

Qualitative Research Interviewing

Conceptual Frameworks for Studying and Inferring from (Research) Interview Interaction Practice

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[p. 16 ↓]

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INTERVIEWS AS PROBLEMATIC

Interview Interaction as Located Practice

Introductory texts on depth interviewing can tend towards a ‘social unrealism’ in which the real histories and the real social identities of those involved are in some ways ignored. Social research, however, invariably considers people to be characterized – either by themselves or others, or by the social researcher, or both – by such ‘statuses’ (sociological word) or ‘characteristics’ (neutral word) as class, gender, race, marital status, age, family position, occupational status, citizen status, tax/welfare status, religious status, neighbourhood status, educational status, prospective ‘serious relationship status’, sexual preference and any number of others.

What happens when I think about the ‘interview cycle interaction’ of people about whom I only know some of the ‘statuses’ or ‘aspects’ of who they are, but not their proper names: ‘social typifications’ (of persons, of contexts, of interactions) as discussed originally by Schutz (1970: 111–23)?

Vignette A: Lorna and John

Supposing that you are a black single mother on social security (Lorna) who, without any basic qualifications, has come to college as a mature student. You do some 'no questions asked' work on the side and you have an occasional boy-friend who is not at college, who is married to someone else and with whom your relationship is quite difficult. Among your fellow-students is a younger white part-time student (John) who is a professional social worker and has got good qualifications. He is hoping to do the course and be promoted. John is unattached, and student gossip has it that he is on the look out for a girl-friend. You have both been asked to practise research interviewing as part of your course. John says he is 'interested in the problems of social welfare clients' and asks you to agree to be researched – confidentially of course – as part of the course (NOT, he stresses, as part of his job) on 'the life-experiences of single mothers with special reference to the courts and the welfare services'. What do you do? If you refuse, what will this do to your further relations as fellow-students?

[p. 17 ↓]

What do you think about, when wondering whether to agree to John's request? What do you think about in terms of planning your responses to anticipated 'difficult questions'? When your 'planned responses' (strategy) don't completely work, what do you think and feel? What do you do? How do you and John feel about each other the day after the interview as fellow students in a class room?

The above 'mental experiment' can also be thought about from the point of view of John. Take his role.

What misapprehensions do you, as John, think 'Lorna' might have about you and the interview, and how could you deal with them? Are there any fears and apprehensions she might have about you and your

suggestion, which you might have to admit are legitimate and maybe well-grounded, and what does this mean for your thinking about the issue? What uses of any interview material might you need (reluctantly) to rule out, given the sensitivity of the situation? Is it fair to ask a fellow-student for such an interview? What areas will you go for and what will you avoid? What will it do to your relationship after the interview, if the interview does not go well? How will other students regard you? What would you do 'next time'?

Supposing you are the 'ethics vetting committee' for such an interview proposal. What would your thinking be about the issue? What conditions or alterations (if any) would you make in respect of the proposed research interview?

The above vignette is designed to help you think about the present and future contexts of the real relationships of real people who may or may not agree to play their respective roles.¹ In the next section, I deal with an aspect of the important 'hidden dimension' of the two people concerned: namely their individual and collective respective interview pasts.

1 If you found this helpful as a 'device to think with', you might consider constructing such vignettes for your own interviews. You don't have to use questions alone to get reflective responses. Vignettes are reviewed briefly in Barker and Renold, 1999.

Past Interview Experiences for both Parties

The Impact of 'Past Interview Experiences' Real and Imagined in Two-person Interviews

I like to think that I am not liable to do any harm, as interviewer. Kvale (1996) argues eloquently – as do many qualitative research evangelists – for the democratic 'interview' in which two 'people' wish for existential closeness and mutual knowledge and come to view each other more closely. It is true that, as you become more proficient in depth interviewing, you are likely to have good experiences of real 'personal encounters'. But in order for anything remotely like that to happen, you need to focus on the 'down side' of interviewing.

Dillon (1990) has usefully identified a large number of types of social interviews and interpersonal communicative encounters in our type of society. I might suggest educational, medical, police, judicial, immigration, occupational, promotional, devotional, journalistic, 'celebrity self-promotional', welfare, job start, charity, disciplinary, university entrance, PhD 'oral', etc.

Though being interviewed for research purposes is rare, most adults have a lot of experience of being interviewed or of imagining being interviewed for other [p. 18 ↓] purposes. Usually, there have been strong inequalities of power and vulnerability between the interviewer and the person who has either 'requested and obtained' an interview or has 'been requested and required to come for interview'. Most of us have had some (some of us have had many) involuntary interviews with head teachers, with suspicious police, with people who 'call you in for an interview'. There are individual but also collective 'histories' that circulate between people and through the media about the resource-holding/withdrawing power of the 'official' of the State or some other organization interviewing a would-be immigrant, a would-be worker, a would-be social rights claimant, somebody applying for a 'post', for 'social support', for 'promotion', for

an 'award', trying to get 'clearance' from doctors, from parents, from friends. I am likely to have had, or at least to have envisaged if only in a nightmare or a novel, punitive and disciplinary encounters with authorities such as bullies, parents, head-teachers, police, social welfare officers, higher-ups in powerful organizations.

To paint the 'worst case scenario', all of us have 'secret personal histories' of being interviewed by 'superiors' (societal and institutional), at our request or at their requirement, who have something to reward and something to punish us with. It might be safest to assume that we have all been in vulnerable, one-down, positions, wishing we didn't have to be there, thinking it was a great mistake to have come, struggling to make the best case we can, pleading a 'less than watertight' case, hoping the other has no information with which to ask us difficult questions or puncture our self-presentation, as we try to hide, underplay, or explain away 'facts' which are not helpful to the 'interpretation' we want others to accept.

These are routinized stressful and fraught experiences in a bureaucratized and hierarchical society. So what happens to both you and your interviewee as you 'psych yourselves up' and 'get ready' for interviewing?

As a *would-be interviewer*, your experience of being interviewed may lead you to behave and 'come across' in your interviewing improvisations like a policeman, or a parent, a teacher or academic, or any 'authority' by whom you have been interviewed and from whom you learnt a way of handling stress and ambiguity. Similarly past experiences of formal or informal 'interviewing' (as a parent, in a profession, as somebody allowing somebody to join something, as a jealous lover) will also be there helping to shape and colour what you do.

You are likely to respond by 'playing particular interview scenes' or the whole cycle in terms of your unconscious repertoire. In the same interview, both informant and interviewer may be constantly switching roles through a medley of historic 'interview identities' without ever realizing what they are doing.

There is an up-side, too. There are *positive* experiences of real, vicarious and hallucinated, formal and informal 'interview' experience, and these also form part of most people's secret unwritten history and potential 'interview identities'. Emancipatory

and self-expressive encounters with relatives, friends, lovers, clergy, counsellors, therapists, and other supportive people are also experiences which occur with less routinized regularity. They provide a basis for more positive evocations in ourselves and others, and the possibility of more positive responses to the conscious or unconscious evocations of others. People who have had a lot of positive experiences of 'deep friendly talk' will be better placed to participate in depth interviews than those who have none.

I am only likely to provide 'relatively safe research interview experiences' for myself and my informants if I am fully aware both of the current social positioning [p. 19 ↓] of myself and my interviewee – as described in the 'Lorna and John' vignette – and ready to detect the impact of any collective and individual past experiences and 'potential interview identities' which I and they ineluctably bring to our interviews.

In looking at the interview extract in Figure 2.1, we know rather little of the past experiences and current identities of the interacting participants and how they bear upon the interaction. The interviewer is an attractive young woman in her late 20s; the man is somewhat older. For the interviewer, this is her first semi-structured interview (on her research topic about the effects on men of having their father disappear at an early age from their life).

Interpreting Interview Data: Interview with 'W'

The Transcript Segment

The extract given in Figure 2.1 is derived from a first interview by an undergraduate student. The three-column format and the numbering of speaker turns and units of meaning will be discussed later in Chapter 10.

‘Reading’ the Transcript in Four Different Ways

In the light of our earlier discussion, I will now explore its relevance in four different ways: (i) about the informant's relation to his father; (ii) about the interview as an interactive process; (iii) about the ‘discourse’ of the informant; and (iv) about the subjective world and the strategy of the informant.

1. What Inferences does the Transcript Allow You to Hypothesize about the Informant's Relation with his Father? The formal focus of the inquiry was into ‘the effects on the adult of paternal deprivation when the child was young’. This very precise focus needs to be constantly borne in mind when thinking about the interview process.

In terms of events in a life story, after 69 lines of interview, the *only hard datum about events* obtained so far is that *W* was six years old when his father left (line 31).

In terms of the *quality of his early relationship* with his father, *W* says that he ‘was afraid of him’, ‘didn't really know him’ and was ‘kind of glad when he left’ (lines 35–7). It is certainly hard data that *W* said this in the particular interview: can I infer that *this account now* is an adequate description of *his feelings then*? As a basis for inference to long-past periods of feeling, it may be seen as much less reliable information. Perhaps *W* was very disappointed when his father left but decided, later, to ‘be glad’ in order to avoid feeling loss and anger? He starts by warning the interviewer that ‘I don't remember much about him from those days’, and this may indicate that he does not think that his memory of the past relationship should be given too much weight.

He gives information about his theory of the three-way relationship with his father and mother by indicating that he thinks he (the informant) was ‘probably really jealous and possessive of my mother, she was always the one I felt emotionally close to, very very much so’ and ‘one senses that he was in the way of that’ (lines 38–42). The strength of this statement – ‘always ... very very much so’ – makes this appear more convincing to the reader and gives credence to the earlier proposition (by explaining it) about his ‘fear’ of his father and being ‘kind of glad when he went’.

There are ‘gradients’ of the information from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’: Different approaches to interviewing have different theories of the relative ‘hardness/softness’ [p. 20 ↓] [p. 21 ↓] [p. 22 ↓]

FIGURE 2.1 Interview with W

Ref. no	Space for one type of notes	Transcript	Space for other type of notes
001		<i>Isabel: OK. Now I've switched on the tape I can start talking. Thanks for the tea and biscuits, they are wonderful</i>	
002		<i>W: You're welcome.</i>	
003		<i>Thank you for giving up this time for me.</i>	
004		<i>W: Well, I don't see it as giving up the time, more as contributing ...</i>	
005		<i>I: Well, for giving me the time, contributing the time, thank you very much</i>	
006		<i>W: If it furthers someone's psychological understanding even a tiny little snippet, it can be of value to me and maybe someone else</i>	
007		<i>I: Lovely, thank you</i>	
008		<i>Anyway, as I said, I'm doing research into paternal deprivation and different people's experience of it</i>	
009		<i>Anyone who has had an absent father is an expert in this field, mostly without being aware of it.</i>	
010		<i>Of course, like all the others, you are totally anonymous.</i>	
011		<i>when I write up the report</i>	
012		<i>everything you say that I write down or record, with your permission, is totally anonymous.</i>	
013		<i>W: So you won't tell anyone</i>	
014		<i>that I'm Prince Charles?</i>	
015		<i>I: No.</i>	
016		<i>OK, so you're anonymous, so you can say what you like.</i>	
017		<i>It is necessary to say that just to make sure that you know</i>	
018		<i>First of all, briefly, a general question:</i>	
019		<i>I would like to ask you</i>	
020		<i>what you think about the role of the father today.</i>	
021		<i>W: 'The role of the father today' is very wide</i>	
022		<i>I guess, it's difficult.</i>	

continued

Ref. no	Space for one type of notes	<i>Transcript</i>	Space for other type of notes
023		It's tough	
024		In terms of roles	
025		being the breadwinner, responsibility, financial, classical role	
026		Myself as a father	
027		er ...	
028		I'm not sure.	
029		<i>I: Perhaps you could tell me a little</i>	
030		<i>about your own father</i>	
031		<i>W: Well, I was six when he left.</i>	
032		I don't remember much about him from those days,	
033		I know him now as a man,	
034		but my relationship with him when I was younger seems to be	
035		that I was afraid of him,	
036		didn't really know him,	
037		yes I was kind of glad when he went.	
038		I think I was probably	
039		really jealous and possessive of my mother.	
040		She was always the one I felt emotionally close to	
041		very very much so.	
042		And one senses that he was in the way of that.	
043		<i>I: Well, you've anticipated my next question,</i>	
044		<i>which was going to be:</i>	
045		<i>'are you aware of having any particular feelings about him?'</i>	
046		<i>W: Well, I've just told you ...</i>	
047		do you want any more?	
048		<i>I: No.</i>	

continued

Ref. no	Space for one type of notes	Transcript	Space for other type of notes
049		<i>that's OK.</i>	
050		<i>Can you describe to me</i>	
051		<i>if it is possible</i>	
052		<i>a typical day in your home</i>	
053		<i>when you were a boy of less than fourteen?</i>	
054		<i>W: I can remember hot summers.</i>	
055		<i>One particular summer</i>	
056		<i>there was a swarm of flies</i>	
057		<i>that were enormous.</i>	
058		<i>I can remember</i>	
059		<i>treading on them</i>	

of different 'interview facts'. Different assumptions, as we saw with Old Wu, change the apparent 'hardness/softness' of the transcript evidence.

2. What does the Transcript Tell You (the Reader) about the Interview

as an Interactive Process? It is possible to segment the interaction into an 'introduction' (lines 1–17), a first question which is not answered (18–28), a second question which is given an answer (29–42), a slightly confusing passage (43–9) in which a question is first offered and then withdrawn, and finally the asking of another question to which we have the beginnings of an answer (50–9) which is not completed by the end of the extract.

There are two moments in which the interaction appears to be 'uneasy'. The first is that of the introduction (lines 1–17); the second is that of the awkward passage of lines 43–9. What is the quality of that unease (the two moments may of course produce different 'sorts' of unease for different reasons)?

This is difficult to answer, since I do not have any material (such as field-notes) to help us determine the 'feeling' of the interaction. Nonetheless, I can generate some provisional hypotheses, some ideas as to what might be going on.

Let us start with the introduction (lines 1–17): the uneasy movement which is ended by the 'general question, I would like to ask you about the role of the father today'.

Some rather different alternative hypotheses suggest themselves, none of which can be 'decided' by the transcript that we have.

These exchanges could be read as merely normal courtesy on both sides with a mutually enjoyed joke (lines 13–15).

[p. 23 ↓]

Alternatively, they could be read as an attempt by W to assure the interviewer that he doesn't see the interview as 'giving up the time, more as contributing' coming up against the interviewer's slight disinterest (line 5) in the distinction which the informant W felt it important to himself to make. W then insists upon it by insisting on his interest in 'the furthering of someone's psychological understanding even a tiny little snippet' which she then counters by a not very responsive 'lovely, thank you' which again puts W in the position of needing to be thanked. She then concludes with a deliberately unspecific appreciation 'lovely' which again keeps him somewhat away from the position of being recognized as a co-contributor to psychological understanding for which he seems to have been angling quite determinedly.

W at line 6 might possibly be being a little ironical by implying that 'someone' may have their 'psychological understanding' furthered 'even a tiny little snippet'? Certainly, his joke about Prince Charles (13–14) suggests a slight lack of reverence for the dignified assurance given by the interviewer of his 'total anonymity' (perhaps experienced by W as laboured pomposity). The lack of any obvious sharing of the joke by her (15–16) and her rather over-serious 'it is necessary to say that just to make sure that you know' (17) suggests a slight 'edge' by line 13 even if there was none by line 6.

It is not clear what we or the informant are to make of the posing of the first question 'a general question ... about the role of the father today' (18–20) except to note that it doesn't seem to work as a question that gets a flow of answering response. By line 28, after some floundering, W has given up with 'I'm not sure'.

The shift to the more personal question (lines 29–30) gets much more of a response, a flow of a definite account or analysis by W who goes firmly to an account of the 'early dynamics' between himself and his father and mother in a way that is both very

expressive and also not very open to further questioning. Whether this is a definitive overcoming of the early unease by plunging into a complete 'self-account' or whether that 'self-account' (he was asked to say 'a little about your own father') is a way of handling that unease by giving a 'quick final analysis or self-theory not to be questioned' is difficult to say. His 'one senses that he was in the way of that' (42) suggests a sudden distancing from the previous 'I-talk' (31–41) which suggests another moment of unease.

For whatever reason, perhaps her own unease, the interviewer does not probe at all into any of the rich potential offered (lines 33–42). She could have asked about the unexplained 'being afraid' (35) or the qualified 'kind of glad' (37); she could have asked for the 'not much' that he implied that he *did* remember (32); she could have asked of any examples or instances of *how* his father was 'in the way' of the boy's closeness to his mother.

Her practice at this point seems marked by a lack of flexibility (difficult to avoid in a novice interviewer) in handling the 'planned sequence of questions' written down on her piece of paper. Instead of taking up any of the material, and asking a question that goes deeper, she remarks 'Well, you've anticipated my next question' thereby implying that she does not need to ask any more questions in relation to either the one she did ask (line 29) or the one she 'was going to ask' (44–5).

We might well feel that his 'self-revelation' (if that is what it was) of lines 31–42 has not really sparked off any desire by the interviewer to probe him further in this area, and has fallen a bit flat. Perhaps the 'one senses' was him starting to feel [p. 24 ↓] her non-responsiveness. Alternatively, it was his self-induced self-distancing by the 'one senses' which led the interviewer to feel that he really did not want to talk any more about this (at least at this time) and so to rush to help him close the vein of self exploration – that he had plunged into, and led her to plunge into – but that he now regretted? I don't know which.

In either case, lines 43–5 seem partly to offer the opportunity to say more but mostly to indicate that the material necessary to answer the proposed next question has already been provided.

W then accepts her definition that she has already had this 'my next question' answered and offers her the opportunity to probe any further if she so wishes. By saying 'do you want any more?', W responds to the implied message of her taking the trouble to tell him that he had 'anticipated her next question'. He may well be assuming that, if his answer had *fully* answered that next question, then the neatest tactic by the interviewer would have been to move smoothly on to the next unanswered question. He may well be thinking as follows:

Actually, I don't know if he says this 'Do you want any more?'² in a spirit of would-be co-operation ('I'm happy either way'); or in a mood of reluctant co-operation ('my "one senses that" should have told you that I don't really want to say more, but I will if you push me'); or in a tone of grumpy politeness ('please don't ask!'). Stage directions about the tone of voice, which would have been inserted within the transcript in one or other side-column, or session notes by the interviewer as to how she was feeling at the time, would resolve some at least of these questions; but I don't have these.

2 Rather like a parent at table asking a child whether they 'want any more?' 'Is there anything more about this that you would like to know?' would be more inviting.

For whatever reason, the interviewer says 'No, that's OK' and switches to a quite different question (line 53) with an odd framing about the time ('a typical day ... when you were a boy of less than 14'), and W starts to produce a 'story' in what appears to be an easy flow of memory. Is the interviewer responding to pressure from W? Or, instead, is she refusing to follow W down a path of exploring an early emotional triangle along which he wishes to go? If the latter, *why* is she refusing? Is she shifting from 'asking for feelings' to 'asking for story'? What implications will this have for the way in which the rest of the interview will unfold and for the use to which she will subsequently put the material?

So what can I say about their respective possibly very different interview experiences?

[p. 25 ↓]

First, is there some way of summing up a version of *his* interview experience?

He starts by 'promising all' with (lines **4–64–6**) even rather an evangelist note, but, perhaps as a result of her over-general first question, ends with a 'failure' by line 20. He then takes the next question as an opportunity to say much more, but may be regarded (it certainly seems as if she regards him) as having 'said too much' because one or both of them do not want to 'go further' into the 'deep water' that he was rushing into. So, in effect, another 'failure' by lines 42–3.

After the 'confused exchange' of lines 43–9, he is given another rather general prompt – What is a 'typical day'? Is 'less than 14' a useful way asking somebody to think about a specific historical period or moment in their life? Is the point of the question clear? – and he produces another rush to co-operate by a story (started at the end of the segment quoted) which may or may not be helpful to the interviewer's conscious purposes.

Is there a way of summing up *her* experience of the interview segment?

She starts off by trying to express thanks for his provision of food and to maintain control of the interviewer role and the interview. She tries a gentle 'general question' as a lead-in which manifestly gets nowhere. She then tries a very personal question which seems to get somewhere fairly deep fairly fast. Either because of the un-cued self-distancing of W at the end of his answer (line 42) or because of her mounting sense of an inability to know what to do with such an unexpectedly personal answer, followed by his to-her-unprovoked aggressive response in lines 46–7, she rushes off – in perhaps a rather awkward and abrupt fashion (lines 48–9) – to another question which may be less awkward, less deep, and gives her time to think what to do next.

The above analysis of questions about the 'interaction' in the interview suggests that, if I am to resolve some of the questions and confirm or deny some of the hypotheses which the words of the transcript suggest about what is going on between the interviewer and the informant in the interview, it will be very important to know more than the words on

the page tell us about the interview interaction.³ Just exploring the problems suggested by the bare transcript is of value in itself, however.

3 In Parts II-IV, I shall argue that more information can be provided for analysis through better transcripts, through session-notes written after the interview and through memos to self written during the analysis of the interview material.

3. What does the Transcript Tell You about the ‘Discourse’ of the Informant? Any conversation – and an interview is just a (special type of) conversation – is more or less a co-production of the participants. Each is taking cues and ideas from each other and giving off cues and ideas for the other to take note of in their turn. I both respond to what has been said (and not said) so far in the conversation, but also act in the present in anticipation of possible futures of the conversation which I wish to move towards (or to avoid).

Consequently, disentangling the preferred mode of talk (discourse) of one of the participants from the joint production of both is particularly problematic as an activity.

Let us look at a number of points where it is plausible to think that the spontaneous mode of talk of W had most chances of ‘coming out’.

[p. 26 ↓]

It might be a rather frantic ‘free association’ (‘remember *something!* answer at least one question satisfactorily’) – flailing around rather like he did in his answer to the first general question about ‘the role of the father today’ – but this time landing on a particular memory as a basis for talking.

It might, rather speculatively, have some connection to the experience of the current interview situation. He has a strong image of ‘treading’ on some irritating thing or things; it may be that, at some level, the questions are seen as ‘enormous flies’ or maybe an ‘enormous swarm’ (in lines 21–3 he is dealing ineffectively with something ‘very wide’, ‘tough’, ‘difficult’) and he would like to cope with the questions (or even the questioner?) by an effective ‘treading’. Alternatively, it might be that he found himself unwillingly

'treading on the flies' just by walking along and so wanted nothing better than to be somewhere else?

So can I come to *any conclusions about the 'discourse' of the informant?* I can say that he seems happier with a psychological discourse around (his personal) family dynamics than he does with a sociological discourse about 'the role of the father today'. I can suggest that perhaps he sees emotions as an expression of social relations and struggles rather than as an expression of psyches irrespective of situation: he distinguishes his relationships now from his relationships then, and talks about his relationship with his father when the request has been to talk about his [p. 27 ↓] father. I can say that he is happier to remember particular events (the summer's day) and to give an account in generalized terms of his own 'family dynamics' than to make general points about 'the role of the father today'.

Having made some preliminary inferences from the transcript to points about the discursive repertoire and practice of 'W', let us now look at the two areas or domains to which inferences from transcript material can be made. We have already noted the 'age at which the father left', the strongest candidate for an uncontroversial real-world/real-history referent in the extract: we now turn to look at inferences to an end-output about subjectivity, the uppermost broken line in Figure 1.4.

4. What does the Transcript Tell us about the Subjective World and Strategy of the Informant? Provisional partial answers to this question can be derived from the reading of the 'discourse' suggested in the previous section.

I say 'provisional' because it is important to bear in mind that the way people talk on a particular occasion may be part of their 'presentation of self' in a very specific context. Consequently, the interview needs to be 'read' to check that the hypothesis that the 'self and world presented in the discourse' is the 'real' subjective world and self of the interviewee. Should I as researcher feel that the 'self-presentation' should be considered with any caution?

Some caution always. On occasion, a lot of fencing and self-promotion may go on in interviews involving sensitive subjects. Any analysis of

interview material which assumes (rather than questions) a straightforward automatic correspondence between the 'presented world' and the 'actual world' may be considered to be variably naive and potentially worthless. Ruthrof (1981) has a useful table which is reproduced in Appendix A.

Germans who lived through the Nazi period tend to represent themselves as 'naive and ill-informed and ignorant' of the inhumane activities of the Nazi regime'; only certain aspects of Britain's colonial past and present (e.g. on the island of Ireland) are well-remembered by the British; ex-President Nixon was as 'economical with the truth' as any other interviewed government official is likely to be.

The transcript may convey an official story about the subjective world and the strategy of the informant (as expressed in discourse); however, if analysed in context, it may reveal a much more complex and possibly opposed one.

In W's case, one's general knowledge about the attachment of children to both parents might lead one to question whether 'kind of glad when he went' (line 37), which is firmly there in his discourse, should be taken at face value in the analysis of subjective meanings *behind* the discourse. Is it not more likely that he felt glad *and sad* when his father left, perhaps that his fear of his father was of some imagined 'retribution' and perhaps came after the father left rather than before, that the wealth of qualifiers in lines 34–42 – 'seems to be', 'didn't really know him', 'kind of glad', 'I think that I was probably' – reflect a much greater uncertainty of the adequacy of 'that version as told then' than a quick reading of the 'face value of the words' would suggest?

These suggestions are put forward as currently purely speculative hypotheses that one might wish to think about, as bases for actual or possible later questions or explorations during the interview, as ideas that might be checked against interviews [p. 28 ↓] with other people in or close to the family, as a base for looking through letters and other documents. Their function here is to suggest the way in which the 'stories as presented'

may not be the same as the 'realities as were', and the 'reader' of an interview text should always be alert for suggestions of difference between the two.

Semi-structured interviewing is very often concerned to explore the subjective world of the interviewee, but this does not mean that what they say is treated uncritically, accepted at face value. I have tried to suggest this through the analysis of segments of interview with Old Wu and with 'W', and will develop this further. We must not be more naive about deception and self-deception in research interaction than we are in interaction with our friends, our lovers, our superiors, our partners, our children, our parents.

Making Decisions in the Interview

In the analysis that I have made above, I have frequently suggested how the interviewer might have made different decisions within the interview, and these might have produced different 'effects'. When learning a craft, such as that of interviewing, it is particularly important to constantly review what you did and the way you did it so as to see how you might have done it differently and better.

To suggest something of the constant decision-making that the interviewer has to make in the interview, a skill that can only be developed by practice and the careful review of practice, I give below (Figure 2.2) a suggestion as to how, in the interview with W, the interviewer might have proceeded better by making different decisions in the interview segment. Clearly, they are based on some ideas about interviewer and informant which might be wrong. You may have different ones, and it would be a useful experiment for you to explore other possibilities. [p. 28 ↓] [p. 29 ↓] [p. 30 ↓] [p. 31 ↓] [p. 32 ↓]

Decisions to Interview Differently: Alternative Interview Decisions

FIGURE 2.2 Interview with W – Alternative Interview Decisions Discussion

Decisions to Interview Differently: Alternative Interview Decisions

	<i>Comment</i>		<i>Alternative interviewer interventions</i>
001		<i>Isobel: OK. Now I've switched on the tape I can start talking. Thanks for the tea and biscuits, they are wonderful</i>	
002		<i>W: You're welcome.</i>	
003		<i>Thank you for giving up this time for me.</i>	
004		<i>W: Well, I don't see it as giving up the time, more as contributing ...</i>	
005	Stay silent, let him clarify whatever the point is he wishes to make	<i>I: Well, for giving me the time, contributing the time, thank you very much</i>	
006		<i>W: If it furthers someone's psychological understanding even a tiny little snippet, it can be of value to me and maybe someone else</i>	

continued

	<i>Comment</i>		<i>Alternative interviewer interventions</i>
007		<i>I :-Lovely, thank-you</i>	I'm certainly expecting that it is going to help <i>me</i> . So, thank you.
008		<i>Anyway, as I said, I'm doing research into paternal deprivation and different people's experience of it</i>	
009		<i>Anyone who has had an absent father is an expert in this field, mostly without being aware of it.</i>	
010	This gives the impression that he is being seen as part of a mass—best not said	<i>Of course, like all the others, you are totally anonymous.</i>	
011		<i>When I write up the report</i>	
012		<i>everything you say that I write down or record, with your permission, is totally anonymous.</i>	
013		<i>W: So you won't tell anyone</i>	
014		<i>that I'm Prince Charles?</i>	
015		<i>I: No.</i>	
016		<i>OK, so you're anonymous, so you can say what you like.</i>	
017	Formally redundant. Don't imply that he is slow on the uptake – it might be better to cut the whole sentence. Alternatively . . .	<i>It is necessary to say that just to make sure that you know</i>	I felt I wanted to say that.
018	General questions are rarely helpful, especially this early on	<i>First of all, briefly, a general question:</i>	

continued

	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Alternative interviewer interventions</i>
019	<i>I would like to ask you</i>	
020	<i>what you think about the role of the father today.</i>	
021	<i>W: 'The role of the father today' is very wide</i>	
022	<i>I guess, it's difficult.</i>	
023	<i>It's tough</i>	
024	<i>In terms of roles</i>	
025	<i>being the breadwinner, responsibility, financial, classical role</i>	
026	<i>Myself as a father</i>	
027	<i>er...</i>	
028	<i>I'm not sure.</i>	
029	<i>I: Perhaps you could tell me a little</i>	
030	<i>about your own father</i>	
031	<i>W: Well, I was six when he left.</i>	
032	<i>I don't remember much about him from those days,</i>	
033	<i>I know him now as a man,</i>	
034	<i>but my relationship with him when I was younger seems to be</i>	
035	<i>that I was afraid of him,</i>	
036	<i>didn't really know him,</i>	
037	<i>yes I was kind of glad when he went.</i>	
038	<i>I think I was probably</i>	
039	<i>really jealous and possessive of my mother.</i>	
040	<i>She was always the one I felt emotionally close to</i>	
041	<i>very very much so.</i>	

continued

	<i>Comment</i>		<i>Alternative interviewer interventions</i>
042		And one senses that he was in the way of that.	
043	Stay with what he wants to talk about, since it is relevant to 'effect of paternal deprivation'. The 'all that' is non-directive.	<i>I:--Well, you've anticipated my next question;</i> →	'Could you tell me a bit more about all that?'
044		<i>which was going to be:</i>	
045		<i>'are you aware of having any particular feelings about him?':</i>	
046		<i>W: Well, I've just told you ----</i>	
047		<i>do you want any more?</i>	
048		<i>I:--No,</i>	
049		<i>that's OK.</i>	
050	After he finishes talking about the dynamics from his point of view, might it be helpful for him to think about the changing role of 'the father' for him at different times, not just at the age of 6?	<i>Can you describe to me</i>	'Can you remember an early point in your life when your image of your father changed from what it was before?'
051		<i>if it is possible</i>	
052		<i>a typical day in your home</i>	
053		<i>when you were a boy of less than fourteen?</i>	
054		<i>W: I can remember hot summers.</i>	
055		<i>One particular summer</i>	

continued

	<i>Comment</i>		<i>Alternative interviewer interventions</i>
056		<i>there was a swarm of flies</i>	
057		<i>that were enormous.</i>	
058		<i>I can remember</i>	
059		<i>treading on them ----</i>	

* This is unclear. Does she mean 'everything that you say that I use when I write up the report'? Does she mean 'any material of yours that I use will be completely anonymized' so that nobody else (not even you?) could recognize it or you through it'?

Discussion

One particular point:

The third question at lines 52–3 – ‘a typical day when you were under 14’ – seems to me to be the wrong question at the wrong time, given that the central research focus of the interview is on the effects of paternal deprivation of boys under 10, and that the informant has just started to talk about his emotional situation at the time when he was deprived of his father at the age of 6. Perhaps, at some other point and in some other context, it might have been a theoretically useful question, but at this point it just seems to lead away from a fruitful vein of response.

In general, if I think about the excerpt as a whole, its difficulties may lie in

The interviewer may not have

Empathy, close listening, close attentiveness to what is said and not said, is the most important quality that can (sometimes, not always) save a not-too-well-prepared – or in this case, a perhaps over-prepared – interviewer from disaster.

It is perhaps worth noting that, after this difficult start, in fact the interview was not a disaster, it was a very productive one, partly because there was a lot of learning by both parties during the early course of the interview. She *learnt to be a better interviewer for him* and he *learnt to be a better informant for her* as the interview session developed. They could have done with a second follow-up interview, but this did not happen.

[p. 33 ↓]

Imagining the Original Interview Differently: the Importance of ‘Going Beyond Written-down Words’

In my earlier discussion of the ‘interview interaction’ of Isobel and W in respect of her interview with him on paternal deprivation, I found that lack of information about the way the words are said (often called ‘paralinguistics’, PL) and about non-verbal communication (NVC) by way of body posture, clothes, setting and the like was peculiarly aggravating. For good inferences in the eventual analysis, I needed more data.

In Figure 2.3 I have imagined two different ways the words might have got said in the way they did. They might be considered as ‘stage directions’ in the manner of the early 20th century playwright George Bernard Shaw. The two alternative ‘versions’ are given either side of the transcript. First read the transcript using ONE as a guide; then TWO. You may wish to consider how they suggest quite different ‘personalities’ for the two participants.

It is important to see how the same flow of words can be interpreted quite differently *after* the interview. You might also want to think how each party *in* the interview as it develops might be responding and interpreting their own and the other's behaviour in quite different ways. Certain points might be said in ONE way but heard as if they had been TWO, and so on. My particular ‘ONE’ and ‘TWO’ by no means exhaust the possibilities.

‘Everything that is said must be said in some way – in some tone of voice, at some rate of speed, with some intonation or loudness. We may or may not consciously consider *what* to say before speaking. Rarely do we consciously consider *how* to say it, unless the situation is obviously loaded: for example, a job interview, a public address, firing someone, or breaking off a personal relationship. And we almost never make deliberate decisions about whether to raise or lower our voice and pitch,

whether to speed up or slow down. But *these are the signals by which we interpret each other's meaning*, and decide what we think of each other's comments – and each other'. (Tannen, 1992: 27, final italics added)

Having raised some of the dimensions of doing, transcribing, and analysing semi-structured depth interviews that will be explored later, I now turn to the key question: what conceptual frameworks exist for research into the scientific practice of depth interviewing?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE STUDY OF SEMI-STRUCTURED DEPTH INTERVIEWS

An Under-researched, Historically Infrequent Social Practice⁴

⁴ Scientific interviewing might be thought of as having some aspects of the 'sacred'. Durkheim's analysis of 'religion' as involving 'special time and place' and imagined equality between a community of believers through religion's 'special officers' and the 'sacred' might be thought of as occurring between interview partners in a 'sacred time' outside ordinary life, time and space, statuses and personal histories. It is a sacred time between a truth-searcher and a truth-sayer, both part of the 'community of believers' in the 'sacred of scientific truth' and of 'research'. Religious experience has been explored in terms of its profane side – but most social researchers do not wish to look sceptically at their own practice as 'believers in science' though they are happy to subject other institutional practices (such as religion) to such a view. Consequently, 'research interview experience' is not so well explored by social researchers and anthropologists.

From our exploration so far, it should be clear that the ‘scientific research interview’ is a very complex process. Given its importance in the practice of social [p. 34 ↓] [p. 35 ↓] [p. 36 ↓] [p. 37 ↓]

FIGURE 2.3 Interview with W – Alternative Attributed Personalities ONE and TWO – Informal Paralinguistics

	ONE		TWO
001	slightly gushy	<i>Isobel: OK. Now I've switched on the tape I can start talking. Thanks for the tea and biscuits, they are wonderful</i>	genuinely grateful
002	a bit reserved	<i>W: You're welcome.</i>	a bit reserved
003	even more gushy	<i>Thank you for giving up this time for me.</i>	trying to get her thankfulness across
004	suddenly eager	<i>W: Well, I don't see it as giving up the time, more as contributing ...</i>	a bit stiffly
005	interrupting – formal and disinterested – asserting control	<i>I: Well, for giving me the time, contributing the time, thank you very much</i>	rushing to repair a mistake she perceives she's made
006	continuing eager, but faltering	<i>W: If it furthers someone's psychological understanding even a tiny little snippet, it can be of value to me and maybe someone else</i>	refuses repair, stiffly and slowly
007	formal + discouraging	<i>I: Lovely, thank you</i>	quickly to cover up awkwardness
008	bored and a bit formal and quick	<i>Anyway, as I said, I'm doing research into paternal deprivation and different people's experience of it</i>	eagerly
009	ditto	<i>Anyone who has had an absent father is an expert in this field, mostly without being aware of it.</i>	
010	said in a 'kindly' tone	<i>Of course, like all the others, you are totally anonymous,</i>	
011	formal	<i>when I write up the report</i>	
012	formal	<i>everything you say that I write down or record, with your permission, is totally anonymous.</i>	
013	attempts to make a 'joke' to humanize the situation	<i>W: So you won't tell anyone</i>	makes 'joke' to indicate that he finds her remarks slightly silly
014		<i>that I'm Prince Charles?</i>	
015	flat – discouraging,	<i>I: No.</i>	taken aback

continued

	ONE		TWO
016	a bit patronizing	<i>OK, so you're anonymous, so you can say what you like.</i>	Re-states anxiously, because she feels she must have not put her message across well before
017	ditto	<i>It is necessary to say that just to make sure that you know</i>	
018	rather formal	<i>First of all, briefly, a general question:</i>	
019	ditto	<i>I would like to ask you</i>	a bit uncertain of reception
020	ditto	<i>what you think about the role of the father today.</i>	
021	taken aback – was expecting something more personal	W: 'The role of the father today' is very wide	a bit censorious
022		I guess, it's difficult.	pompous
023		It's tough	
024		In terms of roles	
025	throws out words to please her	being the breadwinner, responsibility, financial, classical role	
026		Myself as a father	slightly more personal
027		er ...	uncertain
028		I'm not sure.	hoping to be asked some more about 'being a father himself today'
029	starts again, slightly desperately	<i>I: Perhaps you could tell me a little</i>	ignores implied request but moves eagerly on to her intended focus on him as a son

continued

	ONE		TWO
030		<i>about your own father</i>	
031	high levels of intensity throughout	W: Well, I was six when he left.	moderate intensity
032		I don't remember much about him from those days,	
033		I know him now as a man,	
034		but my relationship with him when I was younger seems to be	starts to give his worked-out 'official position' as developed over the years
035		that I was afraid of him,	
036		didn't really know him,	
037		yes I was kind of glad when he went.	
038		I think I was probably	
039		really jealous and possessive of my mother.	
040		She was always the one I felt emotionally close to	
041		very very much so.	
042	doesn't feel listened to – wraps it up finally and quickly	And one senses that he was in the way of that.	formality matches earlier formality of 'stating official position'
043	'congratulatory' if a bit patronizing	I: Well, you've anticipated my next question,	taken aback
044		<i>which was going to be:</i>	
045		<i>'are you aware of having any particular feelings about him?'</i>	
046	uncertainly	W: Well, I've just told you ...	very aggressively
047	genuine offer	do you want any more?	very aggressively
048	hastily	I: No,	hastily, afraid of hostility
049	definitively	<i>that's OK.</i>	reassuring

continued

	ONE		TWO
050	rather bored inquiry plucked out of the air	<i>Can you describe to me</i>	moves away from 'dangerous topic', hoping to come back to it later
051		<i>if it is possible</i>	
052		<i>a typical day in your home</i>	
053		<i>when you were a boy of less than fourteen?</i>	
054	not particularly interested but still trying to co-operate: doesn't see the point of the question	W: I can remember hot summers.	reassured by shift away from any discussion of 'official position': happy to co- operate by remembering an unimportant memory about much later period
055		One particular summer	
056		there was a swarm of flies	
057		that were enormous.	
058		I can remember	
059		treading on them	

research – Briggs (1986: 1) cites Brenner (1981: 15) as asserting that 90% of all social science research involves interviews – one would imagine that it would itself be the object of much research, if only to improve the practice of professional depth interviewers.

One would expect the normal social research questions to be applied: who does what, when do they do it, how do they do it, what do they do, with what do they do it, with whom, for what purposes and with what effects? Sadly, this is not the case.

There has been very little social research into 'semi-structured research interviewing' as a historically produced and socially proliferating practice. Briggs in his review (1986: 27) found that things had not moved on much since the depressed and depressing findings of Dexter in 1970:

[p. 38 ↓]

'Professional interviewers have for the most part assumed without analysis the nature of the process in which they are engaged. Until that process itself is seen as problematic, something to be analysed

and explored, we will not be ready to determine what it records and measures, let alone how it can be used to draw valid inferences ...
' (Dexter, 1970: 157)

Twenty-three years after Dexter, Foddy remarked (1993: ix-x) that

'although a number of studies have been carried out to increase our understanding of question-answer processes, there are few signs that social researchers have made major improvements in their ways'.

Although I cannot explore that research here (Briggs, 1986: 1–30 provides an excellent start to such a discussion), in what follows, I shall attempt to be sensitive to its implications.

Frameworks: Interactional and Anthropological-historical

Objectives

In analysing the practices of ourselves and others (as in the 'W' transcript segment and in looking at our own transcripts of our own interviews), we have to search unendingly for 'communicative' and 'interpretive' blunders and naiveté⁵, for ways of doing things better. You need to 'analyse' your interviews (as soon as they happen) as a 'researcher of interviews' would research it, in order to improve your practice for your next interview. Schon's (1983) model of the 'reflective practitioner' is appropriate here.

5 Compare the question of 'consciously controlling for potentially confounding variables'.

I now provide conceptual frameworks which enable such exploration of the practice of research interviewing. I shall start with relatively narrow interactionist speech-event models (Foddy, Markova), and then shift to a more anthropological 'historical situation'

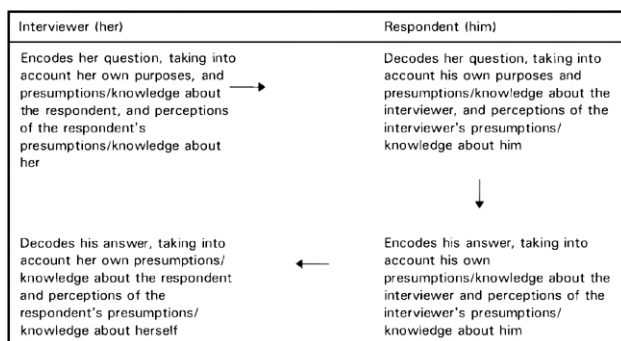
model developed from Charles Briggs's synthesis. This latter model is spelled out at some length to function as a checklist of issues for you to think about when reflecting in or after the interview you conduct.

Interactional Frameworks: Adjacent and Non-adjacent Units of Meaning

Foddy's Symbolic Interactionist Model An initial framework for the analysis of the 'unique' time-space event of every interview is provided by Foddy (1993: 22). His framework is one of symbolic interactionism, and he suggests the way in which meanings of questions and answers have to be negotiated between the participants. Typically, like the participants in the interview with W, interviewer and interviewee are variably successful in doing this and variably aware of their success or lack of it. His conceptual framework is based upon the Communication Studies/semiology concept of encoding and decoding of messages. Meaning is not transferred, only messages (consisting of bundles of signs, like this book) into which meanings have been subtly or grossly encoded that may be decoded by the recipient in ways that are subtly or grossly different from those intended by the sender.

[p. 39 ↓]

FIGURE 2.4 Foddy's Symbolic Interactionist Model of a Question-answer Sequence, Modified



In the conversational shuffling between W and his interviewer, we can see a whole variety of a less-than-full meeting of minds. Foddy's model can help us explore the interview with W in this way.

The key philosophy behind the above formulation is that it is unlikely that the meaning of any utterance as 'decoded' by the recipient will be identical to that 'encoded' by the questioner. The struggle to recognize and minimize subtle erroneous 'decoding' in oneself and in the other person is the mark of the sophisticated communicator: it is characteristic of the naive communicator that he or she can only recognize very obvious cases of breakdown and does not have a variety of techniques for doing repair-work.

However I want to suggest a further development. The general concept of encoding and decoding of messages embodied in signs (semiotics, semiology) does not have to be restricted to the question-answer pair embodied in Figure 2.4 above.

The 'question-answer' model of the 'unit of speech analysis' is dangerously akin, as Mishler (1986) points out, to the 'stimulus-response model' of the 'unit of behavioural analysis' as used, for example, by the dominant mainstream school devoted to fully structured questionnaires. Let us attempt to weaken the 'magical hold' of the question-answer model over our imaginations first by looking at a three-step model which suggests a much more processual flow of interview interaction and then by considering a more 'jumpy' model.

Linell-Markova's Three-step Interactional Model Markova (1990) asks 'What is the best model for understanding interview processes?' Though the 'obvious' answer in an interview would appear to be the two-step unit, Question+Answer, she argues convincingly for a minimum of a 'three-step unit' which may all be [p. 40 ↓] completed within a single utterance (1990: 136–40) or which may cut across an utterance (1990: 140–2).

She points out that 'a single utterance or a single turn' can be seen as a 'natural unit of understanding'. Working on the primary conceptual axiom that each turn is a combination of some degree of initiative and of response, and on the basis of another chapter on interactional dominance by Linell in the same book, Markova writes as follows:

'By looking at each initiative and response in each turn in terms of maintenance and changing of topic by the interlocutors, the researcher's problem is to identify the features of interactional dominance. Each turn has the characteristics of a three-step process, each turn being the result of some initiative and some response. As Linell claims, each turn or utterance is Janus-like, i.e. it is potentially directed simultaneously towards the past and towards the future.

The retroactive feature of the turn or utterance is internally related to the proactive feature. Take for example, the health visitor's turn:

"That's very good. That's very good. And did he lose on his birth weight at all while you were in hospital or ...?"

The health visitor's contribution is retroactive, i.e. it is a response to the mother, confirming that the health visitor has understood and confirmed the mother's previous turn about her baby's birthweight.

However the health visitor's turn is also proactive, i.e. it initiates further exploration of the discussed subject-matter by asking whether the baby has lost any weight while in hospital ...

In this case the response to the mother [i.e. "That's very good. That's very good"] and the initiative [i.e. "And did he lose," etc.] are both clearly identifiable parts....

In reality, though, many dialogical turns may only be responses while others may only be initiatives [and in many cases] one cannot meaningfully physically separate the retroactive and the proactive [aspects] of the participants' turns.' (Markova, 1990: 137, modified)

I can apply this conceptual framework to the 'W' interview and see how each utterance might be seen as pointing both towards the past and towards the future of the conversational interaction. Looking at just one segment, it might come out something like that shown in Figure 2.5.

The research tradition of Conversational Analysis (CA) looks for adjacent natural units: with Markova's three-step analysis being perhaps better than the normal stimulus-response two-step one.

However, tracing intelligible units may engulf looking at *non-adjacent* speech.

Discussion of Models Focusing on Non-adjacent Speech Even Markova's version of the traditional 'question+answer' segmentation of the text underplays the point that at some points either the interviewer or the informants inevitably decide (not necessarily in harmony with each other) not to ask or answer further questions or points on a given topic. Similarly, the decision by one participant *not*

[p. 41 ↓]

FIGURE 2.5 Interview with W Analysed in Markova's Three-step Model

		<i>Initiatives for conversational future</i>	<i>Responses to conversational past</i>
1	I	are you aware of having had any particular feelings about him?	
2	W	do you want any more?	Well, I've just told you ...
3	I	Can you describe to me if it is possible a typical day in your home when ...	No, that's OK.
4	W		I can remember hot summers ...

to follow-up a certain 'lead' offered by another – or to not follow it up at the time but to return to it *much later* – is a decision that may not be as visible as some other speech decisions, but may be just as important.

Markova argues for units that are not characterized by physical togetherness in the text but 'that are primarily conceptual and epistemological in character' (Markova, 1990: 131). I strongly agree. The 'unit of analysis' should not be *merely* the utterances of the informant (thus ignoring the question, as in the Old Wu extract) nor even the 'question plus answer plus follow-up question plus follow-up answer' (as in the interview with W).

For example, in a way that will be shown to be important later on, the ‘thematic analysis’ of narrative accounts may look, quite rightly and very productively, at ‘units of analysis’ that have been carefully separated into non-adjacent spaces. A person may start an argument, break off into a story, half-tell the story, start another argument, go back to the first argument, complete the final half of the first story. Identifying segments of the same argument interrupted by a half-told story and the start of another argument; identifying when argumentative speech appears to be part of one argument but actually functions as part of another: these are all skills dependent on the understanding that adjacent phrases may be part of separate units of meaning and that a single unit of meaning may be spread in a variety of speech locations (and therefore in the transcript text) (Casement, 1985).

Similarly, the interviewee may drop hints while telling one story, which are not noticed by the interviewer at that moment but ‘puzzle’ him or her so that the interviewer goes back to the ‘dropped hint’ at a much later point and gets at a different dimension that was present but not observed at the time. Conversation is much more *artful* than is suggested by turn-by-turn analysis or question+answer models. That artfulness is hardly ever fully conscious, in the way that a hypnotist or a propagandist consciously ‘embeds’ significant units in such a non-adjacent way that their hypnotic or functional connection is not perceptible. More usually, the separation is that of half-conscious mental functioning.

[p. 42 ↓]

I hope the above argument has convinced you that units of meaning may not consist only of adjacent speech, and that adjacent speech may be part of different units of meaning.

An Anthropological-historical Approach to Interview Interaction based on Briggs

In the discussion thus far of the contribution of Foddy, Markova and Linell, I have been working with interactional models which tend to abstract from the 'whole-person relations and context' in which the communication is embodied.

I now present a model which asks you to take more account of the real-life context: a more anthropological and historical account which, while providing space for the analysis of verbal interaction developed by the CA-school and others, goes beyond it to a more inclusive synthesis.

Such a model is provided by Charles Briggs in his *Learning How to Ask* (1986: 41). I have modified it below in order to take account of insights and terminology developed by Muriel Saville-Troike (1982) and to include other items and dimensions I consider important, such as Foddy's interactional material.

In Figure 2.6, the centre of the diagram is *the relationship and communication between the interviewer and the informant*, as represented by the solid black horizontal line. My understanding of that relationship and that communication will be determined by the *particular model of human inter/subjectivity* with which I understand all relationships and communications. In particular, the process will be one involving constant *emotion* and constant *evaluation* on both sides.

Looking first at the bottom right of the diagram, the fact that this communicative event occurs within a given and historically evolving *social setting* is stressed, and that this *communicative event* is of a certain *type*, one with its own norms of what should or shouldn't happen during and after the event, its own *norms of propriety*. Obviously, it is quite possible for those involved to disagree about what the social setting is and about what the appropriate norms are.

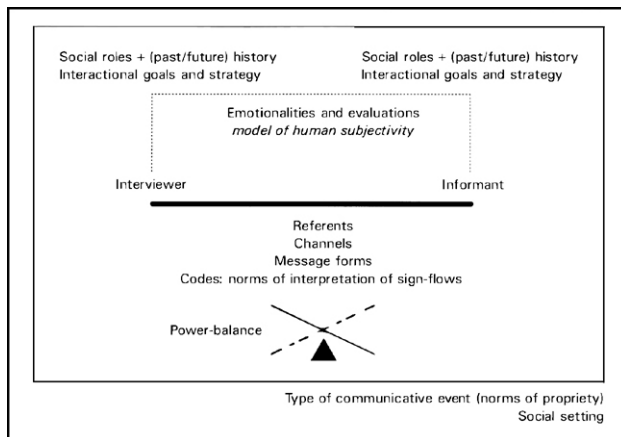
If I then move from the social setting and the cultural definitions of the type of event and its norms of propriety to the scene within the 'black box' of the interview interaction,

I find useful the image of a see-saw which represents *the evolving power-balance* between those involved. This power-balance is strongly affected by the items at the top of the black box, namely the *histories and social roles* of those involved and their goals in general which determine their particular *goals and strategies for the interview interaction* itself. In the process of interview interaction, existing power resources may be mobilized and new ones created or lost. The power-balance of interviewer and interviewee when they end the interview may be the same or may be different from that with which they started. Even if it remains the same, this may only be the result of a frustrated attempt by one or both parties to increase their own power or that of both parties together. *The fact that a dimension of power is always present doesn't mean that a power-interaction is always on a win-lose basis.* Both interviewer and interviewee may struggle for power within an interview and both may emerge from the interview more powerful than when they started.

If I then look at the communication itself, the material below the central black bar, I find the models of Foddy and of the semiologists relevant in their discussion of the codes which determined *the encoding and the decoding of the messages as communicated through the channels*, mostly of sound but also involving non-verbal

[p. 43 ↓]

FIGURE 2.6 Briggs-Wengraf Model of Components of the Interview Situation



communication channels and codes as well. Much of the message-exchange will be about the *referents* to which the verbal exchange is oriented, but much of it will not.

Let us look at the components already discussed and represented in the figure.

Social Setting⁶ Here such factors as location, type of day, time of day, social-constraints, physical and social arrangements and interruptions need to be considered. These physical and temporal arrangements are always of considerable importance. Is the interview in a private space of one of the participants, or in a public one? Most 'private spaces' are liable to overhearing interruption by flatmates, family members, assorted others, the telephone or just distracting sights or sounds. It is important to try to avoid these. Public spaces also have their distractions. A 'neutral space' may be the best to aim for, unless you want to get clues from the surroundings that your informant wishes to present himself or herself in. What might be the effects of a social setting on you and the interviewee?

⁶ I have here relied on Saville-Troike's (1982) reworking of Hymes, replacing Briggs's original 'social situation'.

Type of Communicative Event with Norms of Propriety Here the constructions of the two parties may be very different. For the researcher, this is a semi-structured depth interview run as a professional operation. For the informant, it may be a favour of a not very clear sort that they are doing for the friend of a friend or a local power-figure.

[p. 44 ↓]

Briggs, early in his career, went to 'interview' as a youthful anthropologist two elderly Mexican-Americans. In his enjoyable and insightful study of his own communicational blunders (1986), he stresses the way his notion that he was 'doing an interview' did not relate to any concept in the conceptual framework of his informants. It took him a while – coming from an 'interview' discipline in an 'interview society' – to realize that the two elderly Mexican-American respondents did not have such a 'speech event' as 'an interview' in their culture

and saw him merely as a young White Anglo asking rather intimate questions of ‘his elders’ without having earned the legitimacy to do so.

As I have already argued, even within societies where ‘interviews’ are more current as a genre of social event, very different personal and collective constructions can be put on the term ‘interview’, not all of them pleasant or auguring well for ‘the next interview’.

Obviously, each participant may have to adjust their sense of ‘the norms’ to how the other is behaving, and at times the strategy of either party may be to ‘depart’ from the expected norms. The norms of any given interview are partly given in anticipation before and are partly subject to negotiation and mutation within the interview interaction itself.

Social Roles + (Past/Future)History The question of ‘social roles’ was raised in the discussion of the Lorna and John vignette (p. 16). It is important to note that you do not just inhabit one social role (‘research interviewer’). In fact we all carry around a bundle of roles with us – as was discussed in the discussion of multiple statuses characteristics we all possess – and the fore-grounded interviewer-interviewee roles are not the only ones to be operative. Indeed, they may just be an area in which other roles come into play.

The ‘social roles *and (past/future) history*’ in the diagram above is designed to stress the way both you and your interviewee come towards this interview carrying all the positive and negative ‘personal history’ that each of you have. These may be similar in surprising ways and very different in surprising ways: they may form what you do and how you interpret it in ways that are very difficult to detect. You need at least to get clear for yourself the collective history which you share and the histories which you imagine that you might well not share, prior to designing the interview.

‘History’ as a dimension includes feared and desired and expected ‘futures’ which may be affected by the interview interaction in the present: Lorna's reflection on her post-interview ‘future history’ as it might be affected by her present decisions about the interview is a case in point. The same is true of John.

Our sense of what to do (in respect of the present moment of the present interview) can be seen as determined by our current sense of the past and our strategy for our future.

Alternative 'future histories' we carry in our heads (as a result of our past histories) affect our present-time deciding. I have therefore referred, in the diagram, to 'past/future history'.

Interactional Goals + Strategies 'Interactional goals' may vary a lot. People's 'official purposes' may be one thing, but there may be real or suspected unofficial purposes which may also affect the outcome. You and your interviewee have separate goals of various sorts (expressed in hopes and fears for its process and its outcomes) and prepared or emergent strategies for achieving them.

[p. 45 ↓]

The interviewer may be determined not to 'lose control of the interview' and the interviewee equally determined to have his or her say as they want to say it. The informant may wish to avoid giving the interviewer information that might upset the interviewer, and be either quite right or quite wrong in their estimate of what questions or answers would cause pain.⁷ Bear in mind the case of W and the way the talk was moved away – by one or both of them – from the topic of his closeness to his mother and his belief in his father's jealousy, etc.

⁷ See Figure 2.4 on this symbolic calculation.

You need to stay sensitive to unavowed and unofficial goals and purposes! Especially your own.

For example: if you are determined to 'prove' a pre-existing theory when you go into an interview, you will behave quite differently than you would if your 'unofficial goal' was to find ideas for 'new interesting theory'. If your goal is to 'impress' the informant, your behaviour will be different than if you want to 'listen to' them.

Bear in mind that 'interactional goals' may change as the 'interview interaction' is co-steered by both of you. Do not assume that goals or strategies are fixed.

In the phrase 'interactional goals and strategy', the '*and* strategy' is important. Even assuming they have common goals, people may have different 'strategies' for the

interview. One person's strategy may be to avoid being too passive at the start – perhaps this was the case for W? Another person may allow the 'other' to dictate the depth and pace of answering for at least a while. Again, people may change their tactics within a given strategy as the interview develops. They may also – if their current strategy seems not to be working – shift to a quite different strategy which they think has a better chance. If you feel that your 'polite non-pushy' strategy of eliciting responses hasn't worked at all for the first 10 minutes of a 30 minute interview, you are likely to shift to a 'more pushy' alternative, or to a quite different alternative.

Power-knowledge, Domination and Resistance The question of the politics of interview interaction and the conditions and outcomes of interviews have been raised particularly by feminist writers, sometimes simply inspired by the exploitation of interviewees in a weak power position and sometimes with their sensitivity enhanced by such writers as Foucault, concerned for the relationship between power and knowledge. For whatever reason, concern for the micro-politics of researched interview work has been higher in Britain and Anglo-Saxon countries than on the European continent (see the introduction to Chamberlayne et al., 2000 for a further discussion; also Perks and Thomson, 1998). It is not possible to develop a general theory or account of power at this point. I wish only to stress that power is a dimension of interview interaction dangerously likely to be overlooked or ignored or denied by the well-intentioned and good-natured interviewer.

[p. 46 ↓]

At any given moment, there is an overall fluctuating 'power-balance' as the attempts to co-operate and pursue interactional goals 'register'. This is indicated by the little power see-saw drawing at the bottom of the diagram.

The 'Referent' The question of the 'referent' is a crucial one. People may imagine that the topic (or referent, that which is being referred to) is commonly understood by both parties, but in fact there may be a greater or lesser degree of unperceived discrepancy between the imagined referents.

When you refer in your questions to racism, and ask me whether I think 'racism is increased or reduced by certain legislation', I may be thinking that the word 'racism' in

your question refers to what I call 'institutionalized racism' but you may have a quite different concept of the referent from me. The word 'racism' is conjuring up two different referents in our mind. When this is obvious, it's easy to deal with or make allowances for.

In our vignette about John and Lorna, what different 'referents' might be the real focus of the would-be interviewer? In the interview with W, what was or were the referents in that case?

There may be more than one referent, of which only one is explicit. You may be talking about 'wrongdoing in general in society' but I may be thinking of some specific act of wrongdoing about which I feel guilty and perhaps of which I think maybe you too are very aware, and so my referent may be double while your's may only be single.

Tannen (1990) suggests that in the society and milieu she was studying, there can be a contradiction between talk which is 'report-talk' (reporting on one or more referents) and talk which is 'rapport-talk' (in which the referents are merely pegs on which to hang other speech functions, such as getting a better sense of the other person, deepening the relationship, etc.). In the interview design, what proportion of referent-report talk you wish to elicit (and when) and what sort of other talk (e.g. rapport-relationship) you wish to elicit (and when) are important questions. For many purposes, rapport needs to be developed before reports on some referents are likely to be of the highest quality.

Emotionalities and Evaluations At a given moment, both you and your informant will be experiencing more- or less-strong emotions, and you will be expressing such emotions anywhere on a spectrum from 'imperceptible' to 'over the top'. You will be doing all this experiencing and evaluating more or less consciously and unconsciously; you will be sharing some emotions and evaluations, not sharing others, and perhaps denying the rest. As a result, this fluctuating emotional experience and exchange will be the context in which you will be 'evaluating' what you are doing and what the other person is doing and how the whole interview is going in terms of your interactional goals and the working out of your interactional strategies and tactics. Think of the 'interview with W' and the implied complex questions of emotional inter/subjectivity as suggested in the two alternative readings, ONE and TWO (p. 34).

Researcher's Model of Human Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity Summing up much of the above, I may say that understanding the interview interaction between two people will depend on our model of human inter/subjectivity [p. 47 ↓] in general and our evolving model of these two subjectivities in particular. A clarification by Hollway and Jefferson of two contrasting models can be found on pages 158–9, where the implications of such models of human subjectivity for the preparation and design of interviews are discussed.

Channel The question of ‘channel’ is of great importance. It is easy to believe that in interviews, messages are being conveyed acoustically through voice, that there is one channel and that is auditory. Or our conception may be even more narrowly conceived: that meaning is just conveyed through the words spoken and heard on that vocal-auditory channel.

If I just pay attention to the words spoken, I have a very impoverished idea of the communication. However, since it is ‘words only’ that can be most easily loaded into a transcript, there is a terrible temptation just to analyse the words. It would be a great mistake to do so. Think back to the interview with ‘W’ and the importance of ‘stage directions’ in determining what meaning was being conveyed. The ‘stage directions’ have to do with ‘how the words are said’: this is known more technically as ‘paralinguistics’ (p. 216 onwards, for analyses of interviews with a strong emphasis on paralinguistics and procedures for registering and displaying them).

Actually the paralinguistics in how I say the words may (as in an ‘ironical’ tone) completely subvert the meaning of the words. One has only to think of excessive politeness by a teacher or a pupil in a school context. One of Elliot Mishler's chapters in his excellent *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* is entitled ‘research interviews as speech events’. They are; but they are, of course, much more. In speech, the tone of voice and the speed of delivery, the silences, the hesitations, the mode of delivery of the words can be as important in determining meaning and reception as the actual words themselves. Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, stressed the importance of listening to the emotions of the voice rather than getting confused by the words actually being said: ‘Forget what your words are saying; what is your voice saying?’ There is much more to speech interaction (say on the telephone) than just the words of the transcript.

Just adding the paralinguistics to the auditory channel is not enough. Other channels are involved. A depth interview is normally carried out in a face-to-face setting with multiple extra channels of communication. The eye perceiving the body is another channel. Our face moves as we talk, our whole body shifts position, we fidget, make notes or not, adjust the tape-recorder, move our chairs around and move in our chair, our bodies do a number of things, often out of our own awareness, but within the awareness of an anxious interviewee. *And you as interviewer are similarly affected by the non-verbal communication (NVC) of the interviewee.*

Most communication analysts stress the way that non-verbal communication occurs through non-auditory channels. There is the smell or perfume of the people involved; their clothes; their body-language and body-styles; there is the arrangement of objects and space between and around the participants. There is the interface between the tape-recorder, microphones and the participants; perhaps the question-schedule on the knee of the interviewer and their pen and papers. There are movements of impatience, slightly blank gazes, sudden leaning-forwards in the seats; raising of the energy and alertness levels of the participants, [p. 48 ↓] a sense of what some might call the constantly mutating 'vibrations' or 'feel' of the interaction. In addition, there are the 'messages' conveyed by the 'choice of setting' for the interview, the part of town, the implied income-level, the type of decoration.

Interviews are not merely speech-events, they are NVC and whole-body/ whole-context events.

To start to approximate to this rich inter-personal reality, video-taping would be a great help. But nothing replaces the self-monitoring sensitive interviewer making detailed session-notes immediately after the session on all outer realities and all inner experiences that they can remember. Even if I cannot for normal purposes articulate anything but a fraction of this richness, the more that can be articulated the better for my future understanding of the interaction.

Codes: the Interpretation of Sign-flows Through the Channels The interaction will normally take place in one language. However, for certain interviews, you may find yourself using a professional or an amateur translator – for example, with an elderly immigrant who does not speak your own language. This will raise additional

questions of how well the ‘translation’ is being done. I raised this question in respect of the ‘narrative’ in English of Old Wu, the Chinese woman reported in Chapter 1. Does the English term ‘madness’ convey the nuance of the Chinese original? In addition, the elderly immigrant may say different things if her (say) school-age daughter is acting as translator (bear in mind that the translator has the other permanent social role of being the school-age daughter!); and, irrespective of what she says, the school-age daughter – not being a professional translator – is likely to ‘edit’ what she reports her mother as having said so as to fit what the daughter thinks of as being ‘the proprieties’.

Even given a common language code (say English), there is an immense amount of variation in the ‘encoding of subtle meanings’ even if the same words are used. The ‘meanings’ of words are held in a dictionary, and changes and varieties of meaning of words are to some (weak and decontextualized) extent caught there. However, for languages and sign forms other than verbal ones, we do not have ‘explicit common code books’ with anything like the power of a ‘dictionary of words’. There are constant attempts to produce ‘code-books’ for signs sent through different non-verbal channels. There are books on body-postures, for example, which attempt to lay down the ‘meaning’ of this or that way of ‘holding’ or ‘moving’ the face and the body; there are books on ‘the language of clothes’ (fast changing sign-forms and fast-changing meanings) which indicate meanings that can be ‘read’ from particular combinations of clothing items and ways of wearing them. There are books on the language of smells and scents. Gestures for example, have different meanings in different gesture codes: one person’s ‘smile’ may be decoded differently by two different people. Dress codes vary between generations, between subcultures, over time and in all sorts of ways. Body-posture codes are also liable to misinterpretation: the same posture might be interpreted as ‘deep interest’ by one decoder and as ‘passive waiting’ by another.

Bear in mind that codes are always being invented, mutated, and rendered obsolete by human intervention: people switch between existing codes in mid-communication. Norms of propriety are brought into being and broken for ‘artistic’ or strategic effect, and so forth. All attempts to render codes explicit are of value; none of the attempts is likely to catch more than a fraction of our tacit receptivity [p. 49 ↓] to subtle nuances of meaning in our multi-channel, multi-code, multi-cultural exchanging of messages within and outside consciousness.

The interviewer needs to be as conscious as possible of how the 'effects' of messages encoded and transmitted through such non-verbal channels are impinging on the interviewer and the interviewee.

Message-form The message form concerns the 'sign systems' through which meaning is conveyed. I may convey dislike by saying 'I dislike you' in a 'sincere' tone of voice, or by 'I like you' using an 'insincere' voice. In both cases, you recognize the message-form of the words and the message-form of a 'tone of voice', and the total message comes through both 'message forms' being used simultaneously. I may indicate non-welcome through the 'message form' of making you wait a long time in an uncomfortable room while I ostentatiously have a long trivial phone call with somebody at the time I agreed to have an interview with you. I may 'say it with flowers'.

Within a given sign-system (English words), the message form and the content may be different in another respect. A request may be put in the form of a 'question' – 'would you like to open the window?' – or a question may be put in the form of an assertion – imagine the voice going up towards the end of the following set of words: 'it is a nice day'.

Some of the complexities of understanding 'the interview with W' transcript lay in attempting to understand the relation between message-form and the message-function.

Multiple-channel Encoding and Decoding, and 'Communicative Blunders' And in each of the many channels through which messages are exchanged in face-to-face interviews, encoding and decoding is always in question. My attempt at politeness may be experienced by you as an 'impersonal push-away'; your attempt to break the ice may be seen by me as dangerous aggression. My attempt to be precise may be experienced by you as nit-picking. The speed at which I speak may indicate laid-backness to one person and excessive speediness to another, depending on the subculture that they come from. When the English talk of mountains with the Tibetans, the two groups may have quite different categories of size in mind.

In Briggs's (1986) Chapter 3 'On communicative blunders' he explores how there may be a mismatch of any of the components of the research interview interaction identified

in the model above. The US sociologist Jessie Barnard is supposed to have said that in any marriage, there were two marriages: 'his marriage' and 'her marriage'. The same is true of any given interview: remember how Isobel and W might have interpreted 'their interview' quite differently. There is W's interview and his interviewer's interview. There is the 'informant's interview' and there is 'your interview'.

The above discussion could not be conclusive and does not attempt to be so. The function of the conceptual framework and the summary discussion of each concept is to suggest the sort of consideration that you might give to what you plan to go on in your future interviews and how you make sense of what did go on in past ones.

Sequencing in the Interview Saville-Troike (1982) stresses the interaction-sequence within the communicative exchange. A question posed at the beginning [p. 50 ↓] of an interview may get a quite different response than the same question posed at the end. Alternatively, the answer may be identical in phrasing but quite different in meaning. Mishler (1986: 52–3) argues that

'an adequate understanding of interviews depends on recognizing how interviewers reformulate questions and respondents frame answers in terms of their reciprocal understandings as meanings emerge during the course of the interview ... the internal history of the developing discourse Within the perspectives of interviews as speech events and speech activities, variation in how particular questions are asked as well as variation in the overall course of interviews become objects of inquiry. Because I cannot ascertain the meaning of a question simply by referring to the interview schedule and interviewer's notes, the research question is transformed from a search for "errors" into an analysis of the interview process in order to determine the meaning of questions and answers ... through mutual reformulation and specification ...'

Summary

This chapter has presented the case 'and a technical language' for becoming sensitive to, and analysing for, a number of different dimensions in the interview. The case is not just technical, however.

I have tried to show that interviews are culturally and historically specific phenomena, to be studied as a practice or set of practices just like any other set of socio-historical practices. I have argued that without such research into interviews as a located socio-historical practice, any inferences about the 'functions for gaining and changing knowledge' through any particular interview interaction is likely to be naive.

I have provided a number of frameworks in terms of which some of the 'features' of interaction of the interview before-and-after can be analysed. These should sensitize you to the potential for 'communicative blunders' that may emerge in your interviewing and, I hope, to some of the ways these can be 'repaired'. Or at least, not repeated.

I shall now go on to consider models of social research design in general and then apply them to develop a model of interview evidence research design applicable particularly to semi-structured depth interviewing.

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