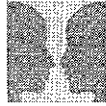


7



The Interview Situation

In the interview, knowledge is created inter the points of view of the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviews with the subjects are the most engaging stage of an interview inquiry. The personal contact and the continually new insights into the subjects' lived world make interviewing an exciting and enriching experience. Different forms of interview conversations were discussed in Chapter 2 and the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview described. In this chapter I outline in more detail some guidelines and techniques for carrying out interviews and give an illustration with an interview on grading.

The Interview Conversation

The purpose of a qualitative research interview was described earlier as obtaining qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning. The interview form treated here is a semistructured interview: It has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects. I will discuss the interview interaction in line with the mode of understanding depicted earlier with respect to 12 aspects of the interview: life world, meaning, qualitative, descriptive, specificity, deliberate naïveté, focus, ambiguity, change, sensitivity, interpersonal situation, and a positive experience (see Box 2.1 in Chapter 2).

An open phenomenological approach to learning from the interviewee is well expressed in this introduction from Spradley (1979):

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 34)

The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest. It is a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue. The interaction is neither as anonymous and neutral as when a subject responds to a survey questionnaire, nor as personal and emotional as a therapeutic interview. Patients seek therapists for help: They are motivated to be as open as possible with the therapist, with whom a trusting relationship is established over time. In a research setting it is up to the interviewer to create in a short time a contact that allows the interaction to get beyond merely a polite conversation or exchange of ideas. The interviewer must establish an atmosphere in which the subject feels safe enough to talk freely about his or her experiences and feelings. This involves a delicate balance between cognitive knowledge seeking and the ethical aspects of emotional human interaction. Thus, at the same time that personal expressions and emotions are encouraged, the interviewer must avoid allowing the interview to turn into a therapeutic situation, which he or she may not be able to handle.

The interviewer has an empathic access to the world of the interviewee; the interviewee's lived meanings may be immediately accessible in the situation, communicated not only by words, but by tone of voice, expressions, and gestures in the natural flow of a conversation. The research interviewer uses him- or herself as a research instrument, drawing upon an implicit bodily and emotional mode of knowing that allows a privileged access to the subject's lived world.

A research interview follows an unwritten script, with different roles specified for the two actors. The implicit rules of their interaction become visible when they are broken, such as in this interview exchange with an unemployed man about traveling, in which the interviewer is caught off guard when the subject reverses the roles:

Subject: When you are on vacation there is some silly time factor, the only thing you have time for is to go down and throw yourself on the beach. Do you sunbathe?

Interviewer: What?

S: Do you sunbathe?

I: Well, no I do not.

S: You have a nice color.

I: I don't spend one single summer day on that, but as a whole I look tanned. Furthermore I get very easily tanned, I only need to put one finger out of the window to catch the sun.

S: A lot of people would envy you that.

I: Well, where do we begin. What are you doing with your friends? (Berg Sørensen, 1988, p. 124).

The conversation in a research interview is not the reciprocal interaction of two equal partners. There is a definite asymmetry of power: The interviewer defines the situation, introduces the topics of the conversation, and through further questions steers the course of the interview. This was the case in the rather open interview reported by Giorgi (Chapter 2). Socrates' interview, despite the conversational partners being formally equal and the polite introduction, took the form of harsh interrogation, relentlessly driving Agathon around in his contradictory conceptions of love and beauty, until Agathon throws in the towel and concedes that he knows nothing of what he was talking about (Chapter 2).

Advance preparation is essential to the interaction and outcome of an interview. A substantial part of the investigation should take place before the tape recorder is turned on in the actual interview situation. The key issues of the interview concern what, why, and how: *what*—acquiring a preknowledge of the subject matter to be investigated; *why*—formulating a clear purpose for the interview; and *how*—being familiar with different interview techniques and deciding which to apply in the investigation. Also, before the first interviews in a study are undertaken, thought should have been given to how the interviews will be analyzed and how the findings will be verified and reported.

Research interviews vary on a series of dimensions. They differ in degree of *structure*, from well-organized interviews that follow a

sequence of standard question formulations, to open interviews where specific themes are in focus but without a predetermined sequence and formulation of questions. Sometimes only a first, topic-introducing question is asked and the remainder of the interview proceeds as a follow-up and expansion on the interviewee's answer to the first questions, such as in the interview on learning reported by Giorgi. The interviews also differ in their *openness of purpose*; the interviewer can explain the purpose and pose direct questions from the start or can adopt a roundabout approach, with indirect questions, and reveal the purpose only when the interview is over.

The interviews can differ further in their emphasis on *exploration versus hypothesis testing*, as mentioned in the discussion of design. Interviews also vary concerning *description versus interpretation*. The interviewer might seek mainly to obtain nuanced descriptions of the phenomena investigated or can, during the interview, also attempt to clarify and interpret the descriptions together with the subject. Interviews also vary on an *intellectual-emotional dimension*, from a rational logical discourse between interviewer and subject analytically clarifying conceptions of the phenomena investigated, to the interviewer attempting to get spontaneous and emotional descriptions of, and reactions about, a topic. Two extreme interviews on the intellectual-emotional dimension were presented earlier—the discursive argumentation of Socrates and the emotional therapeutic interchange reported by Rogers.

Framing the Interview

The interview is a stage upon which knowledge is constructed through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee roles. Some directions are suggested here for setting the interview stage so the interviewees will be encouraged to put words to their points of view on their lives and worlds. The directions pertain to interviews with middle-class persons in Northern Europe and North America. In other cultures, different norms may hold for interactions with strangers concerning initiative, directness, openness, and the like.

The interviewees should be provided with a context for the interview by a briefing before and a debriefing afterward. The context is

introduced with a *briefing* in which the interviewer defines the situation for the subject; briefly tells about the purpose of the interview, the use of a tape recorder, and so on; and asks if the subject has any questions before starting the interview. Further explanations about the interview investigation should preferably wait until the interview is over.

The first minutes of an interview are decisive. The subjects will want to have a grasp of the interviewer before they allow themselves to talk freely, exposing their experiences and feelings to a stranger. A good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding, and respect for what the subject says; at the same time, the interviewer is at ease and clear about what he or she wants to know.

The initial briefing should be followed up by a *debriefing* after the interview. At the end of the interview there may be some tension or anxiety, because the subject has been open about often personal and emotional experiences and may be wondering about the interview's purpose and how it will be used. There may perhaps also be feelings of emptiness; the subject has given much information about his or her life and may not have received anything in return. This being said, a common experience after research interviews is that the subjects have experienced the interview as genuinely enriching, have enjoyed talking freely with an attentive listener, and have sometimes obtained new insights into important themes of their life world.

The interaction can be rounded off by the interviewer mentioning some of the main points learned from the interview. The subject may then want to comment on this feedback. The interaction can thereafter be concluded by the interviewer saying, for example, "I have no further questions. Do you have anything more you want to bring up, or ask about, before we finish the interview?" This gives the subject an additional opportunity to deal with issues he or she has been thinking or worrying about during the interview.

The debriefing is likely to continue after the tape recorder has been turned off. After a first gasp of relief, the interviewee may bring up topics he or she did not feel safe raising with the tape recorder on. And the interviewer can now, insofar as the subject is interested, tell more fully about the purpose and design of the interview study.

The lived interview situation, with the interviewee's voice and facial and bodily expressions accompanying the statements, provides a richer access to the subjects' meanings than the transcribed texts will later. It may be worthwhile for the interviewer to set aside 10 minutes of quiet time after each interview to recall and reflect on what has been learned from the particular interview, including the interpersonal interaction. These immediate impressions, based on the interviewer's empathic access to the meanings communicated, may—in the form of notes or simply recorded onto the interview tape—provide a valuable context for the later analysis of transcripts.

The Interview Guide

An interview guide indicates the topics and their sequence in the interview. The guide can contain just some rough topics to be covered or it can be a detailed sequence of carefully worded questions. For the semistructured type of interview discussed here, the guide will contain an outline of topics to be covered, with suggested questions. It will depend on the particular design chosen whether the questions and their sequence are strictly predetermined and binding on the interviewers, or whether it is up to an interviewer's judgment and tact how closely to follow the guide and how strongly to pursue an individual subject's answers.

Each interview question can be evaluated with respect to both a thematic and a dynamic dimension: thematically with regard to its relevance for the research theme, and dynamically with regard to the interpersonal relationship in the interview. A good interview question should contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting a good interview interaction.

Thematically the questions relate to the topic of the interview, to the theoretical conceptions at the root of an investigation, and to the subsequent analysis. The questions will be different when interviewing for spontaneous descriptions of the lived world, or interviewing for a conceptual analysis of the person's concepts of a topic. Simply expressed, the more spontaneous the interview procedure, the more likely one is to obtain spontaneous, lively, and unexpected answers from the interviewees. And vice versa: The more structured the

interview situation is, the easier the later structuring of the interview by analysis will be.

In line with the principle of “pushing forward” in an interview project, the later stages should be taken into account when preparing the interview questions. If the method of analysis will involve categorizing the answers, then clarify continually during the interview the meanings of the answers with respect to the categories to be used later. If a narrative analysis is to be employed, then give the subjects ample freedom and time to unfold their own stories, and follow up with questions to clarify the main episodes and characters in their narratives.

Dynamically, the questions should promote a positive interaction; keep the flow of the conversation going and motivate the subjects to talk about their experiences and feelings. The questions should be easy to understand, short, and devoid of academic language.

A good conceptual thematic research question need not be a good dynamic interview question. When preparing an interview it may be useful to develop two guides, one with the project’s main thematic research questions and the other with the questions to be posed during the interview, which takes both the thematic and the dynamic dimensions into account.

Table 7.1 depicts the translation of thematic research questions in the grading study into interview questions to provide thematic knowledge and contribute dynamically to a natural conversational flow. The abstract wording of the research questions would hardly lead to off-the-cuff answers from high school pupils. The academic research questions need to be translated into an easy-going, colloquial form to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions. One research question can be investigated through several interview questions, thus obtaining rich and varied information by approaching a topic from several angles. And one interview question might provide answers to several research questions.

The roles of the “why,” “what,” and “how” questions are different in research versus interview questions. It has been repeatedly emphasized that when designing an interview project, the “why” and “what” questions should be asked and answered before the question of “how” is posed. In the interview situation, the priority of the question types change. In the interview itself, the main questions should be in a descriptive form: “What happened and how did it happen?” “How

TABLE 7.1 Research Questions and Interview Questions

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Interview Questions</i>
Which form of learning motivation dominates in high school?	Do you find the subjects you learn important?
	Do you find learning interesting in itself?
	What is your main purpose in going to high school?
Do the grades promote an external, instrumental motivation at the expense of an intrinsic interest motivation for learning? →	Have you experienced a conflict between what you wanted to read (study) and what you had to read to obtain a good grade?
	Does learning for grades socialize to working for wages?
	Have you been rewarded with money for good grades?
	Do you see any connection between money and grades?

did you feel then?” “What did you experience?” and the like. The aim is to elicit spontaneous descriptions from the subjects rather than to get their own, more or less speculative explanations of why something took place. “Why” questions about the subjects’ own reasons for their actions may be important in their own right. Many “why” questions in an interview may, however, lead to an intellectualized interview, perhaps evoking memories of oral examinations. Figuring out the reasons and explanations for why something happened is primarily the task of the investigator.

Interview Questions

The research interview proceeds rather like a normal conversation but has a specific purpose and structure: It is characterized by a

systematic form of questioning. The interviewer's questions should be brief and simple. In the life world interviews described here, an opening question may ask about a concrete situation. The different dimensions introduced in the answer can then be pursued. The decisive issue is the interviewer's ability to sense the immediate meaning of an answer and the horizon of possible meanings that it opens up. This, again, requires a knowledge of, and interest in, both the theme and the human interaction of the interview. Decisions about which of the many dimensions to pursue that are introduced by a subject's answer will depend on the purpose and content of the interview, as well as on the social interaction in the interview situation.

Box 7.1 depicts some main types of questions that may be useful in the semistructured interview form treated here. A more extended discussion of interview questions is given by Seidman (1991). In addition to paying attention to the thematic and dynamic aspects of the questions, the interviewer should also try to keep in mind the later analysis, verification, and reporting of the interviews. Interviewers who know what they are asking about, and why they are asking, will attempt to clarify the meanings relevant to the project during the interview, obtaining a disambiguation of the statements made, and thereby provide a more trustworthy point of departure for the later analysis. Such a process of meaning clarification during the interview may also communicate to the subjects that the interviewer actually is listening to and interested in what they are saying. Ideally, the testing of hypotheses and interpretations is finished by the end of the interview, with the interviewer's hypotheses having been verified or falsified during the interview.

If an interview is to be reported, perhaps quoted at length, then attempt when feasible to make the social context explicit during the interview, and when possible the emotional tone of the interaction, so that what is said is understandable for the readers, who have not witnessed the live interview situation. Much is to be learned from journalists and novelists about conveying the setting and mood of a conversation.

The focus here has been on the interviewer's questions. Active listening—the interviewer's ability to listen actively to what the interviewee says—can be more important than the specific mastery of questioning techniques. Therapists' education emphasizes their skills

Box 7.1

Types of Interview Questions

A. *Introducing Questions*: "Can you tell me about . . . ?"; "Do you remember an occasion when . . . ?"; "What happened in the episode you mentioned?"; and "Could you describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which learning occurred for you?" Such opening questions may yield spontaneous, rich, descriptions where the subjects themselves provide what they experience as the main dimensions of the phenomena investigated. The remainder of the interview can then proceed as following up of dimensions introduced in the story told in response to the initial question.

B. *Follow-Up Questions*: The subjects' answers may be extended through a curious, persistent, and critical attitude of the interviewer. This can be done through direct questioning of what has just been said. Also a mere nod, or "mm," or just a pause can indicate to the subject to go on with the description. Repeating significant words of an answer can lead to further elaborations. Interviewers can train themselves to notice "red lights" in the answers—such as unusual terms, strong intonations, and the like—which may signal a whole complex of topics important to the subject. The key issue here is the interviewer's ability to listen to what is important to the subjects, and at the same time to keep in mind the research questions of an investigation.

C. *Probing Questions*: "Could you say something more about that?"; "Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?"; "Do you have further examples of this?" The interviewer here pursues the answers, probing their content but without stating what dimensions are to be taken into account.

(continued)

Box 7.1 Continued

D. *Specifying Questions*: The interviewer may also follow up with more operationalizing questions, for instance: "What did you think then?"; "What did you actually do when you felt a mounting anxiety?"; "How did your body react?" In an interview with many general statements, the interviewer can attempt to get more precise descriptions by asking "Have you also experienced this yourself?"

E. *Direct Questions*: The interviewer here directly introduces topics and dimensions, for example: "Have you ever received money for good grades?"; "When you mention competition, do you then think of a sportsmanlike or a destructive competition?" Such direct questions may preferably be postponed until the later parts of the interview, after the subjects have given their own spontaneous descriptions and thereby indicated what aspects of the phenomena are central to them.

F. *Indirect Questions*: Here the interviewer may apply projective questions such as "How do you believe other pupils regard the competition for grades?" The answer may refer directly to the attitudes of others; it may also be an indirect statement of the pupil's own attitude, which he or she does not state directly. Careful further questioning will be necessary here to interpret the answer.

G. *Structuring Questions*: The interviewer is responsible for the course of the interview and should indicate when a theme has been exhausted. The interviewer may directly and politely break off long answers that are irrelevant to the topic of the investigation, for example by saying, "I would now like to introduce another topic: . . ."

H. *Silence*: Rather than making the interview a cross examination by continually firing off questions, the research interviewer can take a lead from therapists in employing silence to further the interview. By allowing pauses in the

Box 7.1 Continued

conversation the subjects have ample time to associate and reflect and then break the silence themselves with significant information.

I. *Interpreting Questions*: The degree of interpretation may involve merely rephrasing an answer, for instance: "You then mean that . . . ?" or attempts at clarification: "Is it correct that you feel that . . . ?"; "Does the expression . . . cover what you have just expressed?" There may also be more direct interpretations of what the pupil has said: "Is it correct that your main anxiety about the grades concerns the reaction from your parents?" More speculative questions can take the form of: "Do you see any connections between the two situations of competing with the other pupils for grades and the relation to your siblings at home?"

as listeners, furthering an empathic active listening to the many nuances and layers of meanings of what their patients tell them. Freud (1963) recommended that therapists listen to their patients with an "evenly hovering attention" to attend to the meaning of their accounts (Chapter 4, Psychoanalytical Knowledge Production).

The importance of listening also appears in phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to interviewing (Chapter 3, sections titled Hermeneutical Interpretation; and Phenomenological Description). There is the phenomenological ideal of listening without prejudice, allowing the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences unfold without interruptions from interviewer questions and the presuppositions these involve. A hermeneutical approach involves an interpretative listening to the multiple horizons of meaning involved in the interviewees' statements, with an attention to the possibilities of continual reinterpretations within the hermeneutical circle of the interview. Attention will also be paid to the influence of the presuppositions of the subjects' answers as well as the presuppositions of the interviewer's questions.