

INTRODUCTION

Social science is fairly strongly oriented towards empirical research in the form of getting knowledge out of subjects by asking them to provide it, whether they are answering interview questions, filling in questionnaires or writing diaries. There is a strong belief that the 'collection' and processing of data can provide a solid base for saying yes or no to various hypotheses and theories. Alternatively, as in grounded theory, the data are presumed to guide researchers to understand specific phenomena and develop theory. This great faith in data and empirical inquiry as a cornerstone in knowledge development has been challenged by a multitude of intellectual streams during recent years. These range from interpretivist approaches emphasizing the centrality of pre-understandings, paradigms and metaphors in research work, to post-structuralists, discursivists and constructivists denying science any privileged access to the objective truth about the social world (Steier, 1991). Interpretivists emphasize that there are no facts, only interpretations which depend on meanings ascribed by the interpreter. Language-focused scholars view discourse as central and argue that language constructs rather than mirrors phenomena. This makes representation and thus empirical work privileging 'data' a basically problematic enterprise (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Gergen & Gergen, 1991). When researchers interact with subjects – undertaking interviews, making observations, requiring responses to questionnaires – they are not just revealing the truth about social conditions and people's experiences through accessing data, they are also producing specific representations of something. These representations are then sometimes naively taken for granted as mirrors of 'reality'. (For broad reviews of the problems of mirroring or capturing reality, see e.g. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995.)

The critique of positivism and neopositivism, including many versions of qualitative research, type grounded theory, has been massive over the years, but this has not prevented the majority of researchers from doing normal science more or less as if nothing had happened. Questionnaire researchers still assume that the X's put in small squares by respondents make it possible to determine what goes on in the social world. Qualitative researchers still present interview statements as if they were pathways to the interiors of those being interviewed or mirrors of social practice. Although it is broadly recognized that data need to be interpreted in order to say anything and that all data are fused with theory, data are still seen as a basic building bloc and an arbitrator of truth (valid knowledge) in much social science. To collect and sort (codify) interview statements is a trusted and robust ground for qualitative research. One problem with the critique of the capacity of social science to deliver empirically grounded knowledge is that it is rather absolutist, is perceived as destructive and is therefore neglected. Another problem is that much of this critique addresses philosophical and epistemological issues, while research practices have received much less attention. The latter are largely viewed – in most method texts as well as in research reports – as technical or practical matters, separated from wider theoretical and philosophical ideas about knowledge production. Method (ideas on how to produce and make sense of empirical material) still largely remains comparatively unaffected by all the theoretical and philosophical work that has tremendous relevance for our understanding of methodological practices. The wealth of insights about problems of developing knowledge and the limitations of social science as a rational project need to be connected to research practices and used to inspire and revise these. It seems vital to make a stronger link between more philosophically inclined discussions and practical and technical method issues. This is the context and overall ambition with the present book.

This book addresses qualitative interviewing, although many of the themes have a broad relevance for social and behavioural research in general. Qualitative research has become increasingly common in social studies. This is often exclusively or mainly based on interviews. The focus of this book is primarily interviews aiming to get 'rich accounts', i.e. normally relatively loosely structured interviews with face-to-face contact. They are typically relatively time-consuming to carry out and can lead to varied responses from interviewees. Qualitative interviews – in opposition to highly structured 'talking

questionnaires' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) – are fairly open to what the interviewee feels is relevant and important to talk about, given the interests of the research project. Advocates of interviews would typically argue that this approach is beneficial in as much as a rich account of interviewees' experiences, knowledge, ideas and impressions may be considered and documented (Bryman et al., 1988; Fontana and Frey, 1994, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997).

For a long time, and to a degree still around today, researchers doing this kind of interviewing suffered attacks from advocates of what was considered to be more rigorous methods. This view often implies that there should be some kind of formal instrument between researcher and subjects, presumably leading to rationality, transparency and control. Here the experiment was seen to be optimal, but questionnaires and structured interviews were also deemed acceptable. Quantification is another part of this rigour idea, as this is supposed to reduce arbitrariness in the data processing work, and to involve a reliable process and the subsequent delivery of clear and robust results, with not very much depending on the subjectivity of the researcher. The critique from quantitative research has lost some of its force over the years, at least in most fields, partly as the result of an even harsher critique of the alternatives to qualitative research and, more generally, of positivism. Advocates of qualitative research, including interviews, have with some success argued for the benefits of more flexible approaches, making it possible to take the experiences and observations of those studied seriously into account and thus get richer description and the inspiration for new ideas.

Conventional views of qualitative research, including interview-based studies, have however faced other critics who would question the basic assumptions of interviews being about the expression and transformation of knowledge from people out there to the researcher. There is increased recognition that while we live in an 'interview society' where interviews in the mass media, entertainment and other contexts are routinely carried out so that most people are accustomed to this form and practice, gathering and exhibiting such knowledge is not as straightforward as it seems (Dingwall, 1997; Silverman, 2006). Interview talk may say more about role-playing and adapting to social standards in the name of impression management – including how to appear authentic – than about how people really feel or what social reality is really like. It is not evident that even ambitious social scientists can score much better than Dr Phil or Oprah Winfrey in providing the

public with good knowledge about people's lives. Critics also raise concerns about the sloppiness of interview standards: 'Interviews are carried out time and again with little hesitation and hardly an afterthought. The individual interview has become a ubiquitous feature of everyday life' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003a: 4). Some people believe that the interview method is over-used in social science. Kvale (1996) talks of a flight from statistics and think that some people prefer interviews because these are seen as an easy option. Dingwall (1997) sees this flight rather as being from observational and ethnographic studies, reflecting a desire to do quick and dirty research and thus avoid the more demanding empirical work of 'being there' for a longer period.

Understanding interviews as a superior technique for tapping knowledge subjects for knowledge about their experiences and/or social practices neglects the interview situation as a socially and linguistically complex situation, critics argue. Interview accounts may just as well be seen as the outcomes of political considerations, script-following, impression management, the operation of discourses constituting subjects and governing their responses – to mention just a few of the themes I will address in this book. Arguably, these are key features of social and organizational life. But most research reports seem to assume that these are absent from or can be minimized in the interview situation, or that the good researcher can somehow bypass or abstract from these. It is important not to simplify and idealise the interview situation, not to assume that the interviewee is primarily a competent and moral truth teller, acting in the service of science, producing the data needed to reveal the 'interiors' of the interviewees (experiences, feelings, values) or the practices of social institutions. It is also important not to see social and linguistic complexities as merely sources of bias. My argument is that the interview, as a complex social event, calls for a theoretical understanding, or rather a reflexive approach in which a set of various theoretical viewpoints can be considered and, when there are reasons for doing so, applied. Without a theoretical understanding supporting our critical judgment, any use of interview material risks naivety and leaves interpretations standing on shaky ground.

It is also important to be aware of the limited range of what can be captured through interviews. Things happen outside of that which is directly registered by individuals and focused on by researchers. Many researchers will distance themselves from the methodological individualism (a focus on the actor level) favoured by most qualitative

researchers, especially those relying on interviews. Critical realists, for example, would argue that 'actors' accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations' (Bhaskar, 1998: xvi). Learning through talking with people is marginalized if not dismissed by Archer through a reference to broader and deeper elements of society: 'we do not uncover real structures by interviewing people in-depth about them' (1998: 199). However, any alternatives to such uncovering activities – the use of statistics, questionnaires, experiments, observations, textual analysis – may not score any better, at least not with regard to indicating the 'real structures'. Nevertheless it is important to think also about what may go on outside of an interviewee's experiences and worldview.

The present book takes the possibilities, problems and limitations of interviews seriously, advocating what I will refer to as a reflexivity approach to interview research. This means that I think we should avoid giving interview material an a priori status (as indicative of reality or meanings) and instead think through a set of interpretive possibilities for assessing what the material is about and for what purposes it can be used. A willingness to challenge and revise one's initial position is vital here. This thinking through and possible position-revision calls for strong theoretical support. This book aims to provide it.

Purpose and structure of the book

The book is an effort to connect a 'high-brow' methodology – including meta-theoretical issues – with a 'low-brow' method – field practices – as well as with social theory. I attempt to consider philosophical traditions like critical theory and poststructuralism, as well as the practice of doing interviews. As a social event, the interview calls for theory to be understood. Empiricism, common sense, good intentions and a (in most cases deceptive) belief in one's own openness and interpersonal ability as an interviewer are not enough. Being an experienced interview researcher is no guarantee for possessing the ability to control an interview and produce good research results. An impression that one's interviewees are trustworthy is too loose a basis for doing social research.

The *first* aim of the book is thus to review and develop a broad critique of dominant understandings of the interview in social research,

indicating substantive problems with using interviews to tap interviewees for knowledge of their social realities and/or their subjective worlds. The *second* aim is to suggest utilizing interviews in ways that are more theoretically well-informed. I propose methodological guidelines for a more reflexive approach to qualitative research. This offers a better balance between options and problems in the interview than seems to be common. The upside of interviews – options and potentials – is typically emphasized, while limits and shortcomings are neglected or marginalized. We need to fully consider both sets of aspects. The guidelines, in particular, not only have a bearing on the interpretation and use of interview material, but also for interview practices and the research questions we can ask in the context of interview-based studies. The *third* aim, implicit in the first and second, is to suggest some ideas for a theory or rather a meta-theory of the research interview. Theory is used in a loose and unconventional sense, indicating a framework and set of concepts for thinking about the subject matter, asking questions and encouraging thinking that breaks with common sense. In this context theory is coupled to methodology and is not aimed at giving an explanation of interview behaviour as an objective in itself, it is more related to how we can understand it in a sophisticated way and then have a good idea of what to do with interview accounts. An important aspect here is the metaphor adopted for the interview situation and interview accounts. A metaphor can provide an image or a gestalt offering a specific view of the subject. Through comparing the interview situation with something else and perhaps unexpected, we understand it in a different and perhaps more imaginative way than as a tool for data collection. Drawing attention to metaphors encourages a re-conceptualization of the interview which involves theoretical abstraction and the use of a vocabulary that also encourages an openness to complex patterns and depth thinking, thus moving beyond a view of interviews as the optimization of techniques and the minimization of bias.

Taken together the three aims mean that an alternative strategy for using interview material is proposed. It suggests that we look upon interviews and interview outcomes as existing in a field of tensions between different forces and logics. A *reflexive pragmatism* view on the interview is proposed. A key element here is to acknowledge as fully as possible the complexity and uncertainty of the research practice and to realize that any meaning pulled out of interviews for example is contestable. Careful consideration of how interview texts can

be interpreted and used is necessary. This approach means working with alternative lines of interpretation and vocabularies and reinterpreting the favoured line(s) of understanding through the systematic drawing upon of alternative points of departure (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Perspective-shifting is thus central. Reflexivity operates with a metatheoretical structure that guides an interplay between producing interpretations and challenging them. Reflexivity includes opening up the phenomena through exploring more than one set of meanings and acknowledging ambiguity in the phenomena addressed and the line(s) of inquiry favoured. *Reflexivity* means a bridging of the gap between epistemological concerns and method. *Pragmatism* means a balancing of endless reflexivity and radical scepticism with a sense of direction and a commitment to accomplishing a result. Pragmatism also includes considerations of relevance and means a bracketing of uncertainty and indecisiveness in favour of a wish to offer some good interpretations and to try to encourage understanding of a well-picked topic of inquiry. This approach means that interviews are potentially valuable for making 'strong' knowledge claims, but only after careful consideration and perhaps often in more modest ways than seem to be common.

The purpose with all this is not (primarily) to make life difficult for the interviewer – even though adding complexity does not make existence any simpler. The purpose is partly to encourage critical consciousness of the problems of interviewing, partly to suggest new and more imaginative ways of thinking and doing of interviews. Hopefully this can contribute to less naive and more thought through and more creative interview based studies. This calls for some challenging of the technical focus and the great faith in sorting and categorizing interview responses (seen as indicators of some 'truth' outside the interview situation).

The book is structured as follows. The next chapter reviews predominant perspectives on the interview in social science studies. Three such perspectives are highlighted and labelled as neo-positivism, romanticism and localism. Chapter 3 fairly briefly addresses some practical issues in interviews. Chapter 4 addresses the concept of metaphor and argues for taking metaphors (or images) for interviews seriously. Do we, for example, see the interview as an instrument for information gathering or as a setting for the exercise of conversational skills? The two views reflect different understandings of what the interview is about as highlighted by two quite different metaphors – instrument and conversation. The significance and value of taking the metaphorical level seriously for getting a deeper and more imaginative

understanding of interviews are underscored. Chapter 5 then presents eight alternative conceptualizations of what the research interview is about, summarized in terms of metaphors. Each of these offers a critique of mainstream ideas on interviews and suggests paths for using interview material in different and often unconventional ways. Chapter 6 addresses ways of using the set of alternative metaphors in a systematic and integrated way. Here the concept of reflexivity is central, drawing attention to how various metaphors can be used to confront and challenge various understandings and to force the researcher to think through a range of analytical options and possible interpretive routes before deciding how to use interview material. In Chapter 7, some of the possible implications of this view are outlined. These concern: a) implications for methodological practice and technique; b) implications for a more rigorous and reflexive approach to using interview material for 'conventional' purposes; c) implications for novel research questions and new lines of interpretation; and d) considerations about whether or not one should maintain empirical claims or downplay these, viewing empirical material as a source of inspiration for thinking and theory-development rather than for grounded description. These possible implications address reflexivity both as a way to increase rigour (by avoiding using interview data without thinking through what they are really 'worth' and being careful about overusing them) and/or imagination (by using the material for other and more unexpected purposes than the conventional ones). In the final chapter, the core arguments and ideas are summarized, the ethics of interpreting interviews are discussed, some conclusions are made and further food for thought is suggested.