

# **Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing**

*Steinar Kvale, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks California, 1996*

The purpose of this book is to offer practical guidelines on how to do research interviews and to suggest conceptual frames of reference for thinking about them.

## **Part 1: Introduction**

### **I Interviewing as Research**

With qualitative research interviews you try to understand something from the subjects point of view and to uncover the meaning of their experiences. Interviews allow people to convey to others a situation from their own perspective and in their own words. Research interviews are based on the conversations of everyday life. They are conversations with structure and purpose that are defined and controlled by the researcher. Although the research interview may not lead to objective information, it captures many of the subjects views on something. That's why the basic subject matter is not, as in qualitative research, object data, but consists of meaningful relations to be interpreted.

## **Part 2: Conceptualizing the Research Interview**

### **II The Interview as Conversation**

There is no common procedure for research interviews but an interview investigation can be outlined in seven method stages: thematizing, designing the study so it addresses the research questions, the interview itself, transcribing, analysing, verification and reporting. The research interview is characterized by a methodological awareness of question forms, a focus on the dynamics of interaction between interviewer and interviewee, and also a critical attention to what is said. The purpose of the qualitative research interview treated in the book is to obtain descriptions with respect to interpretations of the meaning of what is described. The interviewer does not use ready-made categories but is open to new and unexpected phenomena. Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions. During an interview an interviewee might gain new insights and change his or her descriptions and meanings. Different interviewers can also produce different statements on the same themes.

### **III Postmodern Thought, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Dialectics**

Kvale explores the different possible philosophical approaches to how qualitative interviews can generate knowledge. He emphasizes that the knowledge that springs from interviews is related to a post modern construction of knowledge. He further explains the implications of the phenomenological approach that is prevalent in qualitative research. The focus is on phenomenology, postmodernism and also dialectics, from the works of Heidegger and Husserl over to Merlau-Ponty, Sartre and Lyotard. These philosophies can be used to highlight different aspects of the qualitative research interview and to provide a framework for the different methodological choices that have to be made.

### **IV Qualitative Research in Science and in Practice**

Kvale rejects the positivists approach that labels qualitative research as unscientific because it doesn't try to eliminate all influence by the person of the researcher. He states that qualitative research does not have to look objectively, since objectivity in itself is a rather subjective notion. And interviews can be free of bias and provide objectivity and mechanically measured reliability by amount of agreement among independent observers. Qualitative research interviews can also be objective in the meaning of 'letting the investigated object speak', in expressing the real nature of the object. Kvale concludes that the interview as such is neither an objective nor a subjective method since its essence is intersubjective interaction. Quantitative and qualitative methods interact in the practice of social research

and a linguistically constituted social world legitimates the use of qualitative interviews as a useful tool.

### **Part 3: The seven stages of an interview investigation**

#### **V Thematizing and Designing an Interview Investigation**

Because of the lack of standard techniques or rules for qualitative research interviews Kvale stresses the importance of advance preparation and interviewer competence. There are however standard choices of methods to be made at the different stages of an interview investigation.

These are presented through the **seven stages of an interview investigation** (Kvale, p. 88):

1. Thematizing: Formulate the purpose of the investigation and describe the concept of the topic to be investigated before the interviews start.
2. Designing: Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages, before the interview starts.
3. Interviewing: Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought
4. Transcribing: Prepare the interview material for analysis, which commonly includes a transcription from oral speech to written text.
5. Analyzing: Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation, and on the nature of the interview material, which methods of analysis are appropriate.
6. Verifying: Ascertain the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. Reliability refers to how consistent the results are, and validity means whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated.
7. Reporting: Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspects of the investigation into consideration, and that results in an readable product.

Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you want to know. Think carefully about using group interviews: the group interaction often leads to spontaneous reactions but reduces the interviewer's control of the situation.

#### **VI Ethical Issues in Interview Inquiries**

Ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and consequences for the interviewee should be taken into account with any qualitative interview. Research subjects should be informed about the purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design. Think carefully about who should give the consent, for example: the artist or the museum that organises the exhibition? Subjects also need to agree to the release of the identifiable information and the risk of harming someone should be the least possible.

#### **VII The Interview Situation**

The research interview situation should be a conversation between 2 partners about a theme of mutual interest. The interviewee must feel confident to talk freely. The interviewer must however keep steering and defining the situation. That's why preparation is important. Think beforehand about the what, why and how of the interview: acquire a basic knowledge of the subject matter, formulate a clear purpose for the interview and decide on which interview technique you are going to use. Start with briefing the interviewee and end with a debriefing in which he or she can pose further questions. During the interview you can follow an interview guide that indicates the topics and their sequence in the interview, with or without detailed questions. The more spontaneous the structure of the interview, the more

spontaneous the and lively the answers will be. The input from a more structured interview will be easier to process. If you want to categorize the answers it is best to continually clarify these categories during the interview. If you want to obtain a narrative it is better to let your subjects talk freely and ask them follow-up questions. Always keep the flow of the conversation going, keep your questions brief and simple and listen actively.

### **Types of interview questions with examples (Kvale p. 133-135)**

- a. Introducing questions: “Can you tell me about...?”, “Do you remember an occasion when...?” “What happened in the episode mentioned?”,...
- b. Follow-up questions: Direct questioning of what has just been said, nodding, “mm”, repeating significant words, ....
- c. Probing questions: “Could you say something more about that?”, “Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?”, “Do you have further examples of this?”,...
- d. Specifying questions: “What did you think then?” “What did you actually do when you felt a mounting anxiety?”, “How did your body react?”,...
- e. Direct questions: “Have you ever received money for good grades? When you mention completion, do you then think of a sportsmanlike or a destructive competition?”
- f. Indirect questions: Projective questions such as ‘How do you believe other pupils regard the competition of grades?’
- g. Structuring questions: indicating when a theme is exhausted by breaking off long irrelevant answers: “I would now like to introduce another topic:...”
- h. Silence: By allowing pauses the interviewees have ample time to associate and reflect and break the silence themselves. With significant information.
- i. Interpreting questions: “You then mean that....?” “Is it correct that you feel that...?” “Does the expression.... Cover what you have just expressed?”

## **VIII The Quality of the Interview**

### **Quality Criteria for an Interview (Kvale p. 145)**

- a. The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.
- b. The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the interviewer’s answers, the better.
- c. The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.
- d. The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.
- e. The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview.
- f. The interview is ‘self-communicating’ – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations.

## **IX From Speech to Text**

When you tape the interview you can listen again to the tone, the pauses,... and you can concentrate on the interview. Videorecording will also record the visual aspects of the interview, but is time consuming and cumbersome to analyse. Inclusion of the visual setting does not ensure objective representation. When you choose to only make notes after the interview is over, from memory, it ideally filters the essentials but may be very subjective. But don’t forget that transcripts from recordings also differ from person to person and are subject to interpretation as well. Transcriber reliability should be considered and detailed typing instructions are recommended. State explicitly in the report how the transcriptions were made, based on the written instructions to the transcribers. The style of the transcription,

whether you use editing, rephrasing, write everything down literally,... will depend on the purpose of the material.

### **X The 1000-Page Question**

It is very important to precisely determine the goal of your investigation. Keeping this goal in mind throughout the whole process ensures that you will get results you can actually use, and don't end up with too much data or data you can't cope with.

### **XI Methods of Analysis**

**Six steps of analysis** (Kvale p. 189-190)

- 1) Subjects describe their lived world during the interview
- 2) Subjects themselves discover new relationships during the interview, see new meanings in what they see and do.
- 3) The interviewer, during the interview, condenses and interprets the meaning of what the interviewee describes and 'sends' the meaning back, ideally until there is only one possible interpretation left or the multiple understandings of a theme by the subject are known.
- 4) The transcribed interview is interpreted by the interviewer, either alone or with other researchers. The material is first structured. Then follows clarification by for example eliminating digressions and repetitions and distinguishes between the essential and the non-essential. The analysis proper involves developing the meanings of the interviews, bringing the subjects' own understanding into the light as well as providing new perspectives from the researcher on the phenomena.
- 5) A re-interview. The subjects get the opportunity to comment on the interviewer's interpretations as well as elaborate on their own original statements.
- 6) A possible sixth step would be to include action. Subjects begin to act from new insights they have gained during the interview.

### **XII The Plurality of Interpretations**

The five main methodological approaches to analysis of meaning are condensation, categorization, narrative structuring, interpretation and an ad hoc approach. Narrative structuring creates coherent stories. Meaning condensation abridges the meanings expressed by the interviewees into briefer statements. Categorization means that the interview is coded into categories and thus can reduce a large text into a few tables and figures. Meaning interpretation stands for a more or less speculative interpretation of the deep meaning of the text. An ad hoc approach uses a variety of methods to result in words, figures, flow charts,... and is the most frequent form of interview analysis. To control the analysis you can use multiple interpreters or put your cards on the table by explicating the procedures in the report.

### **XIII The Social Construction of Validity**

In social sciences results should be generalizable, reliable and verifiable in all stages. Issues of verification should be addressed throughout the entire research process. 'Validity' is not only a strict scientific principle but can be seen as quality of craftsmanship of the researcher. Communicative validity is obtained by validating a knowledge claim in the dialogue of the interview. Pragmatic validity is when the results of the research lead to the desired effect or action.

### **XIV Improving Interview Reports**

The aim of the final research report is to inform other researchers and the general public of the importance and trustworthiness of your findings. It should contain new knowledge and it should be possible to check the contents. Kvale suggests to investigate with the final report already in mind and to write the report with the readers in mind. A standard structure of

scientific reports is: introduction, method, results and discussion. A selection of interview quotes is commonly used to give an impression of the interaction that took place. Results can also be presented in a journalistic form or as a dialogue.

#### **XV Conversations about Interviews: Ten Standard Objections to Interview Research**

Kvale concludes with the ten most heard objections against qualitative research and suggests answers and arguments to answer to those.