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INTRODUCTION

People tend to gain and communicate much of their knowledge by means of language. For instance, if we want to know something about the latest play at our favourite theatre, we may *hear* about it on local TV or radio, we can *read* about it in local newspapers, or we can *ask* friends that have been there and they may give us their opinion. The fact that asking somebody else is a common way of obtaining knowledge about something is the reason for the unbroken relevance of 'interviewing'. As Brinkmann (2008: 471) writes: 'We can presuppose that humans have interviewed each other in some form or other for as long as they have mastered the use of language.' In other words, qualitative research interviewing makes use of the ancient human habit of asking and answering questions. It is a well-tried and reliable way of finding out about things and about each other in conversations.

Yet there are different ways of doing it. Since the first half of the twentieth century, when interviewing entered the more systematic discussion about social research methods, as Platt (2001) shows in her historical review of the status of interviewing in social research in the USA, many different techniques of interviewing have been developed. They all make specific suggestions about how to collect and construct knowledge. For instance, going back to the scenario about the play, it makes a difference whether we simply invite our friends to tell us how it was, or whether we confront them instead with a list of specific questions regarding the length of the interpretation, the number of people who left during the first break, the availability of beer, or the temperature in the theatre. While such specific questions may be important for us to decide whether we want to attend the performance, they may not help us find out what our friends actually thought about the play.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 48–50) introduce two metaphors for describing and contrasting these two ways of obtaining knowledge. They distinguish between the interviewer as a miner and a traveller. The *miner-interviewer* has a targeted and well-defined interest in specific informations she considers valuable: she knows what to look for and turns this (re)search into a collection of pure 'nuggets of knowledge' (ibid.: 48). Afterwards she will decide what it is actually worth. Alternatively, the *traveller-interviewer* is openly curious. She 'wanders through the landscape' (ibid.) of the area under investigation, involves herself in

conversations, and encourages people to tell her about their experiences. With each conversation she may discover new aspects, and develop and modify her opinion. Together with the respondents encountered, she interactively co-constructs the knowledge that she will take home.

Both approaches produce useful knowledge but also involve certain disadvantages. On the one hand, chances are low that the miner, who corresponds to a systematic collector of scientific knowledge according to pre-defined standards, will be open to changing her assessment criteria and reflect upon the concept of what (using the mining metaphor) 'precious metal' is. On the other hand, it may be difficult for the traveller to come to the end of her journey; she may be overwhelmed by the many new impressions and perspectives she has encountered, and may even forget about her original interest.

Metaphors are a useful way of imagining interview research (Alvesson, 2011). This book is about a third way of collecting knowledge – by involving people more actively into a process of knowledge constitution. In the context of the problem-centred interview (PCI), interviewers take the role and attitude of a *well-informed traveller*: they have certain priorities and expectations and start the journey on the basis of background information obtained beforehand. Yet the trip they will finally make, and the story they will tell about it afterwards, depend on the people they meet on the road and on their insider knowledge. By talking to them they are able to refine their assessment of the major sights mentioned in the travel guide. Their guidebook only helped them to outline a preliminary roadmap and frame of reference that remains open to modification and revision on the basis of conversations with the locals. It is through these conversations that they get a better idea about what is relevant and worth seeing. Box 1.1 illustrates this interaction.

Box 1.1

A short story about well-informed travelling

Imagine the following scenario. You travel to a small mediaeval town in the south of France that is highly recommended in your travel guide. You get up early and visit a small local café for breakfast. One of the locals, a retired teacher, notices you studying a travel guide of his home town and involves you in a conversation. You tell him that you are here to get an impression of how town life may have been organised a few hundred years ago, and what is still left of it. You refer to your travel guide and other preparations you made in advance, and explain that you want to start your exploration at the main square in front of the church. From there, you would march along the bank of the river and then along the remains of the city wall to the old market square and the city hall.

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The teacher is surprised about your plans and offers to take you on an alternative tour that starts at an old tree outside the former city wall where the main gate used to be. You find out that the story of the old tree and the Roman grave that its shadow covers is crucial for how the town's main roads were organised towards the old market square in a way that they crossed the river where it was narrowest. The old tree also used to be the place where, over hundreds of years, many convicted criminals and 'witches' were executed – it is in walking distance to the church, whose crypt served as dungeons. Even today, the significance of the old tree can still be seen. For instance, every festival begins with a small parade starting at the old tree and proceeding to the market square where it is welcomed by the mayor from the balcony of the city hall; agreements with neighbouring towns are symbolically signed under the old tree; and it is popular among local youths who carve hearts and oaths of love into its trunk, although this has long been forbidden by the authorities. With an apologetic smile and putting his arm around the tree like an old friend, the teacher confesses to having done his fair share of carving on the tree. And sometimes he even visits the place with his wife or his grandchildren to talk about the old times and to search for fading traces of his very own marks.

After three intensive hours of talking to the former teacher, asking him about details and being guided through the town, you understand that the church, river banks, city walls, market square and city hall are all relevant sights and worthwhile exploring, just as your travel guide suggested (it does not mention the multi-purpose function of the crypt though). Yet the way they are arranged can only be understood in the historical perspective represented by the old tree and reproduced in contemporary local habits. With its much broader orientation towards relevant sights, the travel guide does not mention the old tree and its importance in the arrangement of these sights. For that, local knowledge is necessary.

As a way of research, well-informed travelling is not about drifting through a (social) space of knowledge and meaning. On the contrary, it requires a lot of preparation in terms of both substance and behaviour. Think about the example above (Box 1.1): local cafés are good places for an 'explorative' breakfast as they are usually places where locals hang out; the opportunity to talk to a teacher is gladly taken as teachers are famously knowledgeable and ready to communicate their knowledge; the hunch that the arrangement of significant buildings usually follows certain standards is taken from the travel guide and academic books about urban planning in the middle ages; and a guided tour by a local insider is the perfect way of investigating the contemporary significance of mediaeval urban planning and its practical implications. The search process for this research was purposefully designed and at least the substantive preparation and some of the initial steps were also done on purpose.

The technique of the PCI that translates this idea of well-informed travelling into a methodological and practical programme of research could be a good approach for you if:

- you identified interviewing as the appropriate way of collecting information regarding a certain issue;
- the issue refers to a research question regarding the what, how and why of actions, appraisals and opinions;
- you have an idea about people who could provide you with first-hand insights into this topic; and
- your interview partners are willing to allow you to collect their extensive knowledge in order to understand their perspective in as much detail as possible.

In terms of a preliminary definition, the PCI can be described as a *qualitative, discursive-dialogic method of reconstructing knowledge about relevant problems.* This definition involves a few peculiarities. The discursive-dialogic character is outlined above in the idea of well-informed travelling and the involvement of interviewers and their knowledge in a *dialogue* with respondents and their perspectives. The discussion of this dialogue as an epistemological challenge (a task of obtaining *knowledge* about something) is done in Chapter 2 together with a reflection of the specificity of social (scientific) knowledge. Suggesting a particular way of *reconstructing* the meaningfulness of this knowledge through interviews, which is the purpose of the whole book, defines the PCI as a *method*: it is a 'stylized way of conducting research that comprise(s) routine and accepted procedures for doing the rigorous side of science' (see Abbott, 2004: 13). Like other methods of *qualitative* research, the PCI involves an 'exchange between real people' in their own 'social, cultural, and physical context'. It focuses on meanings and behaviour, which the researcher tries to understand 'through the eyes and lived experience of the people' (Schensul, 2008: 521–2).

But what are the 'problems' in problem-centred interviews?

First of all, PCIs do not necessarily deal with issues that are 'problematic'. That would be a misunderstanding of the term. The French notion of *problématique* or the German term *Problemstellung* refers to a *specific research question* – this would be a more appropriate meaning for the 'problem' in problem-centred interviews. Let us consider the original research puzzle that led to the development and design of the PCI as a distinct technique of qualitative interviewing. When the first author wrote his PhD thesis (Witzel, 1982) in the 1970s he was involved in a research project about occupational socialization of young people (Heinz et al., 1979). The purpose of the study was the investigation of the perspectives of graduates from a (lower) secondary modern school and their parents regarding the 'problem' of finding an occupation. The study wanted to

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explore these perspectives as authentically as possible and without theoretical preconceptions. The PCI was the genuine method developed for this very purpose on the basis of a review of methodological and methodical discussions available at that time (see below).

As research is usually not initiated by people themselves, the first step in addressing the research question of this study in terms of *problem centring* was taken by researchers. Thus, the starting point here was the identification of a s*ocietal problem with immediate relevance for individuals*: the conditions and patterns of transitions of graduates from lower secondary education into the world of work in relation to their familial socialization and other influencing factors. The assumption was that, in the process of occupational orientation (of the child), the researcher would be able to address issues of socialization within families, simply because these issues were relevant to family members. The main challenge and task of the PCI was then to take the perspective of the teenager and his or her parents seriously and to trace *their* own criteria of assessing and making sense of the problem in this period of their lives, within this rough thematic frame of reference.

This first reason for naming the interviewing method according to its *orientation towards socially relevant problems* is immediately associated with a key precondition of conducting PCIs: the research question has to correspond to an everyday problem in the perspective of *practical knowledge* that the respondent can articulate and also has an interest in dealing with. This is an important step towards realising the PCI's endeavour of learning about the real motivations behind actions. In order to bridge the scientific and the practical knowledge without corrupting the respondent's perspective on the problem, the *researcher's perspective needs to be systematised and disclosed*. In this way, the term 'problem-centred' underlines the method's programmatic opposition to naive empiricism that promotes radical openness and assumes that meaning will emerge only if interviewers restrain themselves (for a critique, see Kelle, 2005). The term also refers to the practical aspects of the method (see section 2.3). All strategies and activities – ranging from access to the field to forms of communication – are oriented systematically, but flexibly, towards the *research problem*, i.e. the object, as well as to the most effective way of disclosing and understanding the *respondent's perspective on the problem*. Throughout this book we describe the consequences of the PCI's original dialogic perspective on problems on the basis of three examples (cf. Box 1.2 and Table 6.1). They are taken from very different studies that employed PCIs and should explicate the dependence of the choice and implementation of the method on the research object (see the principle of object orientation in section 2.3).

Finally, the aspect of *'centring'* the problem has caused some confusion in the reception of the technique. It was sometimes interpreted in the sense of a limitation of the topic – it was associated with legitimising strategies of interviewers to bring respondents back on track in case they strayed off topic.

Instead, problem centring means that the respondent is encouraged and supported in reconstructing research problems by means of reconstructing practical problems. In the process of a dialogue characterised by mutual trust, the respondent should gradually remember more and more and unfold the overall problem in narrative accounts. This entails the establishment of a *focus of the reconstruction of meaning* on all crucial aspects of the problem involving the breadth and depth that are appropriate for the topic. And there is no reason to expect respondents to stray off topic here.

Box 1.2

Studying problems: three examples

Throughout the book we refer to three examples from our own experience in conducting PCIs. They are mainly taken from three very different research contexts introduced below. As we were (leading) researchers in these projects, we can inform about every aspect without reservation and generalise our reflections about particular challenges, pitfalls and mistakes involved. These studies differ in terms of scope, duration, funding and human resources, etc. and are thus able to illustrate the wide range of challenges when using this method (see Table 6.1 for a comparative overview).

In the first, STUDY A, PCIs were used in the frame of a longitudinal, mixed-methods study. It investigated the job entry of young adults after completing vocational education in the German apprenticeship system and their successive careers regarding gender and class differences. In the second, STUDY B, PCIs were used for expert interviews in the frame of a short, commissioned and applied investigation of rising costs after the reform of custodianship of adults in the German federal state of Lower Saxony. In a peer research approach, judges were trained to interview judges. STUDY C was a PhD thesis and used PCIs in the frame of investigating meanings of unemployment in the post-communist context of Lithuania in the perspective of young people in transition to the world of work. The research puzzle and societal problem consisted here in the fact that the transformation from state socialism to market economy brought an end to decades of full employment and introduced mass unemployment as a new problem for both society and individuals. STUDIES A and C had a common interest in the issue of youth transitions, which originally motivated the development of the technique of the PCI.

Examples are integrated throughout the book and the reader will learn more and more details about these studies as she moves through the text. The general chapters of the book (3 to 5) include mostly examples from STUDIES A and C. They help to illustrate the basic methodical aspects of the PCI. Chapter 6 complements this

general perspective and is dedicated to extensive discussions of examples from STUDIES A and B, which also serve as the basis for the discussion of typical interviewing errors and pitfalls.

Background and use of the PCI

The development of the PCI has its origin in the German tradition of qualitative research and the methods discourse of the 1970s and 1980s (Mey and Mruck, 2007). In its very first version, the PCI was introduced as a comprehensive mixed-methods approach combining interviewing with case analyses, group discussions and biographical elements (Witzel, 1982). In this book, we will only discuss the interviewing part and refer to it as PCI. The PCI originated in the context of the 1970s revival and re-development of qualitative methods associated with the reception of the interpretive paradigm that Goldthorpe (1973: 449) called a 'revolutionary "paradigm shift"'.

Its development is also a response to the then tenacious status paradox of qualitative interviewing. Open interviewing was also recognised at the time, in influential standard textbooks of social research, as fulfilling several criteria that are taken for granted in empirical research, for instance, the consideration of individual experiences as well as the context of a certain case (e.g. Friedrichs, 1973). Yet, at the same time, the systematic development of qualitative methods of interviewing was largely neglected; they were generally considered as unsophisticated and pre-scientific methods that could not replace the conventional, more formalised techniques. Typically, the qualitative interview continued to have the status of a method applied in the frame of 'unstructured' or less structured pre-tests and pilot studies exploring a field of research for the purpose of preparing a 'proper', i.e. quantitative-representative, investigation. Alternatively, the material produced with qualitative interviews was used for little more than to enrich and illustrate quantitative analyses with 'juicy quotes' that should bring flesh to the bones and colour to the phenomenon under investigation, as Adorno (1961: 8) once put it. After all, as Kohli (1978: 23) maintained, in an influential German publication of the late 1970s, open interviewing was, despite its merits, regarded as too time- and resource-consuming. Somewhat ironically he claims that this also resulted in an arbitrariness of findings that was 'at least hidden behind an impressive technical apparatus' in the traditional approach of 'closed' methods. The research policy and economy of this period were characterised by hegemonic criteria of generalisation on the basis of representativeness and inference, and by a breadth-before-depth approach. Against this background, the status of qualitative interviewing was, at best, that of a complementary and auxiliary method filling the by-then obvious knowledge gaps that the standardised empirical

research (re-)produced. Consequently, the refinement of qualitative methods was until then hardly facilitated.

The original design of the PCI, embedded within this methods discourse, tried to establish a distinct qualitative interview technique as a stand-alone method for research that responds to some of this criticism. As indicated in Chapter 2, the principles of object orientation and problem centring constitute alternative perspectives to the instrument-orientation of traditional approaches. The research-economic argument at any rate needs to be rebutted on academic grounds alone at least with regard to the collection and consolidation of qualitative data that is both valuable and valid.

Importantly, the PCI is the product of a twofold critique of the social research culture of that time. On the one hand, it criticised the artificial interviewing style suggested by the then hegemonic quantitative paradigm for its *fallacy of non-reactivity*. Reactivity, meaning the fact that 'the act of doing the research changes the behaviour of participants' (McKechnie, 2008: 729), is inevitable as soon as it involves people interacting in face-to-face encounters. While it is commonly understood that 'people are not machines', the 'importance of interviewing uniformity' is nevertheless maintained in this approach (Moser and Kalton, 1971: 276). On the other hand, the critique of the PCI addressed radical alternatives from qualitative research, like the narrative interview (Schütze, 1983) for its *fallacy of non-intervention*. Inherent demands of narrations (*Zugzwänge*) – i.e. the tendency and capacity of people to unfold, complete and elaborate a story by themselves (and without supposedly 'contaminating' contributions of the interviewer) once they began to tell it – are important but rely heavily on quite a few communicative requirements. The rule of not intervening or interrupting accounts is at risk of creating an equally artificial situation that may demand too much of the respondents. As a consequence of this criticism, the PCI instead suggests that interviewers take the role of an agent of *active listening* including the stimulation of narrations and thoughts. They dissolve some of the asymmetry inherent in the interview situation by involving the respondent in a process of *active understanding* that provides the possibility to clarify and deepen meaning and knowledge during the interview.

Over the years, the PCI (Witzel, 1982, 1989, 1996) has become recognised as one of the more elaborate approaches within the range of methods for collecting verbal data (e.g. Flick, 2006; Helfferich, 2009: 35–6; Lamnek, 2010: 332–7; Mayring, 2002: 67–72; Reinders, 2005: 116–25). And it has been widely used: the PCI is 'probably one of the most frequently used types of qualitative interviewing and analysis used in the German social sciences', as Scheibelhofer (2005: 20) writes. The method is suitable to investigate actions and experiences, their justification and evaluation, as well as individual opinions. It is directed towards topics, objects and their interrelations, which are little explored. Its underlying image of humanity (*Menschenbild*) considers people as self-reflective and capable of acting and communicating.

Overall, the PCI is more of a skill and craft than a (specialised) technique or tool because its appropriateness depends on the concrete object and question of research. The PCI's 'solution' of common problems of qualitative interviewing proved to be useful in many research contexts. PCIs were used in a variety of contexts, countries and across many disciplines of the human and social sciences including, for instance: demography (Von der Lippe and Fuhrer, 2004), pedagogics (Szczyrba, 2003), psychology (Kühn, 2004; Mey, 1999; Nentwich, 2008), psychiatry (Roick et al., 2006; Stiglmayr, 2008), sociology (Bolder and Hendrich, 2000; Fritsch, 2006; Reiter, 2003), cross-cultural management (Hajro and Pudelko, 2010), political science (Pregernig, 2007), social work (Schmidt-Grunert, 1999), cultural sciences (Filep, 2009), marketing research (Kurz et al., 2007), medicine (Hasseler et al., 2011), environmental sciences (Medilanski et al., 2006; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001), criminology (Strobl, 1998), and food study (Riefer and Hamm, 2011). The PCI can be at the core of interdisciplinary research as it was in the case of the Collaborative Research Centre 186 'Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course' that was carried out at the University of Bremen from 1988 to 2001 (Kluge and Kelle, 2001). More recently, the overall approach of the PCI also constitutes the basis of advances in the method of 'problem-centred group discussion' (Kühn and Koschel, 2011).

And, as Mey (1999: 148) notes, it has been applied and re-labelled by several scholars for the purpose of their specialised research needs. For instance, Diezinger (1995: 273) calls it a 'combination of open narrative questions and more precise follow-up questions'; in this way, they try to combine the advantages of an open and non-directive approach with specific stimulation through targeted questions. Lenz (1991: 57) describes it for his purpose as 'narratively enlightened guided interview'; and Bock (1991: 161) calls it 'semi-structured guide-oriented in-depth interview'.

Yet apart from a brief introductory text in English (Witzel, 2000), which is available worldwide through the authoritative and recognized online journal 'Forum: Qualitative Social Research' (http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs), the technique is so far hardly accessible to the wider international audience. The present book fills this gap by providing an authoritative yet concise and applied introduction to the background and history, scope, technique and application of the method.

Purpose of the book and preview of chapters

This book is a comprehensive introduction to the methodology, technique and application of the specific interviewing technique of the PCI (Witzel, 1982, 1989, 1996). It is *not* a general introduction to qualitative interviewing, and does not intend to replace introductory literature (e.g. Gillham, 2005; King and Horrocks, 2010; Kvale, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Roulston, 2010; Rubin and Rubin, 2004; Schostak, 2006; Seidman, 2006; Wengraf, 2001). Due

to the hands-on character of this textbook we need to neglect relevant specialised discourses regarding methodology and methods that were relevant in the development of the PCI. For instance, the debate about the apparent opposition between qualitative and quantitative approaches as well as their different criteria for research quality is ongoing in the German context although constructive contributions to overcoming it were available 30 years ago (Steinke, 1999; Wilson, 1982/86). We also need to neglect here the discussion of the many approaches of qualitative data analysis that could be applied to interviews collected with PCIs. We can only offer a few practical examples of how it can be done.

Chapter 2, following, starts with an outline of the methodological and epistemological approach of the PCI and indicates how it is distinguished from other established techniques of interviewing. We consider some of the features of interpretive knowledge constitution and explicate the epistemological background of the *well-informed traveller* as metaphor for the particular role and attitude of problem-centred interviewers. As a method of interpretive social research, problem-centred interviewing consists essentially in the epistemological challenge of reconstructing problems in a dialogue between interviewers (well-informed travellers equipped with certain forms of prior knowledge) on the one side, and respondents with their practical knowledge from everyday life on the other (see Figure 2.1). They are partners in a temporary and interactive relationship, the quality of which is crucial for the final quality of the interview. After discussing the method's three main principles of problem centring, process orientation and object orientation, we discuss differences of the PCI in relation to other methods of interviewing that share certain similarities.

Chapters 3 to 5 are dedicated to the discussion of the practical steps that usually characterize the process of problem-centred interviewing. These parts constitute a general but dense roadmap for the implementation of PCIs consisting of three steps: preparing, doing and processing PCIs. The flowchart in Figure 3.1 can be taken as the table of contents for these parts.

Chapter 3, about *preparing PCIs'*, describes the typical steps before the fieldwork starts. The consolidation of a research interest and its translation into questions go hand-in-hand with the development of a qualitative research design. Then we discuss the crucial status of prior knowledge in PCI research. We distinguish between everyday, contextual and research knowledge and suggest using them in a sensitising way by integrating them into a preliminary framework of research. The development and use of an interview or topical guide is one of the tools that bridge the sensitising framework and the concrete interview situation. Ideally, PCIs are carried out by the principal researcher who is usually better able to handle pre-interpretations developed during the interview. However, this is not always feasible and we therefore also discuss the training of interviewers. We conclude this section with some remarks concerning sampling and field access.

The main steps of *doing PCIs* are described in Chapter 4. After some suggestions about the choice of the interview setting, we discuss important aspects regarding the very beginning of the conversation. We then explicate and illustrate the interplay of opening question, opening account and follow-up questions. They constitute the heart of the PCI and form a complex unity of strategies of interaction and communication with the purpose of facilitating a process of discursive-dialogic knowledge production. The collection of information related to the background of the respondent, the optional use of a short questionnaire, and the important moment of debriefing and bringing the conversation and the encounter to a close conclude the discussion in this chapter.

Chapter 5, about *processing PCIs'* is dedicated to the typical steps that usually follow the actual interview. The postscript is a self-debriefing tool that helps to capture important information about the conversation and its context which has not been registered otherwise. Transcription and analysis of PCIs do not follow particular rules; they depend on the research design and the research interest. The question of qualitative analysis cannot be discussed exhaustively in this book with its focus on PCI-based data *collection*. Thus, we restrict ourselves here to providing a general outline of how the principle of problem centring can be considered also in the analysis and interpretation of the interviews. We suggest a series of general steps of a dialogic and problem-centred process of constructing and arriving at 'findings'. Examples from STUDIES A and C are integrated. Finally, we briefly address a few points associated with the planning of resources for PCI research.

Short interviewing examples are integrated into the whole book. Yet in order to do justice to the textbook character of this introduction to problem-centred interviewing, Chapter 6 is exclusively dedicated to providing an in-depth look at practical aspects of the method. We introduce two studies, describe selected aspects of problem-centred interviewing, and provide extensive examples of producing, interpreting and reflecting typical interview passages and how the production of knowledge is contingent upon the interaction of interviewer and respondent. Integrated in this part are exemplary discussions of common interviewing mistakes and pitfalls, which are described and explained with regard to their systematic relation to the basic principles of problem-centred interviewing.

Instead of a conclusion, Chapter 7 provides a systematic discussion of interviewing errors. This should not discourage students and researchers from using the PCI but should instead help them to understand the basic principles of the PCI from the negative angle of discussing common interviewing mistakes and pitfalls. Flawless interviews are rare. Neither of us has ever come across a PCI without mistakes, or has ever done one. We think that the idea of being 'in control' of the immediacy of interview communication is an illusion. However, the development of the skill of problem-centred interviewing is greatly improved when we are willing to learn from these mistakes. This is what the final chapter wants to facilitate.

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