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Theorizing the Interview

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Jun., 1996), pp. 295-314

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The London School of Economics and Political Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/591728>

Accessed: 27/12/2012 03:20

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## Theorizing the interview

### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to breathe a little life into one of the most moribund corners of the methodological literature, namely the 'debate' on interview strategy and the supposed opposition between 'structured' and 'unstructured' approaches. From the very beginning, we tend to learn about interviewing as an issue concerning the *pros* and *cons* of each respective strategy. The choice of interviewing style is thus presented as a matter of inclination towards standardization versus sensitivity, enumeration versus emancipation, anonymity versus ardour, and so forth. All such distinctions are essentially *method-driven* and have resulted in extensive technical literatures on how to achieve the chosen ends. Forgotten, therefore, in most of the literature is the very purpose of the interview – namely to advance data in order to inspire/validate/falsify/modify sociological explanation. This paper proposes a *theory-driven* approach to the construction of the interview. It takes on board two contemporary approaches to sociological understanding, namely a *realist* theory of explanation and a *structurationist* theory of social being, and attempts to incorporate their principles into the basic structure of the interview. The paper is illustrated with examples from the author's research with prisoners, and so hopes to inspire a *dons* and *cons* approach to the interview.

### INTRODUCTION

There is a timeless quality to methodological debate in sociology. Readers will recognize the mode instantly, if I give it the label of the '*polarity principle*'. It operates as follows. Whatever the issue, be it a matter of fundamental strategy or the application of practical skill, two camps of basically opposite persuasion will draw up and glare at each other, with the result that the development of the said method will be forever framed in a discourse of dualism. The reason for the methodological bifurcation is, of course, that most of the said polarities seem to be 'nested'. Thus, if we start with a broad epistemological opposition ('positivism' versus 'phenomenology'), this tends to have implications for explanatory scope ('nomothetic' versus 'idiographic'), for data collection strategy ('quantitative' versus 'qualitative'), for population studied ('sample' versus 'case study') and so on.

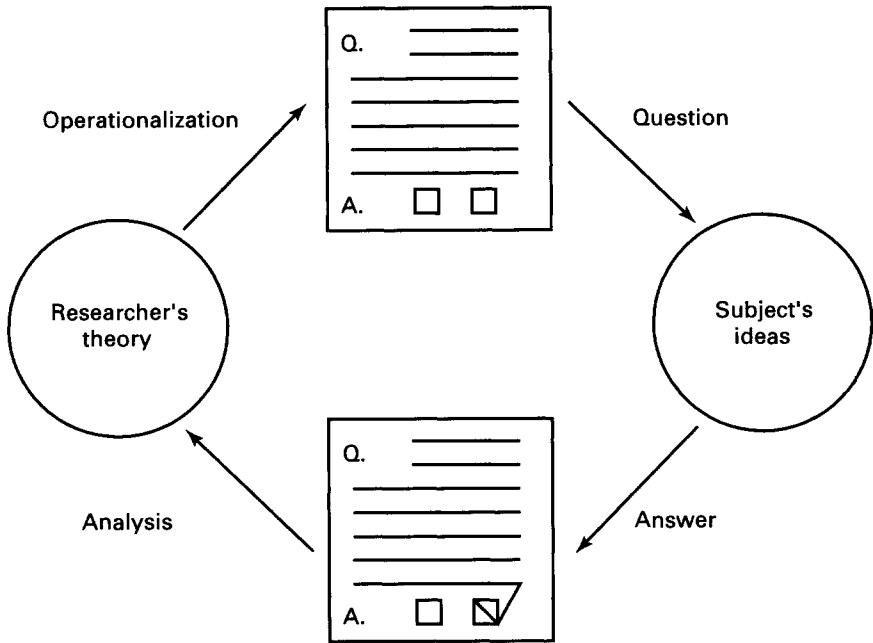
I must not exaggerate. There are other methodological voices, of course. These espouse a strategy which will be equally recognizable when I refer to it as the '*pluralist principle*'. This approach has always struck me as being most memorably characterized by Bell and Newby's (1977) adjective, namely *decent* methodological pluralism. What tends to be argued here is that proper, get-your-hands-dirty researchers have little truck with these supposed polarities, since in actual research practice it is often sensible, indeed advantageous, to operate with a combination of diverse methods. It goes without saying that there are studies which have pooled the survey with the ethnography, the formal and informal interview and so on, and thereby produced a more comprehensive understanding of the institution under study. Oddly enough, the same example is always quoted, I'm sure you know it – Barker's *Moonies* (1984).

My purpose here is not to express a preference for the polarity principle or the pluralist principle. Indeed, this somewhat tetchy introduction should be recognized for what it is, namely the construction of yet another methodological dualism. My task is thus to declare a plague of both the houses of the purists and the pragmatists. My reasoning is that despite the seeming of gulf between them, their opposition in fact leaves methodological debate unchanged. The 'purist' approach to methodological rule-making is the 'rational reconstruction' which attempts to achieve the logical consistency of an entire methodological apparatus with some basic epistemological/ontological axiom. Disagreement on these basic axioms automatically leads to the nested oppositions described above. Yet pluralists, with their a-bit-of-this-and-a-bit-of-that approach, actually develop no new thinking, no methodological refinements beyond the fuzzy mid-way compromise. Their argument tends to go as follows. Quantitative method is good for structural/institutional features, qualitative approaches are best for the meaningful stuff; our investigation needs both, so let us do the decent thing and make the best of both worlds.

Sociological method has been shaken but not stirred by these antagonisms for many a year. Against such a framework, I want to promote a '*parley principle*'. In order to get out of the trenches, in order to promote general methodological development, there needs to be genuine synthesis between the ranks of opposites. The place to start is with the most stultifying bifurcation of all – that between 'theory' and 'method'. Even the metaphors used to describe these domains ('armchair theorists' as opposed to 'field workers', 'grand theorists' versus 'underlabourers') have the ring of intellectual apartheid. One has to go right back to Mills (1959) and Merton (1957) for real attempts at a dialogue. It is interesting to note that even the great synthesiser of modern sociology, Giddens, strikes a state of repose when it comes to discussing the implications of his structuration theory for empirical method.

The concepts of structuration theory, as with any competing theoretical perspective should for many research perspectives be regarded as sensitising devices, nothing more. (1984: 362)

FIGURE I: *Structured interviews*

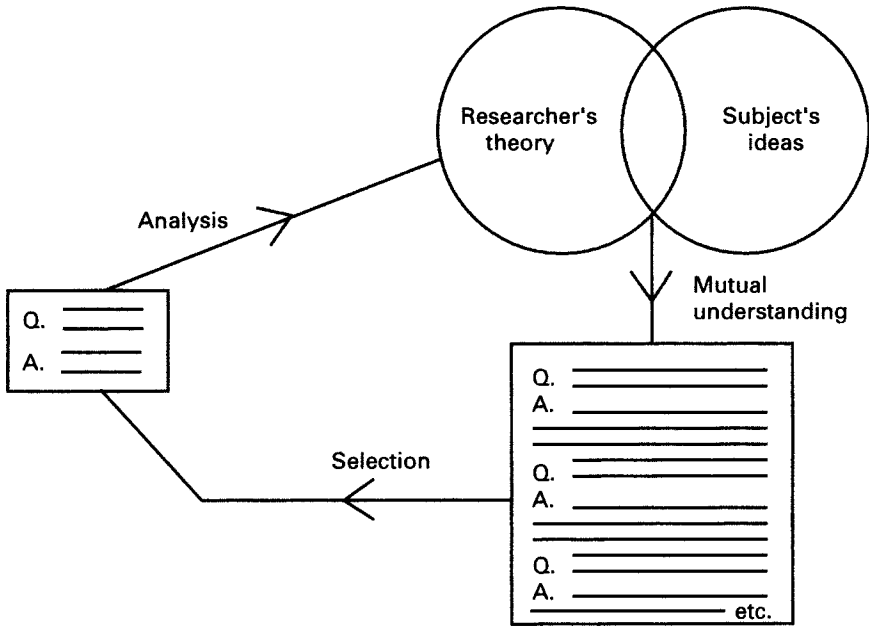


Although the scope of this paper is sounding ever more grandiose, I do not pretend to further the Mertonian or Millsean thesis here. I actually have a very modest ambition, in respect of but one example. Methodological writing on ‘interviewing’ typifies what I have been saying here (technically-driven, two main styles and a mid-way compromise). The paper suggests we begin to parley. What if we give theorists the responsibility to design an interview? What might they come up with?

OLD ANTAGONISMS

In one way or another, in order to get their data, sociologists end up in talking to people. Thus, despite possibly being *the* most inspected piece of social interaction, researchers remain at loggerheads on how to harness the flow of information that emerges from these dialogues. I refer, of course, to the battle lines between ‘structured’ and ‘unstructured’ interviewing and as a preface to attempting to transcend this distinction, I reduce a few decades of argumentation between the two to the following couple of paragraphs.

Figure I represents the flow of information in the more formal, structured approaches. The subject’s ideas and the subject matter of investigation are one and the same thing. The rationale is to provide a simple, neutral stimulus in order to tap the true ‘responses’ or true ‘values’

FIGURE II: *Unstructured interviews*

of individual subjects. The usage of an identical stimulus with all respondents is said to allow for proper comparison to be made across the entire field of potential viewpoints. Critics of such an approach stress that the researcher's conceptual system is *imposed* entirely on the flow of information. The subject's response is limited entirely to a set of operational fragments. Set questions and predetermined response categories offer little opportunity to question, or even understand, the researcher's chosen theoretical framework.

Figure II represents the flow of information in the unstructured (qualitative) interview. The subject's ideas and the subject matter of investigation are one and the same thing. Data collection has the task of creating a conversational setting in which the information provided is faithful to the frame of reference of the respondent. The investigator offers minimal steerage of the research topic within broad areas of discussion as they seem appropriate to each respondent. Critics of such an approach stress that the information collected in such a situation is diverse and discursive and thus hard to compare from respondent to respondent. Researchers are accused of *selecting* from this massive flow of information and thus fitting together small fragments of the respondent's utterances into their own preferred explanatory framework. Whilst the data is supposed to emerge in 'mutual' understanding, the researcher's theory is never clearly on view to the subject.

This particular opposition has proven more dogged and less prone to a

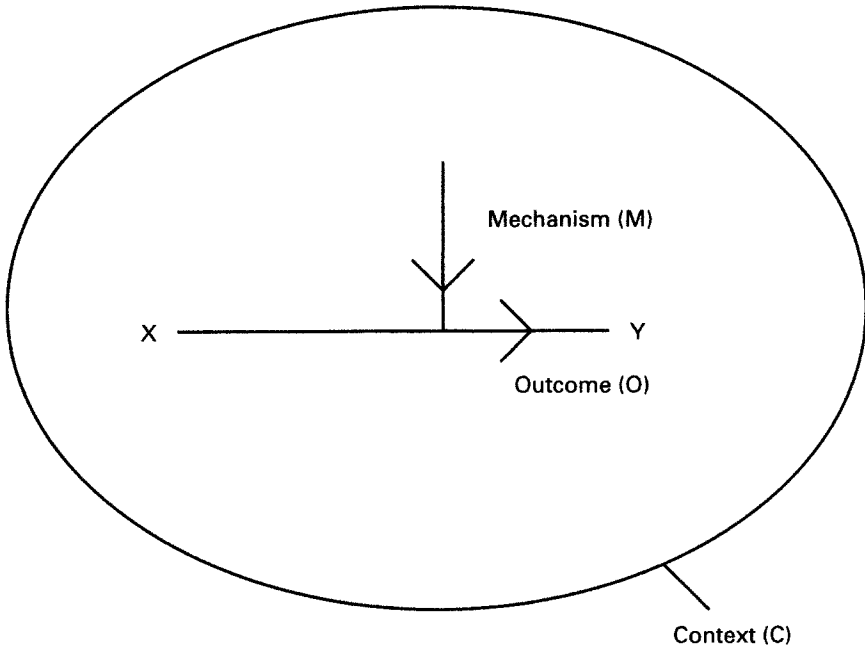
collapse into pluralism than any other domain in the technical repertoire of sociology. The reason for this, of course, is the enhanced celebration of the unstructured model as a feature of the development of certain fashionable research strategies which regard themselves not merely as 'qualitative' but as 'participatory' or 'emancipatory' (Oakley 1981; Barnes 1992). Pluralist thinking on the interview exists of course, but tends to play safe with a horses-for-courses approach – if you want factual information, go for the structured approach – if you want interpretative detail, go unstructured (Malseed 1987). Alongside this, perhaps, is the much used but little celebrated pluralist midway compromise, the semi-structured interview which recognizes that by offering respondents a chance to elaborate on their fixed-choice answers that both hard, comparable and rich, meaningful data can ensue.

In advocating a 'theory-driven' position within this debate, I will in fact seek out a midway position (c.f. Foddy 1993: 73) which combines a 'structured' and 'unstructured' approach. However, I wish to do so in a manner which transcends the fuzzy mid-ground compromise and promises more than the creation of a comprehensive, many-sided data set. The point of trying to synthesise these methods is to go beyond saying *what* they cover, and to show *why* both qualitative and quantitative information are needed in sociological explanation and, above all, to show *how* it is to be melded together.

#### ENTER THEORY

The starting point for this effort is to rethink the 'task' of the interview as well as the 'positioning' of the respondent. Perhaps the crucial difference in what I advocate is a change in thinking about the subject matter of the interview (c.f. Pawson 1989, Ch. 10). Both 'mainstream' models tend to suppose that the subject of the interview is its subject matter. The task is thus to ascertain (according to the favoured method) information which is faithful to the subject's thoughts and deeds. On the theory-driven model *the researcher's theory is the subject matter of the interview, and the subject is there to confirm or falsify and, above all, to refine that theory.*

To many, the (italicized) statement above will seem a curiosity, since theoretical considerations are seldom taken to have such an immediate 'reach' into the world of data and the concerns of the subject. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want to illustrate this inevitable and intimate interrelationship between theory and method with some of my own research on the rehabilitative potential of education in prisons. This is an ongoing project carried out collaboratively with 'corrections' researchers in the UK and Canada (Duguid 1981). It is an evaluation of some long-standing higher education courses carried out within prison walls, and seeks to discover whether attending such courses is associated with reduced reconviction rates. In order to answer such a question, we

FIGURE III: *Basic elements of realist explanation*

suppose it is necessary to learn what it is about 'education' which might change an inmate's reasoning about crime, and to discover what individual circumstances and institutional contexts might prove favourable to such a transformation. Now, as the reader will be able to imagine, we pursue a whole range of particular theories in exploring such questions. For the purposes of this paper, the detail of our meagre efforts in this direction are unimportant, since our hypotheses carry certain broad features which I believe to be common to the explanatory structure of most substantive theory in sociology. It is these general features of explanation which must be attended to if we are to advance methodological thinking on the interview.

In my view, the starting point of any attempt to understand the synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative is to celebrate the potential of the 'realist' approach to social investigation. Realism's head start over other attempts to codify the rules of sociological method is its commitment to 'ontological depth' in explanation, that is to say – the notion that since social events are interwoven between various layers of social reality, then so must be any account of them. There has been a plethora of attempts to portray the fine texture of this interlinkage, so much so that realism risks becoming an incoherent sack-of-potatoes of a method. I cut a very long story short here by asserting that in my book (Pawson 1989) realist explanation can be boiled down to three key features (see Figure III).

These three features can be woven together to form a fundamental explanatory strategy for social research and one that is particularly well suited to getting to grips with the way the social world is put together. Explanatory propositions are made as follows

The basic task of sociological inquiry is to explain interesting, puzzling, socially significant outcome patterns (O) between events or happenings or social properties. Explanation takes the form of positing some underlying mechanism (M) which generates these outcomes and thus consists of propositions about how the interplay between agency and structure has constituted these outcomes. Explanatory closure requires that, within the same investigation, there is also an examination of how the workings of such mechanisms is contingent and conditional, and thus are only fired in particular historical or institutional contexts (C).

As an example of realist theory-making in action, let me demonstrate this schema using the 'campus-in-a-prison' example. The starting point is the assumption that prison education courses do not 'work' towards rehabilitation in some undifferentiated way. Attending such a course involves a myriad of different events and experiences. Explanatory work begins by considering cases in which there is a positive outcome (O) – i.e. the cessation of criminal activity on release. The key theoretical activity is to speculate upon the mechanisms (M) involved in 'education' which might provoke a prisoner into reckoning that a way of life they once considered justified is justified no longer. In higher education our weapons are the rather genteel ones of reasoning, thought and reflection, and in a massively abbreviated way, I can give some examples (in theory) of how these might sediment into an underlying process of change. Education might be a spur to self-realization and self-confidence (M<sub>1</sub>), to economic potential and career-building (M<sub>2</sub>), to increased social skills and public acceptability (M<sub>3</sub>); to moral change and civic responsibility (M<sub>4</sub>), to cognitive change and deepening self-reflection (M<sub>5</sub>).

These mechanisms are paraphrased here not because they are exhaustive and efficacious or even particularly wise and worthy. Indeed, as everyone knows, they can be woefully far-fetched in many prison contexts, where there are a whole range of contravening forces (M<sub>6</sub>) in operation. This brings me to the next great explanatory imperative which is to consider the impact of different institutional and social contexts (C) on the process described above. Any educationist would concede that one needs the appropriate 'students' and 'climate' to sustain objectives. Theory thus has the job of speculating on 'for whom and in what circumstances' such mechanisms might be influential.

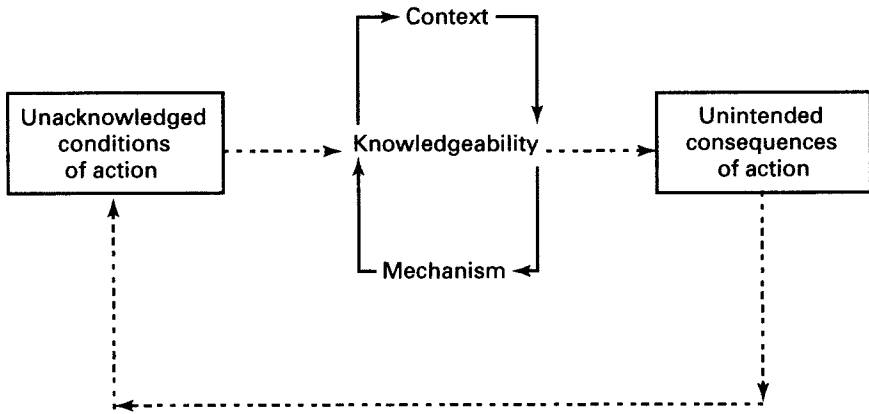
Prison organization itself, of course, is a response to the different characters and circumstances of the inmates. Thus we have young offenders institutes (C<sub>1</sub>), open prisons (C<sub>2</sub>), dispersal prisons (C<sub>3</sub>), training prisons (C<sub>4</sub>) and so forth as well as different security classifications for inmates within each establishment. Such managerial thinking



impinges on the success of a prison education course at two different levels. Each of the potential mechanisms for reform through education above is going to have more (or less) scope according to the profile of the 'typical' inmate. Thus by dint of the age (C<sub>5</sub>), offence (C<sub>6</sub>), custodial record (C<sub>7</sub>) etc. certain establishments will have an 'availability' of suitable types. Regime differences will also bite at the institutional level and since prisons are also about security, surveillance and control, the precise 'ethos' of the establishment (C<sub>8</sub>) will limit the chances of success of any rehabilitation mechanism incorporated within an educational programme.

Of course, there is more to 'rehabilitation' than this. This little realist snapshot is intended primarily to list the kind of 'ingredients' which one would use in a full explanation (and evaluation). It thus acts as a prelude to my main question about how to track such ingredients through into the data. Before we reach that point, let me add one further and entirely typical explanatory assumption which I also take as a prerequisite for understanding the interview. This concerns what Giddens calls the 'knowledgeability' of the actor in processes of social transformation. People are always knowledgeable about the reasons for their conduct but in a way which can never carry total awareness of the entire set of structural conditions which prompt an action, nor the full set of potential consequences of that action (Giddens 1984). For instance, prisoners will enter an education with a clear understanding of why it is a reasonable choice from the (few) opportunities available, without necessarily appreciating that certain of their background features (age, criminal history, previous education, etc.) have made their candidature more likely. Nor will their reasons for trying education (sanctuary from the wings, choosing the lesser of several evils, a good doss, etc.) necessarily correspond to the outcomes that can ensue (developing interests, rehabilitation). In attempting to construct explanations for the patterning of social activity, the researcher is thus trying to develop an understanding which includes hypotheses about their subjects' reasoning *within* a wider model of their causes and consequences. This positioning of the actor within sociological explanation is summarized in figure four which borrows from Giddens (1984: 5).

At the risk of repetition, let me stress that Figures III and IV represent an entirely general picture of sociological explanation. For instance, exactly the same ingredients (ontological depth, the duality of agency and structure, contextually conditioned causal mechanisms, knowledgeable action with unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences) can be found in explanations of everything from social mobility (Goldthorpe et al. 1980) to car park crime (Tilley 1993). The task now is to say – if this is the structure of 'theory' and 'theory' is the subject matter of the interview, what are the implications for the way we construct data?

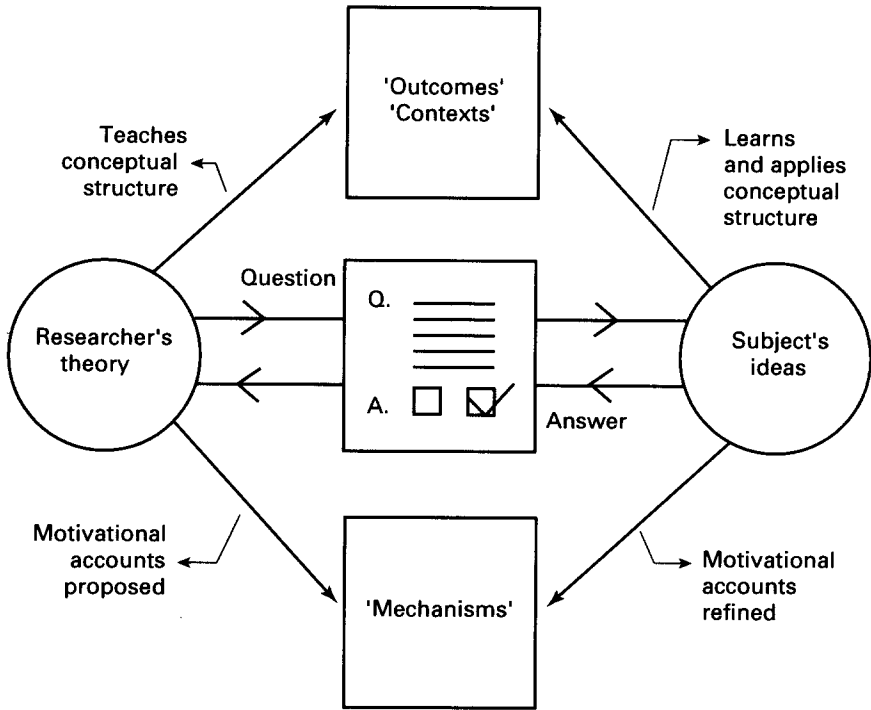
FIGURE IV: *Structuration theory and the (partly) knowledgeable actor*

## THE THEORY-DRIVEN INTERVIEW

Carried to the point of data collection, these explanatory imperatives prefigure a *division of labour* in the practice of interviewing, one based squarely in a *division of expertise* about different aspects of the topic under investigation. Between them the researcher and subject know a great deal about their subject matters, the trick is to get both knowledge domains – ‘scholarship’ and ‘savvy’ – working in the same direction.

How does such a task break down? As a first approximation, we can say (using realist explanatory distinctions) that the understanding of *contexts* and *outcomes* should be led by the researcher’s conceptualizations. In relation to my working example, on matters such as the calculation of ‘reconviction rates’, the categorization of ‘offence’ types, the measurement of ‘educational background’, the phrasing of questions on ‘custodial record’ and so forth, the conceptual distinctions involved should be derived from the researcher’s theory and these meanings should be made clear to the respondent in the getting of information.

Exploring explanatory *mechanisms* is another matter. In the example, these speak of the reasoning, choices, motivations which develop during prison education programmes. Typically, it will be the case that the researcher will have a range of provisional expectations about what these may be. Equally typically, the ‘hypotheses’ will be ‘theoretically over-determined’ in that a whole range of potential mechanisms may be consistent with the outcomes postulated in the inquiry. Even in the ‘mini-theory’ of rehabilitation described above, I managed to speculate upon potential changes in personal, economic, social, moral and cognitive mechanisms within the prison classroom. In short, in the realm of ‘generative mechanisms’, the researcher will often assume that the balance of expertise lies with the informant in describing the detailed way in which reasoning contributes to social change.

FIGURE V: *The theory-driven interview*

Here we reach the crux of my argument. In my suggestion of such a division of labour, the reader may be experiencing a sense of *déjà vu* and a corresponding disappointment. Do not the conventional (purist or pluralist) models of the interview acknowledge the difference between 'factual' and 'attitudinal' questions or between 'institutional' and 'affective' domains, and lay down a rather well-worn technical apparatus for tackling each – namely the 'structured' and 'unstructured' interview? Well, yes indeed they do, but the whole point I am making is that these distinctions actually misunderstand the division of labour between researcher and informant, and thus misspecify the requisite technical apparatus. By leading with theory, we can come to a better understanding of the division of expertise in the interview, which I try to capture in Figure V and which is distinctive in bringing to the fore two erstwhile hidden features of data collection namely: a) the teaching–learning function and b) the conceptual focusing function.

Fear not, dear reader. Although Figure V may look the demented scribbling of a city-centre traffic-flow planner, it does in fact depict an *information flow* which is common to *all interviews*. This flow needs to be understood clearly and then manipulated sensitively if we are to locate subject's knowledge into sociological explanations. The information highway on the model remains a good old-fashioned structured question

and answer sequence running through the centre of the figure. Thankfully, the most common interviewing experience is that if one puts a straight question, most of the time one gets a straight answer. This little miracle happens routinely because researcher and subject share a taken-for-granted set of conceptual building blocks. Social interaction is premised on this realm of the *accepted-as-real* which allows us to know we are talking about the same thing. (Giddens 1984: 331).

This item-by-item, utterance-by-utterance, membership category-by-membership category understanding is, however, only the beginning of the story. Our everyday familiarity with conversational practices will always make interviews happen but not always allow for the apposite data to be constructed. This is where the 'teacher-learner' function comes in. We are interested here in concepts to do with 'outcome' and 'context' elements in the explanatory structure, and the issue is to consider how can we know that the subject is attending to the researcher's understanding of these items. The traditional (structured interview) answer to this problem is to rely on precision in question wording and clarity in operationalization. Whilst the precise turn of a phrase is, of course, important, my basic objection is that operational definitions alone are rarely sufficient to teach the subject the underlying research tack. In reducing the inquiry to variables and values on variables they, in fact, construct meaning in a manner contrary to the way theory will have been devised.

Theory has a complex and deep structure (recall Figure III) and basically the researcher will have come to learn the meaning of any individual concept therein, through its place in these elaborate propositional nets. Method-driven interviews traditionally pay little heed to this important source of conceptual clarity. So whilst researchers will know full well they are asking questions about a prisoners educational background ( $C_1$ ) as part of a proposition about how further education ( $M_1$ ) in providing cognitive change ( $M_2$ ) might produce more potential for rehabilitation ( $O_1$ ) in inmates who have been deprived of early opportunities ( $C_2$ ), the inmate can remain blithely unaware of these purposes and meanings. Usually it is the case that this collateral information is smuggled in, rather implicitly across the pages of the questionnaire. What I am suggesting here is that the researcher/interviewer play a much more active and explicit role in teaching the overall conceptual structure of the investigation to the subject, for this in turn will make more sense of each individual question to the respondent. In practice this means paying more attention to 'explanatory passages', to 'sectional' and 'linking' narratives, to 'flow paths' and 'answer sequences', to 'repeated' and 'checking' questions and so on. It also means being prepared to take infinite pains to describe the nature of the information sought and thus a sensitivity to the struggles the respondent may have in using what are ultimately the researchers' categories. This function is depicted in Figure V (on the north-western ring-road).

As every interviewer will know, respondents also travel these outer perimeters. So, as well as providing straight answers to straight questions,

subjects ponder (mostly in silence) – ‘who is this person?’, ‘what is she after?’, ‘why am I being asked?’, ‘what have others said?’, ‘what should I be saying?’, and so on. The theory-driven model I am presenting here has a unique tack on such ‘hypothesis-seeking’ behaviour. The aim is not *minimize* it (as in the structured approach), nor to *wallow* in it (as in the unstructured approach), but to *channel* it. That is to say, the battery of questions posed and explanatory cues offered should be understood as putting the subject in a position which allows them to think (still in silence, incidentally) – ‘yes, I understand the general theoretical tack you are exploring, this makes your concepts clear to me, and applying them to me gives the following answer’. This particular information flow is depicted in the ‘north east’ of Figure V. Elaborate as it may seem this in fact describes the thought process which underlies the typical question and answer sequences found in most detailed formal questionnaires and interviews. Elsewhere (Pawson 1989, Ch. 10) I have provided some working examples of how to facilitate the teacher–learner function.

However, a further step is needed in respect of those aspects of explanation to which interviewees have a privileged access, namely their own reasoning processes. This is where the ‘conceptual focusing’ function comes in. Such a process is intended to describe the collection of data on explanatory mechanisms (M), the coverage of which is conspicuously absent in Pawson (1989). Thus the ‘southern’ ring-road in Figure V depicts an extension of interviewing process which allows subjects to have their own say (decidedly out loud) about how their thinking has driven them to particular actions. The key point, however, is that they deliver these thoughts on their thoughts in the context of and, (perhaps) as a correction to, the researcher’s own theory. To explain – the overall structure of the researcher’s questions will, in general, contextualize the area in which the subject’s make decision and highlight some potential decision making activity which goes on therein. The subject’s task is to agree, disagree and to categorize themselves in relation to the attitudinal patterns as constructed in such questions *but also* to refine their conceptual basis. It is at this point that mutual knowledge is really achieved. The subject is saying in effect ‘this is how you have depicted the potential structure of my thinking, but in my experience it happened like this . . .’

In short, I am postulating a formula for ‘attitude’ questions (more properly, items in the cognitive and affective domains generally) in which the respondent is offered a formal description of the parameters of their thinking *followed by* and opportunity to explain and clarify this thinking. To repeat, sociological explanations offer hypotheses about their subjects reasoning *within* a wider model of their causes and consequences and the attraction of the particular model is that it reflects a division of labour which is best able to put these pieces together.

An ‘example’ is overdue at this point (and shall be delivered!). First, I should point out that what I describe as the ‘formula’ in the previous paragraph does *not* imply the existence of some singular and unique

technique which captures the idea. The 'I'll show-you-my-theory-if-you'll-show-me-yours' strategy has echoes in a number of existing methods. Two that come instantly to mind are *vignettes* (in which the stimulus stories are constructed to smuggle in the key theoretical parameters under investigation, upon which the respondent is asked to reflect) and *pilot interviews* (which say – answer these questions and please also tell me what you think of 'em).

#### DONS AND CONS

My detailed illustration comes (appropriately enough) from some pilot interviewing I did on a small scale UK version of the campus-in-a-prison project at HMP Full Sutton. Towards the end of the studies of the first cohort of men through the course, I made an attempt to draw an overall picture of the men's accounts about how (if at all) the course had changed their attitudes, reasoning, outlook, etc. There are, of course, no standard questionnaires or attitude scales ready-made for such a specific purpose, so I had to invent one. What I ended up doing was modifying a 'discussion document' produced by the then Northern Regional Education Officer which took as its task to list and elaborate upon the potential 'aims and objectives' of the prison education service. The adaptation took the form of rewriting each statement of aspiration contained in the document, so that they became a sort of attitude rating questionnaire to which the men could agree/disagree and so forth.

As a research instrument, this could certainly be improved upon. It omits some entire categories of potential change and I'm pleased to report that we are working on a much more comprehensive attack on the problem in the Canadian version of the study. However, the example does have the basic methodological features alluded to here. It was written by an 'insider' with an eye on encouraging penal educators to look beyond getting their students through 'GCSE', 'City and Guilds' or whatever. It relates the classroom experience to broader concerns about prison and after. It contains (and this is the important bit) the accumulated wisdom (or as I would prefer to say – 'theories') of practitioners on personal change associated with educational programmes in prisons. A little sub-plot here is that given its origins, which I made known to my subjects, there was a 'whiff' of the Home Office about the construction of the items. This, I recall, added a little spice when I came to get the men to complete and comment upon the questionnaire.

The actual form of questionnaire was as follows. The students were presented with the list of statements representing possible goals of a prison education course and they were asked to respond according to each item in respect of how the statement applies to their experience of the Full Sutton course. They were required to place answers in one of four categories as follows

This applies to me. . . . .

- to a considerable extent 1
- to a moderate extent 2
- to a slight extent 3
- not at all 4

There follows a list of the statements and for each I record the mean response score using the scale as above.

*The course:*

	<i>Mean response</i>
a) helps inmates to accept themselves and their feelings more fully	3.4
b) helps inmates to become more self-confident and self-directing	2.4
c) helps inmates to become more acceptable persons to society	3.1
d) helps inmates to accept more realistic goals for themselves	2.5
e) helps to change the moral outlook of the inmates	3.1
f) helps inmates to become more flexible in their opinions	2
g) helps inmates to behave in a mature fashion	2.8
h) helps inmates to change their maladjustive behaviours	2.8
i) helps inmates to become more acceptant of others and of other points of view	2.2
j) helps inmates to reject their criminal past	4
k) helps inmates to assume responsibility for their own lives	3.4
l) helps inmates improve their power of concentration and persistence	1.8
m) helps inmates to discern previously undiscovered talents	2
n) helps inmates to correct their personality characteristics in constructive ways	2.8
o) helps inmates to experience success	2.2

- p) helps to provide a basis on which inmates can build new life 2.6
- q) helps inmates to achieve control over their actions and choices 2.6

Rather a lot can be learned by the simple device of *ordering* the responses from those features which the men found consistent with their own experience down to those which they considered inapplicable. As ever in data analysis, it is the patterns of response we are seeking to uncover and this can be aided by the device of superimposing some breaks and boundaries within this rank order. In the following I distinguish those objectives which collectively met with i) considerable to modest agreement, ii) moderate to slight agreement and iii) slight to no agreement. I also insert a mid point axis (score 2.5) which can help us see the general balance of sentiments.

- 1-2

*considerable to moderate agreement*  
 'improve powers of concentration and persistence'  
 'become more flexible in opinions'  
 'discern previously undiscovered talents'
- 2-3

*moderate to slight agreement*  
 'experience success'  
 'acceptant of others and other points of view'  
 'self-confident and self-directing'  
 'accept more realistic goals' ..... (2.5)  
 'behave in a more mature fashion'  
 'correct personality characteristics in constructive ways'  
 'change their maladjustive behaviours'
- 3-4

*slight to no agreement*  
 'more acceptable persons to society'  
 'change moral outlook'  
 'accept themselves and their feeling more fully'  
 'assume responsibility for their own lives'  
 'reject their criminal past'

It is possible to make some rough and ready sense of the above configuration by seeking to uncover the 'themes' which underlie the difference between those aspirations with which the men concur and those of which they are sceptical. It can be seen readily enough that the items with which the men concur concern the improvement in 'mental powers', 'learning skills', 'flexibility of viewpoints' and so on. In short, the



connecting thread here is a recognition of personal change along a dimension that perhaps speaks for itself – namely *academic related change*. The roots of scepticism about the transformative capacity of education seem more diverse. There would seem to be (at least) two distinctive features which underlie doubt. The first is when the items refer to *public acceptability*. The thinking here, presumably is that all prisoners know they are no longer free agents, expect a tough reception on release and do not expect things will be dramatically different, with or without a diploma. The second dimension which the inmates declare untouched by their presence in the academy can be thought of as items pertaining to *personal character*, especially those statements getting at their inner self and most specifically, of course, the only item on which there was unanimity, namely item (j) and its insinuation that education allows them to reject their criminal past.

What we have to this point is an unremarkable, not to say undistinguished, piece of attitudinal scaling which produces, incidentally, some rather unwelcome results – there being only the faintest whiff of ‘rehabilitation’ in all this data. Orthodox methodological thinking divides habitually at this point. The quantitative instinct would be to get more formal – the pilot items could be beefed up, a proper factor analysis could be attempted, and a rather larger sample could be constructed (have I mentioned that the above data is culled from seven inmates?) The qualitative instinct would be to ditch the lot as arbitrary number-crunching and to go for personal involvement as the high road to understanding personal change.

It is possible to escape these weary old methodological straight-jackets by considering more closely the men’s reasoning in response to being presented with this battery of propositions. I can still recall vividly the Full Sutton students’ outward reaction to this exercise two years on. They moaned, they groaned; a couple of them were on the point of refusing to complete the task at all (until I threatened them with more lectures on mobility tables). The roots of this discomfort were exactly the same as most people feel when they are asked to complete such exercises, but in this case MAGNIFIED several times. That is to say, attitudinal statements are normally regarded as irritating simplifications and only with some generosity can one reduce the richness of life’s experiences down to the pre-set categories. In this particular instance, some of the simplifications were regarded as more than mere irritations but were seen as positively insulting (in certain respects which I will come to in a moment).

The methodological point that shines through this, however, is that the questions perform a much more significant function than as the specific *stimuli* to respective *responses*. Neither are they an *invitation* for respondents to muse on whatever aspects of their experience are central to them. Taken as a piece, these formal questions set a clear agenda which represents a body of theory, offering up the researcher’s potential explanations for a closely circumscribed set of actions. Their key role,

therefore, should be to involve the respondent in a closer articulation and clarification of these theories. This can be done (and was done in this instance) by the simple device of getting the respondents to explain *why* they have plumped for the particular responses to the particular items. This is a common place enough tactic in semi-structured interviewing, but one that is never understood in the way that I am presenting it here, namely – as a superb vehicle for the here’s-my-theory-what’s-yours strategy of data collection. What is induced by this process is a great deal of conceptual hair-splitting and this is precisely the kind of data which leads to better focused explanation.

Let us look more closely at a couple of examples of this process at work. Question (j) about inmates rejecting their criminal pasts because of contact with education got short shrift, yet the subsequent account of *why* the statement is disregarded, prompts the inmates into a much more subtle level of reflection on their own reasoning. The following extracts give the accounts of four men on why they registered ‘not at all’ in answer to this question. As always, transcripts fail to give the underlying ‘mood’ of the answer which might be summarized helpfully here as ‘furious’, ‘imperious’, ‘cool’, ‘cooler’, respectively.

- But to *reject* your criminal past, I’m not rejecting it. I’m not rejecting what I’ve done, but you don’t reject it do you, you . . . you take and you . . . you step on from there and you try and learn from it. You don’t go, well you don’t know. Its a part of . . . its a part of you.
- I know why overall I’ve scored so low its because its I . . . I . . . I do have thin thing umm . . . about personal responsibility, you know I . . . I acknowledge that I’m in prison through my own fault, and umm . . . if I’m going to stop coming into prison it will be down to my own motivation.
- I mean its (the question) assuming that its (the course) is gonna change somebody’s whole outlook on life and behaviour and everything I don’t relate to it, don’t relate it at all. I mean I can see that the more educated you are the more you can get away I suppose. But I don’t connect with it at all.
- In my case, when I commit a crime I know I’m doing wrong and I know if I’m going to get caught, I’ll go to prison. So its not as though I’m *rejecting* it.

A similar theme emerges in relation to the question of whether education can help inmates to accept ‘themselves and their feelings more fully’.

- I feel that I excepted myself and my feelings before I came onto the course, before I knew of the existence of the course.
- I fully accepted my feelings a long time before I came here.
- I agree that this course and education still could really help those people who don’t really understand yourself (themselves). Firstly I

understand myself and I don't really see that (the course) leading me in to that direction. Really (this) is one thing I have to discover myself.

What even these few clarifications reveal is a tension in most of these prisoner's beliefs about education. It is recognized as 'improving' and yet they want to take credit for the improvement. They 'learn' but not as empty buckets filled with knowledge against their better judgment. It is recognized that education can lead to self-understanding but only because prison conditions are already conducive to intense self-reflection, since they provide many hours, days and years of opportunity for the same.

This tension was perhaps best expressed by 'No7' who was most hostile to this particular phase of the research because he felt the questions were 'patronizing' and that they were full of 'civil service rhetoric'. He set out to swat down their 'preconceived ideas' with a series of 'not at alls' in his written responses. Under follow-up questioning, he relents a little and finds that he was 'making a nonsense of some of his own scoring.' Basically he back tracks because

- I will go down the road of agreeing, because, err . . . I feel that education is a civilizing process . . . it could well prove a contributing factor in the adjustment to acceptable behaviour. Change is something that comes within but you would be taking on board education. . . . it's a catalyst . . . more than a catalyst, as I've said before its a civilizing process

Here is another man choosing his words carefully and, being an educated sort, he does indeed know his 'catalysts' from his 'contributing factors'. Actually, the most telling phrase he uses here is probably 'taking on board education' and this is an image which comes through most strongly in all of the men's discussion. *If we take as the starting point that many prisoners routinely engage in self-scrutiny and choice-making then what a rigorous period of education can perhaps provide, is a means of extending, deepening and affirming such processes.* Or to put this back into prison parlance.

- It's not the course that's changed you as such, it's you've developed an interest inside you, you know.
- By and large you've got your own . . . you've got your own way of working . . . and you can work in a number of directions . . . you're sort of given advice on which way to go and that, but at the end of the day its your choice.

The sprinkling of metaphors in the above on 'interests inside you', 'taking on board of education', 'stepping on from there', contains important messages about the importance and nature of cognitive change as a potential mechanism for rehabilitation. The upshots of such reasoning will be explored in the research to come. Here I should return

to the general methodological significance of this tale. I readily admit that the example came unfortunately *before* the rationale I am in the process of relating. To me it came as a (minor methodological) Eureka – after months of going round the houses, trading anecdotes about early educational experiences, the nature of crime, their likelihood of re-offence or rehabilitation, the influence of family, peers, teachers, Uncle Tom Cobbley and all – this simple formal schedule did the trick. All at once they talked about *their* world in *my* language.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper ought to have brought on a strong sense of recognition to researchers who will know that the processes described here are already part and parcel of the negotiation of meaning which goes on in any substantial interview. The paper will have worked if these same researchers believe that the conceptual framework elaborated here provides a better methodological foundation than hitherto for understanding, controlling and developing these negotiations. In particular I have tried to rethink the boundary line between the researcher's and subject's knowledge.

In advocating this approach as one with general utility in data construction, I should make it clear that I am not simply putting the 'trick' or the 'technique' up for inspection. All this is not simply a matter of piling up a set of attitudinal statements and getting them explained. What I am actually counselling is the *information flow* as depicted in the model in Figure V. Its key aspect is the creation of a situation in which the theoretical postulates/conceptual structures under investigation are open for inspection in a way that allows the respondent to make an informed and critical account of them. Much more could be said about when, why and for whom one would adopt the approach. Here I only need stress that it involves a highly specific and carefully planned route march which goes between the qualitative and quantitative traditions.

(Date accepted: April 1995)

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