

# INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW RESEARCH

In this chapter, we address research interviews as conversations and present examples of interview sequences. We briefly outline a history of interviewing and depict a current interview society. We go on to outline the methodological and ethical issues in using conversations for research purposes and conclude the chapter with an overview of the book.

## CONVERSATION AS RESEARCH

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. Although the term *subject* has fallen out of fashion to designate participants in qualitative research, we use it in this book to emphasize that qualitative interview research approaches people not as objects, mechanically controlled by causal laws, but rather as persons, i.e., as subjects who act and are actively engaged in meaning making. In research interviews, we talk to people because we want to know how they describe their experiences or articulate their reasons for action. At the same time, however, the term *subject* indicates that people are subject to discourses, power relations, and ideologies that are not of their own making but that nonetheless affect and perhaps even constitute what they talk about and how. So, in interviewing, we can think of people as "authored authors," and we find that this double meaning is nicely captured by referring to them as subjects.

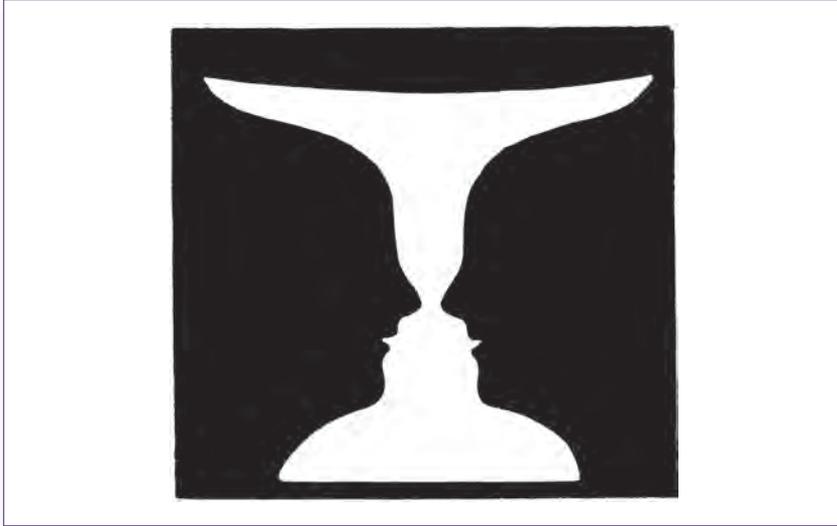
Interview research may to some appear a simple and straightforward task. It seems quite easy to obtain a sound recorder and ask someone to talk about his or her experiences regarding some interesting topic or to encourage a person to tell his or her life story. It seems so simple to interview, but it is a fundamental assumption of this book that it is hard to do well. Research interviewing involves a cultivation of conversational skills that most adult human beings already possess by virtue of being able to ask questions, but the cultivation of these skills can be challenging.

There are multiple forms of conversations—in everyday life, in literature, and in the professions. Everyday conversations may range from chat and small talk to exchanges of news, disputes, formal negotiations, or deep personal interchanges. Within literature, the varieties of conversation are found in dramas, novels, and short stories, which may contain longer or shorter passages of conversations. Professional conversations include journalistic interviews, legal interrogations, academic oral examinations, philosophical dialogues, religious confessions, therapeutic sessions, and—as discussed here—qualitative research interviews. These conversational genres use different rules and techniques.

Different forms of interviews serve different purposes: Journalistic interviews are means of recording and reporting important events in society, therapeutic interviews seek to improve debilitating situations in people's lives, and research interviews have the purpose of producing knowledge. However, there are not necessarily hard-and-fast distinctions among these interview forms, for qualitative research interviews sometimes come close to journalistic interviews (and vice versa), and some qualitative researchers depict their interview practice as a therapeutic process of instigating changes in people's lives.

The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an inter-view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. The interdependence of human interaction and knowledge production is a main theme throughout this book. In what follows, we use the term *knowledge* in a comprehensive sense, covering both everyday knowing and systematically tested knowledge.

The ambiguous drawing in **Figure 1.1** was introduced by Danish psychologist Rubin as an example of the figure/ground phenomenon in visual Gestalt perception—it can be seen alternatively as two faces or as a vase, but not as both at the same time. We use the figure to illustrate the present perspective on

**Figure 1.1** The Research Interview Seen as Inter Views

the interview conversation as *inter views*. We can focus on the two faces in the ambiguous figure, see them as the interviewer and the interviewee, and conceive of the interview as interaction between the two persons. Or we can focus on the vase between the two faces and see it as containing the knowledge constructed *inter the views* of the interviewer and the interviewee. There is an alternation between the knowers and the known, between the constructors of knowledge and the knowledge constructed, and between the actors who enact the conversational context of the interview and the context that organizes what the actors say. This dual aspect of the interview—the personal interrelation and the inter-view knowledge that it leads to—runs through the chapters of this book, which alternate between focusing on the personal interaction and on the knowledge constructed through that interaction.

### THREE INTERVIEW SEQUENCES

The use of the interview as a research method is nothing mysterious: An interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose. It goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views in everyday conversations and becomes a

careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge. The research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation. The interview researcher introduces the topic of the interview and also critically follows up on the subject's answers to his or her questions. One form of research interview—a semistructured life world interview—is the main focus of this book. It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena.

To give an initial idea of what qualitative research interviews can look like, we present three interview sequences from different research projects. The research explored Danish pupils' views on grading in high schools in Denmark, Canadian teachers' views on their work situation in a postmodern society, and the views of oppressed youth on their living conditions in a French suburb. The following passages serve to give a first impression of qualitative research interviews.

### Box 1.1 An Interview About Grading

**Interviewer:** You mentioned previously something about grades. Would you please try to say more about that?

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

**Interviewer:** How should that influence the grade?

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

**Interviewer:** Is this not only your postulate?

**Pupil:** No, there are lots of concrete examples.

The interview sequence in **Box 1.1** is taken from a study led by Kvale (1980) on the effects of grading in Danish high schools; the interview was conducted by a student taking part in the research project. The overall design of the study is presented later (in **Box 6.4**), and we refer to the study throughout this book. We see how the pupil, in a response to an open question from the interviewer, introduces an important dimension of his experience of grades—they are unfair—and then spontaneously provides several reasons why they are unfair. The interviewer follows up on the answers, asks for specifics, and tests the strength of the pupil's belief through counterquestions in which he doubts what the pupil tells him. This rather straightforward questioning contrasts with the reciprocity of everyday conversations. The interviewer is cast in a power position and sets the stage by determining the topic of the interchange; it is the interviewer who asks and the interviewee who answers. The researcher does not contribute with his position on the issue, nor does the pupil ask the interviewer about his view of grades.

The next sequence is from Hargreaves's (1994) interview study of the work situation of Canadian teachers and their experience of the effects of changes of school leadership in a postmodern society. One key theme that emerged was the tension between individualism and collegiality.

### Box 1.2 An Interview on Teamwork

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

**Interviewer:** Do you think that's good?

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

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

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

*(Continued)*

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**Interviewer:** How would that be . . . ?

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

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**SOURCE:** *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in a Postmodern Age* (pp. 178–179), by A. Hargreaves, 1994, New York: Teachers College Press.

The teacher quoted in **Box 1.2** is rather critical of the school administration's requirements of teamwork, which he regards as a control mechanism, counteracting creative teaching by the individual teachers. The interviewer does not merely register the teacher's opinions but also asks for elaborations and receives the teacher's arguments for why he does not think that anybody should have to participate in the kind of teamwork he is subjected to. Hargreaves interpreted this and other interview sequences on teamwork as expressions of a "contrived collegiality" (see Chapter 14, the section "Interview Analysis as Theoretical Reading").

The next sequence is from a large interview project on the conditions of oppressed youth by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues.

### Box 1.3 An Interview With Two Young Men

**Interviewer** (Pierre Bourdieu): You were telling me that it wasn't much fun around here. Why? What is it, your job, your leisure time?

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

**Ali:** There's no leisure activities.

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

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

- Interviewer:** Why do they complain, because they . . .
- François:** Because we hang around the public garden, and in the evening there is nothing in our project; we have to go in the hallways when it's too cold outside. And when there's too much noise and stuff, they call the cops.
- [ . . . ]
- Interviewer:** You are not telling me the whole story . . .
- Ali:** We are always getting assaulted in our project; just yesterday we got some tear gas thrown at us, really, by a guy in an apartment. A bodybuilder. A pumper.
- Interviewer:** Why, what were you doing, bugging him?
- François:** No, when we are in the entryway he lives just above, when we are in the hall we talk, sometimes we shout.
- Interviewer:** But that took place during the daytime, at night?
- François:** No, just in the evening.
- Interviewer:** Late?
- François:** Late, around 10, 11 o'clock.
- Interviewer:** Well you know, he's got the right to snooze. The tear gas is a bit much, but if you got on his nerves all night, you can see where he's coming from, right?
- Ali:** Yeah, but he could just come down and say . . .
- Interviewer:** Yes, sure, he could come down and merely say "go somewhere else" . . .
- Ali:** Instead of tear gas.

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**SOURCE:** *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (pp. 64–65), by P. Bourdieu et al., 1999, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

The sequence in **Box 1.3** is taken from one of the many interviews reported at length by Bourdieu and his colleagues in their book on the situation of the immigrants and the poor in France. The two young men in the interview

are living in a suburban housing project in the north of France under dismal living conditions. A decade later, in late 2005, there were large uprisings among the youth in these French suburbs, protesting against their miserable situation and the harassment by the police. In this interview, Bourdieu is not a neutral questioner but expresses his own attitudes and feelings toward the situation of the young men and also confronts their accounts critically.

These three interviews address important issues of the subjects' life worlds, such as grades in school, changes in school leadership, and deplorable suburban living conditions. None of the interviewers are merely "tape recording sociologies," to use Bourdieu's expression, but are actively following up on the subjects' answers, seeking to clarify and extend the interview statements. This involves posing critical questions to the Danish pupil who believes that his teachers' grading is biased, obtaining reasons for the Canadian teacher's rejection of teamwork, and challenging the young men's presentations of themselves as innocent victims of harassment in their French suburb. We return to the social interaction and the knowledge production in these interview sequences later in the book.

## INTERVIEW RESEARCH IN HISTORY AND IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Conversations are an old way of obtaining systematic knowledge. In ancient Greece Thucydides interviewed participants from the Peloponnesian Wars to write the history of the wars, and Socrates developed philosophical knowledge through dialogues with his Sophist opponents. The term *interview*, however, is of rather recent origin; it came into use in the 17th century.

### Box 1.4 Journalist Interviews

The first journalist interviews appeared in the middle of the 19th century. This form of interview has been defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "face to face meeting for the purpose of a formal conference, between a representative of the press and someone from whom he wishes to obtain statements for publication" (Murray, Bradley, Craigie, & Onions, 1961). The credit for having introduced the journalist interview has been given to

Horace Greely, editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*. His interview with Brigham Young, the leader of the Mormon Church, was published in 1859 (see Silvester, 1993). Although the use of interviews in newspapers quickly caught on, they were also controversial, as the following quotes testify.

The interview is the worst feature of the new [journalism]—it is degrading to the interviewer, disgusting to the interviewee, and tiresome to the public.

—Le Figaro, 1886

Why do I refuse to be interviewed? Because it is immoral! It is a crime, just as much a crime as an offence against my person, as an assault, and just as much merits punishment. It is cowardly and vile. No respectable person would ask it, much less give it.

—Rudyard Kipling, 1892

Being interviewed does have the advantage of self-revelation. I must articulate my feelings, and I may learn something about myself. It makes me more self-aware, more aware of my own unhappiness.

—Tennessee Williams, ca. 1982

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**SOURCE:** *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology From 1859 to the Present Day*, edited by E. Silvester, 1993, London: Penguin.

As we see in **Box 1.4**, the interview has not always been taken for granted as a popular form of social practice. As indicated in these statements from the early years of journalism, interviews are perceived as a somewhat “dangerous” practice that can result in immorality and unhappiness. This attitude to being interviewed contrasts rather sharply with the current age, when many people—at least in the Western world—are more than willing to be interviewed for newspapers, magazines, talk shows, and so on.

Qualitative interviews were used to varying extents in the social sciences throughout the 20th century. Although systematic literature on research interviewing is a phenomenon of the last few decades, anthropologists and sociologists have long used informal interviews to obtain knowledge from their informants. In particular, the Chicago School in sociology, which studied the

urban experience in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, can be mentioned as an important forerunner of the later interest in qualitative research interviewing, although Chicago School researchers were rather short on methodological treatises and “just did their job” (Warren, 2002, p. 86). Survey interviews, following standard procedures with fixed wordings and sequences of questions as well as quantification of answers, have been used more frequently in the social sciences than the open qualitative interviews treated in this book. Within education and the health sciences, qualitative interviews have been a common research method for decades. Turning to our own discipline of psychology, interviews as a research method have until recently hardly been mentioned in textbooks on psychological methods, although qualitative interviews throughout the history of psychology have been a key method for producing scientific and professional knowledge. Here we briefly mention four examples of historically significant interview studies in the psychological domain.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory was to a large extent founded on therapeutic interviews with his patients. His several hundred interviews, an hour long with each patient, were based on the patient’s free associations and on the therapist’s “even-hovering attention” (Freud, 1963). These qualitative interviews produced new psychological knowledge about dreams and neuroses, personality, and sexuality—knowledge that after a hundred years still has a prominent position in psychological textbooks. Psychoanalysis continues to have an impact on the profession of psychotherapy, to be of interest to other disciplines and the general public, and to represent a challenge to philosophers.

Piaget’s (1930) theory of child development was based on his interviews with children in natural settings, which were often conducted in combination with simple experimental tasks. He was trained as a psychoanalyst, and what he termed his “clinical method” was inspired by the psychoanalytic interview. He let the children talk spontaneously about the weight and size of objects and using a combination of naturalistic observations, simple experiments, and interviews, noticed the manner in which their thoughts unfolded.

Experiments on the effects of changes in illumination on production at the Hawthorne Chicago plant of Western Electrical Company in the 1920s had led to unexpected results—work output and worker morale improved when the lighting of the production rooms was increased, as well as when it was decreased. These unforeseen findings were followed up in what may have been

the largest interview inquiry ever conducted. More than 21,000 workers were each interviewed for over an hour and the interview transcripts analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The Hawthorne studies were initiated by Mayo and carried out by Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939). The researchers were inspired by therapeutic interviews, and they mention the influence of Janet, Freud, Jung, and in particular Piaget, whose clinical method of interviewing children they found particularly useful. As Mayo recounted, it was necessary to train interviewers “how to listen, how to avoid interruption or the giving of advice, how generally to avoid anything that might put an end to free expression in an individual instance” (Mayo, 1933, p. 65).

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

These historical interview studies have made a difference to their fields, influenced the way we think about men and women and children today, and had a major impact on social practices such as therapy and techniques for controlling the behaviors of workers and consumers (Kvale, 2003). Freud and Piaget, whose main empirical evidence came from interviews, are still among the psychologists most quoted in the scientific literature, and their interpretations of their interviews with patients and children have had a major impact on how we understand personality and childhood. Thus, in *Time* magazine’s selection of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century, three social scientists were among the 20 leading “scientists and thinkers”: the economist Keynes and the psychologists Freud and Piaget (“Scientists and Thinkers,” 1999). The Hawthorne investigations have had a strong influence on the organization of industrial production by instigating the change from a harsh “human engineering” to a softer emotional “human relations” mode of managing workers. The marketing of consumer products today rests heavily on qualitative interviews, in particular on focus groups, to secure maximum prediction and control of consumers’ purchasing behaviors.

In the social sciences, qualitative interviews are now increasingly employed as a research method in their own right, with an expanding methodological literature on how to carry out interview research. Glaser and Strauss's sociological study of hospitals, reported in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967), pioneered a qualitative research movement in the social sciences. The researchers integrated qualitative interviews into their field studies of the hospital world.

Two important early books that systematically introduced research interviewing were Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979) and Mishler's *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (1986). For an overview of the scope of research interviewing, the reader is referred to Fielding's four-volume *Interviewing* (2003) and to the *Handbook of Interview Research*, edited by Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, and McKinney (2012). For qualitative research more broadly, see Denzin and Lincoln's *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011). In the next chapter, we also present different conceptualizations of the qualitative research interview.

Qualitative methods—ranging from participant observation to interviews to discourse analysis—have since the 1980s become key methods of social research. The rapidly growing number of books about qualitative research is one indication of this trend; thus for one leading company—SAGE Publications—there was a growth in qualitative texts from 10 books from 1980 to 1987 to 130 books from 1995 to 2002 (Seale, 2004).

Technical, philosophical, and cultural reasons may be suggested for the growing use of qualitative research interviews. The availability of small portable tape recorders in the 1950s made the exact recording of interviews easy. In the 1980s, computer programs facilitated qualitative analyses of transcribed interviews. An opening of the social sciences to philosophy and the humanities also has taken place, drawing on phenomenology and hermeneutics as well as narrative, discursive, conversational, and linguistic forms of analysis (see, e.g., Schwandt, 2001). Broad movements in philosophy influencing current social science emphasize key aspects of knowledge relevant to interview research. These aspects are the phenomenological descriptions of consciousness and of the life world, the hermeneutic interpretations of the meaning of texts, and the postmodern emphasis on the social construction of knowledge. While such fundamental philosophical positions can be at odds with one another, they have in common a rejection of a methodological positivism in the social sciences that confines scientific evidence to quantifiable facts.

Qualitative research methods in general have thus become endemic today in many disciplines such as education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, media studies, human geography, marketing, business, and nursing science. At the backdrop of the increasing popularity of qualitative methods stands what may be called a qualitative stance (Nielsen et al., 2008). From this stance, the processes and phenomena of the world should be described before theorized, understood before explained, and seen as concrete qualities before abstract quantities. The qualitative stance involves focusing on the cultural, everyday, and situated aspects of human thinking, learning, knowing, acting, and ways of understanding ourselves as persons, and it is opposed to “technified” approaches to the study of human lives.

## THE INTERVIEW SOCIETY

Interviews have also become part of the common culture. In the current age, as visualized by the talk shows on TV, we live in an “interview society” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), where the production of the self has come in focus and the interview serves as a social technique for the public construction of the self. In **Box 1.5**, we present some impressions of the current interview society, as seen from the point of view of an interview researcher. While Atkinson and Silverman regard the interview society as one that relies “pervasively on face-to-face interviews to reveal the personal, the private self of the subject” (p. 309), we use the term somewhat more broadly to also capture the spread of interviews to a wide variety of social arenas.

### Box 1.5 A Day in the Interview Society: A Personal Account

Like most mornings, I am awakened by my clock radio. A politician is interviewed about why he has left his party. The interviewer is interested not just in his political reasons for the decision, but also in his personal motives, experiences, and hopes for the future: “Please, tell us the story about how you felt after having made the decision.” Then, browsing through the main headlines of the newspaper, I notice that most articles contain statements from interviews.

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I take my children to the daycare center, and their teacher greets me with a probing interview about the kids and their opportunities for further development. Having read some literature on current educational practices, I recognize her conversational technique as a version of appreciative inquiry, a style of interviewing that focuses on positive experiences and narratives.

When I get to work, I have scheduled a meeting with a journalist, who wants to interview me about a book that I have contributed to. I try to think of something interesting to say—in today's world of media, with their cacophony of competing voices, journalists are always looking for a new angle when they do interviews. I then engage in a session of student supervision, which involves a subtle interviewing technique of its own. The goal is to ask questions that will help the student progress, rather than posing examining or confusing questions.

After work, I ask my wife about how her day has been, and she tells me about her experiences. Being a schoolteacher, she reports a narrative of how she has struggled with ways of getting the pupils to say something in class. How can she improve her questioning techniques? When she then asks me about my experiences, the phone interrupts us—a market researcher wants to interview me about my consumption habits concerning breakfast products. I decide to be a reluctant respondent and quickly end the conversation.

Watching the news on TV, I am confronted with interviews with business leaders, politicians, and also ordinary men and women, who seem more than happy to express their opinions. A witness to a traffic accident is interviewed, and someone else is interviewed about how he feels about a certain politician's trustworthiness. After the news, I watch one of the many confessional talk shows that run on TV, where the host manages to do three life story interviews in half an hour.

I find that I am unable to fall asleep—perhaps due to the conversational bombardment I have experienced—and I put on one of my favorite Woody Allen DVDs. I come to the conclusion that Allen's movies are a perfect representation of the interview society. In almost every scene, people are constantly talking, interviewing each other and even themselves, while walking, eating, partying, in therapy, and having sex. Allen's characters live in a truly conversational reality, where experiences, desires, and doubts are relentlessly shared, and the self is expressed and constructed in and through speaking. I finally manage to fall asleep with the 6-pound *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* in my hands.

**Box 1.5** describes a day in the interview society of the first author. A variety of interview forms were encountered, some were informal and the goal was simply conversation itself (e.g., conversations at the dinner table), and others were structured as professional conversations with specific goals (to inform, supervise, or entertain an audience, for example). Whereas journalistic interviews were regarded as somewhat dangerous practices in the 19th century, in the 20th century they became simply taken for granted as a standard form of human relations. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) attributed the contemporary prevalence of interviews to a spirit of the age; we would like to add that there is a more material basis for the rise of interviewing—the experiential economy of a consumer society. With knowledge of consumers’ experiences and lifestyles so essential to the Western economy, qualitative interviewing for consumer experiences, in particular in the form of focus groups, has become a key approach to predicting and controlling consumer behavior.

Although people now consider 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. Briggs has argued that this form of relationship involves a specific “field of communicability,” which refers to a social construction of communicative processes (2007, p. 556). This construction is a product of cultural-historical practices and is placed within social fields that enable 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 current 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 too rarely addressed by interview researchers (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 27). We seldom stop to 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, as Briggs (2007) warns against, we should learn to defamiliarize ourselves with it—like ethnographers visiting a strange “interview culture”—in order to understand and appreciate its role in scientific knowledge production.

## METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH INTERVIEWING

We now turn from discussing the pervasive role of interviews in the broader social scene to depicting some of the methodological and ethical concerns that we address throughout this book. While one form of research interview—a semistructured life world interview, in part inspired by phenomenology—is our focus, other ways of conducting and analyzing interviews are also treated. Whereas phenomenologists are typically interested in charting how human subjects *experience* life world phenomena, hermeneutical scholars address the *interpretation* of meaning, and discourse analysts focus on how language and discursive practices *construct* the social worlds in which human beings live.

This book does not aim to settle the questions concerning these epistemological and ontological differences between philosophies of qualitative inquiry but instead has a pragmatic approach. With this approach, reflections on how to conduct and analyze interviews are based on what the researcher is interested in knowing about: Is it primarily experiences of concrete episodes, the meanings of specific phenomena, comprehension of specific concepts, processes of discursive construction, or something different? Our aim is not to force certain philosophical preconceptions onto our readers, but to assist you in making informed choices about what to do when conducting interview research, reflected choices that we hope will allow you to engage more deeply with the kind of knowledge you will be producing in your research interviews.

The closeness of the research interview to everyday conversation may imply a certain simplicity, but this simplicity is illusory. Nevertheless, it has probably contributed to the popularity of research interviewing—it is too easy to start interviewing without any preceding preparation or reflection. A novice researcher may have a good idea, grab a sound recorder, go out and find some subjects, and start questioning them. The recorded interviews are transcribed, and then—during the analysis of the many pages of transcripts—a multitude of problems about the purpose and content of the interviews surfaces. There is little likelihood that such spontaneous interview studies will lead to worthwhile information; rather than producing new substantial knowledge about a topic, such interviews may be reproducing common opinions and prejudices. That being said, interviewing can be an exciting way of doing strong and valuable research. The unfolding of stories and new insights can be rewarding for both

parties in the interview interaction. Reading the transcribed interviews may inspire the researcher to new interpretations of well-known phenomena, and the interview reports can contribute substantial new knowledge to a field.

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

If corresponding questions were raised about, for example, a questionnaire survey, several of them would be fairly easy to answer by consulting authoritative textbooks on standard techniques and rules of survey research. As this book makes clear, the situation is quite the contrary for the craft of qualitative interview research, for which there are few standard rules or common methodological conventions. Interview research is a craft that, if well carried out, can become an art. The varieties of research interviews approach the full spectrum of human conversations. The forms of interview analysis can differ as widely as ways of reading a text. The qualitative interview is sometimes called an *unstructured* or a *nonstandardized* interview. Because there are few prestructured or standardized procedures for conducting these forms of interviews, many of the methodical decisions have to be made on the spot, during the interview. This requires a high level of skill on behalf of the interviewer, who needs to be knowledgeable about the interview topic and familiar with the methodological options available, as well as have an understanding of the conceptual issues of producing knowledge through conversation.

In this book we attempt to steer between the free spontaneity of a no-method approach to interviewing and the rigid structures of an all-method approach by focusing on the expertise, skills, and craftsmanship of the interview researcher. Some of the decisions that will have to be made on the way through the stages of an interview inquiry and the methodological options available are outlined, and the specific modes of questioning are discussed, as well as the multiple options for analyzing interviews. If one is looking for a cookbook approach to the practice of qualitative research interviewing, however, reading this book may be frustrating. In lieu of standard procedures and fixed rules, the answers to questions such as those posed earlier will most often

be prefaced by “It depends,” as the answers depend on the specific purpose and topic of an investigation.

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

In-depth interviewing is a distinctive, often frustrating craft. Unlike a pollster asking questions, the in-depth interviewer wants to probe the responses people give. To probe, the interviewer cannot be stonily impersonal; he or she has to give something of himself or herself in order to merit an open response. Yet the conversation lists in one direction; the point is not to talk the way friends do. The interviewer all too frequently finds that he or she has offended subjects, transgressing a line over which only friends or intimates can cross. The craft consists in calibrating social distances without making the subject feel like an insect under the microscope. (pp. 37–38)

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Throughout this book we follow three main lines to guide the learning of interviewing for research purposes: We approach interviewing as a craft, as a knowledge-producing activity, and as a social practice.

### Interviewing as a Craft

Interviewing rests on the practical skills and the personal judgments of the interviewer; it does not follow explicit steps of rule-governed methods. The quality of interviewing is judged by the strength and value of the knowledge produced. The conception of interviewing as a craft, to be learned through practice, contrasts with a methodological positivism in the social sciences, with its conception of research as following the rules and predetermined steps of specific methods. In our pragmatic craft approach, we do not attempt to derive rules of an interview method from some normative theory of

science, but attempt to learn from how competent interview researchers work. This book seeks to promote learning through exemplary cases; it presents and discusses examples from interview studies, some of which have made significant differences to their respective fields. Rules of thumb for interviewing, derived from interview practice, are presented, and for the interviewer craftsman (the term *craftsman* as it is used in this book applies to interviewers of both genders) we provide toolboxes with a variety of techniques, in particular for the key stages of conducting and analyzing interviews.

The skills of interviewing are learned through the practice of interviewing, and there is a paradox in presenting a textbook for the learning of a skill, a paradox enhanced by addressing in written form the learning of an oral skill. We return to this paradox in the final chapter, but throughout this book we engage with the paradox by giving suggestions for learning interviewing the way a craft is learned. The book depicts the journey through the practical stages of an interview project, providing the necessary road directions and equipment. The chapters examine the complex skills of the interview craft, breaking them down into discrete steps, giving examples, and pointing out the practical, conceptual, and ethical issues involved.

### **Interviewing as a Social Production of Knowledge**

Interviewing is an active process where interviewer and interviewee through their relationship produce knowledge. Interview knowledge is produced in a conversational relation; it is contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic. The conception of interview knowledge presented here contrasts with a methodological positivist conception of knowledge as given facts to be quantified. This book presents philosophies congenial to the knowledge produced in interview research, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and postmodern thought. We show how different conceptions of interview knowledge lead to different forms of interviewing and analyses of interviews. Some see the practice of qualitative research interviewing as involving an unearthing of preexisting meaning nuggets from the depths of the respondent, while others argue that it should be an unbound and creative process where the researcher is free to construct appealing stories. Some see interview talk as reports that connect directly with experiences of past events, while others argue that it should be understood as accounts that are made to fit the specific conversational situation. Rather than locating the meanings and narratives to

be known solely in the subjects or the researchers, we argue in this book that the process of knowing through conversations is intersubjective and social, involving interviewer and interviewee as coconstructors of knowledge. And rather than choosing once and for all between thinking of interview talk as reports or accounts, we argue that both dimensions are nearly always relevant when seeking to understand interview materials.

### **Interviewing as a Social Practice**

Interviewing is a new practice of the last few centuries; today it has become a pervasive social practice in what has been called the interview society. Interviewing as a mode of inquiry is embedded in a historical and social context. The interaction of interviewer and interviewee is laden with ethical issues, and publishing interview research entails broader sociopolitical concerns. We address ethical issues of the specific interview practices, as well as the social effects of interview research, and also take issue with a belief in interviewing as a particularly ethical form of research. Our conception of interviewing as social practice contrasts with the idealism in many textbooks, which present interviewing predominantly within the context of ideas and as a pure and authentic interaction within a human relationship. This book addresses the power asymmetry of the interview situation and also includes the broader social influences on, and social consequences of, interview research. Among these social influences and consequences are the current impact of ethical review boards and evidence-based practice on research interviewing, the consequences of interviews in coshaping our conceptions of human beings and in providing knowledge for human management and manipulation, and the contribution to public enlightenment.

### **Part I: Conceptualizing the Research Interview**

In this conceptual part of the book, we address principal issues concerning the use of conversations for research purposes. While it may appear as a truism that theory and practice should be related in the production of interview knowledge, the issues become more complex when we turn to how conceptions of knowledge and practice are related.

We display the richness and varieties of conversations and give examples of research interviews. Contrasts are drawn to philosophical dialogues and

therapeutic interviews. We depict philosophical approaches that are open to qualitative interviewing, such as postmodern thought and phenomenological, hermeneutical, and pragmatic philosophies. We also ask whether research interviewing should be viewed as a method or a craft. A conception of research interviewing as a rule-governed method will lead to different interview practices than an understanding of research interviewing as a craft, where the quality of the interview knowledge rests on the skills and the personal judgment of the interviewer craftsman.

In addition, we address ethical issues in research interviewing, arguing that ethical research behavior involves more than rule following and adherence to ethical codes. Ethics is basic to an interview inquiry; it goes beyond ethical rules to encompass the broader fields of ethical and sociopolitical uncertainties in social research. In situations of conflict, decisions about which rules to follow will to a large extent depend on the researcher's experience and personal judgment. Finally, we present the qualitative interview as a specific context for human interaction and knowledge production, which make possible different ways of being a subject for both interviewers and interviewees.

Readers who want to learn interviewing by doing interviews should discontinue reading the book now and jump to the appendix, Learning Tasks, where we suggest exercises for those interested in learning interviewing in ways that approximate the learning of a craft. After spending a few weeks with these tasks, preferably in the company of colearners, return to reading the book and you will discover that by practicing interviewing, you may already have started on some of the theoretical reflections put forth in the conceptual chapters of Part I and have experienced a good deal of what is said about conducting interviews in the practical chapters of Part II.

## **Part II: Seven Stages of Research Interviewing**

Part II treats in detail the practical steps of interviewing. The chapters follow seven stages of an interview investigation: (1) thematizing an interview project, (2) designing, (3) interviewing, (4) transcribing, (5) analyzing, (6) verifying, and (7) reporting. The importance of conceptualizing an interview topic in advance of interviewing, as well as planning an entire interview project through seven stages before starting to interview, is pointed out. The chapters provide the interviewer craftsman with toolboxes for the stages of his or her journey. Although we go into detail with the common life world interview,

other forms of interviewing are also addressed, such as narrative and discursive interviews, as well as more confrontational interviews. When it comes to the analyses of the interviews, forms of coding, categorization, condensation, and interpretation of meanings are depicted, as well as linguistic analyses in the form of conversational, narrative, and discursive approaches.

### **Concluding Perspectives**

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 17, we summarize the three main lines followed throughout the book: interviewing as a craft, as a knowledge-producing activity, and as a social practice. We raise a number of critical questions to qualitative interviewing as currently practiced, and we suggest potentials for developing the quality of interview research. We conclude by emphasizing a pragmatic validation of interview research through producing knowledge worth knowing—knowledge that makes a difference to a discipline and those who depend on it.

## PART I

# CONCEPTUALIZING THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

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**CHAPTER 2: Characterizing Qualitative Research Interviews**

**CHAPTER 3: Epistemological Issues of Interviewing**

**CHAPTER 4: Ethical Issues of Interviewing**

**CHAPTER 5: The Qualitative Research Interview as Context**

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In this first part of the book, we discuss principal issues of research interviewing, particularly those related to epistemology (asking, What can we know?) and ethics (asking, How can we know responsibly?). We address the qualitative research interview as a specific form of conversation. In Chapter 2, we exemplify and outline the mode of understanding a qualitative research interview and relate it to a philosophical dialogue and a therapeutic interview. We then treat epistemological questions concerning the production of interview knowledge in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, we address the ethical dimension of the social practice of interviewing, and in Chapter 5 we discuss some of the specific contextual features of the interview situation. We point out some implications of these conceptual issues for practicing interview research, implications we treat in more detail in relation to the seven stages of an interview investigation in Part II, which covers the practice of qualitative research interviewing.

A reader who is impatient to learn the practical skills of the interview craft may ask why he or she should bother with such complex and subtle issues and not just go straight to the practice of interviewing. One answer is that an able craftsman needs to be familiar with the materials he or she is working with and also the product that is the goal. The research interviewer works with language and knowledge, and the product arrived at is likewise knowledge in a linguistic form. The able interviewer is familiar with the nuances and problems of the material she works with and with the value and strength of the product she delivers.

Readers who are unfamiliar with social science research and philosophy may go directly to Part II, where the practice of research interviewing is presented in seven stages, and then return to the conceptual issues after becoming more familiar with the interview practice.