Conversational Disobedience in Research Interviewing

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Abstract: In this article, it is argued that qualitative interview research benefits substantially from more comprehensive attention being paid to active interviewing implying conversational disobedience. The baseline argument is that research interviewing may, through this approach, produce objective knowledge, not as a mirror of the object/subject, but by allowing the object (the interviewee) to “fight back” (Latour, 2000). In the article, empirical examples of active interviewing are presented, and on this basis, the analysis deals with how to proceed with a conversational model for interviewing in qualitative research.

“If social scientists wanted to become objective, they would have to find the very rare, costly, local, miraculous situations where they can render their subjects of study as much as possible able to object to what is said about them, to be as disobedient as possible to the protocol, and to be capable of raising their own questions in their own terms and not in those of the scientists whose interests they do not have to share” (Latour, 2000, p. 116).

1. Introduction

In this article, it is argued that qualitative interview research should benefit substantially from paying comprehensive attention to active interviewing implying conversational disobedience. The baseline argument is that research interviewing may, in this manner, produce objective knowledge, not as a mirror of the object/subject, but by allowing the object (the interviewee) to “fight back” (Latour, 2000). Active interviewing pays considerate attention to the interview as a context for inter-subjective negotiations of meaning and to facilitating active involvement and integration of the conceptions of both parties in the interview in producing both the framework and results of the interviewing process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 2003, Brinkman & Kvale, 2005, Kvale, 2006). In earlier texts, the author considered research interviewing as a conversation resembling the image of discourses crossing each other like swords in combat (Tanggaard, 2003, 2006). Rather than viewing the interview as a context for the unfolding of human experience and the subjective self, the interview is seen as a setting in which discourses cross each other. I have suggested that in such cases, the qualitative research interview can be understood though a battlefield metaphor highlighting the antagonistic character of conversations and encounters in a research interview setting. Tanggaard (2006) discussed explicitly how this kind of discursive interviewing can be part of radical psychological research. This radical methodological view works on the basis that the account of the interviewee is not seen as private and something that can be collected from his or her

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inner psyche, but as something spoken in context and spoken against or debated, where appropriate.

The present article deals with how the practice of active interviews can be framed and how this kind of interviewing differs from non-directive, subjective life-world interviews initially proposed by Rogers (1945). This latter view has heavily influenced basic textbooks on qualitative interviews, such as Gleshne & Peshkin (1992), Kvale (1996) and Smith & Osborn (2003). Examples of active interviewing (Tanggaard, 2006, Salomon et al., 2006) are presented below and discussed in relation to a Socratic dialogical model of interviewing (Dinkins, 2005). Before discussing these examples in more detail, some characteristics of the non-directional approach to interviewing are contrasted with the objectives underlying the more and more commonly used and proposed assumptions behind active interviews.

2. Non-directional interviewing

In his book on qualitative interviewing, Kvale (1996) cites three major inspirations of modern research interviewing: Socrates’ confrontational philosophical dialogues, Giorgi’s phenomenological interviews on learning and Roger’s clinical interviewing.

The assertion emphasized in the first part of the present article is that ‘Rogerian’ non-directional therapeutic techniques and the concept of unconditional positive regard as a basic tool in professional relationships has, until now, been very dominant in texts on qualitative interviewing. Rogers’ (1945) advice to the interviewer is to reflect back to the respondent his or her subjective experiences. The intention behind this is to allow the interviewee’s life stories and subjective experiences to unfold in the interview (Gleshne & Peshkin, 1992, Kvale, 1996). Smith & Osborn (2003) describe semi-structured qualitative interviewing, and their advice is likewise:

“… to encourage the person to speak about a topic with as little prompting from the interviewer as possible. One might say that you are attempting to get as close as possible to what your respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by your questions. Good interview technique therefore often involves a gentle nudge from the interviewer rather than being to explicit.” (Op.cit., 2003, p. 59f). Further on in the text they underline that “Questions should be neutral rather than value-laden or leading” (Op.cit., p. 61).

In his classic text on “The Nondirective Method as a Technique for Social Research” from 1945, Rogers explains his visions of a non-directive researcher role in the social sciences. He argues that the principle of client-centred and non-directive counselling can inspire the research process, and that it provides surprising and unexpected value as a tool of social research. The ideal is that the client (the interviewee) is given room to explore his problem in his own way, and the researcher should do nothing, which would in any way trigger his defences. This ideal is very similar to that given in modern interview texts such as Smith & Osborn (2003). This text provides a classic example of the approach, in which the advice to the interviewer is to
pursue neutral, rather than value-laden or leading questions. As argued below in this paper this emphasis on neutral questions can be traced back to the ‘Rogerian’ ideal of a non-evaluative attitude from the researcher in the interview context.

2.1. The non-directive interview as an unbiased method

In Rogers’ text from 1945, the role of the interviewing therapist is described as a catalyst rather than a as a chemical agent: “He enters into the therapeutic situation as little as possible and interposes none of his own opinions, diagnoses, evaluations, or suggestions”. The material gathered is to be a chemically pure expression of the client’s attitudes” (Rogers, 1945, p. 279). The researcher holds a verbal mirror to the client, which enables the latter to see himself as clearly as possible without making evaluations of him or his attitudes. Rogers describes non-directive therapeutic interviewing as a neutral and unbiased method of sampling the individual’s attitudes toward himself. “Through the non-directive interview, we have an unbiased method by which we may plumb these private thoughts and perceptions of the individual”. (op. cit., p. 282). The image of the interviewer is clear. He is non-manipulative, a mirror of the other, gentle, client-centred, non-evaluative – all of which allow for a reliable account of the other.

3. A return to active interviews

In advocating active interviews, Holstein & Gubrium (1995, 2003) are critical towards Rogers’ classical framing of the interview method as ideally non-directional. In their view, the interview is not a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding or misdirection. Interviews in themselves shape the form and content of what is said, they argue, and interviews inevitably impose particular ways of understanding reality upon subject’s responses. Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably active. Responders are constructors of meaning and knowledge in collaboration with the interviewer. They argue that the researcher should take advantage of the co-construction of meaning and take a more ‘active’ view of the interview, which means being sensitive to the social construction of knowledge. In this sense, the interviewer is not a mirror of the other, but a collaborator in a process of negotiation of meaning. Likewise, the interviewee is seen as someone engaged in an ongoing revision and construction of a particular socially and historically constructed narrative. Interview responses are:

…”seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed, nor ever pure. Any interview situation – no matter how formalized, restricted, or standardized – relies upon the interaction between participants. Because meaning making is unavoidably collaborative (Garfinkel, 1967, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974), it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be construed as contaminants. All participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making meaning” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 78).

In this sense of interviewing, the data do ‘not speak for themselves’. Rather, the analyst must describe the complex discursive activities through which the respondents produce meaning
within the interview context itself. In this sense, the interview is a discursively orchestrated conversation in line with Alasdair MacIntyre’s suggestion that “a conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only actors, but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreement the mode of their production.” (Shaffer & Elkins, 2005, p. 19).

However, the above analysis does not really answer the question of what active interviewing implies in actual interview practice and how to proceed. In order to answer this question, some instances of research interviewing are presented below, which can be seen as contexts for active interviewing. The intention is not to present empirical research results as such, but with these examples create a context for further discussion of the differences between active interviewing and more non-directional forms of subjective life-world interviewing.

4. Examples of active forms of interviewing

In the following section, four different instances of active forms of interviewing are presented as a basis for discussing the potential offered by these research modes.

4.1. Interviewers as “space-invaders”

A group of Australian researchers recently published an article on workplace learning in which they view themselves as “space-invaders” (Salomon et al., 2006). This article is mentioned here, because it is an example of an (unintended) application of a very active interview approach in which the participants are invited to fight back regarding the interpretations made by the researchers of the importance of informal learning.

The Australian researchers were investigating so-called informal learning spaces in four different workgroups in public schools of vocational school teachers in Australia. As part of the project, they conducted interviews with the teachers. Afterwards, they returned the interview transcripts to the teachers, who then turned out to be very ambivalent about referring to informal periods of time such as during lunch or in the tearoom a learning space. In the article it is shown how the teachers became engaged in a discussion with the researchers about this particular issue. By including the controversial interview sequences in the article, the researchers open up the research process for further scrutiny by the reader:

Researcher: How do you learn from each other as a team of teachers? Do you learn from each other?

Trade Teacher: Well, we don’t…..Ok, we do to an extent. Every lunch time, we’re always sitting around the table and something will come up and we’ll look at it there.

Later, during the discussion with the teachers, one of the researchers attempted to name the tearoom space an informal learning space. Another teacher clearly resisted this suggestion:
Researcher: You know how we were talking about informal learning spaces and how the lunchroom is a good example of that. And there’s a lot of everyday talk that goes on there and lots of learning as well.

Trade teacher: I don’t think we think about that as learning. I don’t walk about here thinking I learned something today. To me, it’s not a learning environment. The classroom’s a learning from me for the student. Sitting around in the lunchroom isn’t a learning environment at all…. even if I do learn something.

Researcher: It seems to me a lot of learning takes place….

Trade Teacher: I’m sure there is learning there all the time, but I don’t look on it as learning, if you know what I mean.

Salomon et al. (2006) argue that the teacher above could regard naming the lunchroom a learning space a transgressive act. The fact that the interviewer intends to acknowledge it formally as a learning space is seen as an intrusion into a protected environment. This occasion of the interview engages the researchers in a reflection about power relations in research, the issue of how learning is discussed, the contested nature of research acts and naming activities in the workplace as learning. In the article of Salomon et al., there is no mention of an intended application of active interviews, but, with the inclusion of the extensive interview sequences, we as readers can recognize aspects of a very active and collaborative research process. For example, the teachers are invited into the “space” of data analysis and interpretation, when given the opportunity to discuss the process with the researchers after the initial round of data collection/generation. Secondly, as part of this exercise, the researcher introduces her own interpretation of the lunchroom as a learning space seemingly without adhering to the immediate interpretation by the teachers that this is not the case. The intention behind this may be to validate the researchers’ interpretations by opening up a conversational space in the field of research. The negotiation of meaning is not just considered an unavoidable part of engaging in research, as discussed by Holstein & Gubrium (2003). The researchers actually create spaces for analytical and interpretation work in co-operation with the teachers who are viewed more as co-researchers than as respondents.

4.2 Dominance-and-resistance power plays in interviewing.
As is the case in the Australian research mentioned above, the theme of refusal to naming work as learning was also a central result of part of a PhD project on learning that the author of the present paper conducted herself in a Danish manufacturing company in 2001 and 2002. The research entailed extensive participant observation and qualitative interviews with ten apprentices. Vocational training in Denmark takes four years and the apprentices primarily receive training in a workplace, with the exception of five periods of five or ten weeks each in a vocational school. In this context, the empirical data serves to illustrate the element of meaning negotiation in qualitative research interviewing. All names of the apprentices have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.
4.2.1. An interview with Bjarne

The interview extracts below are from an interview conducted with Bjarne in the company workplace in November 2001. Bjarne has already completed high school, but intended to use his training in electro-mechanics as a basis for further training in summer 2002. The interview lasted 1 hour and was transcribed verbatim in 17 A-4 pages.

The interview illustrates a contradiction between the researcher’s focus on “learning for the sake of learning” and the interviewee’s assumptions that learning is something done only to get a formal education and to advance oneself economically:

I: One thing I have been wondering. A lot of you guys stay after work either to do troubleshooting on your own equipment or to do unpaid work after hours?

B: Yes.

I: What do you learn from that?

B: It depends on what kind of moonlighting we do. Of course, we want to be allowed to just potter around with something in which we see some benefit. If you have an old computer monitor at home and it’s broken, then you bring it to work and fiddle with it to see if you can find out what’s wrong. It’s not … you know, we are not allowed to work on our own television at work. You do not learn that (officially), you learn about an instrument. To build your own amplifier is also something other than measuring some electronic equipment down here.

I: Okay, so you do it to get some experience with more types of instruments and equipment?

B: No, it’s not to get experience; it’s to apply what you have learned at school for your own profit. A broken computer monitor - you fix the old one so you don’t need to buy one. If you build an amplifier, well, it’s much cheaper than having to buy one yourself. It’s not to learn something extra, it’s done simply out of interest, or because you can earn some cash repairing a friend’s video.

4.2.2 No shared-learning euphoria

At the beginning of the interview sequence with Bjarne, the interviewer understands that apprentices moonlight as an active and deliberate effort to gain experience and learn from working on various pieces of electronic equipment. The assumption was that the apprentices do moonlighting in order to supplement their formal training. However, Bjarne quickly denied this and described moonlighting as something done for one’s own benefit.

There is then, an economic interest in moonlighting and Bjarne is driven primarily by this motivation and not by a desire to learn from this activity. This part of the interview shows the
interviewee’s rejection of the interpretation of moonlighting as a learning activity by the researcher: "No, it’s not to learn something extra."

As mentioned earlier, Latour (2000) argues that objectivity in research can mean "allowing the object to object". If indeed the social sciences and qualitative interview studies are aimed at approximating a pragmatic criterion of objectivity, this could be achieved by doing interview research in which the interviewee has maximum potential to contest the claims of the researcher and to raise questions on his/her own terms. If interviews are considered as a collaborative conversation, the subjects (objects) of research can or should be allowed the freedom to fight back.

In the following interview sequence with Bjarne, the productive “meaning-making” process of ongoing interpretation and validation of the statements made by the interviewee is clear. The interviewee is allowed to fight back in response to the interpretations made of his statements. This type of interaction is clearly present in the following sequence:

I: Okay. It seems like something of a contradiction when you say it’s not to learn something, it’s just for interest or to make money?

B: I don’t think of it as learning.

I: But you do learn something through it?

B: Yes, but it’s not like when you come home from school and say, “I don’t understand this, now I want to learn until I do understand”. And then you go and ask for a job where you need to do just that. It’s not like you go and choose a monitor so you can learn about it. You have a monitor at home which is broken and you decide to fix it. Then you find out something about it.

In this context, the interviewer challenges contradictions and conflicts in the assumptions made by the researcher about the apprentice regarding the possible places where learning occurs and the motivation to learn. The interviewer asks leading questions. One could legitimately object to this style of interviewing on the basis that it might not be in the interest of the apprentices or be unethical. Nevertheless, from my experience, the above interviews did take place in a relaxed and positive atmosphere. I did not enter the room as a stranger and simply turn on my tape recorder. The apprentices knew me from the extensive field studies that I had conducted at their workplace(s), and we had therefore already established some common ground and an atmosphere of mutual trust. The apprentices also informed me that they found it benefited their own educational to reflect on their learning experiences with me, and that they also found it “quite fun” to be interviewed. In this sense, reasonably extensive knowledge of the field and the persons interviewed can be seen as a condition for an open-minded conversation. Knowledge of and experience with a particular field as a condition for doing research was emphasised by the anthropologist Jean Lave in an interview with Steinar Kvale (1995). Lave
argues that an intensive study of the literature is needed prior to conducting anthropological research and that more formal conversations with the participants in a field can be done only when the researcher, as part of the process, gets to know the basis issues confronting the respondents. Similar arguments can be found in Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 610) who argue that social proximity and familiarity provide two of the necessary conditions for “non-violent” communication. Bourdieu is convinced that this can be achieved if interviewers knows on his or her own body the dispositions, the social practice and the lifestyle of the participants in the research process. In this way, questions can be tailored objectively to the specific nature of the respondents. With respect to the above examples, in various respects, I personally am too different from the apprentices to achieve this (by virtue of being a woman, mother, researcher and teacher), but my knowledge of their lives gained from the extensive field studies surely helped create a relationship of trust that was a basic condition for an open-minded dialogue about the meaning of learning.

5. Discussion

The argument made so far in this article is that an active form of interviewing, in which the interview takes the form of a shared inquiry, is a means of producing objective knowledge in a pragmatic sense. The intention behind this is to allow the interviewee to fight back about the assumptions and interpretations made by the researcher, either while conducting the research interviews or afterwards. The objective is not to dominate the interviewee, but to focus on establishing a shared inquiry of the research themes through the interviewing process. The parties to the interview may, in this respect, touch each other metaphorically, challenge each others’ assumptions and inquire into possible conflicts.

Confrontational style? The interview extracts above can be regarded as examples of a confrontational interview style. One could object that this form closes rather than opens up the ongoing conversation. However, in discussing legal counselling and interviewing, Shaffer & Elkins (2005, p. 148) argue that in a warm and open inquiry relationship, it is possible for the interviewer to use an confrontational style of interviewing, and for it to remain effective. Shaffer & Elkins cite Kinsey who conducted (the renowned) interviews on sexual behaviour, in which he used to confront the interviewees with his intuition that they might lying to him. The examples given in this article support the assumption that a warm, relaxed, and trusted relationship between interviewer and interviewee – possibly enabled through knowing each other and both having extensive knowledge of the field or “world” of the participants, before the actual interview – create a good context for interviewing as conversation, dialogue and negotiations of meaning. As argued by Potter & Hepburn (2005, p. 300), active interviewing is often combined with elements that are more like ‘neutral interviewing’ – for example, when emphasizing the importance of a warm and relaxed atmosphere between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Socratic inquiry? Some of the above examples could be argued to approach a Socratic inquiry with the researcher acting as a rather impatient questioner of the immediate assumptions expressed by the interviewee. Dinkins (2005) recently raised the issue of Socratic inquiry in a
critique of the dominant narrative approach to current interviewing processes in nursing research and other fields. As is the case with Rogers’ non-directed methods, in narrative interviewing, the respondent is encouraged to tell his or her life-story with as little prompting and interruptions from the interviewer as possible. Although this can lead to interesting research results, the interviewer does not engage in a dialogue or conversation with the interviewee. Instead, the interviewer avoids “leading” the respondent in order to allow the story to take its own course. One problem with this is that it does not facilitate immediate reflection by either the researcher or the participant on the possibly diverging interpretations of the conversation themes. In contrast to the narrative approach to interviewing, Dinkins suggests going back to Socrates’ method of inquiry, also referred to as his elenchus, a shared dialogue. Socrates and his interlocutors search together for understanding, questioning each other’s beliefs and help each other to clarify their own thoughts:

“Because the inquiry is a shared one, Socrates puts himself very much into the inquiry. He expresses surprise when an interlocutor says something he didn’t expect, he challenges beliefs that seem to conflict, and he acknowledges his own assumptions and allow them to affect the dialogue. He is never passive, and he never simply asks a question and lets the answer lie” (Dinkins, 2005, p. 116).

If interviewing is turned into a dialogue, the researcher acknowledges that she is part of the inquiry. She checks her assumptions with the interviewee, and remains open to the possibility that these assumptions might be changed as part of the dialogue. Socrates believed that his inquiries with the young men in Athens could be compared to midwifing, where the innate ideas of the young men could be “given life”. It is controversial whether this concept of knowledge being innate should be retained, but we might say that Socrates was our first active interviewer - although the sophists before him also taught young people the art of rhetoric and conversation. Nevertheless, the sophists’ main intention was to persuade people and convince them that certain world views were better than others, while Socrates believed that the task was to make people aware of the knowledge they already processed. As argued by Dinkins (2005), with interviewing turned into a real dialogue as part of shared inquiry, each party examines its beliefs, seeks out and deals with conflicts, and reject the beliefs, which they hold less dear. They will ideally move closer and closer to a deeper understanding.

Dialogue and power. It is extremely important to keep in mind that dialogues within human and/or discursive relationships are entirely never free of power imbalances and conflict. The interview may include aspects of manipulation and instrumentality, despite a humanistic ethos of mutuality, co-authorship and emancipation (see Burman, 1997). Following the interpretational approach of Foucault (1995), active interviewer-interviewee relations are powerful, because they invite the interview-person into the field of research as a collaborator. As is the case with non-directional interviews, dialogical interviewing may also encourage the interviewee to feel free to express himself in a way he would normally never do with anyone other than his closest relatives. Ultimately, it is the researcher who takes control over data (see also Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The issue is not to argue in favour of the superior qualities of one form of interview over another or to eliminate issues of
power, but to explore the prospects of developing new and alternative forms of research interviewing suitable for different purposes and diverse research projects. In this respect and with these aims, the following seven characteristic dimensions of active-confrontational forms of interviewing are fundamental:

Table 1: Active-confrontational interviewing

| 1) Dialogue: | Active, confrontational interviewing requires a shared dialogue among the participants |
| 2) Collaborative interpretation: | In active-confrontational interviewing, both the interviewer and the interviewee are invited to voice their interpretations of the theme of the interview |
| 3) Trust and knowledge as a condition for shared inquiry: | Extensive knowledge of the field and of the persons interviewed may create a common ground of trust that enables an open-minded interview dialogue |
| 4) Co-work on analysis: | The interviewee can be invited to reflect retrospectively on the interview in collaboration with the researcher |
| 5) Discourses rather than self: | The main focus in these forms of interview is not the self of the interview-person, but to facilitate a context for negotiating the meanings of a particular research theme |
| 6) Reflective capabilities: | The goal of interviewing is not to achieve an unbiased picture of the life of the other, but to take advantage of the interpretational and reflective capabilities of the participants, so that the interview is turned into a discursive activity |
| 7) Disobedience: | Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the interview person is invited to act disobедiently and even raise questions in their own terms |

6. Conclusion

In this article, the intention was to reflect on particular instances of active interviewing. Initially, I analysed the possible differences between non-directional interviewing originating from Rogers (1945) and active interviews as proposed by Holstein & Gubrium (1995, 2003). The article analysed and discussed some actual examples of active, confrontational research interviewing. This analysis was inspired by Latour’s ideas of a pragmatic objectivity and in particular by Dinkins’ (2005) discussion of Socratic inquiry as a possible inspiration for qualitative research interviewing. Through these approaches, some central aspects of active, confrontational interviewing have emerged. These are: 1) Dialogue, 2) Collaborative Interpretation, 3) Trust and Familiarity as a condition for shared inquiry, 4) Cooperative Analysis, 5) Discourses Rather than Self, 6) Reflective Capabilities, 7) Disobedience.

Active-confrontational forms of interviewing share many of the epistemological ideas behind active interviews that were initially described by Holstein & Gubrium (1995, 2003), but it is also a very specific style of interviewing with an emphasis on forming the interview as a conversation. The more general point of the article is that research interviewing can be turned
into a discursive activity, rather than focusing only on the unfolding of subjective experiences. In the discursive case, the interview consists of two or more parties judging and discussing different logical, moral and emotional expressions and claims. However, the parties may not seek the innate truth as in the original Socratic inquiry. Within the present postmodernist context, the intention behind this form of interviewing is to negotiate meanings in the particular context of the interview. Whatever the particular epistemological claim on knowledge, the main emphasis in this article has been to highlight the possibilities of turning research interviewing into a shared inquiry.

References:


