time, face to face, in a lived situation—where what is said is addressed to a specific listener present—and a written text created for a general, distant, public.

An emphasis on the transcription may promote a reifying analysis that reduces the text to a mere collection of words or single meanings conceived as verbal data. The originally lived face-to-face conversations disappear in endless transcripts, only to reappear butchered into fragmented quotes. The interviews become closed, they no longer open up to a horizon of possible meanings, to be explored and developed.

An alternative approach toward the transcripts involves entering into a *dialogue* with the text, going into an imagined conversation with the "author" about the meaning of the text. The reader here asks about the theme of the text, goes into the text seeking to develop, clarify,

and expand what is expressed in the text. The meanings may be approached as manifestly expressed, or, in line with a "depth hermeneutics," seeking to uncover meanings hidden in the texts.

The alternative to the transcription emphasis in the 1,000-page question is: *How do I analyze what my interviewees told me in order to enrich and deepen the meaning of what they said?*

#### "COLLECTED" VERSUS COAUTHORED

The interviewee's statements are not collected—they are co-authored by the interviewer.

The inter-view is an inter-subjective enterprise of two persons talking about common themes of interest. The interviewer does not merely collect statements like gathering small stones on a beach. His or her questions lead up to what aspects of a topic the subject will address, and the interviewer's active listening and following up on the answers co-determines the course of the conversation.

There is a tendency to take the results of a social interaction, when first arrived at, as a given, forgetting the original discourse and the social co-construction of the final outcomes. Such a reification may be strengthened by the transcription of the interviews; the fixated written form takes over and the original face-to-face interaction of the interview situation fades away.

A reification of the jointly produced interview into a transcription of collected statements has consequences in both a social and a temporal dimension. Socially, the forgetting of the joint social creation of the interview statements and the neglect of the interviewer's constructive contributions to the answers produced may lead to a biased view of the interview as merely reflecting the interviewee, with the possible exception of the influence of directly leading questions. The alternative approach of deliberately using the role of the interviewer as a coproducer and a coauthor of the interview, and of reflecting on the social constitution of the interview, is then overlooked.

Temporally, focusing on the transcripts as a collection of statements may freeze the interview into finished entities rather than treat its passages as stepping stones toward a continuous unfolding of the meaning of what was said. In the latter case, the analysis of the transcribed interviews is a continuation of the conversation that started in the

interview situation. The interviewee's answers open up to a horizon of possible meanings to be pursued during the later conversational analysis with the interview text. The focus of the analysis moves from what has already been said, goes beyond the immediately given, to what could have been said.

The continued dialogue with the text may lead to a renewed conversation with the interviewee, sharing and developing the zone of possible meanings in the original interview. More often, the analysis will be in the form of an imagined dialogue with the text, unfolding its horizon of possible meanings.

The alternative to the stamp-collecting version of the 1,000-page question is: *How do I carry on the dialogue with the text I have coauthored with the interviewee?*

#### "ANALYZE" VERSUS NARRATE

Do not let the analysis stage inflate so that it consumes the major portion of time available for an interview project.

The analysis of an interview is interspersed between the initial story told by the interviewee to the researcher and the final story told by the researcher to an audience. To *analyze* means to separate something into parts or elements. The transcription of the conversation and the conception of the interview as a collection of statements might promote a fragmentation of the story told by the interviewee into separate parts, be they single paragraphs, sentences, or words. It is then easy to forget that in open, nondirective interviews the interviewee tells a story, or several stories, to the researcher, and that the transcript itself may then approximate the form of a narrative text.

The structures and functions of the narratives of folktales and literature, as worked out in the humanities, can be used to reflect and analyze the narrative structures employed by the interviewee. A narrative approach to the interview analysis, going back to the original story told by the interviewee and anticipating the final story to be reported to an audience, may prevent becoming lost in a jungle of transcripts. A focus on the interview as a narrative may even make the interview transcripts better reading, in that the original interview is deliberately created in a story form. A narrative conception of interview research supports a unity of form among the original interview situation, the analysis, and the final report.

A narrative alternative to the analysis version of the 1,000-page question then becomes: *How can I reconstruct the original story told to me by the interviewee into a story I want to tell my audience?*

#### Method of Analysis

A question about interview research was posed in the introduction of this chapter: How can I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcripts I have collected?

The answer given was that the question was posed too late to obtain a satisfactory answer and that its formulation made it difficult to answer. The wording of the question was then analyzed in detail with the purpose of bringing its implicit presuppositions of interview research into the open, and with the general interest of making the question superfluous.

No standardized method of analysis was applied to the question; rather, a variety of approaches were tried in order to bring out the meaning of the question. The general structure was to select 7 key words from the 17-word sentence and analyze them individually. Yet the analysis was not entirely decontextualized; there were continuous overlappings among the meanings developed from the key words that pointed to common threads of meaning underlying the question. By analyzing the separate words, an attempt was made to bring in the context of the question. Guesses were made to find the implied meanings of, for example, vocal intonation—such as whether the emphasis on the "1,000 pages" was in a despairing or an assertive voice. Some brief attempts at an etymological analysis were made, concerning terms as *method* and *analyze*.

The original sentence was rephrased in various forms, leading to different directions of meanings. The alternative rephrasings of the 1,000-page question shifted the focus from what was said to what could have been said, opening up some of the possibilities of meanings that the original formulation of the question closed off. It presupposes a certain background knowledge of interview research to see some of the possibilities the question leads away from. The analysis took the form of an imagined dialogue, an attempt to answer the original 1,000-page question by asking about its possible meanings. The analysis resembled the question-answer sequence of an imagined