

## INTERVIEW QUALITY

We now turn to quality criteria for good interviewing practice: What is a good interview? Here we focus mainly on the semistructured life world interview described in Chapter 7, with the caveat that the varieties of interviewing discussed in Chapter 8 may involve different quality criteria. We begin with an interview by Hamlet to illustrate how the judgment of the quality of an interview depends on its purpose and content. Thereafter internal criteria for a good and ideal interview are suggested as well as standards for the craftsmanship of interviewing. Epistemological issues pertaining to the quality of interview-produced knowledge are treated in relation to some standard external objections to interview quality and exemplified by the question of leading questions. We conclude the chapter by pointing out how methodological and ethical criteria of good interviewing in some cases may be at odds with each other.

### HAMLET'S INTERVIEW

A dramatic case may exemplify how the appraisal of an interview technique depends on the content and the purpose of the interview.

*Hamlet:* Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

*Polonius:* By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

*Hamlet:* Methinks it is like a weasel.

*Polonius:* It is back'd like a weasel.

*Hamlet:* Or like a whale?

*Polonius:* Very like a whale.

*Hamlet:* (Aside) They fool me to the top of my bent.

(*Hamlet*, act III, scene 2)

Our first comment on the quality of this interview concerns its length. Hamlet's interview is brief. The seven lines are, however, dense and rich enough to instigate more lengthy comments. In contrast, current research interviews are often too long and filled with idle chatter. If one knows what to ask for, why one is asking, and how to ask, one can conduct short interviews that are rich in meaning.

The quality of Hamlet's interview technique depends on how the purpose of the interview is understood. This short passage gives rise to several interpretations. At first glance the interview is an example of an unreliable technique—by using three leading questions Hamlet leads Polonius to give three entirely different answers. Thus the interview does not yield any reproducible, reliable knowledge about the shape of the cloud in question.

At second glance, the topic of the interview might change: The figure in question is no longer the cloud, but the personality of Polonius and his trustworthiness. The interview then provides reliable, thrice-checked knowledge about Polonius as an unreliable person—his three different answers are all led by Hamlet's questions. With the change in the purpose and topic of the interview, the leading questions do not produce entirely unreliable knowledge but involve an indirect, reliable interview technique.

The contents of Hamlet's interview then approximate a threefold ideal of being interpreted, validated, and reported by the end of the interview. By repeating the question in different versions and each time getting the "same" indirect answer about Polonius's trustworthiness, the interview is "self-interpreted" before Hamlet closes off with his aside interpretation: "They fool me to the top of my bent." As to the second requirement—validation—few interview researchers today repeat so consistently as Hamlet a question in different versions to test the reliability of their subject's answers. Regarding the third requirement—reporting—the short interview has been carried out so well that it speaks for itself. We would think that, when watching the play, the audience

would generally experience a Gestalt switch from the shape of the cloud to the trustworthiness of Polonius as the interview topic, even before Hamlet gives his aside conclusion.

So far, we have discussed Hamlet's interview in isolation from its context, its position in the broader drama. At a third glance, the interview appears as a display of the power relations at a royal court. The prince demonstrates his power to make a courtier say anything he wants. Or, the courtier demonstrates his mode of managing the power relations at the court. In an earlier scene in the play, Polonius himself gave a lesson in what in current textbooks of method is called an indirect, funnel-shaped interview technique. Polonius requests a messenger to go to Paris to inquire into the behavior of his son studying music in the city. The messenger is instructed to start with a broad approach, "Enquire me first what Danskers are in Paris," and then gradually to advance the subject, ending up with suggesting such vices as drinking, quarreling, and visiting brothels, where "Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth," concluding the lesson, "By indirections find directions out" (*Hamlet*, act II, scene 1). With Polonius that well versed in indirect questioning techniques, is he actually caught by Hamlet's questioning technique? Or does he see through the scheme and play up to Hamlet as a courtier?

A central theme of the play, which was written at the transition from the medieval to the modern age, is a questioning of reality—not just a suspicion of the motives of others but also a preoccupation with the frail nature of reality. Hamlet's interview may in that case be seen as an illustration of a pervasive doubt about the appearance of the world, including the shape of a cloud and the personalities of fellow players.

From an ethical perspective, the evaluation of Hamlet's interview also depends on the interpretation of its purpose and content. In the first reading, the leading questions merely lead to unreliable knowledge of the shape of the cloud. In the second reading, the interview entails the deliberate deception of Polonius; there is no question of informed consent, and the consequences may be a matter of life and death for the protagonists of the drama. Here an ethics of principles is overruled by a utilitarian interest in survival.

The quality and the ethicality of Hamlet's interview depend on the interpretation of the content and the purpose of this specific interview. With the different topics and objectives of interviews, and the variety of forms in mind, we shall nevertheless suggest some criteria for evaluating the quality of a research interview and the craftsmanship of the interviewer.



## INTERVIEW QUALITY

The quality of the original interviews is decisive for the quality of the subsequent analysis, verification, and reporting of the interview findings, as can be seen in the emphasis by Kinsey and his colleagues on the need for developing the quality of the interaction in the interview (see **Box 6.7**). Sophisticated statistical or theoretical analysis based on interviews of dubious quality may turn out to be magnificent edifices built on sand.

### Box 9.1 Quality Criteria for an Interview

- The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee
- The shortest interviewer's questions and longest subjects' answers possible
- The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers
- To a large extent, the interview being interpreted throughout the interview
- The interviewer attempting to verify his or her interpretations of the subject's answers over the course of the interview
- The interview being "self-reported," a self-reliant story that hardly requires additional explanations

Of the six quality criteria for a semistructured interview proposed in **Box 9.1**, the last three, in particular, refer to an ideal interview—suggesting that the meaning of what is said is interpreted, verified, and reported by the time the sound recorder is turned off. This demands craftsmanship and expertise and presupposes that the interviewer knows what he or she is interviewing about, as well as why and how. Although such quality criteria might seem to be unattainable ideals, they can serve as guidelines for good interview practice. The examples given in this book of the interviews by Socrates and Hamlet do fulfill many such ideal criteria; they provide a coherent unity in themselves and present rich texts for further interpretations. Again, it should be borne in mind that different ways of doing interviews can involve different quality criteria. From the discursive viewpoint outlined in Chapters 8 and 13, the quantity of contradictions present in an interview text, for example, could be taken as a criterion that the text is potentially interesting to analyze.

## THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT

Some interview subjects may appear to be better than others. Good interviewees are cooperative and well-motivated; they are eloquent and knowledgeable. They are truthful and consistent; they give concise and precise answers to the interviewer's questions; they provide coherent accounts and do not continually contradict themselves; they stick to the interview topic and do not repeatedly wander off. Good subjects can give long and lively descriptions of their life situation; they tell capturing stories well suited for reporting. The subject of the interview on grades in Chapter 7 was a good interview subject according to most of these criteria.

As pleasant as such interview subjects may appear to the interviewer, it is by no means given that they provide the most valuable knowledge about the research topics in question. The idealized interviewee appears rather similar to an upper-middle-class intellectual, whose views are not necessarily representative of the general population. Well-polished eloquence and coherence may in some instances gloss over more contradictory relations to the research themes.

The ideal interview subject does not exist—different persons are suitable for different types of interviews, such as for providing accurate witness observations, giving sensitive accounts of personal experiences and emotional states, or telling captivating stories. The two young men interviewed by Bourdieu (**Box 1.3**) were obviously not well-behaved, accommodating interviewees. Still, the interview provided a strong picture of their living situation. Interviewees can be good subjects with respect to different purposes, as exemplified by Agathon providing logical contradictions for Socrates to clarify (**Box 2.4**) and the therapeutic client living out, and learning from, the emotional nature of the therapeutic relationship (**Box 2.5**). Recognizing that some people may be harder to interview than others, it remains the task of the interviewer to motivate and facilitate subjects' accounts and to obtain interviews rich in knowledge from virtually every subject.

## INTERVIEWER QUALIFICATIONS

The interviewer is the key research instrument of an interview inquiry. As an able craftsman, he or she knows how to apply interview techniques and exercise a situated judgment of the differing forms of questioning in a given



interview situation. A good interviewer knows the topic of the interview, masters conversational skills, and is proficient in language, with an ear for his or her subjects' linguistic style. The interviewer should have a sense for good stories and be able to assist the subjects in the unfolding of their narratives. The interviewer must continually make on-the-spot-decisions about what to ask and how, which aspects of a subject's answer to follow up on—and which not to; which answers to comment on and interpret—and which not to.

### Box 9.2 The Interviewer Craftsman

The interviewer craftsman is

*Knowledgeable.* He or she has an extensive knowledge of the interview theme and can conduct an informed conversation about the topic. This interviewer knows what issues are important to pursue, without attempting to shine with his or her extensive knowledge.

*Structuring.* The interviewer introduces a purpose for the interview, outlines the procedure in passing, and rounds off the interview by, for example, briefly telling what was learned in the course of the conversation and asking whether the interviewee has any questions concerning the situation.

*Clear.* He or she poses clear, simple, easy, and short questions; speaks distinctly and understandably; and does not use academic language or professional jargon. The exception is in a stress interview; then the questions can be complex and ambiguous, with subjects' answers revealing their reactions to stress.

*Gentle.* The interviewer allows subjects to finish what they are saying and lets them proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking. He or she is easygoing, tolerates pauses, and indicates that it is acceptable to put forward unconventional and provocative opinions and to treat emotional issues.

*Sensitive.* He or she listens actively to the content of what is said, hears the many nuances of meaning in an answer, and seeks to get the nuances of meaning described more fully. The interviewer is empathetic, listens to the emotional message in what is said, not only hearing what is said but also how it is said, and notices as well what is not said. The interviewer feels when a topic is too emotional to pursue in the interview.

*Open.* The interviewer hears which aspects of the interview topic are important for the interviewee, listens with an evenly hovering attention, and is open to new aspects that can be introduced by the interviewee and follows up on them.

*Steering.* The interviewer knows what he or she wants to find out and is familiar with the purpose of the interview, what it is important to acquire knowledge about. The interviewer controls the course of the interview and is not afraid of interrupting digressions from the interviewee.

*Critical.* He or she does not take everything that is said at face value but questions critically to test the reliability and validity of what the interviewees tell. This critical checking can pertain to the observational evidence of the interviewees' statements as well as to their logical consistency.

*Remembering.* The interviewer retains what a subject has said during the interview, can recall earlier statements and ask to have them elaborated on, and can relate what has been said during different parts of the interview to each other.

*Interpreting.* He or she manages throughout the interview to clarify and extend the meanings of the interviewee's statements, providing interpretations of what is said, which may then be disconfirmed or confirmed by the interviewee.

Interviewer qualifications, such as those outlined in **Box 9.2**, which were formulated in relation to a phenomenological life world interview, may lead to good interviews in the sense of producing rich knowledge and ethically creating a beneficial situation for subjects. In contrast, in more confronting interviews, as discussed in Chapter 8, the interviewer actively confronts the interviewee (e.g., by challenging him or her to provide justification for attitudes or beliefs), and the interview quality depends on the interviewer's skills in this regard. It may be more demanding for an interviewer to engage in such actively confronting interviews, especially if they involve dialectical questioning with the goal of producing knowledge in the sense of *episteme*. Such interviewing will often presuppose considerable knowledge of the subject matter under consideration. With extensive practice in different interview forms and with different subjects, an experienced interviewer might go beyond technical recommendations and



criteria and—sometimes—deliberately disregard or break the rules. Also, interviews conducted by less experienced interviewers, which do not fulfill common interview guidelines, may in some cases provide worthwhile information. The qualifications summed up here may differ for various types of interviews, and in interviews in which the topic really matters, the technical rules and criteria may lose relevance when compared with the existential importance of the interview topic.

### STANDARD OBJECTIONS TO THE QUALITY OF INTERVIEW RESEARCH

The issue of interview quality goes beyond the craftsmanship of the individual interviewer and raises epistemological and ethical issues of pursuing interview knowledge. We now first turn from internal quality criteria of interview research to some common external criticisms of the quality of interview-produced knowledge.

#### Box 9.3 Standard Criticisms of Qualitative Research Interviews

The qualitative research interview is *not*

1. scientific, but only reflects common sense.
2. quantitative, but only qualitative.
3. objective, but subjective.
4. scientific hypothesis testing, but only explorative.
5. a scientific method, because it is too person dependent.
6. trustworthy, but biased.
7. reliable, because it rests on leading questions.
8. intersubjective, because different readers find different meanings.
9. valid, as it relies on subjective impressions.
10. generalizable, because there are too few subjects.



Interview reports have tended to evoke rather standardized objections about their quality from the mainstream of modern social science. In **Box 9.3**, 10 typical criticisms of interview research are listed; the first five refer to general conceptions of scientific research, the next three to the interviewing and analysis stages, and the last two to validation and generalization. Some of the objections refer to intrinsic problems of interview research, whereas others arise from an inadequate understanding of the use of conversation as a research method. Shortly we give some rhetorical suggestions for responding to such standard objections, summarizing points made earlier and anticipating arguments in the coming chapters. This overview may save novice interview researchers some of the time and energy often used for external defense, to the benefit of more intensive internal work with interview quality. If an objection is considered valid to the specific interview investigation, it can be taken into account when designing the study and thereby improve the quality of the research. If an objection is regarded as invalid, the arguments for this can be offered in the report. In the concluding Chapter 17, we also discuss some objections to interviewing that come from insiders to the field of qualitative inquiry.

1. *The qualitative research interview is not scientific, but only reflects common sense.* No single authoritative definition of science exists, according to which the interview can be unequivocally categorized as scientific or unscientific. A working definition of science may be the methodical production of new, systematic knowledge. The question of scientific or not then depends on the understanding of the key terms in this definition, such as *methodical*, *new*, *systematic*, and *knowledge*, in relation to the specific interview investigation.

2. *Interviews are not quantitative, only qualitative, and thus not scientific.* In paradigmatic social science discussions, science has often been equated with quantification. In the research practice of the natural and the social sciences, however, qualitative analyses also have a major position (see Chapter 17). In mainstream social science textbooks on method, however, the qualitative aspects of the research process have until recently hardly existed.

3. *The qualitative research interview is not objective, but subjective.* The basic terms of this objection are ambiguous. The objectivity of interview research needs to be discussed specifically for each of the multiple meanings of objectivity, as relevant to the interview inquiry in question (see Chapter 15).

4. *Qualitative interviews do not test hypotheses; they are only explorative and thus not scientific.* In a broad conception of science as hypothesis testing, as well as descriptive and exploratory, designs are important, with description and exploration as strong points of qualitative research. And, contrary to the objection, an interview may also take the form of a process of continual hypothesis testing, where the interviewer tests hypotheses, for instance, with the interplay of direct questions, counterquestions, leading questions, and probing questions (see Chapter 7).

5. *The interview is not a scientific method; it is too person dependent.* A research interview is flexible, context sensitive, and dependent on the personal interrelationship of the interviewer and interviewee. Rather than attempt to eliminate the influence of the personal interaction of interviewer and interviewee, we might regard the person of the interviewer as the primary research instrument for obtaining knowledge, which puts strong demands on the quality of the interviewer's craftsmanship (see Chapter 5).

6. *Interview results are not trustworthy; they are biased.* The answer needs to be concrete—the specific counterquestion concerns who cannot be trusted and in what sense. Unacknowledged bias may entirely invalidate the results of an interview inquiry. A recognized bias or subjective perspective may, however, come to highlight specific aspects of the phenomena investigated and bring new dimensions forward, contributing to a multiperspectival construction of knowledge.

7. *Might not the interview results be due to leading questions and thus unreliable?* The leading effects of leading questions are well documented. The qualitative interview is, however, well suited to systematically apply leading questions to check the reliability of interviewees' answers, which was exemplified in Hamlet's interview earlier (more on this shortly).

8. *The interpretation of interviews is not intersubjective, but subjective, as different readers find different meanings.* We may here distinguish between an unacknowledged biased subjectivity, to be avoided, and a perspectival subjectivity. With a clarification of the perspectives adopted toward an interview text, several interpretations of the same text need not be a weakness but can be a strong point of interview research (see Chapter 12).

9. *Interviewing is not a valid method, as it depends on subjective impressions.* Interviewing is a personal craft, the quality of which depends on the craftsmanship of the researcher. Here validation becomes a matter of the

researcher's ability to continually check, question, and theoretically interpret the findings (see Chapter 15).

**10. Interview findings are not generalizable; there are too few subjects.**

The number of subjects necessary depends on the purpose of the study. In postmodern conceptions of social sciences the goal of global generalization is replaced by a transferability of knowledge from one situation to another, taking into account the contextuality and heterogeneity of social knowledge (see also the discussion of when and how to generalize from single case studies in Chapter 15).

In a reinterpretation, the standard objections can be reversed and read as pointing to the strong points of qualitative interview research. The force of the interview is its privileged access to subjects' everyday world. The deliberate use of the subjective perspective need not be a negative bias; rather, the personal perspectives of interviewees and interviewer can provide a distinctive and receptive understanding of the everyday life world. A controlled use of leading questions may lead to well-controlled knowledge. A plurality of interpretations enriches the meanings of the everyday world, and the researcher as a person is the most sensitive instrument available to investigate human meanings. The explorative potentialities of the interview can open to qualitative descriptions of new phenomena. Validating and generalizing from interview findings open up alternative modes of evaluating the quality and objectivity of qualitative research.

## LEADING QUESTIONS

The question most likely to be asked about interview quality concerns leading questions, sometimes raised in the form of a question such as "Cannot the interview results be due to leading questions?" The very form of the question involves a liar's paradox—an answer of "Yes, this is a serious danger" may be due to the suggestive formulation of the question leading to this answer. And a "No, this is not the case" may demonstrate that leading questions are not that powerful.

It is well-documented that even a slight rewording of a question in a questionnaire or in the interrogation of eyewitnesses may influence the answer. When the results of public opinion polls are published, the proponents of a political party receiving low support are usually quick to find biases in the wording of the poll's questions. Politicians are experienced in warding off



leading questions from reporters, but if leading questions are inadvertently posed to subjects who are easily suggestible, such as small children, the validity of their answers may be jeopardized.

Although the wording of a question can inadvertently shape the content of an answer, it is often overlooked that deliberately leading questions are necessary parts of many questioning procedures, as exemplified by Hamlet's interview. The validity of leading questions depends on the topic and purpose of the investigation. Legal interrogators may on purpose pose leading questions in order to obtain information they suspect is being withheld. The burden of denial is then put on the subject, as with the question, "When did you stop beating your wife?" Police officers and lawyers also intentionally apply leading questions to test the consistency and reliability of a person's statements. Piaget used questions leading in wrong directions in order to test the strength of the child's concept of, for example, weight. We may also recall Bourdieu's use of leading questions in his active confrontational interview with the two young men, such as "What were you doing, bugging him?" (Box 1.3). In Socrates's dialogue on love, he repeatedly employed leading questions with the intention of exposing the contradictions of Agathon's understanding of love and beauty and of leading Agathon to true insight.

In contrast to common opinion, the qualitative research interview is particularly well suited for employing leading questions to repeatedly check the reliability of interviewees' answers, as well as to verify the interviewer's interpretations. Thus leading questions need not reduce the reliability of interviews but may enhance it; rather than being used too much, deliberately leading questions are today probably applied too little in qualitative research interviews.

It should be noted that not only may the questions preceding an answer be leading but the interviewer's own bodily and verbal responses, such as second questions following an answer, can act as positive or negative reinforcers for the answer given and thereby influence the subject's answers to further questions. We may also note that in questionnaires, the response alternatives may lead subjects to accept the researcher's dichotomies when closing off the responses to answer either yes or no to a question, without an option to argue that a question may be based on a false dichotomy. Leading questions may close off the range of potential answers; exemplified by the question "Which hand do you choose?" excluding answers where the subject does not want to choose either hand. Or, as an American president proclaimed not long ago, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," which leaves those bewildered who were

neither with the terrorists nor with the president. An advantage of the qualitative research interview is that the interviewee has an open range of response possibilities, including a rejection of the premises of the interviewer's questions.

While the technical issue of using leading questions in an interview has been rather overemphasized, the leading effects of project-based research questions have received less attention. Recall the different kinds of answers obtained by a Rogerian, a Freudian, and a Skinnerian approach in the imaginary interview on teasing and in the interview about grades (Chapters 6 and 7). A project's orienting research questions determine what kind of answers may be obtained. The task is, again, not to avoid leading research questions but, in line with a hermeneutical emphasis on the role of preconceptions, to recognize the primacy of the question and attempt to make the orienting questions explicit, thereby providing the reader of an interview report with an opportunity to evaluate their influence on the research findings and to assess the validity of the findings.

The fact that the issue of leading questions has received so much attention may be due to prevailing empiricist and positivist conceptions of knowledge. There may be a belief in a neutral observational access to a social reality of objective facts independent of the investigator, implying that an interviewer collects verbal responses as a miner finds buried metals or a botanist collects plants in nature. In an alternative view of the interviewer as traveler, which follows from a postmodern perspective on knowledge construction, the interview is a conversation in which the knowledge is constructed in and through an interpersonal relationship, coauthored and coproduced by interviewer and interviewee. The decisive issue is not whether to lead or not to lead but where the interview questions lead and whether they lead to new, trustworthy, and worthwhile knowledge. We close this chapter by addressing the issue of quality as such in **Box 9.4**.

#### **Box 9.4    Quality: For and Against**

No interview researcher can possibly be against quality in the research product, i.e., the published article or the successful dissertation. But it is still relevant to raise a question about the search for quality in the interviews as such: Can a determined focus on obtaining "good interviews"

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paradoxically be detrimental to knowledge production? And can we learn anything from “bad interviews”?

Without denying that much may be gained from following the advice in this and similar interview books, we believe that both of these questions should be answered in the affirmative. Because an interview is a human encounter, an interpersonal relationship, it is important to be able to be present in the situation rather than constantly thinking about its quality. We may compare this with falling asleep: If one is manically trying to fall asleep, then it may prove to be very difficult, but once one simply loses control, it can be much easier. The good interviewer perhaps achieves interviews of high quality by *not* focusing on quality as such but on the situation he or she is in and the person sitting in front of him or her.

Likewise, as Roulston (2011) has argued, there is much to learn from seemingly “failed” interviews, i.e., from interviews where things “go wrong” according to the textbooks on interviewing. In Box 8.4, for example, we saw an interview with “discourses crossing swords,” and even if this interview hardly qualifies as “best practice” for interviewers, the researcher was able to gain new knowledge from it by conducting an analysis of what happened in the interview. A reassuring conclusion is that even interviews that appear unsuccessful and of low quality can be valuable. This, however, should not discourage learners from aspiring to acquire the skills of expert qualitative interviewers.



There are no unequivocal quality criteria for research interviews. A good interview rests on the craftsmanship of the researcher, which goes beyond a mastery of questioning techniques to encompass knowledge of the research topic, sensitivity to the social relation of interviewer and interviewee, and an awareness of epistemological and ethical aspects of research interviewing. There are no fixed criteria for what constitutes a good interview, not when it comes to the scientific or the ethical quality. The evaluation of interview quality depends on the specific form, topic, and purpose of the interview.