



## CHAPTER

## 14 Unstructured and Semi-Structured Interviewing

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### Abstract

This chapter gives an introduction to qualitative interviewing in its unstructured and semistructured forms. Initially, the human world is depicted as a conversational reality in which interviewing takes a central position as a research method. Interviewing is presented as a social practice that has a cultural history and that today appears in a variety of different formats. A number of distinctions are introduced, which are relevant when mapping the field of qualitative interviewing between different levels of structure, numbers of participants, media of interviewing, and also interviewer styles. A more detailed exposition of semistructured life world interviewing is offered because this is arguably the standard form of qualitative interviewing today.

**Keywords:** [Interviewing](#), [conversation](#), [unstructured interviews](#), [semistructured interviews](#), [phenomenology](#), [discourse analysis](#)

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Qualitative interviewing has today become a key method in the human and social sciences and also in many other corners of the scientific landscape from education to the health sciences. Some have even argued that interviewing has become *the* central resource through which the social sciences—and society—engages with the issues that concern it (Rapley, 2001). For as long as we know, human beings have used conversation as a central tool to obtain knowledge about others. People talk with others in order to learn about how they experience the world, how they think, act, feel, and develop as individuals and in groups, and, in recent decades, such knowledge-producing conversations have been refined and discussed as qualitative interviews.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter gives an overview of the landscape of qualitative interviewing, with a focus on its unstructured and semistructured forms. But what are interviews as such? In a classic text, Maccoby and Maccoby defined the interview as “a face-to-face verbal exchange, in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons” (Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954, p. 449). This definition can be used as a very general starting point, but we shall soon see that different schools of qualitative interviewing have interpreted, modified, and added to such a generic characterization in many different ways.

I begin this chapter by giving an introduction to the broader conversational world of human beings in which interviewing takes place. I then provide a brief history of qualitative interviewing before introducing a number of conceptual and analytical distinctions relevant for the central epistemological and theoretical questions in the field of qualitative interviewing. Particular attention is given to the complementary positions of experience-focused interviewing (phenomenological positions) and language-focused interviewing (discourse-oriented positions).

Human beings are conversational creatures who live a dialogical life. Humankind is, in the words of philosopher Stephen Mulhall, “a kind of enacted conversation” (Mulhall, 2007, p. 58). From the earliest days of our lives, we are able to enter into proto-conversations with caregivers in ways that involve subtle forms of turn-taking and emotional communication. The dyads in which our earliest conversations occur are known to be prior to the child’s own sense of self. We are therefore communicating, and indeed conversational, creatures before we become subjective and monological ones (Trevarthen, 1993).

Of course, we do learn to talk privately to ourselves and hide our emotional lives from others, but this is possible only because there was first an intersubjective communicative process with others. Our relationships with other people—and also with ourselves—are thus conversational. To understand ourselves, we must use a language that was first acquired conversationally, and we try out our interpretations in dialogue with others and the world. The human self exists only within what philosopher Charles Taylor has called “webs of interlocution” (Taylor, 1989, p. 36). Our very inquiring and interpreting selves are conversational at their core; they are constituted by the numerous relationships we have and have had with other people (Brinkmann, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, conversations are therefore a rich and indispensable source of knowledge about personal and social aspects of our lives. In a philosophical sense, all human research is conversational because we are linguistic creatures and language is best understood in terms of the figure of conversation (Mulhall, 2007). Since the late nineteenth century (in journalism) and the early twentieth century (in the social sciences), the conversational process of knowing has been conceptualized under the name of *interviewing*. The term itself testifies to the dialogical and interactional nature of human life. An interview is literally an *inter-view*, an interchange of views between two persons (or more) conversing about a theme of mutual interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). *Conversation* in its Latin root means “dwelling with someone” or “wandering together with.” Similarly, the root meaning of *dialogue* is that of talk (*logos*) that goes back and forth (*dia-*) between persons (Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995, p. 4).

Thus conceived, the concept of conversation in the human and social sciences should be thought of in very broad terms and not just as a specific research method. Certainly, conversations in the form of interviewing have been refined into a set of techniques—to be explicated later—but they are also a mode of knowing and a fundamental ontology of persons. As philosopher Rom Harré has put it: “The primary human reality is persons in conversation” (Harré, 1983, p. 58). Cultures are constantly produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members (Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995, p. 2). Thus conceived, our everyday lives are conversational to their core. This also goes for the cultural investigation of cultural phenomena, or what we call social science. It is fruitful to see language, culture, and human self-understanding as emergent properties of conversations rather than the other way around. Dialogues are not several monologues that are added together but the basic, primordial form of associated human life. In the words of psychologist John Shotter:

[W]e live our daily social lives within an ambience of conversation, discussion, argumentation, negotiation, criticism and justification; much of it to do with problems of intelligibility and the legitimation of claims to truth.

(Shotter, 1993, p. 29)

The pervasiveness of the figure of conversation in human life is both a burden and a blessing for qualitative interviewers. On the one hand, it means that qualitative interviewing becomes a very significant tool with which to understand central features of our conversational world. In response to widespread critiques of qualitative research that it is too subjective, one should say—given the picture of the conversational world painted here—that qualitative interviewing is, in fact, the most *objective* method of inquiry when one is interested in qualitative features of human experience, talk, and interaction because qualitative interviews are uniquely capable of grasping these features and thus of being adequate to their subject matters (which is one definition of objectivity).

On the other hand, it is also a burden for qualitative interviewers that they employ conversations to study a world that is already saturated with conversation. If Mulhall is right that humankind is a kind of enacted conversation, then the process of studying humans by the use of interviewing is analogous to fish wanting

to study water. Fish surely “know” what water is in a practical, embodied sense, but it can be a great challenge to see and understand the obvious, that with which we are so familiar ↵ (Brinkmann, 2012). In the same way, some interview researchers might think that interviewing others for research purposes is easy and simple to do because it employs a set of techniques that everyone masters by virtue of being capable of asking questions and recording the answers. This, however, is clearly an illusory simplicity, and many qualitative interviewers, even experienced ones, will recognize the frustrating experience of having conducted a large number of interviews (which is often the fun and seemingly simple part of a research project) but ending up with a huge amount of data, in the form of perhaps hundreds or even thousand pages of transcripts, and not knowing how to transform all this material into a solid, relevant, and thought-provoking analysis. Too much time is often spent on interviewing, whereas too little time is devoted to preparing for the interviews and subsequently analyzing the empirical materials. And, to continue on this note, too little time is normally used to reflect on the role of interviewing as a knowledge-producing social practice in itself. Due to its closeness to everyday conversations, interviewing, in short, is often simply taken for granted.

A further burden for today’s qualitative interviewers concerns the fact that interviewees are often almost too familiar with their role in the conversation. As Atkinson and Silverman argued some years ago, we live in an *interview society*, where the self is continually produced in confessional settings ranging from talk shows to research interviews (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). Because most of us, at least in the imagined hemisphere we call the West, are acquainted with interviews and their more or less standardized choreographies, qualitative interviews sometimes become a rather easy and regular affair, with few breaks and cracks in its conventions and norms, even though such breaks and cracks are often the most interesting aspects of conversational episodes (Roulston, 2010; Tanggaard, 2007).

On the side of interviewers, Atkinson and Silverman find that “in promoting a particular view of narratives of personal experience, researchers too often recapitulate, in an uncritical fashion, features of the contemporary interview society” in which “the interview becomes a personal confessional” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 305). Although the conversation in a broad sense is a human universal, qualitative interviewers often forget that the social practice of research interviewing in a narrower sense is a historically and culturally specific mode of interacting, and they too often construe “face-to-face interaction” as “the primordial, natural setting for communication,” as anthropologist Charles Briggs has pointed out (Briggs, 2007, p. 554).

As a consequence, the analysis of interviews is generally limited to what takes place during the concrete interaction phase with its questions and responses. In contrast to this, there is reason to believe that excellent interview research does not simply communicate a number of answers to an interviewer’s questions (with the researcher’s interpretive interjections added on), but includes an analytic focus on what Briggs has called “the larger set of practices of knowledge production that makes up the research from beginning to end” (Briggs, 2007, p. 566). Just as it is crucial in quantitative and experimental research to have an adequate understanding of the technologies of experimentation, it is similarly crucial in qualitative interviewing to understand the intricacies of this quite specific knowledge-producing practice, and interviewers should be particularly careful not to naturalize the form of human relationship that is a qualitative research interview and simply gloss it over as an unproblematic, direct, and universal source of knowledge. This, at least, is a basic assumption of the present chapter.

## The History of Qualitative Interviewing

This takes us directly to the history of qualitative interviewing because only by tracking the history of how the current practices came to be can we fully understand their contingent natures and reflect on their roles in how we produce conversational knowledge through interviews today.

In one obvious sense, the use of conversations for knowledge-producing purposes is likely as old as human language and communication. The fact that we can pose questions to others about things that we are unknowledgeable about is a core capability of the human species. It expands our intellectual powers enormously because it enables us to share and distribute knowledge between us. Without this fundamental capability, it would be hard to imagine what human life would be like. It is furthermore a capacity that has developed into many different forms and ramifications in human societies. Already in 1924 could Emory Bogardus, an early American sociologist and founder of one of the first US sociology departments (at the

University of Southern California) declare that interviewing “is as old as the human race” (Bogardus, 1924, p. 456). Bogardus discussed similarities and differences between the ways that physicians, lawyers, priests, journalists, detectives, social workers, and psychiatrists conduct interviews, with a remarkable sensitivity to the details of such different conversational practices.

## Ancient Roots

In a more specific sense, and more essentially related to qualitative interviewing as a scientific human enterprise, conversations were used by Thucydides in ancient Greece as he interviewed participants from the Peloponnesian Wars to write the history of the wars. At roughly the same time, Socrates famously questioned—or we might say *interviewed*—his fellow citizens in ancient Athens and used the dialogues to develop knowledge about perennial human questions related to justice, truth, beauty, and the virtues. In recent years, some interview scholars have sought to rehabilitate a Socratic practice of interviewing, not least as an alternative to the often long monologues of phenomenological and narrative approaches to interviewing (see Dinkins, 2005, who unites Socrates with a hermeneutic approach to dialogical knowledge) and also in an attempt to think of interviews as practices that can create a knowledgeable citizenry and not merely chart common opinions and attitudes (Brinkmann, 2007a). Such varieties of interviewing have come to be known as dialogic and confrontational (Roulston, 2010, p. 26), and I return to these later.

## Psychoanalysis

If we jump to more recent times, interviewing notably entered the human sciences with the advent of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, emerging around 1900. Freud is famous for his psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, but it is significant that he developed this revolutionary theory (which, in many ways, changed the Western conceptions of humanity) through therapeutic conversations, or what he referred to as the *talking cure*. Freud conducted several hundred interviews with patients that used the patients’ free associations as a conversational engine. The therapist/interviewer should display what Freud called an “even-hovering attention” and catch on to anything that emerged as important (Freud, 1963).

Freud made clear that research and treatment go hand in hand in psychoanalysis, and scholars have more recently pointed to the rich potentials of psychoanalytic conversations for qualitative interviewing today (see Kvale, 2003). For example, Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson have developed a more specific notion of the interview that is based on the psychoanalytic idea of “the defended subject” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In their eyes, interviewees “are motivated *not* to know certain aspects of themselves and... they produce biographical accounts which avoid such knowledge” (p. 169). This, obviously, has implications for how interviewers should proceed with analysis and interpretation of the biographical statements of interviewees and is a quite different approach to interviewing compared to more humanistic forms, as we shall see.

Many human and social scientists from the first half of the twentieth century were well versed in psychoanalytic theory, including those who pioneered qualitative interviewing. Jean Piaget, the famous developmental researcher, had even received training as a psychoanalyst himself, but his approach to interviewing is also worth mentioning in its own right. Piaget’s (1930) theory of child development was based on his interviews with children (often his own) in natural settings, frequently in combination with different experimental tasks. He would typically let the children talk freely about the weight and size of objects, or, in relation to his research on moral development, about different moral problems (Piaget, 1932/1975), and he would notice the manner in which their thoughts unfolded.

Jumping from psychology to industrial research, Raymond Lee, one of the few historians of interviewing, has charted in detail how Piaget’s so-called clinical method of interviewing became an inspiration for Elton Mayo, who was responsible for one of the largest interview studies in history at the Hawthorne plant in Chicago in the 1920s (Lee, 2011). This study arose from a need to interpret the curious results of a number of practical experiments on the effects of changes in illumination on production at the plant: it seemed that work output improved when the lighting of the production rooms was increased but also when it was decreased. This instigated an interview study, with more than 21,000 workers being interviewed for more than an hour each. The study was reported by Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), but it was Mayo who laid out the methodological procedures in the 1930s, including careful—and surprisingly contemporary—advice to interviewers that is worth quoting at length:

1. Give your whole attention to the person interviewed, and make it evident that you are doing so.
2. Listen—don't talk.
3. Never argue; never give advice.
4. Listen to:
  - (a) what he wants to say
  - (b) what he does not want to say
  - (c) what he cannot say without help

p. 281

5. ↳ As you listen, plot out tentatively and for subsequent correction the pattern (personal) that is being set before you. To test this, from time to time summarize what has been said and present for comment (e.g., "is this what you are telling me?"). Always do this with the greatest caution, that is, clarify in ways that do not add or distort.
6. Remember that everything said must be considered a personal confidence and not divulged to anyone. (Mayo, 1933, p. 65)

Many approaches to and textbooks on interviewing still follow such guidelines today, often forgetting, however, the specific historical circumstances under which this practice emerged.

## Nondirective Interviewing

Not just Piaget, but also the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers had influenced Mayo and others concerned with interviewing in the first half of the twentieth century. Like Freud, Rogers developed a conversational technique that was useful both in therapeutic contexts (so-called client-centered therapy), but also in research interviews, which he referred to as the "non-directive method as a technique for social research" (Rogers, 1945). As he explained, the goal of this kind of research was to sample the respondent's attitudes toward herself: "Through the non-directive interview we have an unbiased method by which we may plumb these private thoughts and perceptions of the individual." (p. 282). In contrast to psychoanalysis, the respondent in client-centered research (and therapy) is a client rather than a patient, and the client is the expert (and hardly a "defended subject"). Although often framed in different terms, many contemporary interview researchers conceptualize the research interview in line with Rogers's humanistic, nondirective approach, valorizing the respondents' private experiences, narratives, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes.

As Lee recounts, the methods of interviewing developed at Hawthorne in the 1930s aroused interest among sociologists at the University of Chicago, who made it part of their methodological repertoire (Lee, 2011, p. 132). Rogers himself moved to Chicago in 1945 and was involved in different interdisciplinary projects. As is well known, the so-called Chicago School of sociology was highly influential in using and promoting a range of qualitative methods, not least ethnography, and it also spawned some of the most innovative theoretical developments in the social sciences, such as symbolic interactionism (e.g., Blumer, 1969).

As the Rogerian nondirective approach to interviewing gained in popularity, early critiques of this technique also emerged. In the 1950s, the famous sociologist David Riesman and his colleague Mark Benney criticized it for its lack of interviewer involvement (the nondirective aspects), and they warned against the tendency to use the level of "rapport" (much emphasized by interviewers inspired by therapy) in an interview to judge its qualities concerning knowledge. They thought it was a prejudice "to assume the more rapport-filled and intimate the relation, the more 'truth' the respondent will vouchsafe" (Riesman & Benney, 1956, p. 10). In their eyes, rapport-filled interviews would often spill over with "the flow of legend and cliché" (p. 11), since interviewees are likely to adapt their responses to what they assume the interviewer expects from them (see also Lee, 2008, for an account of Riesman's surprisingly contemporary discussion of interviewing). Issues such as these, originally raised more than fifty years ago, continue to be pertinent and largely unresolved in today's interview research.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a number of other large interview studies that remain classics in the field and that have also shaped public opinion about different social issues. I mention three examples here of such influential interview studies to show the variety of themes that have been studied through interviews: on authoritarianism, sexuality, and consumerism.

After World War II, there was a pressing need to understand the roots of anti-Semitism, and *The Authoritarian Personality* by the well-known critical theorist Adorno and co-workers controversially traced these roots to an authoritarian upbringing (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Their study was based on interviews and employed a combination of open qualitative interviews and much more structured questionnaires to produce the data. Although important knowledge of societal value may have been produced, the study has nonetheless been criticized on ethical grounds for using therapeutic techniques to get around the defenses of the interviewees in order to learn about their prejudices and authoritarian personality traits (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 313).

p. 282 Another famous interview study from the same period was Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). The research group interviewed about 6,000 men for an hour or more about their sexual behaviors, which generated results that were shocking to the public. In addition to the fascinating results, the book contains many interesting reflections on interviewing, and the authors discuss in great detail how to put the interviewees at ease, assure privacy, and how to frame the sequencing of sensitive topics (the contributions of Adorno and Kinsey are also described in Platt, 2002). As Kinsey put it in the book:

The interview has become an opportunity for him [the participant] to develop his own thinking, to express to himself his disappointments and hopes, to bring into the open things that he has previously been afraid to admit to himself, to work out solutions to his difficulties. He quickly comes to realize that a full and complete confession will serve his own interests.

(Kinsey et al., 1948, p. 42)

The movie *Kinsey*, from 2004, starring Liam Neeson, is worth seeing from an interviewer's point of view because it shows these early interviewers in action.

As a third example, it can be mentioned that qualitative interviewing quickly entered market research in the course of the twentieth century, which is hardly surprising as a consumer society developed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). A pioneer was Ernest Dichter, whose *The Strategy of Desire* (1960) communicates the results of an interview study about consumer motivation for buying a car. Interestingly, Dichter describes his interview technique as a "depth interview," inspired both by psychoanalysis and also by the nondirective approach of Rogers. Market and consumer research continue to be among the largest areas of qualitative interviewing in contemporary consumer society, particularly in the form of focus groups, and, according to one estimate, as many as 5 percent of all adults in Great Britain have taken part in focus groups for marketing purposes, which certainly lends very concrete support to the thesis that we live in an "interview society" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).

## Contemporary Conceptions of Qualitative Interviewing

Along with the different empirical studies, academics in the Western world have produced an enormous number of books on qualitative interviewing as a method, both in the form of "how to" books, but also in the form of more theoretical discussions. Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979) and Mishler's *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (1986) were two important early books, the former being full of concrete advice about how to ask questions and the latter being a thorough theoretical analysis of interviews as speech events involving a joint construction of meaning.

Also following from the postmodern philosophies of social science that emerged in the 1980s (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lyotard, 1984), in the past couple of decades there has been a veritable creative explosion in the kinds of interviews offered to researchers (see Fontana & Prokos, 2007), many of which question both the idea of psychoanalysis as being able to dig out truths from the psyche of the interviewee and that the nondirective approach to interviews can be "an unbiased method," as Rogers had originally conceived it.



Roulston (2010) makes a comprehensive list of some of the most recent postmodern varieties of interviewing and also of more traditional ones (I have here shortened and adapted Roulston's longer list):

- *Neo-positivist* conceptions of the interview are still widespread and emphasize how the conversation can be used to reveal “the true self” of the interviewee (or the essence of her experiences), ideally resulting in solid, trustworthy data that are only accessible through interviews if the interviewer assumes a noninterfering role.
- *Romantic* conceptions stress that the goal of interviewing is to obtain revelations and confessions from the interviewee facilitated by intimacy and rapport. These conceptions are somewhat close to neo-positivist ones, but put much more weight on the interviewer as an active and authentic midwife who assists in “giving birth” to revelations from the interviewee's inner psyche.
- *Constructionist* conceptions reject the romantic idea of authenticity and favor an idea of a subject that is locally produced *within* the situation. Thus, the focus is on the situational practice of interviewing and a distrust toward the discourse of data as permanent “nuggets” to be “mined” by the interviewer. Instead, the interviewer is often portrayed as a “traveler” together with the interviewee, with both involved in the co-construction of whatever happens in the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).
- *Postmodern* and *transformative* conceptions stage interviews as dialogic and performative events that aim to bring new kinds of people and new worlds into being. The interview is depicted as a chance for people to get together and create new possibilities for action. Some transformative  $\hookrightarrow$  conceptions focus on potential decolonizing aspects of interviewing, seeking to subvert the colonizing tendencies that some see in standard interviewing (Smith, 1999). In addition, we can mention feminist (Reinharz & Chase, 2002) and collaborative forms of interviewing (Ellis & Berger, 2003) that aim to practice an engaged form of interviewing that focuses more on the researchers' experience than in standard procedures, sometimes expressed through autoethnography, an approach that seeks to unite ethnographical and autobiographical intentions (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

p. 283

It goes without saying that the overarching line of historical development laid out here, beginning in the earliest years of recorded human history and ending with postmodern, transformative, and co-constructed interviewing, is highly selective, and it could have been presented in countless other ways. I have made no attempt to divide up the history of qualitative interviewing into historical phases because I believe this would betray the criss-crossing lines of inspiration from different knowledge-producing practices. Socrates as an active interviewer inspires some of today's constructionist and postmodern interviewers (as we shall see), whereas Freud and Rogers—as clinical interviewers—in different ways became important to people who use interviewing for purposes related to marketing and the industry. Thus, it seems that the only general rule is that no approach is never completely left behind and that everything can be—and often is—recycled in new clothes. This should not surprise us, because the richness and historical variability of the human conversational world demand that researchers use different conversational means of knowledge production for different purposes.

## An Example of Qualitative Interviewing

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Before moving on, here I introduce an example of what a typical qualitative interview may look like, taken from my own research, to illustrate more concretely what we are talking about when we use the term “qualitative interviewing.”

The following excerpt is from an interview I conducted about ten years ago. It was part of a research project in which I studied ethical dilemmas and moral reasoning in psychotherapeutic practice. The project was exploratory and sought an understanding of clinical psychologists' own experiences of ethical problems in their work. The excerpt in Box 14.1 is not meant to represent an ideal interview, but rather to illustrate a common choreography that is inherent in much qualitative interviewing across the different varieties.

These few exchanges of questions and answers follow a certain conversational flow common in qualitative interviews. This flow can be divided into (1) *question*, (2) *negotiation of meaning* concerning the question raised and the themes addressed, (3) *concrete description* from the interviewee, (4) the interviewer's *interpretation* of the description, and (5) *coda*. Then the cycle can start over with a new question, or else—as in this case—further questions about the same description can be posed.

The sequence begins when I pose a question (1) that calls for a concrete description, a question that seems to make sense to the interviewee. However, she cannot immediately think of or articulate an episode, and she expresses doubt concerning the meaning of one of the central concepts of the opening question (an “ethical dilemma”). This happens very often, and it can be quite difficult for interviewees (as for all of us) to describe concretely what one has experienced; we often resort to speaking in general terms (this characterizes professionals in particular, who have many general scripts at their disposal to articulate). There is some negotiation and attunement between us (2), before she decides to talk about a specific situation, but even though this is interesting and well described by the interviewee (3), she ends by returning (in what I call the coda) to a doubt about the appropriateness of the example. Before this, I summarize and rephrase her description (4), which she validates before she herself provides a kind of evaluation (5). After this, I have a number of follow-up questions that ask the interviewee to tell me more about the situation before a new question is introduced, and a similar conversational flow begins again.

The uncertainty of the interviewee about her own example around (2) illustrates the importance of assuring the interviewee that he or she is the expert concerning personal experience. The interviewer should make clear that, in general, there are no right or wrong answers or examples in qualitative interviewing and that the interviewer is interested in anything the interviewee comes up with. It is very common to find that participants are eager to be “good interviewees,” wanting to give the researcher something valuable, and this can paradoxically block the production of interesting stories and descriptions (although it did not in the present case).

p. 284 In this case, a key point of the study became the term “ethical dilemma” itself; a term that is currently a nodal point in a huge number of different ↵

p. 285 ↵

discourses with many different meanings, and it was thus interesting to hear the respondents’ immediate understandings of the term. Their widespread uncertainty concerning the referents of the term (which was shared by the interviewer!) was not only understandable, but actually conducive to developing my ideas further about (professional) ethics as something occurring in a zone of doubt rather than certainty (as otherwise stressed by some of the standard procedural approaches to ethics).



### Box 14.1 An interview on ethics and psychotherapy

At the time of the interview, the interviewee was in her early fifties and had been a practicing psychologist for about twenty-five years. The interview was conducted in Danish, and I have translated it into English myself.

After some introductory remarks and an initial briefing, I, the interviewer (SB), go straight to a question that I had prepared in advance and ask the interviewee (IE) for a description of a concrete ethical dilemma (the numbers in square brackets refer to elements of the conversation that are addressed in the text):

**SB:** (1) First, I'd like to ask you to think back and describe a situation from your work as a psychologist in which you experienced an ethical dilemma... or a situation that in some way demanded special ethical considerations from you.

**IE:** (2) Actually, I believe I experience those all the time. Well... I believe that the very fact that therapeutic work with other people demands that you keep... I don't know if it is a dilemma—that's what you asked about, right?—well, I don't know if it's a dilemma, but I think I have ethical considerations all the time. Considerations about how best to treat this human being with respect are demanded all the time... with the respect that is required, and I believe that there are many ethical considerations there. Ahm... When you work therapeutically you become very personal, get very close to another human being, and I think that is something you have to bear in mind constantly: How far are you allowed to go? How much can you enter into someone else's universe? But that is not a dilemma, is it?

**SB:** I guess it can be. Can you think of a concrete situation in which you faced this question about how close you can go, for example?

**IE:** (3) Yes, I can. I just had a... a woman, whose husband has a mental disorder, or he has had a severe personality disorder, so their family life is much affected by this. And she comes to me to process this situation of hers, having two small children and a husband, and a system of treatment, which sometimes helps out and sometimes doesn't. And it is very difficult for her to accept that someone close to her has a mental disorder or is fragile, it's actually a long process. She is a nurse and family life has more or less been idyllic before he... before the personality disorder really emerged. So it is extremely difficult for her to accept that this family, which she had imagined would be the place for her children to grow up, is not going to be like that. It is actually going to be very, very different. And she tries to fight it all the time: "It just *might* be... if only... I guess it will be..." And it is *never* going to be any different! And there lies a dilemma, I think: How much is it going to be: "This is something you *have* to face, it is *never* going to be different!" So I have to work to make her pose the question herself: "What do you think? How long time... What are your thoughts? Do you think it will be different? What do they tell you at the psychiatric hospital? What is your experience?" And right now she is getting closer to seeing... I might fear that it ends in a divorce; I am not sure that she can cope with it. But no one can know this. I think there is a dilemma here, or some considerations about how much to push and press forward.

**SB:** (4) Yes, the dilemma is perhaps that you—with your experience and knowledge about these matters—can see that the situation is not going to change much from its current state?

**IE:** It certainly won't.

**SB:** And the question is...

**IE:** ... how much I should push, for she does actually know this intellectually. (5) We have talked about it lots of times. But emotionally she hasn't... she doesn't have the power to face it. One day I told her: "I don't think you develop, I don't think anything happens to you, before you accept emotionally that he is not going to change." I put her on the spot and she kept evading it and so on, but it... "You don't accept it; I can tell that you don't accept it. You understand it intellectually, but you still hope that it passes." I pushed her a lot then. But I don't know if this is an ethical dilemma, I am not sure...

When I first set out to conduct this study, I had something like a neo-positivist conception of interviewing in mind, in Roulston's sense, believing that there were certain essential features connected to the experience of ethically difficult situations. When working further with the theme, and after learning from my interviewees, I gradually grew suspicious of this idea, and I also came to appreciate a more constructionist conception of interviewing, according to which the interview situation itself—including the interviewer—plays an important role in the production of talk.

Other things to note about the example in Box 14.1 include the asymmetrical distribution of talk that can be observed between the two conversationalists: the interviewer poses rather short questions, and the interviewee gives long and elaborated answers. This is not always so (some respondents are more reluctant or simply less talkative), but this asymmetry has been highlighted as a sign of quality in the literature on qualitative interviewing (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). There is also quite a bit of dramatization in the interviewee's talk in the excerpt; for example, when she uses reported speech to stage a dialogue between herself and her client, which signals that she is capable with words and a good storyteller. On the side of the interviewer, we see that no attempts are made to contradict or question the interviewee's account, and the part of the interview quoted here thus looks quite a bit like that recommended by Mayo in the 1930s and by later nondirective interviewers: the interviewer listens a lot and does not talk much, he does not argue or give advice, and he plots out tentatively (in [4]) what the interviewee is saying, which is commented on and verified (cf. Mayo, 1933, p. 65).

## Different Forms of Qualitative Research Interviews

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The semistructured, face-to-face interview in Box 14.1 is probably very typical, but it merely represents one form an interview may take, and there is a huge variety of other forms. Each form has certain advantages and disadvantages that researchers and recipients of research alike should be aware of. I here describe how qualitative interviews may differ in terms of structure, the number of participants in each interview, different media, and also different interviewer styles.

### Structure

It is common to draw a distinction between structured, semistructured, and unstructured interviews. This distinction, however, should be thought of as a continuum ranging from relatively structured to relatively unstructured formats. I use the word “relatively” because, on the one end of the continuum, as Parker (2005) argues, there really is no such thing as a completely structured interview “because people always say things that spill beyond the structure, before the interview starts and when the recorder has been turned off” (p. 53). Utterances that “spill beyond the structure” are often important and are even sometimes the key to understanding the interviewee's answers to the structured questions. One line of criticism against standardized survey interviewing actually concerns the fact that meanings and interpretive frames that go beyond the predetermined structure are left out, with the risk that the researcher cannot understand what actually goes on in the interaction.

We might add to Parker's argument that there is also no such thing as a completely unstructured interview because the interviewer always has an idea about what should take place in the conversation. Even some of the least structured interviews, such as life history interviews that only have one question prepared in advance (e.g., “I would like you to tell me the story of your life. Please begin as far back as you remember and include as many details as possible”), provide structure to the conversation by framing it in accordance with certain specific conversational norms rather than others. Another way to put this is to say that there are no such things as nonleading questions. All questions lead the interviewee in certain directions, but it is generally preferable to lead participants only to talk about certain *themes*, rather than to specific *opinions* about these themes.

So, it is not possible to avoid structure entirely nor would it be desirable, but it is possible to provide a structure that is flexible enough for interviewees to be able to raise questions and concerns in their own words and from their own perspectives. Anthropologist Bruno Latour has argued that this is one definition of objectivity that human and social science can work with, in the sense of “allowing the object to object” (Latour, 2000). Latour pinpoints a problem in the human and social sciences related to the fact that, for these sciences and unlike in the natural sciences “nothing is more difficult than to find a way to render

objects able to object to the utterances that we make about them” (p. 115). He finds that human beings behave too easily as if they had been mastered by the researcher’s agenda, which often results in trivial and predictable research that tells us nothing new. What should be done instead is to allow research participants to be “interested, active, disobedient, fully involved in what is said about themselves by others” (p. 116). This does not imply a total elimination of structure, but it demands careful preparation and reflection on how to involve interviewees actively, how to avoid flooding the conversation with social science categories, and how to provoke interviewees in a respectful way to bring contrasting perspectives to light (Parker, 2005, p. 63).

In spite of this caveat—that neither completely structured nor completely unstructured interviews are possible—it may still be worthwhile to distinguish between more or less structure, with semistructured interviews somewhere in the middle as the standard approach to qualitative interviewing.

## Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are employed in surveys and are typically based on the same research logic as questionnaires: standardized ways of asking questions are thought to lead to answers that can be compared across participants and possibly quantified. Interviewers are supposed to “read questions exactly as worded to every respondent and are trained never to provide information beyond what is scripted in the questionnaire” (Conrad & Schober, 2008, p. 173). Although structured interviews are useful for some purposes, they do not take advantage of the dialogical potentials for knowledge production inherent in human conversations. They are passive recordings of people’s opinions and attitudes and often reveal more about the cultural conventions of how one should answer specific questions than about the conversational production of social life itself. I do not address these structured forms in greater detail in this chapter.

## Unstructured Interviews

At the other end of the continuum lie interviews that have little preset structure. These are, for example, the life story interview seeking to highlight “the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 125). What these aspects are for an individual cannot be known in advance but emerge in the course of spending time with the interviewee, which means that the interviewer cannot prepare for a life story interview by devising a lot of specific questions but must instead think about how to facilitate the telling of the life story. After the opening request for a narrative, the main role of the interviewer is to remain a listener, withholding desires to interrupt and sporadically asking questions that may clarify the story. The life story interview is a variant of the more general genre of narrative interviewing about which Wengraf’s (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing* gives a particularly thorough account, focusing on biographical–narrative depth interviews. These need not concern the life story as a whole, but may address other, more specific storied aspects of human lives, building on the narratological insight that humans experience and act in the world through narratives. Narratives, in this light, are a root metaphor for psychological processes (Sarbin, 1986). With the more focused narrative interviews, we get nearer to semistructured interviews as the middle ground between structured and unstructured interviews.

## Semistructured Interviews

Interviews in the semistructured format are sometimes equated with qualitative interviewing as such (Warren, 2002). They are probably also the most widespread form of interviews in the human and social sciences and are sometimes the only format given attention to in textbooks on qualitative research (e.g., Flick, 2002). Compared to structured interviews, semistructured interviews can make better use of the knowledge–producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee; as well, the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge–producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide. And, compared to unstructured interviews, the interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project.

One definition of the qualitative research interview (in a generic form, but tending toward the semistructured format) reads: “It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions 4 of

the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 3). The key words here are *purpose*, *descriptions*, *life world*, and *interpretation of meaning*:

- *Purpose*: Unlike everyday conversations with friends or family members, qualitative interviews are not conducted for their own sake; they are not a goal in themselves, but are staged and conducted to serve the researcher’s goal of producing knowledge (and there may be other, ulterior goals like obtaining a degree, furthering one’s career, positioning oneself in the field, etc.). All sorts of motives may play a role in the staging of interviews, and good interview reports often contain a reflexive account and a discussion of both individual and social aspects of such motives (does it matter, for example, if the interviewer is a woman, perhaps identifying as a feminist, interviewing other women?). Clearly, the fact that interviews are conversations conducted for a purpose, which sets the agenda, raises a number of issues having to do with power and control that are important to reflect on for epistemic as well as ethical reasons (Brinkmann, 2007b).
- *Descriptions*: In most interview studies, the goal is to obtain the interviewee’s descriptions rather than reflections or theorizations. In line with a widespread phenomenological perspective (explained more fully later), interviewers are normally seeking descriptions of how interviewees experience the world, its episodes and events, rather than speculations about why they have certain experiences. Good interview questions thus invite interviewees to give descriptions; for example, “Could you please describe a situation for me in which you became angry?,” “What happened?,” “How did you experience anger?,” “How did it feel?” (of course, only one of these questions should be posed at a time), and good interviewers tend to avoid more abstract and reflective questions such as “What does anger mean to you?,” “If I say ‘anger,’ what do you think of then?,” “Why do you think that you tend to feel angry?” Such questions may be productive in the conversation, but interviewers will normally defer them until more descriptive aspects have been covered.
- *Life world*: The concept of the life world goes back to the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, who introduced it in 1936, in his book *The Crisis of the European Sciences* to refer to the intersubjectively shared and meaningful world in which humans conduct their lives and experience significant phenomena (Husserl, 1954). It is a prereflective and pretheorized world in which anger, for example, is a meaningful human expression in response to having one’s rights violated (or something similar) before it is a process occurring in the neurophysiological and endocrinological systems (“before” should here be taken in a logical, rather than temporal, sense). If anger did not appear to human beings as a meaningful experienced phenomenon in their life world, there would be no reason to investigate it scientifically because there would, in a sense, be nothing to investigate (since anger is primarily identified as a life world phenomenon). In qualitative research in general, as in qualitative interviewing in particular, there is a primacy of the life world as experienced, as something prior to the scientific theories we may formulate about it. This was well expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another famous phenomenologist, who built on the work of Husserl:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced [i.e., the life world], and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by re-awakening the basic experiences of the world of which science is the second order expression.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. ix)

Objectifying sciences give us second-order understandings of the world, but qualitative research is meant to provide a first-order understanding through concrete description. Whether interview researchers express themselves in the idiom of phenomenology, or use the language of some other qualitative paradigm (discourse analysis, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, etc.), they most often decide to use interviews to elicit descriptions of the life world—or whatever term the given paradigm employs: the interaction order (to speak with Erving Goffman, an exponent of symbolic interactionism), the immortal ordinary society (to speak with Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology), or the set of interpretative ↳ repertoires that make something meaningful (to speak with Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, significant discursive psychologists).<sup>2</sup>

- *Interpret the meaning*: Even if interviewers are generally interested in how people experience and act in

the world prior to abstract theorizations, they must nonetheless often engage in interpretations of people's experiences and actions as described in interviews. One reason for this is that life world phenomena are rarely transparent and "monovocal" but are rather "polyvocal" and sometimes even contradictory, permitting multiple readings and interpretations. Who is to say what someone's description of anger signifies? Obviously, the person having experienced the anger should be listened to, but if there is one lesson to learn from twentieth-century human science (ranging from psychoanalysis to poststructuralism) it is that we, as human subjects, do not have full authority concerning how to understand our lives because we do not have—and can never have—full insight into the forces that have created us (Butler, 2005). We are, as Judith Butler has argued, authored by what precedes and exceeds us (p. 82), even when we are considered—as in qualitative interviews—to be authors of our own utterances. The interpretation of the meanings of the phenomena described by the interviewee can favorably be built into the conversation itself (as I tried to do at point (4) in the excerpt in Box 14.1) because this will at least give the interviewee a chance to object to a certain interpretation, but it is a process that goes on throughout an interview project.

In my opinion, too rarely do interview researchers allow themselves to follow the different, polyvocal, and sometimes contradictory meanings that emerge through different voices in interviewee accounts. Analysts of interviews are generally looking for *the* voice of the interviewee, thereby ignoring internal conflicts in narratives and descriptions. Stephen Frosh has raised this concern from a discursive and psychoanalytic perspective, and he criticizes the narrativist tendency among qualitative researchers to present human experience in ways that set up coherent themes that constitute integrated wholes (Frosh, 2007). Often, it is the case that the stories people tell are ambiguous and full of gaps, especially for people "on the margins of hegemonic discourses" (p. 637). Like Butler, Frosh finds that the human subject is never a whole, "is always riven with partial drives, social discourses that frame available modes of experience, ways of being that are contradictory and reflect the shifting allegiances of power as they play across the body and the mind" (p. 638). If this is so, it is important to be open to multiple interpretations of what is said and done in an interview. Fortunately, some qualitative approaches do have an eye to this and have designed ways to comprehend complexity; for example, the so-called *listening guide* developed by Carol Gilligan and co-workers and designed to listen for multiple voices in interviewee accounts (for a recent version of this approach, see Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008).

To sum up, the "meanings" that qualitative interviewers are commonly looking for are often multiple, perspectival, and contradictory and thus demand careful interpretation. And there is much controversy in the qualitative communities concerning whether meanings are essentially "there" to be articulated by the interviewee and interpreted by the interviewer (emphasized in particular by phenomenological approaches) or whether meanings are constructed locally (i.e., arise dialogically in a process that centrally involves the interviewer as co-constructor, as stressed by discursive and constructionist approaches). Regardless of one's epistemological standpoint, it remains important for interviewers to make clear, when they design, conduct, and communicate their research, how they approach this thorny issue because this will make it much easier for readers of interview reports to understand and assess what is communicated.

I have now introduced a working definition of the relatively unstructured and semistructured qualitative research interview and emphasized four vital aspects: such interviews are structured by the interviewer's *purpose* of obtaining knowledge; they revolve around *descriptions* provided by the interviewee; such descriptions are commonly about *life world phenomena* as experienced; and understanding the meaning of the descriptions involves some kind of *interpretation*. Although these aspects capture what is essential to a large number of qualitative interview studies now and in the past (and likely many in the future as well), it is important to stress that all these aspects can be and have been challenged in the methodological literature.

In relation to qualitative interviewing, as in qualitative research in general, there is never one correct way to understand or practice a method or a technique because everything depends on concrete circumstances and on the researcher's intentions when conducting a particular research project. This does not mean that p. 289 "anything goes" and that nothing is ↵ never better than something else, but it does mean that what is "better" is always relative to what one is interested in doing or knowing. The answer to the question "What's the proper definition of and approach to qualitative interviewing?" must thus be: "It depends on what you wish to achieve by interviewing people for research purposes!" Unfortunately, too many interview researchers simply take one or another approach to interviewing for granted as the only correct one and forget to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of their favored approach (sometimes they are not



even aware that other approaches exist). These researchers thus proceed without properly theorizing their means of knowledge production.

## Individual and Group Interviews

It is not only the interviewer's agenda and research interests that structure the interaction in an interview. Unsurprisingly, the number of participants also plays an important role. As the history of interviewing testifies, the standard format of qualitative interviewing is with one person interviewing another person. This format was illustrated in the example in Box 14.1, and although this chapter is not about group interviews, I briefly mention these to illustrate how they differ from conventional forms of qualitative interviewing.

### Group Interviews

There is an increasing use of group interviews. These have been in use since the 1920s but became standard practice only after the 1950s, when market researchers in particular developed what they termed "focus group interviews" to study consumer preferences. Today, focus groups dominate consumer research and are also often used in health, education, and evaluation research; they are in fact becoming increasingly common across many disciplines in the social sciences.

In focus groups, the interviewer is conceived as a "moderator" who focuses the group discussion on specific themes of interest, and she or he will often use the group dynamic instrumentally to include a number of different perspectives on the given themes (Morgan, 2002). Often, group interviews are more dynamic and flexible in comparison with individual interviews, and they may be closer to everyday discussions. They can be used, for example, when the researcher is not so much interested in people's descriptions of their experiences as in how participants discuss, argue, and justify their opinions and attitudes.

The standard size for a focus group is between six to ten participants, led by a moderator (Chrzanowska, 2002). Recently, qualitative researchers have also experimented with groups of only two participants (sometimes referred to as "the two-person interview," although there are literally three people if one counts the interviewer), mainly because it makes the research process easier to handle than with larger groups, where people will often not show up. The moderator introduces the topics for discussion and facilitates the interchange. The point is not to reach consensus about the issues discussed but to have different viewpoints articulated about an issue. Focus group interviews are well suited for exploratory studies in little-known domains or about newly emerging social phenomena because the dynamic social interaction that results may provide more spontaneous expressions than occur in individual interviews.

### Individual Interviews

Individual interviews with one interviewer and one interviewee may sometimes be less lively than group interviews, but they have a couple of other advantages: First, it is often easier for the interviewer in one-on-one interviews to lead the conversation in a direction that is useful in relation to the interviewer's research interests. Second, when studying aspects of people's lives that are personal, sensitive, or even taboo, it is preferable to use individual interviews that allow for more confidentiality and often make it easier for the interviewer to create an atmosphere of trust and discretion. It is very doubtful, to take a rather extreme example, that Kinsey and his colleagues could have achieved the honest descriptions of sexual behaviors from their respondents had they conducted group rather than individual interviews. And there are obviously also certain themes that simply demand one person telling a story without being interrupted or gainsaid by other participants, such as in biographical research.

Although late-modern Western culture now looks on the individual, face-to-face interview as a completely common and natural occurrence, we should be very careful not to naturalize this particular form of human relationship, as I emphasized earlier. Briggs (2007) has argued that this form of relationship implies a certain "field of communicability," referring to a socially situated construction of communicative processes (p. 556). This construction is an artefact of cultural-historical practices and is placed within organized social fields that produce different roles, positions, relations, and forms of agency that are frequently taken for granted. There are thus certain rights, duties, and a repertoire of acts that open up when entering the field of communicability of qualitative interviewing—and others that close down. Much about this field



of communicability may seem trivial—that the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee answers, that the interviewee conveys personal information that he or she would not normally tell a stranger, that the interviewee is positioned as the expert on that person’s own life, and so on—but the role of this field in the process of knowledge production is very rarely addressed by interview researchers. We too seldom stop and consider the “magic” of interviewing—that a stranger is willing to tell an interviewer so many things about her life simply because the interviewer presents herself as a researcher. Rather than naturalize this practice, we should defamiliarize ourselves with it—like ethnographers visiting a strange “interview culture”—in order to understand and appreciate its role in scientific knowledge production.

## Interviewing Using Different Media

Following from Briggs’s analysis of the communicability of interviewing, it is noteworthy that the otherwise standardized format of “face-to-face interaction” was named as late as the early twentieth century by the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley but was since constructed as “primordial, authentic, quintessentially human, and necessary” (Briggs, 2007, p. 553). It is sometimes forgotten that the face-to-face interview, as a kind of interaction mediated by this particular social arrangement, also has a history. Other well-known media employed in qualitative interviewing include the telephone and the internet, and here we briefly look at differences among face-to-face, telephone, and internet interviews.

### Face-to-Face Interviews

In face-to-face interviews, people are present not only as conversing minds, but as flesh-and-blood creatures who may laugh, cry, smile, tremble, and otherwise give away much information in terms of gestures, body language, and facial expressions. Interviewers thus have the richest source of knowledge available here, but the challenge concerns how to use it productively. In most cases, how people look and act is forgotten once the transcript is made, and the researcher carries out her analyses using the stack of transcripts rather than the embodied interaction that took place. This is a problem especially when a research assistant or someone other than the interviewer transcribes the interview because, in that case, it is not possible to note all the nonverbal signs and gestures that occurred. If possible, it is therefore preferable for the interviewer herself to transcribe the conversations, and it is optimal to do so relatively soon after the conversations are over (e.g., within a couple of days) because this guarantees better recollection of the body language, the atmosphere, and other nontranscribable features of the interaction.

### Telephone Interviews

According to Shuy (2002), the telephone interview has “swept the polling and survey industry in recent years and is now the dominant approach” (p. 539). It often follows a very structured format. In a research context, the use of telephone conversations was pioneered by conversation analysts, who were able to identify a number of common conversational mechanisms (related to turn-taking, adjacency pairs such as questions–answers, etc.) from the rather constricted format that is possible over the telephone. The constricted format may in itself have been productive in throwing light on certain core features of human talk.

Shuy emphasizes a number of advantages of telephone interviewing, such as reduced interviewer effects (important in structured polling interviews, for example), better interviewer uniformity, greater standardization of questions, greater cost-efficiency, increased researcher safety (Shuy, 2002, p. 540), and—we might add—better opportunities for interviewing people who live far from the interviewer. In qualitative interviewing, however, it is not possible (nor desirable) to avoid these “interviewer effects” because the interviewer herself is the research instrument, so only the latter couple of points are relevant in this context. However, Shuy also highlights some advantages of in-person interviewing versus telephone interviewing, such as more accurate responses due to contextual naturalness, greater likelihood of self-generated answers, more symmetrical distribution of interactive power, greater effectiveness with complex issues, more thoughtful responses, and the fact that such interviews are better in relation to sensitive questions (pp. 541–544). The large majority of interviews characterized as “qualitative” are conducted face-to-face, mainly because of the advantages listed by Shuy.

E-mail and chat interviews are varieties of internet interviewing, with e-mail interviewing normally implying an asynchronous interaction in time, with the interviewer writing a question and then waiting for a response, and chat interviews being synchronous or occurring in “real time” (Mann & Stewart, 2002). The latter can approach a conversational format that resembles face-to-face interviews, with its quick turn takings. When doing online ethnographies (e.g., in virtual realities on the internet), chat interviews are important (see Markham, 2005, on online ethnography). One advantage of e-mail and chat interviews is that they are “self-transcribing” in the sense that the written text itself is the medium through which researcher and respondents express themselves, and the text is thus basically ready for analysis the minute it has been typed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 149).

Disadvantages of such interview forms are related to the demanded skills of written communication. Not everyone is sufficiently skilled at writing to be able to express themselves in rich and detailed ways. Most research participants are also more comfortable when talking, rather than writing, about their lives and experiences. However, as the psychiatrist Finn Skårderud has pointed out, there are some exceptions here, and Skårderud emphasizes in particular that internet conversations can be useful when communicating with people who have problematic relationships to their bodies (e.g., eating disorders). For such people, the physical presence of a problematic body can represent an unwanted disturbance (Skårderud, 2003).

In concluding on the different media of interviewing, it should be emphasized that all interviews are mediated, even if only by the spoken words and the historical arrangement of questioning through face-to-face interaction, and there is no universally correct medium that will always guarantee success. Interviewers should choose their medium according to their knowledge interests and should minimally reflect on the effects of communicating through one medium rather than another. That said, most of the themes that qualitative interviewers are interested in lend themselves more easily to face-to-face interviewing because of the trust, confidentiality, and contextual richness that this format enables.

## Different Styles of Interviewing

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We have now seen how interviews may differ in terms of structure, number of participants, and media. Another crucial factor is the style of interviewing; that is, the way the interviewer acts and positions herself in the conversation. In relation to this, Wengraf (2001) has introduced a general distinction between “receptive” interviewer styles and assertive styles (or strategies, as he calls them), with the former being close to Carl Rogers’s model of psychotherapy and the latter being more in line with active and Socratic approaches to interviewing (both of which were addressed earlier). Here, I describe these in greater detail as two ends on a continuum.

### Receptive Interviewing

According to Wengraf, a receptive style empowers informants and enables them to have “a large measure of control in the way in which they answer the relatively few and relatively open questions they are asked” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 155). Much of what was said earlier on the historical contributions of Elton Mayo and Carl Rogers and on semistructured life world interviewing addressed the receptive style in a broad sense; this is often thought of as self-evidently correct, so that no alternatives are considered. Therefore, I devote more space to articulate the somewhat more unusual assertive style, which is attracting more and more attention today.

### Assertive Interviewing

Wengraf states that an assertive style may come close to a legal interrogation and enables the interviewer “to control the responses, provoke and illuminate self-contradiction, absences, provoke self-reflexivity and development” (2001, p. 155), perhaps approaching transformative conceptions of interviewing to use Roulston’s terminology mentioned earlier.

A well-known and more positive exposition of the assertive style was developed by Holstein and Gubrium in their book on *The Active Interview* (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). They argued that, in reality, there is not much

of a choice because interviews are unavoidably interpretively active, meaning-making practices, and this would apply even when interviewers attempt a more receptive style. In this case, however, their role in meaning-making would simply be more elusive and more difficult to take into account when analyzing interview talk. A consequence of this line of argument is that it is preferable for interviewers to take their inevitable role as co-constructors of meaning into account rather than trying to downplay it.

Discourse analysts such as Potter and Wetherell (1987) have also developed an active, assertive practice of interviewing. In a classic text, they describe the constructive role of the interview researcher and summarize discourse analytic interviewing as follows:

p. 292

First, variation in response is as important as consistency. Second, techniques, which allow diversity rather than those which eliminate it, are emphasized, resulting in more informal conversational exchanges and third, interviewers are seen as active participants rather than like speaking questionnaires.

(Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 165)

Variation, diversity, informality, and an active interviewer are key, and the interview process, for Potter and Wetherell, is meant to lead to articulations of the “interpretative repertoires” of the interviewees, but without the interviewer investigating the legitimacy of these repertoires in the interview situation or the respondent’s ways of justifying them. This is in contrast to Socratic and other confronting variants of active interviews, which are designed not just to map participants’ understandings and beliefs, but also to study how participants justify their understandings and beliefs.

To illustrate concretely what a confrontative assertive style looks like, we turn to a simple and very short example from Plato’s *The Republic*, with Socrates as interviewer (discussed in Brinkmann, 2007a). The passage very elegantly demonstrates that no moral rules are self-applying or self-interpreting but must always be understood contextually. Socrates is in a conversation with Cephalus, who believes that justice (*dikaosune*)—here “doing right”—can be stated in universal rules, such as “tell the truth” and “return borrowed items”:

“That’s fair enough, Cephalus,” I [Socrates] said. “But are we really to say that doing right consists simply and solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed? Are those not actions that can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong? For instance, if one borrowed a weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, not to consent to tell the strict truth to a madman?”

“That is true,” he [Cephalus] replied.

“Well then,” I [Socrates] said, “telling the truth and returning what we have borrowed is not the definition of doing right.”

(Plato, 1987, pp. 65–66)

Here, the conversation is interrupted by Polemarchus who disagrees with Socrates’ preliminary conclusion, and Cephalus quickly leaves to go to a sacrifice. Then Polemarchus takes Cephalus’s position as Socrates’ discussion partner and the conversation continues as if no substitution had happened.

The passage is instructive because it shows us what qualitative interviewing normally is *not*. Socrates violates almost every standard principle of qualitative research interviewing, and we can see that the conversation is a great contrast to my own interview excerpt in Box 14.1. Socrates talks much more than his respondent, he has not asked Cephalus to “describe a situation in which he has experienced justice” or “tell a story about doing right from his own experience” or a similar concretely descriptive question probing for “lived experience.” Instead, they are talking about the definition of an important general concept. Socrates contradicts and challenges his respondent’s view. There is no debriefing or attempt to make sure that the interaction was a pleasant experience for Cephalus, the interview is conducted in public rather than private, and the topic is not private experiences or biographical details, but justice, a theme of common human interest, at least of interest to all citizens of Athens.

Sometimes, the conversation partners in the Platonic dialogues settle on a shared definition, but more often the dialogue ends without any final, unarguable definition of the central concept (e.g., justice, virtue, love). This lack of resolution—*aporia* in Greek—can be interpreted as illustrating the open-ended character of our conversational reality, including the open-ended character of the discursively produced knowledge of human social and historical life. If humankind is a kind of enacted conversation, to return to my opening remarks in this chapter, the goal of social science is perhaps not to arrive at “fixed knowledge” once and for all, but to help human beings improve the quality of their conversational reality, to help them know their own society and social practices, and debate the goals and values that are important in their lives (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

p. 293 Interviews can be intentionally assertive, active, and confronting (good examples are found in Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, who explicitly acknowledge a debt to Socrates), but the assertive approach can also be employed post hoc as a more analytic perspective. Consider, for example, the excerpt in Box 14.2 from a study by Shweder and Much (1987), discussed in detail by Valsiner (2007, pp. 385–386). The interview is set in India and was part of a research project studying moral reasoning in a cross-cultural research design. Earlier in the interview, Babaji (the interviewee) has been presented with a variant of the famous Heinz dilemma (here called the Ashok dilemma), invented by moral developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg to assess people’s moral capabilities (Kohlberg, 1981): a man (Heinz/Ashok) has a wife who is ill and will die if he does not steal ↴ some medicine from a pharmacist (who refuses to sell the medicine at a price that the man can afford). According to Babaji’s Hinduism, stealing is not permitted, and the interview unfolds from there (see Box 14.2).

According to Valsiner (2007), we see in the interview how the interviewer (Richard Shweder), in a very active or assertive way, does everything he can to persuade Babaji to accept the Western framing of the dilemma and see the tension between stealing for a moral reason and stealing as an immoral act. But Babaji fails to, or refuses to, see the situation as a dilemma and first attempts to articulate other possibilities in addition to stealing/not stealing (viz. give shamanistic instructions) before finally suggesting that Ashok sells himself in order to raise the money. As such, the interview flow is best understood as an active and confrontational encounter between two quite different worldviews that are revealed exactly because the interviewer acts in a confronting, although not disrespectful, way.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the excerpt illustrates how cross-cultural interviewing can be quite difficult—but also extremely interesting—not least when conducted in “noninterview societies” (Ryen, 2002, p. 337); that is, in societies where interviewing is not common or recognized as a knowledge-producing instrument. All qualitative interviewing is a collaborative accomplishment, but this becomes exceedingly visible when collaborating cross-culturally.

## Analytic Approaches to Interviewing

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p. 294 Before closing this chapter, I give a very brief introduction to different perspectives on how to analyze interviews. Obviously, I cannot here cover the immense variety of phenomenological, discursive, conversation analytic, feminist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic perspectives, so instead I present ↴ a simplified dichotomy that should really be thought of as a continuum. The dichotomy has already played an implicit role earlier because it implies a distinction between interview talk as primarily descriptive (phenomenological) reports (concentrating on the “what” of communication) and interview talk as primarily (discursive) accounts (chiefly concerned with the “how” of talk). Phenomenological approaches to interviewing in a broad sense (exemplified in my exposition of semistructured life world interviewing) try to get as close as possible to precise descriptions of what people have experienced, whereas other analytical approaches (found, e.g., in certain schools of discourse analysis and conversation analysis) focus on how people express themselves and give accounts occasioned by the situation in which they find themselves. The two approaches are contrasted in Table 14.1, with “what” approaches on the left-hand side and “how” approaches on the right-hand side.

## Box 14.2 An interview on Hindu morality

**Interviewer:** Why doesn't Hindu dharma permit stealing?

**Babaji:** If he steals, it is a sin—so what virtue is there in saving a life. Hindu dharma keeps man from sinning.

**Interviewer:** Why would it be a sin? Isn't there a saying "On must jump into fire for others"?

**Babaji:** That is there in our dharma—sacrifice, but not stealing.

**Interviewer:** But if he doesn't provide the medicine for his wife, she will die. Wouldn't it be a sin to let her die?

**Babaji:** That's why, according to the capacities and powers which God has given him, he should try to give her shamanistic instructions and advice. Then she can be cured.

**Interviewer:** But, that particular medicine is the only way out.

**Babaji:** There is no reason to necessarily think that that particular drug will save her life.

**Interviewer:** Let's suppose she can only be saved by that drug, or else she will die. Won't he face lots of difficulties if his wife dies?

**Babaji:** No.

**Interviewer:** But his family will break up.

**Babaji:** He can marry other women.

**Interviewer:** But he has no money. How can he remarry?

**Babaji:** Do you think he should steal? If he steals, he will be sent to jail. Then what's the use of saving her life to keep the family together. She has enjoyed the days destined for her. But stealing is bad. Our sacred scriptures tell that sometimes stealing is an act of dharma. If by stealing for you I can save your life, then it is an act of dharma. But one cannot steal for his wife or his offspring or for himself. If he does that, it is simply stealing.

**Interviewer:** If I steal for myself, then it's a sin?

**Babaji:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** But in this case I am stealing for my wife, not for me.

**Babaji:** But your wife is yours.

**Interviewer:** Doesn't Ashok have a duty or obligation to steal the drug?

**Babaji:** He may not get the medicine by stealing. He may sell himself. He may sell himself to someone for say 500 rupees for six months or one year.

(Shweder & Much, 1987, p. 236)

**Table 14.1** Two conceptions of interviewing

Conception of interviewing	Research instrument	Social practice
Conception of interview data	Reports, interview data as resource	Accounts, interview data as topics
Standard analytic focus	Lived experience—the "what"	Situated interaction—the "how"
Typical interviewer style	Receptive	Assertive
Main challenge	Validity of interviewee reports	Relevance of interviewee accounts
Paradigmatic background	Phenomenology, grounded theory, etc.	Discourse analysis, conversation analysis, etc.

My inspiration for slicing the cake of qualitative interviewing in this manner comes from Talmy (2010) and Rapley (2001), who builds on a distinction from Clive Seale between interview-data-as-resource and interview-data-as-topic.

## Interviews as Research Instrument

Researchers working from the former perspective (corresponding to the left-hand side of Table 14.1) believe that interview data can reflect the interviewees' reality outside the interview and consequently seek to minimize the interviewer's effects on coloring interviewees' reports of their everyday reality. The interview becomes a research instrument in the hands of interviewers, who are supposed to act receptively and interfere as little as possible with the interviewee reporting. The validity of the interviewees' reports becomes a prime issue when one approaches interviewing as a research instrument. And because interviews normally concern things experienced in the past, this significantly involves considerations about human memory and about how to enhance the trustworthiness of human recollections.

In one of the few publications to discuss the role of memory in interviewing, Thomsen and Brinkmann (2009) recommend that interviewers take the following points into account if they want to help interviewees' improve the reporting and description of specific memories:

- Allow time for recall and assure the interviewee that this is normal.
- Provide concrete cues; for example, "the last time you were talking to a physician/nurse" rather than "a communication experience."
- Use typical content categories of specific memories to derive cues (i.e., ongoing activity, location, persons, other people's affect and own affect).
- Ask for recent specific memories.
- Use relevant extended time line and landmark events as contextual cues; such as "when you were working at x" to aid the recall of older memories.
- Ask the interviewee for a free and detailed narrative of the specific memory (adapted from Thomsen & Brinkmann, 2009).

Following such guidelines results in interviewee descriptions that are valid (they are about what the researcher intends them to be about) and close to the "lived experience" of something, or what was earlier referred to as "life world phenomena." Although phenomenology is one typical paradigm to frame interviews analytically as research instruments, many other paradigms do so as well, for example grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with the intent of developing theoretical understandings of phenomena grounded in empirical materials through meticulous coding of data.

p. 295

A typical goal of qualitative analysis within a broad phenomenological perspective is to arrive at an understanding of the essential structures of conscious experience. Analysts can here apply an inductive form of analysis known as *meaning condensation* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 205). This refers to an abridgement of the meanings articulated by the interviewees into briefer formulations. Longer utterances are condensed into shorter statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words. This technique rests on the idea in phenomenology that there is a certain essential structure to the way we experience things in the life world, and this constitutes an experience as an experience of a given something (shame, anxiety, love, learning something new, etc.).

A specific approach to phenomenological analysis has been developed in a psychological context by Amedeo Giorgi (e.g., Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Giorgi breaks the analytic process down into four steps: (1) obtain a concrete description of a phenomenon (through an interview) as lived through by someone; read the description carefully and become familiar with it to get a sense of the whole, (2) establish meaning units in the description, (3) transform each meaning unit into expressions that communicate the psychological sense of the data, and (4) based on the transformed meaning units, articulate the general structure of the experience of the phenomenon (p. 170).

A large number of books exist on how to do a concrete analysis (e.g., Silverman, 2001), so I will refer the reader to these and also to relevant chapters of this handbook.



## Interviewing as a Social Practice

In contrast to those approaches that see interviewing as a research instrument designed to capture the “what” of what is reported as accurately as possible, others working from more constructionist, localist, and situated perspectives have much greater analytic focus on the “how” of interviewing. They view interviewing as a social practice, as a site for a specific kind of situated interaction, which means that interview data primarily reflect “a reality constructed by the interviewee and interviewer” (Rapley, 2001, p. 304). The idea of obtaining valid reports that accurately reflect a reality outside the conversational situation is thus questioned, and the main challenge becomes instead how to explain the relevance of interview talk. That is, if what is said in an interview is a product of this social practice itself, why is it relevant to conduct interviewing? Postmodern interviews, emphasizing performative and transformative aspects of interviewing, attempt to meet this challenge by arguing that if interviews do not concern a reality outside themselves, they can instead be used to perform or facilitate social change.

People subscribing to the right-hand side of Table 14.1 believe that interview talk should be conceived of as accounts. Unlike reports, which refer to experiences from the interviewee’s past that can be articulated when prompted, accounts are answers that are “normatively oriented to and designed for the questions that occasion them” (Talmy, 2010, p. 136). If interviewee talk is best understood as accounts, it must be seen as a kind of social action that has effects and does something in the situation of which it is a part. This perspective on interviewing is shared by some discourse and conversation analysts who limit themselves to analyzing interview talk as situated interaction.

Readers may wonder if these approaches are mutually exclusive. My own pragmatic answer is that they are not, but that none of the approaches should be brought to an extreme: it is true that huge problems are associated with viewing the interview as a site for pure, “unpolluted” reports of the past (we know too much about the constructive role of human memory and of how the social practice of interviewing mediates what is said to take this seriously). But it is also true that there are problems associated with denying that we can use our communicative powers to refer more or less accurately to past experiences. Those who follow the right-hand side of Table 14.1 to the extreme and deny that data can be resources for understanding experiences of the past still believe that their own communicative practice, materialized in their texts, are about matters outside this specific text. So, taken to extremes, both approaches become absurd, and I believe that it is now time for the two (sometimes opposed) camps to learn from one another and realize that they need not exclude one another. In my view, some of the most interesting interview studies are those in which analyses of the “what” and the “how” fertilize each other in productive ways. I end this chapter with a brief illustration of this, taken (rather shamelessly!) from a paper co-authored by myself (Musaeus & Brinkmann, 2011) that shows how an analytic look at interviews can employ perspectives from both sides at the same time. The two forms thus need not exclude each other, and some ↪ interviews can favorably be analyzed using a combination of the two broad analytic approaches.

p. 296

First a little contextualization to render the example meaningful: my colleague, Peter Musaeus, conducted in their home a relatively unstructured group qualitative interview with four members of a family that was receiving family therapy. We were interested in understanding the effects of the therapeutic process on the everyday life of the family. In the excerpt in Box 14.3, we meet Maren and Søren, a married couple, and Maren’s daughter Kirstina, who was thirteen years old at the time (and we also see the interviewer’s voice).<sup>4</sup> In the following extract, Maren (the mother) has just made a joke about the movie *The Planet of the Apes* (a science-fiction movie telling the story of how apes are in control of the earth and keep humans as pets or slaves), and they have talked about the scene where the apes jokingly remark that females are cute, just as long as you get rid of them before puberty.

Toward the end of this sequence Søren, the father of the family, denies—as he does throughout the interview—that Maren is hitting her daughter, and he uses what the family calls a “stop sign” (line 17), which they were taught to employ in their therapy sessions. The verbal sign “STOP” (said in a loud voice) is supposed to bring the conflict cycle to a halt before it accelerates. In the interview, however, the stop sign (like other similar signs from therapy that have been appropriated by the family members) sometimes function counter-productively to raise the conflict level because it is almost shouted by family members. The sudden question in line 20 is actually much more effective in defusing the conflict by diverting the participants’ attention from the problem.

I have here just provided a glimpse of our analysis, which tries to bring forth the role of semiotic mediation —the use of signs (like the stop sign and other therapeutic tools)—in regulating social interaction in a troubled family. The point is, however, that the interview both contains family members' descriptions of their problems and challenges, thus giving us their reports of what they experience; but we also see the persons' shared past being formative of the present in the interview situation itself, resulting in quite significant accounts occasioned by the social episode itself. In short, the two analytic perspectives on interviewing (both as a resource providing reports and also as a topic in its own right, i.e., a social practice providing accounts) are mutually reinforcing in this case and have given us what we (as authors of the paper) believe is a valid analysis. Rather than just hearing people describing their problems, the interviewer is in fact witnessing the family members' problems as they play out in ↪ their interaction, in front of him so to speak, thus offering him a chance to validate his analysis. The “what” and the “how” here intersect very closely.

p. 297

### Box 14.3 A family interview

1. Maren: And the comment that followed was: “Get rid of it before... ha, ha = “
2. Interviewer: Before it becomes a teenager?
3. Maren: Because it simply is so hard.
4. Interviewer: Yes, right, but it =
5. Kirstina: Should you also simply get rid of me?
6. Interviewer: Ha, ha.
7. Maren: No, are you crazy, I love you more than anything. But it's really hard
8. for all of us sometimes, I think.
9. Kirstina: Are you also in puberty when you hit me?
10. Maren: No, I am in the menopause, that is different.
11. Interviewer: Ha, ha.
12. Søren: You don't hit, do you? You say “when you hit”? Your mother doesn't
13. hit you.
14. Kirstina: She has hit me today and yesterday.
15. Maren: I probably did hit her but well =
16. Kirstina: Yes, but still, you may say that it isn't hitting, when you miss.
17. Søren: STOP Kirstina, it isn't true. Your mother hasn't hit you and you don't
18. hit.
19. Kirstina: No, no let's just say that.
20. Maren: Does anyone want a cream roll?

(adapted from Musaeus & Brinkmann, 2011, p. 53)

## Conclusion

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In this chapter, I have given a broad introduction to qualitative interviewing. I have tried to demonstrate that the human world is a conversational reality in which interviewing takes a privileged position as a research method, at least in relation to a number of significant research questions that human and social scientists want to ask. Qualitative interviewing can be both a useful and valid approach, resulting in analyses with a certain objectivity in the sense that I introduced earlier. Throughout the chapter, I have kept a focus on interviewing as a social practice that has a cultural history, and I have warned against unreflective naturalization of this kind of human interaction (i.e., viewing it as a particularly natural and unproblematic way of staging human relationships).

Furthermore, I introduced a number of distinctions that are relevant when mapping the field of qualitative interviewing (e.g., between different levels of structure, numbers of participants, media of interviewing, and also interviewer styles). I also provided a detailed presentation of semistructured life world interviewing as the standard form of qualitative interviewing today.

I finally gave particular attention to two broad analytic approaches to interviewing: on the one side, experience-focused interviewing that seek to elicit accurate reports of what interviewees have experienced (in broad terms, the phenomenological positions), and, on the other side, language- and interaction-focused interviewing (discourse-oriented positions) that focus on the nature of interview interaction in its own right. In my eyes, none of these is superior per se, but each enables researchers to pose different kinds of questions to their materials. Too often, however, interviewers forget to make clear what kinds of questions they are interested in and also forget to consider whether their practice of interviewing and their analytic focus enable them to answer their research questions satisfactorily.

## Future Directions

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In the future, the field of qualitative interviewing is likely to continue its expansion. It is now among the most popular research tools in the human and social sciences, and nothing indicates that this trend will stop. However, a number of issues confront qualitative interviewing as particularly pressing in my opinion:

- Using conversations for research purposes is close to an everyday practice of oral communication. We talk to people to get to know them, which—in a trivial sense—is also the goal of qualitative research. Will the focus on interviewing as a “method” (that can be articulated and perhaps spelled out procedurally) be counterproductive when the goal is human communication and getting to know people? Are we witnessing a fetishization of methods in qualitative research that is blocking the road to knowledge? And are there other ways of thinking about interviews and other “qualitative methods” than in the idiom of “methods”?
- Qualitative interviewers can now find publication channels for their work, but has the practice of interviewing become so unproblematic that people are forgetting to justify and theorize their means of knowledge production in concrete contexts? In my view, more work should be done to theorize interviewing as a social practice (the “how”), as essential to what goes on in interview interactions.
- When reporting qualitative analyses, researchers too often decontextualize interviewee statements and utterances. What person A has said is juxtaposed with the statements of person B, without any contextual clues. If an interview is a form of situated interaction, then readers of interview reports need to be provided with temporal and situational context in order to be able to interpret the talk (What question was this statement an answer to? What happened before and what came after?).
- Some qualitative researchers remain convinced that they are “on the good side” in relation to ethical questions. They “give voice” to individuals, listen to their “subjective accounts,” and are thus against the quantitative and “objectifying” approaches of other, more traditional researchers. However, qualitative interviewers should, in my view, be aware that very delicate ethical questions are an inherent part of interviewing. They should avoid the “qualitative ethicism” that sometimes characterizes qualitative inquiry, viz. that “we are good because we are qualitative.” Especially in an “interview society,” there is a need to think about the ethical problems of interviewing others (often

about intimate and personal matters), when people are often seduced by the warmth and interest of interviewers to say “too much.”

## Notes

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1. The first journalistic interviews appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century (Silvester, 1993), and social science interviews emerged in the course of the twentieth century (see the history of interviewing recounted later in this chapter).
2. Obviously, these traditions are not identical, nor are their main concepts, but I believe that they here converge on the idea of a concretely lived and experienced social reality prior to scientific abstractions of it, which Husserl originally referred to as the life world and which remains central to most (if not all) paradigms in qualitative research.
3. Confronting interviews are sometimes misunderstood to imply a certain aggressive or disrespectful attitude, which, of course, is a misunderstanding. An interviewer can be actively and confrontingly curious and inquiring in a very respectful way, especially if she positions herself as not-knowing (ad modum Socrates in some of the dialogues) in order to avoid framing the interview as an oral examination.
4. Kirstina has an older sister, who no longer lives at home, and Søren is not the biological father of the girls. He has two children from a previous marriage. One of them has attempted suicide, which, however, is not the reason for the family's referral to therapy. The reason, instead, is Maren's violent behavior toward her daughter Kirstina.

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