The Problems With Interviews

Karl Nunkoosing

Despite the popularity of the interview in qualitative research, methodological and theoretical problems remain. In this article, the author critically examines some of these problems for the researcher. He deals with the problems of power and resistance, distinguishing truth from authenticity, the (im)possibility of consent if knowing is a problem for both the interviewer and the interviewee, and the nature and significance of stories and the self. Although it is not always possible to address these problems directly, the author seeks in this article to create a dialogue with all of us for whom the interview is judged to be the appropriate answer to the research question "How can I know . . . ?"

Keywords: *consent; discourse; ethics; narratives; postmodern; power*

The interview is the most widely used method of generating data in qualitative social research. In the interview society (Silverman, 1993), this popularity has spawned many types of interview. Although the literature gives different names to describe these various suggestions for interviewing, there is considerable overlap between the many types of interviews. This is an example of what Fairclough (1992) has described as "overwording" and as a sign of "intense preoccupation" with an idea or concept (p. 193). This preoccupation is an indicator of the importance of interviewing, the search for better understanding of interviews as a way of knowing in social and health research, and the continued search for more effective ways to conduct interviews.

The popularity of the interview in qualitative research does not mean, however, that we have to take the interview for granted. For example, when we see the interview as a tool for collecting data, we look for techniques to use this tool, and we conceive of a precise technology of interviewing that might not pay enough attention to the uniqueness of each interview encounter with different participants. I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as a skilled interviewer. I am suggesting that it is in the use of the self, of relationship building, of acute awareness of the flow of conversations, of a sensitive awareness of the interviewer's theoretical and professional position, and of his or her research question that qualitative data of high quality are constructed in the interview. The skilled, embodied interviewer uses his or her person to communicate with people to create stories.

QUALITATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH, Vol. 15 No. 5, May 2005 698-706
DOI: 10.1177/1049732304273903
© 2005 Sage Publications

Why do we interview? In the natural course of research events, we normally start by asking “What do I want to know?” and the interview is a likely answer to the next question: “How can I know . . . ?” We interview when we want to know something about what another person has to say about her or his experience of a defining event, person, idea, or thing. We choose the interview because we know that the best way to get into the lived experience of a person who has experienced an important health-related issue is to enable the person to narrate that experience. We are interested in the person’s cognition, emotion, and behavior as a unifying whole rather than as independent parts to be researched separately.

Interviews deal with thinking and talk that are later transformed into texts. The interview requires linguistic transactions and relationships between at least two persons. The interview invites and persuades individuals to think and to talk—that is, to discourse—their needs, wants, expectations, experiences, and understandings at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

THE INTERVIEW AND THE PROBLEM OF POWER

Power is always present in the transactions of the interview, as it is in all human interactions. In the interview, power takes many forms and degrees, and we can conceive of the various forms of power constantly shifting back and forth between the interviewer to the interviewee. In this dance of forms of power, which differentiates the research interview from other forms of verbal exchange, both the interviewer and the interviewee are constantly seeking to (dis)equalize their respective authorities.

The power of the interviewer rests in his or her authority as a seeker of knowledge and methodological expertise, and that of the interviewee as a more or less privileged knower. From the beginning, when we seek the consent of a participant to get involved in our study, we give in to the authority and the civil rights of the person. It is our duty of care to explain the risks, and to minimize those risks, that might be involved. The participant has, in turn, to agree or resist our persuasion. This interplay of power is continued throughout the interview.

The interviewer is also in a power relationship with his or her research community. We all want to do worthy, publishable works, and in this the approval of the research community might have to compete with our research relationships with the people we interview. Thus, the intellectual rigor and validity of our interpretations have to meet with the requirements of the research community rather than the agreement of the people we interview. This is the case even when we seek the agreement of the interviewees about our interpretations, for the simple reason that we write for practitioners and researchers.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) have questioned whether a nonhierarchical position is ever possible in the event called an interview. At best, the interviewer-researcher can be involved in seeking reciprocity. Reciprocity in the knowledge-power game of the interview rarely involves equality, because it is the researcher who reconstructs the text of the transcript from the talk of the interview. Eventually, he or she also engages in the task of analysis and interpretations that will be presented to the community of other researchers. In this act, the text becomes the intellectual property of its author. The reader has to make his or her own sense of the often decontextualized fragments of the interview that the researcher constructs as his or her narrative of

research. This is just another case of what Bourdieu (1977) has referred to as those "artful improvisations" (p. 5) that characterize human practices. Garfinkle (1967), too, has used the term *artful* to characterize the spontaneous and creative nature of human interactions and the process of creating reality with words. Now, there are moments when such artfulness might amount to deceit on the part of both the interviewee and the interviewer. We are used to accepting that this is part of the game in the interrogations that we see on television and in motion pictures or read about. Deceit is clearly an ethical problem when applied to the research interview, though not necessarily one to which there is a ready solution. We expect such artfulness to be part of the expertise of the experienced interviewer. Consider, for example, how the novice student/researcher usually thinks of the interview in terms of asking questions and of techniques. This does not mean that the role of the interviewee is devoid of such artfulness. Douglas (1985) was mistaken when he assumed that only the interviewer engages in creative artfulness to produce data; the interviewee is also deeply involved in this process.

In their essay about interview studies with men, Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) described the interview as an arena in which masculinity both is displayed and is under threat. This type of risk is present in all interviews. The interview exposes the thinking of the interviewee, transformed into talk and later into text, to scrutiny, first by the researcher, then by his or her readers.

The transactional dynamic of the interview where the exercise of power is a characteristic of both the interviewee and the interviewer makes terms like structured, semistructured, and unstructured interviews misnomers. All conversations are highly structured events. All interviews involve conversations. Because the words *structured*, *semistructured*, and *unstructured* refer to the degree to which all participants are asked the same preselected questions and the order in which these questions are asked, the highly "structured" interviews are versions of the open-ended questionnaires. *Structure* here implies the degree of control that the interviewer exercises over the transaction of the interview. This assumption of control is problematic in the interview when we know that we might believe one thing and do another.

Other structures also influence what is talked about in the interviews. Some of these come from the cultural context in which the interviewer and the interviewee are located. Much of the reason for our ethical emphasis on anonymity is due to the fact that the interview makes public what is often considered private thoughts and behavior. One such example is people's sexual practices that might involve health risks. Other aspects of structure are likely to be the theories and ideologies that the researcher brings to the interaction and its research topic. In this sense, structure can be likened to the discursive resources that are available to the interviewer and the interviewee to draw on to create narratives. These discourses are drawn from the culture, and they discipline both the interviewer and the interviewee, in that they impose constraints on how their respective roles can be defined and their boundaries delineated. In the extended interview, many discourses are possible, and both the interviewer and the interviewee might make many shifts between the discourses that are available to them. Thus, they are not disciplined only by their culture; they are also disciplined by the availability of discourses. This, too, involves power relations.

There are times when the researcher's search for interesting, revealing lives can lead him or her to engage in activities that are potentially exploitative. The research

interview as either interrogation or confession comes to mind. Oakley (1981) identified the orthodox social research interview as one that emphasizes the role for the interviewee as passive responder to questions and the interviewer as questioner and rapport promoter. Here, the participant is reduced to the role of a passive provider of data who is susceptible to the influences of the skilled rapport promotion technology of the interviewer as technician. The primary purpose of promoting rapport is to get at data. The human interaction is secondary to the primary purpose of seeking data. Just asking questions has limited use in the creation of human stories.

TRUTHS AND AUTHENTICITY IN INTERVIEWS

The interviewee can choose whatever means is available to him or her to construct his or her story. The interviewer does not just collect data, as if picking daisies; he or she colludes with the interviewee to create, to construct, stories. In this context, all the stories are authentic rather than true. This is an overstatement, because there are times in health research when the binary truth-falsehood is important. Consider this example: One of my students is currently interviewing older men about their health-related behaviors, and she believes that one of the men who says that he visits the gym every day is being economical with the truth. She encourages the participant to give more details about these visits, but short of spying on him or asking other people who are close to this man, she has no evidence that he does not attend the gym with the frequency he describes. People draw on cultural narratives to make sense of their situation, and their preference for one narrative over another might be related to how they explain and attribute their health experience and, consequently, the actions they take.

What is important here is that the interview is not the end of the research process. The interview-based qualitative research can help in the generation of hypotheses or theories that lead to further studies. For example, a predominant discourse or narrative by some people might relate to their degree of adjustment to health-related life events. In such circumstances, it might also be desirable to interview people who are closely related to the persons. When we do this, we inevitable seek to confirm what the person told in the original study.

In the power relationship of the interview, there are moments when choice is limited. However, even if there is no choice, resistance is always a possibility. People do not want to, and do not have to, reveal everything about themselves (Charmaz, 1995). The interviewee chooses the aspects of his or her life that he or she is most interested in telling. The interviewer, too, might be more interested in some stories than the one being told. My position is that in an in-depth interview, all stories that the interviewee chooses to tell are equally important in what they can contribute to my understanding of his or her experience. The notion of digression cannot exist in its usual, everyday form here. However, a person might have a well-rehearsed story to tell, and this is the only one that that he or she can tell. It is the only one that he or she has access to at the moment. This can equally be a form of resistance to protect his or her ego, just as it can be a deliberate act against the intrusion of the researcher. In these instances, there are always new stories to be told. The interviewer has to wait, to negotiate, to build an enabling relationship with the interviewee so that he or she can find new things to reveal through acquiring new insight about the situation. One cannot hurry a good interview, nor can one push the interviewee to reveal

what he or she does not want to tell or does not know about. Not knowing is itself an important stance for the interviewer to take. The interview does not take place to support this or that theory of the researcher. Its purpose is primarily to construct stories and versions of events that can have the possibility of generating theories.

The research interview is not an interrogation. In the context of an inductive interview with a person with a disability or a prolonged chronic illness, it is likely that one will, at first, hear the often-told story of the person making sense of his or her disability or illness. This is what Woodhill (1994) has termed the "popular cultural voice of disability" (p. 209). The interviewer will need patience and skills to hear other voices of disability that take time to articulate. Woodhill identified four other voices of disability: the intimate voice, the professional voice, the marginalized voice, and the analytical voice. One problem that this idea indicates is that the interviewer easily seeks only to spot these popular voices, which are drawn from available cultural discourses, at the risk of ignoring the personal interpretations of the person. When we seek to find what we already know in interviews, we learn little to advance our knowledge.

There are likely to be voices that are typical of the experience of chronic illness, as well as voices that are unique to different illnesses and personal experiences of individuals, but all these stories have to start with what is familiar and readily accessible to the interviewee. The interviewee, too, has to start with what is readily available to him or her at the time. All stories are likely to change over time and in their retellings. This is always a problem when one is concerned with human experiences. Much more is available than what is readily accessible. And what becomes accessible through the process of the interview is often a construction of experiences into words that is a product of the interview itself. This difference between the available experience and the accessible talk is similar to the Vygotskian concept of a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development is defined as the gap between a child's observed level of development and his or her potential performance when appropriately assisted by an adult/teacher. The associated concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), describing the contingent adult assistance that leads to demonstration of the child's potential performance, is also pertinent to the research interview. The interviewer uses her or his skills to enable the interviewee to tell stories that would otherwise remain untold. It is unlikely that I am the only interviewer who is often told by interviewees, "That's an interesting idea that I have not thought about before."

> Meaning is not elicited merely by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak—as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114)

THE PROBLEM WITH CONSENT

Although Charmaz (1995) was right when she pointed out that people exercise choice in the part of their lives that they want to reveal, the issue is not that simple. For ethical reasons, we seek people's consent before they are interviewed, but this is the source of a major problem with in-depth, open-ended, and inductive inter-

views. In such interviews, the stories being narrated are constructed in the moments of the interviews to the extent that neither the interviewers nor the interviewees can predict the details of what is going to be discussed in advance of the event (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002). The person is consenting only to take part in the interview. As part of consent seeking, ethical researchers always make interview transcripts available to participants for them to remove any part of the interview that they do not want included in the analysis, interpretation, and report of the research. In doing this, we acknowledge that what is said in the moment of the interview might not always be under the immediate control of the speaker. Conversations exist as both means of expression and means of repression (Billig, 1997).

> Human communication cannot be seen simply as a matter of information transfer from one location to another; it must be seen as ontologically formative, as a process by which people can, in communication with one another, literally inform one another's being. (Shotter, 1989, p. 145)

The transaction of the interview can be a relationship of mutual benefit to the interviewee and the interviewer; however, there are occasions on which it can be costly to the interviewee. The researcher gives of his or her time and skill to enable the informant to transform his or her subjective thinking into talk. Although the research interview should not be considered as therapy, as Hutchinson and Wilson (1994) noted, it can have therapeutic effect for the informant. However, we cannot offer this as a product, nor can we make this a purpose of the research interview. In seeking participants' consent, we cannot evoke the therapeutic potential of the interview. Informants, too, give of their time and agree to explore their thoughts, which are then "storied" into being as talk and text. Such explorations can also lead to the recollections of painful, upsetting memories, sometimes even repressed memories. At least we can point out this possibility and offer the person information and access to postinterview support when this is indicated. Spradley (1979) conceptualized the interviewer-interviewee relationship thus:

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

Although I like the sentiments expressed above, it is unlikely that an interviewer can "feel things" in the way that these are felt by the interviewee either in the moments of the interview or during the original experience of an event. Often, the recollection and telling of the interview takes place long after the event was originally felt. We are left with the question of how to understand the meaning of a person's experience with this impossibility of replicating for oneself the feelings of the participant. The best we can do is to retell the person's story while telling our own story as researcher.

THE INTERVIEW AND THE PROJECT OF THE SELF

In its attempt to engage the interviewee as a teacher, the interview runs the risk of playing its part in the postmodern style of totalitarianism, whereby the citizen is

kept in a state of helpless, educated awareness, which Zizek (1989) has called the "ideology of cynicism" (p. 28). The research interview is not a neutral product of the academy. Like all products of the academy, the interview serves the hegemonic purpose of the culture in which it is produced. In this sense, there is often a political element to the interview, its interpretations, and the texts that are derived from it. Put simply, we have to ask questions not just about the purpose of the research but also about whose purpose is being served by this research (Seidman, 1998).

The researcher is not just an interviewer. He or she also possesses other identities that serve to legitimize his or her actions. Health researchers who use interviews cannot pretend that their status, race, culture, and gender and their interviewee's status, race, culture, and gender do not influence what can be said, how it is said, and what can be written about. The interviewer also belongs to other identity-defining professional tribes, such as anthropologist, nurse, policy analyst, psychologist, sociologist, teacher, and so on. Each profession makes claims to ways of knowing, theories, and practices that discipline individuals into acceptable subjects (Foucault, 1977/1980). This, in turn, serves to provide the professional with the politically generated filters to listen to the interviewee and maintain the acts that constitute the interview. Although these different professions are likely to be informed by similar methodological sources, they are engaged in constructing knowledge that would serve to maintain their relationships within their own profession and the hegemony of their profession against all others who might profess to similar knowledge-practice-authority.

In the interview, the self is also engaged in a performance. However, this performative act has no beginning or end; it is a continually changing ontological state for the creation-destruction of competing discourses and desires, in which selfhood is artfully transacted into being. Because each interview is a unique event, this selfhood, for both of the actors in the interview drama, is constantly being created and recreated. In the context of a world that is experienced as changing, Bauman (1996) has considered all of us to be engaged in an ever-changing, postmodern, inner-worldly pilgrimage of refashioning our self-identity termed "the unfinished project of the self" (p. 24). The constant re-creation of the interview is itself an artifact of this changing creation of the interviewer and the social researcher, and in the various retellings of the interviewee's story, each interview refashions the experience being narrated. The interviewer and the interviewee are both changed by the dialogue of the interview. It seems to me that only grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1991), in its principles of theoretical sampling, acknowledges that the process of successive interviews has the capacity to change the knowledge of the interviewer. An outcome of this change is that each new interview has something in common with, but is also different from, the previous interview.

The interview contributes to this project of creation of forms of selfhood by enabling reflexivity and talk. Talk connects an external world of events to an inner world of thoughts and emotions that constitute a person's subjectivities. The form of communication referred to as talk provides the means both to construct and to understand reality and subjectivity. Language is not "in a passive relation to reality, merely referring to objects which are taken to be given in reality . . . discourse is an active relation to reality . . . language signifies reality in the sense of constructing meaning from it" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 42).

The interview has to attend to what is and is not remembered, pains and pleasures, ego defenses and ego expressions, facts and fantasy, needs and wants, desires and hopes, expression and repression. It might not be possible or, indeed, desirable to attend to all these tensions before establishing how such dichotomies might be discoursed into being. Feminist critics of Foucault, such as Cain (1993), have drawn attention to what are referred to as prediscursive and extradiscursive events that are related to feelings and emotions, and that might not be expressed in language. Such feelings and emotions might not even be expressible in the language of the interview. Holloway (1989), too, warned against "discourse determinism" (p. 84): an overemphasis on discourse as a culturally shared commodity that does not account for individual uniqueness. The problem is assuming that what is talked can be an exact replication of what is lived and experienced. Furthermore, what is experienced in one moment of existence changes with the accumulation of new experiences. There is no way out of this trap. We talk with people about their experiences of things, events, people, and places on the assumption that what is lived can be talked about. There is another aspect to this problem. How do we involve people with no voices, people with weak voices, and people with incomprehensible voices in the interview? How are the stories of the very young, the people with cognitive impairments, the people with contaminable illnesses, and the strangers going to be told? Interview-based health research has to do more to enable these voices to be heard.

For the social researcher to tell stories from interviews, he or she has to give full expression to the emotional lives that these stories recreate. It is not enough to tell stories. The researcher has to also address how the stories are told. Researchers take it on themselves to do justice to the lives that they have helped to construct with the people, and it is unlikely that the traditional way in which researchers communicate with each other is always the appropriate way to retell the story of selfhood and emotion. I leave the last words to Eco (1994), the novelist and literary critic:

> It is difficult to reconstruct the actions and feelings of a character surely afire with true love, for you never know whether he is expressing what he feels or what the rules of amorous discourse prescribe in his case—but then, for that matter, what do we know of the difference between passion felt and passion expressed, who can say which has precedence? (pp. 5-6)

REFERENCES

Bauman, Z. (1996). From pilgrim to tourist—Or a short history of identity. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Question of cultural identity* (pp. 18-36). London: Sage.

Billig, M. (1997). The dialogic unconscious: Psychoanalysis, discursive psychology and the nature of repression. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *36*, 1-21.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline for a theory of practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Cain, M. (1993). Foucault, feminism and feelings: What Foucault can and cannot contribute to feminist epistemology. In C. Ramazanoglu (Ed.), *Up against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism* (pp. 73-96). London: Routledge.

Charmaz, K. (1995). Between positivism and postmodernism: Implications for methods. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, *17*, 43-72.

Cutcliffe, J. R., & Ramcharan, P. (2002). Leveling the playing field? Exploring the merit of ethics-as-process approach for judging qualitative research proposals. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*, 1000-1010.

Douglas, J. D. (1985). *Creative interviewing*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.
Eco, U. (1994). *The island of the day before*. London: Vintage.
Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Foucault, M. (1980). *Discipline and punishment*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1977)
Garfinkle, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1968). *The discovery of grounded theory*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longmans.
Holloway, W. (1989). *Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, meaning and science*. London: Sage.
Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1997). Active interviewing. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (pp. 113-129) London: Sage.
Hutchinson, S., & Wilson, H. (1994). Research and therapeutic interviews: A poststructuralist perspective. In J. M. Moser (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 300-315). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Oakley, A. (1981). *Subject women*. London: Fontana.
Schwalbe, M., & Wolkomir, M. (2001). The masculine self as problem and resource in interview studies of men. *Men and Masculinities*, *4*, 90-103.
Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Shotter, J. (1989). Social accountability and the social construction of "you." In J. Shotter & K. Gergen (Eds.), *Texts of identity* (pp. 133-151). London: Sage.
Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods of analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.
Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Grounded theory in practice*. London: Sage.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scriber, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Wood, J. D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *17*, 89-100.
Woodhill, G. (1994). The social semiotics of disability. In M. H. Rioux & M. Bach (Eds.), *Disability is not measles: New research paradigms in disability* (pp. 201-226). North York, Canada: Roeher Institute.
Zizek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.

Karl Nunkoosing, Ed.D., is a principal lecturer in psychology at the University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom.