CHARACTERIZING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

This chapter begins with a research interview about learning, based on a phenomenological approach (in later chapters, we present alternatives to phenomenological life world interviewing). After a brief outline of phenomenology follows a depiction inspired by phenomenology of the mode of understanding in a qualitative research interview. In contrast to the common emphasis on empathy and equality in qualitative interviewing, we point out the power asymmetry of a research interview. We then go on to highlight the specific nature of the research interview by comparing and contrasting it with two other forms of interviews—the philosophical dialogue and the therapeutic interview. We compare and contrast the modes of interaction and understanding in the research interview with the logical/cognitive mode of philosophical dialogues and the emotional/personal mode of therapeutic interviews. We present a philosophical dialogue by Socrates, then discuss the logic of this Socratic form of interview inquiry and show its relationship to current research interviewing. Finally, we present a therapeutic interview, outline one mode of understanding in therapeutic interviews, and mention implications for the history of research interviewing.

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEW ON LEARNING

The purpose of the qualitative research interview discussed here is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives. The structure comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview, it involves a specific approach and technique of questioning. The

following interview passage is taken from the foundational article "An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology" by Giorgi (1975). The research question guiding the interview was What constitutes learning in the everyday world? The first half of the interview, conducted by a student, is reproduced here.

R (Researcher): Could you describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which learning occurred for you?

S (Subject:
E. W., 24-year-old female, housewife, and educational researcher): The first thing that comes to mind is what I learned about interior decorating from Myrtis. She was telling me about the way you see things. Her view of looking at different rooms has been altered. She told me that when you come into a room you don't usually notice how many vertical and horizontal lines there are, at least consciously, you don't notice. And yet, if you were to take someone who knows what's going on in the field of interior decorating, they would intuitively feel if there were the right number of vertical and horizontal lines. So, I went home, and I started looking at the lines in our living room, and I counted the number of horizontal and vertical lines, many of which I had never realized were lines before. A beam . . . I had never really thought of that as vertical before, just as a protrusion from the wall. (Laughs) I found out what was wrong with our living room design: many, too many, horizontal lines and not enough vertical. So I started trying to move things around and change the way it looked. I did this by moving several pieces of furniture and taking out several knick-knacks, de-emphasizing certain lines, and . . . it really looked differently to me. It's interesting because my husband came home several hours later and I said, "Look at the living room; it's all different." Not knowing this, that I had picked up, he didn't look at it in the same way I did. He saw things were different, he saw things were moved, but he wasn't able to verbalize that there was a de-emphasis on the horizontal lines and more of an emphasis on the vertical. So I felt I had learned something.

R: What part of that experience would you consider learning?

S: The knowledge part that a room is made up of horizontal and vertical lines. The application of that to another room; applying it to something that had been bothering me for quite a long time and I could never put my finger on it. I think the actual learning was what was horizontal and vertical about a room. The learning that was left with me was a way of looking at rooms.

R: Are you saying then that the learning was what you learned from Myrtis, what you learned when you tried to apply . . . ?

S: Since I did apply it, I feel that I learned when I did apply it. I would have *thought* that I learned it only by having that knowledge, *but* having gone through the act of application, I really don't feel I would have learned it. I could honestly say, I had learned it at that time. (pp. 84–86)

This interview investigated what constitutes learning for a woman in her everyday world. It began with an open request to describe a situation where learning occurred. The woman herself chose the learning situation she would talk about—interior decorating; she described this freely and extensively in her own words. The answer spontaneously took the form of a story, a narrative of one learning episode. The interviewer's first question introduced learning as the theme of the interview. Her remaining questions departed from the subject's answers in order to keep learning in focus and to ask for clarification of the different aspects of the subject's learning story.

This interview gives a good picture of a semistructured research interview focusing on the subject's experience of a theme. The interviewer's questions aimed at a cognitive clarification of the subject's experience of learning, which is further analyzed in Chapter 12. Although this kind of interview aims at letting the subject describe as freely as possible, it is not completely without presuppositions. For example, the opening question frames learning as something that "occurs," which represents a specific view of learning that not everyone would agree with (others would emphasize that learning is "done," for example). This illustrates an important discussion about the extent to which qualitative interviewing can avoid leading or influencing the subjects,

which we return to a number of times (most explicitly in Chapter 9). The mode of interviewing was inspired by phenomenological philosophy, to which we now turn.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE MODE OF UNDERSTANDING IN A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Phenomenology was founded as a philosophy by Edmund Husserl around 1900, further developed as an existential philosophy by Martin Heidegger, and then taken in an existential and dialectical direction by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The subject matter of phenomenology began with consciousness and experience, was expanded by Husserl and also Heidegger to include the human life world, and was further expanded by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to take account of the body and human action in historical contexts.

A phenomenological approach has, in a general nonphilosophical sense, been prevalent in qualitative research. In sociology, phenomenology was mediated by the Husserlian-based phenomenology of the social world by Alfred Schutz and expounded on by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and by Garfinkel (1967) in his ethnomethodological studies of the practical production of social order. Generally, in qualitative inquiry, *phenomenology* is a term that points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actors' own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be. The open phenomenological approach to the meanings of phenomena in the everyday world are taken up again when we address how to analyze interviews (in Chapter 12 on meaning condensation).

In focusing the interview on the experienced meanings of the subjects' life world, phenomenology has been relevant for clarifying the mode of understanding in a qualitative research interview. The implications of phenomenological philosophy for qualitative research were developed in a series of studies at Duquesne University. Starting with van Kaam's (1959) study of "the experience of really being understood," the method was further applied, systematized, and reflected on by the phenomenological psychologist Giorgi and his colleagues, among others (see Fischer & Wertz, 1979; Giorgi, 1970; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). According to Giorgi, "Phenomenology is the study of the

structure, and the variations of structure, of the consciousness to which any thing, event, or person appears" (Giorgi, 1975, p. 83).

Box 2.1   Phenomenological Method

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), what matters is to describe the given as precisely and completely as possible; to describe rather than to explain or analyze. It is not possible to give precise instructions for an *open description*, and Spiegelberg (1960) illustrates the method by using metaphors; for example, "to the matters themselves," "seeing and listening," "keeping the eyes open," "not think, but see."

In phenomenological philosophy, objectivity is an expression of fidelity to the phenomena investigated. The goal is to arrive at an *investigation of essences* by shifting from describing separate phenomena to searching for their common essence. Husserl termed one method of investigating essences a "free variation in fantasy." This means varying a given phenomenon freely in its possible forms, and that which remains constant through the different variations is the essence of the phenomenon.

A phenomenological *reduction* calls for a suspension of judgment as to the existence or nonexistence of the content of an experience. The reduction can be pictured as a "bracketing," an attempt to place the commonsense and scientific foreknowledge about the phenomena within parentheses in order to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomena.

In **Box 2.1** we have, based on Spiegelberg (1960), outlined a phenomenological method that includes description, investigation of essences, and phenomenological reduction. Shortly, we depict more specifically the mode of understanding in a qualitative research interview from a perspective inspired by phenomenology.

A semistructured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semistructured—it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire. It is

conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and that may include suggested questions. The interview is usually transcribed, and the written text and sound recording together constitute the materials for the subsequent analysis of meaning.

In what follows, we further characterize the semistructured qualitative interview by elaborating on twelve aspects or key words from a phenomenological standpoint.

Life world. The topic of qualitative research interviews is the interviewee's lived everyday world. The attempt to obtain unprejudiced descriptions entails a rehabilitation of the Lebenswelt—the life world—in relation to the world of science. The life world is the world as it is encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanations. The qualitative interview may be seen as one realization of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) program for a phenomenological science starting from the primary experience of the world:

> All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by re-awakening the basic experiences of the world of which science is the second order expression. (p. viii)

The geographer's map is thus an abstraction of the countryside where we first learned what a forest, a mountain, or a river was. In this phenomenological approach, the qualitative studies of subjects' experiences of their world are basic to the more abstract scientific theories of the social world; interviews are in this sense not merely a few entertaining curiosities added to some basic scientific quantitative facts obtained by experiments and questionnaires. The qualitative interview is a research method that gives a privileged access to people's basic experience of the lived world.

Meaning. The interview seeks to understand the meaning of central themes of the subjects' lived world. The interviewer registers and interprets the meanings of what is said as well as how it is said; he or she should be knowledgeable about the interview topic and be observant of—and able to interpret—vocalization, facial expressions, and other bodily gestures. An

everyday conversation often takes place on a factual level. A pupil may state, "I am not as stupid as my grades at the examinations showed, but I have bad study habits." Common reactions could then concern matters of fact: "What grades did you get?" or "What are your study habits?"—questions that also may yield important information. A meaning-oriented reply would, in contrast, be something like, "You feel that the grades are not an adequate measure of your competence?" A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level, although it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level. It is necessary to listen to the explicit descriptions and to the meanings expressed, as well as to what is said "between the lines." The interviewer can seek to formulate the implicit message, "send it back" to the subject, and obtain an immediate confirmation or disconfirmation of the interpretation of what the interviewee is saying.

Qualitative. The qualitative interview seeks knowledge as expressed in normal language; it does not aim at quantification. The interview aims at nuanced accounts of different aspects of the interviewee's life world; it works with words and not with numbers. The precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation in qualitative interviews correspond to exactness in quantitative measurements.

Descriptive. The qualitative interviewer encourages the subjects to describe as precisely as possible what they experience and feel and how they act. The focus is on nuanced descriptions that depict the qualitative diversity, the many differences and varieties of a phenomenon, rather than on ending up with fixed categorizations. The question of why the subjects experience and act as they do is primarily a task for the researcher to evaluate.

Specificity. Descriptions of specific situations and actions are elicited, not general opinions. On the basis of comprehensive accounts of specific situations and events, the interviewer will be able to arrive at meanings on a concrete level, instead of general opinions obtained by questions such as "What is your opinion of grading?" Still, it should be recognized that this type of general opinion question might yield information of interest in itself.

Deliberate naiveté. The interviewer exhibits openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation. The qualitative interview attempts to obtain descriptions that are as inclusive and presuppositionless as possible of important themes of the interviewee's life world. Rather than the interviewer posing preformulated questions with respect to prepared categories for analysis, the deliberate

naiveté and a bracketing of presuppositions implies openness to new and unexpected phenomena. The interviewer should be curious, sensitive to what is said—as well as to what is not said—and critical of his or her own presuppositions and hypotheses during the interview. Thus, presuppositionlessness implies a critical awareness of the interviewer's own presuppositions.

Focus. The interview is focused on particular themes; it is neither strictly structured with standard questions, nor entirely "nondirective." Through open questions the interview focuses on the topic of research. It is then up to the subject to bring forth the dimensions he or she finds important in the theme of inquiry. The interviewer leads the subject toward certain themes but not to specific opinions about these themes.

Ambiguity. The interviewee's answers are sometimes ambiguous. One statement can imply several possibilities of interpretation, and the subject may also give apparently contradictory statements during an interview. The aim of the qualitative research interview is not to end up with unequivocal and quantifiable meanings on the themes in focus. The task of the interviewer is to clarify, as far as possible, whether the ambiguities and contradictory statements are due to a failure of communication in the interview situation or whether they reflect genuine inconsistencies, ambivalence, and contradictions in an interviewee's life situation. The contradictions of interviewees need not merely be due to faulty communication in the interview, nor to the interviewee's personality, but may be adequate reflections of objective contradictions in the world in which they live.

Change. In the course of an interview, subjects can change their descriptions of, and attitudes toward, a theme. Subjects may themselves discover new aspects of the themes they are describing and suddenly see relations they had not been aware of earlier. The questioning can thus instigate processes of reflection where the meanings of themes described by subjects are no longer the same after the interview. An interview may be a learning process for the interviewee, as well as for the interviewer.

Sensitivity. Different interviewers, using the same interview guide, may produce different statements on the same themes, due to varying levels of sensitivity toward, and knowledge about, the topic of the interview. Thus an interviewer who has no ear for music may have difficulties obtaining nuanced descriptions of musical experiences from his or her interviewees, in particular if the interviewer is trying to probe more intensively into the meaning of the music. If a common methodological requirement of obtaining intersubjectively reproducible data were to be followed here, the interview form might have to

be standardized in a way that would restrict the understanding of musical experiences to more superficial aspects understandable to the average person. The requirement of sensitivity to, and a foreknowledge about, the topic of the interview contrasts with the presuppositionless attitude advocated earlier. The tension between these two aspects may be expressed in the requirement for a qualified naiveté on the part of the interviewer.

Interpersonal situation. The research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between two people. The interviewer and the subject act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other. The interaction may also be anxiety provoking and evoke defense mechanisms in the interviewee as well as in the interviewer. The interviewer should be aware of potential ethical transgressions of the subject's personal boundaries and be able to address the interpersonal dynamics within an interview. The knowledge produced in a research interview is constituted by the interaction itself, in the specific situation created between an interviewer and an interviewee. With another interviewer, a different interaction may be created and a different knowledge produced.

Positive experience. A well-conducted research interview may be a rare and enriching experience for the subject, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation. It is probably not a very common experience in everyday life that another person—for an hour or more—shows an interest in, is sensitive toward, and seeks to understand as deeply as possible one's own experiences and views on a topic. In practice, it may sometimes be difficult to terminate a qualitative interview, as the subject may want to continue the conversation and explore further the insights into his or her life world brought about by the interview.

We have here attempted, inspired by phenomenology, to depict the mode of understanding in a semistructured and empathetic life world interview, which was exemplified by the phenomenological interview on learning in everyday life.

Box 2.2   Phenomenology: For and Against

Although phenomenology has been extremely significant in the development of qualitative research, not least with respect to establishing steps and procedures of analysis and thereby contributing to making qualitative

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inquiry a legitimate scientific endeavor, it has also been criticized for favoring an individualist and essentialist approach to research. Critics take issue with the phenomenological insistence on describing the given. At the same time as phenomenologists were developing their method in the 20th century, other philosophers were attacking what they saw as "the myth of the given" (Sellars, 1956), arguing that nothing is purely and simply given and that every understanding is perspectival and rests on interpretation.

Furthermore, Husserl's assumption that the goal of phenomenological analysis is to uncover the essences of experiences came to sit uneasily with the antiessentialist stance of postmodern thought. And even the key notion of experience has been questioned, and deconstructed, not least by the godfather of deconstruction himself, Jacques Derrida, who argued that experience as an idea is connected with what he denounced as a metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1970; see also St. Pierre, 2008). The metaphysics of presence grounds knowledge in what is present to a knowing subject, but, according to poststructuralist philosophers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and not least Derrida himself, this is an illusion, since there are no stable grounds or foundations from which to know the world once and for all. St. Pierre (2008) goes further and argues that the otherwise important qualitative notion of *voice* (privileging the speaking subject and her stories) belongs together with *experience* and *narrative* to the questionable metaphysics of presence. She even suggests that we need to move forward to "post qualitative research," because she finds that the very idea of qualitative research is too closely wedded to the modernist favoring of the knowing subject and her experiences (St. Pierre, 2011).

We return to the very idea of qualitative research in the next chapter. Here we can summarize the arguments for and against phenomenology by saying that its advocates point to its capacity for studying first-person experience, its rigorous methodology, and its success in establishing many forms of qualitative research on a firm basis. Its critics attack the essentialism and the idea of experience as a given that characterizes some versions of phenomenology, especially in its Husserlian forms. We should note, however, that Derrida's own deconstructive poststructuralism (to which we return in later chapters) grew out of phenomenology, owing much to Husserl's successor Heidegger, which indicates that there is no simple—or given!—antagonism between phenomenology and its critics.

Box 2.2 provides some discussion points around phenomenology with relevance for qualitative interviewing. We return again to phenomenology as inspiration for how to conduct qualitative interviewing in Chapter 7, whereas other forms of interviewing are addressed in Chapter 8.

Power Asymmetry in Qualitative Research Interviews

Taking into account the mutual understanding and the personal interview interaction described in the twelve aspects just listed, we should not regard a research interview as a completely open and free dialogue between egalitarian partners. The empathetic form of phenomenological life world interviewing we have characterized here may appear harmonious, and issues of power have been little addressed in relation to these and other forms of qualitative research interviews. The research interview is, however, a specific professional conversation, which typically involves a clear power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject. In order to correct the potential misunderstanding of research interviews as a dominance-free zone of consensus and empathy, we point out in **Box 2.3** some power asymmetries in qualitative research interviews.

Box 2.3   Power Asymmetry in Qualitative Research Interviews

The interview entails an asymmetrical power relation. The research interview is not an open, everyday conversation between equal partners. The interviewer has scientific competence, and he or she initiates and defines the interview situation, determines the interview topic, poses questions and decides which answers to follow up on, and also terminates the conversation.

The interview is a one-way dialogue. An interview is a one-directional questioning—the role of the interviewer is to ask, and the role of the interviewee is to answer.

The interview is an instrumental dialogue. In the research interview an instrumentalization of the conversation takes place. A good conversation is no longer a goal in itself but a means for providing the researcher with

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descriptions, narratives, texts—to interpret and report according to his or her research interests.

The interview may be a manipulative dialogue. A research interview may follow a more or less hidden agenda. The interviewer may want to obtain information without the interviewee knowing what the interviewer is after, attempting to "by indirections find directions out."

The interviewer has a monopoly of interpretation. The researcher usually has a monopoly of interpretation over the subject's statements. As the "big interpreter," the researcher maintains an exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant.

Countercontrol. In reaction to the dominance of the interviewer, some subjects will withhold information, or talk around the subject matter, and some may start to question the researcher and also protest his or her questions and interpretations, or, in rare cases, withdraw from the interview.

Exceptions. Some interviewers attempt to reduce the power asymmetry of the interview situation by collaborative interviewing where the researcher and subject approach equality in questioning, interpreting, and reporting.

The asymmetry of the power relation in the research interviewer outlined in **Box 2.3** is easily overlooked if we only focus on the open mode of understanding and the close personal interaction of the interview. There does not need to be any intentional exertion of power by the interviewer. The description concerns the structural positions in the interview, whereby for example subjects may, more or less deliberately, express what they believe the interviewer authority wants to hear. If power is inherent in human conversations and relationships, the point is not that power should necessarily be eliminated from research interviews, but rather that interviewers ought to reflect on the role of power in the production of interview knowledge. Acknowledging the power relations in qualitative research interviews raises both epistemological issues about the implications for the knowledge produced and ethical issues about the implications for how to deal responsibly with power asymmetries. We return to these questions in the two following chapters on epistemology and ethics.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUES, THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATIONS, AND RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

One way to characterize qualitative interviews is to contrast them to other conversational practices that are close to interviewing but still substantially different. So in order to highlight the mode of understanding, and the specific interaction in the research interview, we now compare it to a philosophical dialogue (on love) by Socrates and also to therapeutic conversations (on hate).

Box 2.4   A Philosophical Dialogue on Love

"And quite properly, my friend," said Socrates; "then, such being the case, must not Love be only love of beauty, and not of ugliness?" he assented.

"Well then, we have agreed that he loves what he lacks and has not?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And what Love lacks and has not is beauty?"

"That needs must be," he said.

"Well now, will you say that what lacks beauty, and in no wise possesses it, is beautiful?"

"Surely not."

"So can you still allow Love to be beautiful, if this is the case?"

Whereupon Agathon said, "I greatly fear, Socrates, I know nothing of what I was talking about."

SOURCE: *V. Lysis, Symposion, Gorgias* (p. 167), by Plato (translated by W. R. M. Lamb), 1953, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plato's *Symposion* is a philosophical dialogue in a dramatic form. The partners in the dialogue are formally on an equal level; there is a reciprocal questioning of the true nature of the knowledge under debate, as well as of the logic of the participants' questions and answers. In *Symposion*, Socrates takes Agathon's speech on love as his point of departure. He repeats its main points in a condensed form, interprets what Agathon has said, and asks for his opponent's confirmations or disconfirmations of the interpretations. Socrates

started out by appearing naive and innocent, then praised Agathon's views on Eros, after which he followed up by uncovering one contradiction after another in Agathon's position. This philosophical dialogue is a harsh form of interaction that seeks true knowledge through the unrelenting rigor of a discursive argumentation. Socrates compared himself to a legal interrogator, and his opponents likened him to an electric eel. Chapter 4 on ethics illustrates another example of Socrates examining his opponents.

Some qualitative researchers have recently found inspiration in Socrates's practice of questioning. Dinkins (2005) has outlined the general principles of Socratic interviewing, which she refers to as "Socratic-hermeneutic interpre-viewing." Socrates's "method" in the dialogues is not a method in the conventional sense of following a fixed procedure toward a goal, but rather an examining of a person by considering his or her statements normatively. The Socratic conversation is a fundamental mode of understanding, rather than a method in any mechanical sense. In Dinkins's (2005) rendition, Socrates's examining proceeds as follows:

1. Socrates encounters someone who takes an action or makes a statement into which Socrates wishes to inquire.

2. Socrates asks the person for a definition of the relevant central concept, which is then offered.

3. Together, Socrates and the respondent (or "co-inquirer" to use Dinkins's term) deduce some consequences of the definition.

4. Socrates points out a possible conflict between the deduced consequences and another belief held by the respondent. The respondent is then given the choice of rejecting the belief or the definition.

5. Usually, the respondent rejects the definition, because the belief is too central—epistemically or existentially—to be given up.

6. A new definition is offered, and the steps are repeated.

Research interviews today, however, tend to be much less agonistic than this; the interview subject is commonly regarded as an informant or a partner, not as an opponent. The interviewer poses questions in order to obtain knowledge about the interviewee's world and rarely enters into tenacious arguments about the logic and truth of what the interviewee says. Moreover, it is normally

outside the scope of research interviews for the interviewer to argue the strength of his or her own conception of the topic investigated or to try to change the subject's convictions. The interviewer is generally conceived as receptive rather than assertive (Wengraf, 2001).

There are also differences between the idea of knowledge found in the Socratic dialogues and the prevalent ideas in qualitative interviewing. Most of the knowledge produced in interview research, especially of phenomenological bents, can be said to be about people's experiences, desires, and opinions. To use a word from classical Greek philosophy, this kind of knowledge represents *doxa.* That is, it is about the interview subjects' experiences and opinions, which are often very interesting and important to learn about but which—when viewed through the lenses of classical philosophy—rarely constitute knowledge in the sense of *episteme* (i.e., knowledge that has been found to be valid through conversational and dialectical questioning).

The purpose of the Socratic dialogues was to move the conversation partners from doxa to episteme (i.e., from a state of being simply *opinionated* to being capable of *questioning* and *justifying* what they believed to be the case) (Brinkmann, 2007a). Thus Socrates demonstrated that Agathon's opinion of the nature of love was unjustifiable—it was doxa rather than episteme—and Agathon had to admit that he did not know what he was talking about. If we follow Socrates, qualitative interviews seem to have the potential of being both doxastic and also epistemic. That is, they can elicit important descriptions and narratives of people's experiences, narratives, hopes, and dreams (the doxa), but they can also be employed as conversational ways of producing episteme, knowledge that has been justified discursively in a conversation.

As an example of the latter, we can mention the interviews conducted by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, as reported in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), which we return to a number of times in this book. In the appendix to their study of North American values and character, the authors spell out their view of social science and its methodology, summarized as "social science as public philosophy." The empirical material for their book consisted of interviews with more than 200 participants, some of whom were interviewed more than once. Inspired by Socratic dialogues, the researchers engaged in what they termed active interviews with their respondents in order to generate public conversation about societal values and goals. Such active interviews do not necessarily aim for agreement between interviewer and interviewee, and the interviewer is allowed to

question and challenge what the interviewee says. In one example from their book, the interviewer tries to discover at what point the respondent would take responsibility for another human being:

Q: So what are you responsible for?

A: I'm responsible for my acts and for what I do.

Q: Does that mean you're responsible for others, too?

A: No.

Q: Are you your sister's keeper?

A: No.

Q: Your brother's keeper?

A: No.

Q: Are you responsible for your husband?

A: I'm not. He makes his own decisions. He is his own person. He acts his own acts. I can agree with them or I can disagree with them. If I ever find them nauseous enough, I have a responsibility to leave and not deal with it any more.

Q: What about children?

A: I . . . I would say I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their own acts. (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 304)

Here, the interviewer repeatedly challenges the respondent's claim of not being responsible for other human beings. With the Socratic principles of interviewing in mind, we can see the interviewer pressing for a contradiction between the respondent's definition of responsibility, involving the idea that she is only responsible for herself, and her likely feeling of at least some (legal) responsibility for her children. The individualist notion of responsibility is almost driven *ad absurdum*, but her restricted definition of responsibility apparently plays such a central role in the person's life that she is unwilling to give it up. It can be argued that this active and Socratic way of interviewing gives us important knowledge *primarily* about the doxastic individualist beliefs of Americans in the mideighties and *secondarily* about the idea of

responsibility in a normative-epistemic sense. For most readers would appreciate the earlier sequence as an argument that the respondent is wrong—she *is* responsible for other people, most clearly her children. At the very least, the reader is invited into an epistemic discussion, not just about private beliefs, but also about citizenship, virtue, responsibility, and ethics. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* conclude that unlike "poll data" generated by fixed questions that "sum up the *private* opinions," active (and in our terminology, epistemic) interviews "create the possibility of *public* conversation and argument" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305).

In the introductory chapter to this book, we presented an interview sequence from Bourdieu's (1999) *The Weight of the World.* Although the theme under discussion there was not a universal philosophical issue such as justice or virtue, we clearly see that Bourdieu as the questioner critically challenges the young men's account. As in some of the Socratic dialogues, and the interviews done in Bellah's study, this conversation approaches the form of a legal interrogation (Bourdieu confronts the respondents, as in these examples: "You are not telling me the whole story . . ."; "But that took place during the daytime, at night?"). The study reported in *The Weight of the World* can be taken as an indication that epistemic interviews need not be limited to conceptual interviews or "elite interviews," like Socrates's conversations with the citizens of Athens, for "nonelites" are often capable of justifying their opinions and beliefs if challenged, and important knowledge sometimes develops from challenging respondents to give good reasons (see also the excerpt from the study of grading discussed in the first chapter).

We have not introduced the distinction between doxa and episteme in order to argue that only one of these should be sought in qualitative interviews. On the contrary, we believe that both can favorably be pursued in interview practices, according to one's knowledge interests, but it is probably fair to say that there has been in many interview studies a bias toward doxastic interviewing as the best way to conduct an interview. That is, texts on qualitative interviewing frequently regard the use of confronting questions that ask respondents to give reasons or reflect on abstract issues as an unfruitful way of conducting qualitative interviews. We now leave the philosophical discussion of episteme and epistemic interviews, but we return to the concept of doxa in Chapter 5 and to the active, confronting interview style as an alternative to more empathetic and accepting interview styles in Chapter 8 on interview variations.

Therapeutic Interviews and Research Interviews

Therapeutic interviews, originally developed by Freud and later by Rogers and many others, have historically influenced how qualitative interviews are conceived and conducted. We now compare and contrast the research inter-view with the emotional personal interaction of therapeutic interviewing.

Box 2.5   A Therapeutic Interview on Hate

Subject: (*Silent for two minutes. Does not look at counselor.*) You feel I want to come, but I *don't*! I'm not coming any more. It doesn't do any good. I don't like you. I hate you! I wish you never were born.

Counselor: You just hate me very bitterly.

S: I think I'll throw you in the lake. I'll cut you up! You think people like you, but they don't . . . You think you can attract women, but you *can't* . . . I wish you were *dead*.

C: You *detest* me and you'd really like to get rid of me.

S: You think my father did bad things with me, but he didn't! You think he wasn't a good man, but he *was*. You think I want intercourse, but I *don't*.

C: You feel I *absolutely misrepresent* all your thoughts.

[. . .]

S: You think I haven't been straight, but I have. I *hate* you. All I've had is pain, pain, pain. You think I can't direct my own life, but I can. You think I can't get well, but I can. You think I had hallucinations, but I didn't. I hate you. (*Long pause. Leans on desk in strained, exhausted pose.*) You think I'm crazy, but I'm not.

C: You're sure I think you're crazy.

S: (*Pause.*) I'm tied, and I just can't get loose! (*Despairing tone of voice, and tears. Pause.*) I had a hallucination and I've *got* to get it out!

[. . .]

S:	I knew at the office I had to get rid of this somewhere. I felt I could come down and tell you. I knew you'd understand. I couldn't say I hated myself. That's true but I couldn't say it. So I just thought of all the ugly things I could say to you instead.
C:	The things you felt about yourself you couldn't say, but you could say them about me.
S:	I know we're getting to rock bottom . . .

SOURCE: *Client-Centered Therapy* (pp. 211–213), by C. Rogers, 1956, Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Carl Rogers was a therapist who pioneered the development of an open, client-centered interview form, originally termed "nondirective" (Rogers, 1945) and later changed to "client centered," with the insight that all interviewing implies a sense of direction. Rogers was critical of Freud's theories of the unconscious and the speculative interpretations of psychoanalysis. Although the theoretical conceptions of client-centered therapy and psychoanalysis differ strongly, the client-centered interview in **Box 2.5** comes fairly close to psychoanalytic interview practice. This concerns the intense emotional interaction as well as the few and cautious responses of the therapist. The interview was conducted by a counselor applying Rogers's therapeutic interview technique, an approach that was an inspiration for the early use of qualitative research interviews (see Rogers, 1945, on the nondirective approach as a method for social research, allowing respondents to express themselves freely in the company of an accepting and empathetic researcher).

In this session, the client takes the lead right from the start, introduces the theme that is important to her—the detestable counselor—and expresses how much she hates him. He responds by reflecting and rephrasing her statements, emphasizing their emotional aspects. He does not, as would be likely in a normal conversation, take issue with the many accusations against him. In this sequence the counselor does not ask questions for clarification, nor does he offer interpretations. At the end, after "she has got it all out," the client acknowledges the counselor's ability to understand her, and she herself offers an interpretation: "I couldn't say I hated myself . . . so I just thought of

all the ugly things I could say to you instead." We may note that the counselor's interventions were not entirely nondirective; the client introduces several themes—such as not wanting to come to therapy; it does not do her any good and objecting to the therapist's belief that her father did wrong things with her—whereas the counselor consistently repeats and condenses her negative statements about him, which lead the client to an emotional insight about her self-hatred.

A therapeutic interview aims at change through an emotional personal interaction rather than through the logical argumentation used in a philosophical dialogue. The changes sought are not primarily conceptual but emotional and personal. Although the main purpose of therapeutic interviews is to assist patients in overcoming their suffering, a side effect has been the production of knowledge about the human situation. Both a therapeutic and a research interview may lead to increased understanding and change, but the emphasis is on knowledge production in a research interview and on personal change in a therapeutic interview.

Although Carl Rogers and Sigmund Freud had different theories of human personality and therapy, with Rogers emphasizing the present and conscious experience and Freud the past and the unconscious, their therapeutic practice was in several ways rather close. Thus the emotional therapeutic session earlier could also have been part of a psychoanalytic session. The psychoanalytic interview, where knowledge production is not the primary purpose, has been *the* psychological method for providing significant new knowledge about humankind. Freud regarded the therapeutic interview as a research method: "It is indeed one of the distinctions of psychoanalysis that research and treatment proceed hand in hand" (1963, p. 120).

Box 2.6   The Psychoanalytic Research Interview

The individual case study. Psychoanalytic therapy is an intensive case study of individual patients over several years. The extensive knowledge of the patient's life world and of his or her past thereby obtained provides the therapist with a uniquely rich context for interpreting the patient's dreams and symptoms.

The open mode of interviewing. The psychoanalytic interview takes place in the structured setting of the therapeutic hour, the content is free

and nondirective; it is based on psychoanalytic theory, yet proceeds in an open manner. To the patient's free associations corresponds the therapist's "evenly hovering attention." Freud warned against formulating a case scientifically during treatment, since it would interfere with the open therapeutic attitude in which one proceeds "aimlessly, and allows oneself to be overtaken by any surprises, always presenting to them an open mind, free from any expectations" (Freud, 1963, p. 120).

The interpretation of meaning. An essential aspect of psychoanalytic technique is the interpretation of the meaning of the patient's statements and actions. The psychoanalytic interpretations are open to ambiguity and contradictions, to the multiple layers of meaning of a dream or a symptom. They require an extensive context, with the possibility of continual reinterpretations: "The full interpretation of such a dream will coincide with the completion of the whole analysis: if a note is made of it at the beginning, it may be possible to understand it at the end, after many months" (Freud, 1963, p. 100).

The temporal dimension. Psychoanalytic therapy unfolds over several years and thus has a historical dimension, with a unique intertwinedness of the past, present, and future. Freud's innovation was here to see human phenomena in a meaningful historical perspective; the remembrance of the past is an active force of therapeutic change, and the therapy aims at overcoming the repressions of the past and the present resistance toward making the unconscious conscious.

The human interaction. Psychoanalytic therapy takes place through an emotional human interaction, with a reciprocal personal involvement. Freud noticed that if the analyst allows the patient time, devotes serious interest to the patient, and acts with tact, a deep attachment of the patient to the therapist develops. The strong emotions, ranging from love to rage, are interpreted as "transference" of childhood feelings for the parents to the therapist. This transference is deliberately employed by the therapist as a means to overcome the patient's emotional resistance toward a deeper self-knowledge and change. Different depths of layers of the patient's personality are disclosed, depending on the intensity of the patient's emotional ties to the therapist. The transference of the therapist's own feelings to the patient, termed "countertransference," is not something to be eliminated but is employed in the therapeutic process as a reflected subjectivity.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Pathology as topic of investigation. The subject matter of psychoanalytic therapy is the abnormal and irrational behavior of patients in crisis, their apparently meaningless and bizarre symptoms and dreams. The pathological behavior serves as a magnifying glass for the less visible conflicts of average individuals. The neuroses and psychoses are extreme versions of normal behavior, which are the characteristic expressions of what has gone wrong in a given culture.

The instigation of change. The mutual interest of patient and therapist is to overcome the patient's suffering from neurotic symptoms. Despite patients having sought treatment voluntarily, they exhibit a deeply seated resistance to a change in self-understanding and action. "The whole theory of psychoanalysis is . . . in fact built up on the perception of the resistance offered to us by the patient when we aeampt to make [the patient's] unconscious conscious" (Freud, 1963, p. 68). While understanding may lead to change, the implicit theory of knowledge in psychoanalysis is that a fundamental understanding of a phenomenon can be obtained by attempting to change the phenomenon.

Box 2.6 shows seven characteristics of the psychoanalytic interview based on Freud's writings on the therapeutic technique (see Kvale, 2003). While main features of the psychoanalytic interview are ethically off-limits for research interviewing, contemporary interview researchers may still learn from this and other therapeutic forms of interviewing. The psychoanalytic interview is related to, but also contrasts with, the research interview and its mode of understanding. The purpose of a therapeutic interview is the facilitation of changes in the patient, and the knowledge acquired from the individual patient is a means for instigating personality changes. The general knowledge of the human situation gained through the psychoanalytic process is a side effect of helping patients overcome their neurotic suffering. The intensive personal therapeutic relationship may open painful, hidden memories and deeper levels of personality, which are inaccessible through a brief research interview. In a qualitative research interview, the purpose is to obtain knowledge of the phenomena investigated, and any change in the interviewed subject is a side effect.

There are many problems with psychoanalysis as a research method, and the scientific status of psychoanalytic knowledge is contested (see, e.g., Fisher & Greenberg, 1977). Yet it is a continuing paradox that the therapeutic interview, which has not been accepted as a scientific method and for which general knowledge production is a side effect, has produced some of the most viable knowledge in the discipline of psychology. Psychoanalysis is the one branch of psychology that, more than a century after its inception, still has a strong professional impact on psychotherapy and continues to be of interest to the general public, to other sciences, and to philosophers. Central areas of current psychology textbooks are based on knowledge originally obtained through the psychoanalytic interview regarding dreams and neuroses, sexuality, childhood development and personality, anxiety and motivation, and the unconscious forces.

Despite the significant knowledge production of psychoanalytic therapy, in textbooks of psychological methods, the major method by which psychoanalytic knowledge is obtained—the psychoanalytic interview—is absent. Though generally critical of the speculative and reductionist trends of psychoanalytic theory, philosophers have reflected on the unique nature of the personal interaction in the psychoanalytic interview and its potential for personal change as well as its contributions to knowledge about the human situation. Among the philosophical texts addressing psychoanalysis are Sartre's (1963) existential mediation on psychoanalysis and Marxism in *The Problem of Method*, Ricoeur's (1970) phenomenological and hermeneutical *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, and Habermas's (1971) critical hermeneutical analysis of psychoanalysis as a model for an emancipatory social science in *Knowledge and Human Interests.*

Despite the radical differences between research interviews and psychoanalytic interviews—ethically and methodologically—it is possible for research interviewers to learn from the modes of questioning and interpreting developed in therapeutic interviews. The development of the free association interview by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) is a case in point. These researchers argue that qualitative interviewers always have an explicit or implicit theory of the subject, and their theory is based on the psychoanalytic idea of "the defended subject." They believe that "subjects are motivated *not* to know certain aspects of themselves and . . . they *produce* biographical accounts which avoid such knowledge" (p. 169). Thus, in order to interpret the subjects' free associations, researchers should be familiar with psychoanalytic theory.

In the preceding chapter we mentioned the influence of the psychoanalytic interview on the interviewing techniques of Piaget and the Hawthorne studies, as well as on the motivational market interviews, which also found inspiration in Rogers's nondirectional interviewing. It was the psychologist Elton Mayo who developed the sophisticated method of interviewing used in the Hawthorne studies, and his advice to interviewers deserves to be mentioned here.

Box 2.7   Elton Mayo's Method of Interviewing

1. Give your whole attention to the person interviewed, and make it evident that you are doing so.

2. Listen—don't talk.

3. Never argue; never give advice.

4. Listen to:

   (a) what he wants to say

   (b) what he does not want to say

   (c) what he cannot say without help

5. As you listen, plot out tentatively and for subsequent correction the pattern (personal) that is being set before you. To test this, from time to time summarize what has been said and present for comment (e.g., "is this what you are telling me?"). Always do this with the greatest caution, that is, clarify in ways that do not add or distort.

6. Remember that everything said must be considered a personal confidence and not divulged to anyone.

SOURCE: *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (p. 65), by E. Mayo, 1933, New York: Macmillan.

Mayo's approach to interviewing, outlined in **Box 2.7**, was much inspired by psychoanalytic therapeutics and an emerging emotional ethos in society, which has been termed "emotional capitalism" (see Illouz, 2007), and his recommendations for interviewers prove to be surprisingly contemporary. Mayo's method of interviewing could, without much change, appear in most introductory books on qualitative interviewing today.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AS RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

The broad phenomenological approach to interviews we have just addressed (which also includes interviewing for applied purposes in the case of Mayo) tends to address interviews as pure research instruments and interviewee talk as descriptive *reports* of experiences, while other approaches that grow out of discourse studies and conversation analysis primarily approach interviews as social practices and interview talk as discursive *accounts*. Phenomenological approaches to interviewing aim to get as close as possible to precise descriptions of *what* people have experienced, while other analytical approaches (found, for example, in certain schools of discourse analysis and conversation analysis) focus on *how* people express themselves through the form of an interview and give accounts occasioned by the situation in which they find themselves. The two approaches to qualitative interviewing are contrasted in **Table 2.1** (adapted from Brinkmann, 2013, p. 37).

The distinction between the two sides of the table is inspired by Talmy (2010) and Rapley (2001), and it reflects a general point of contention in current discussions of qualitative interviewing, which in different ways will also be running through this book. Interviewers, who build on the assumption that interview data can reflect the interviewees' reality outside the interview, typically seek to minimize the interviewer's effects on how interviewees describe that reality (e.g., phenomenological essences of experiences). The interview becomes a research instrument for interviewers, who need to learn to act

Table 2.1 Two conceptions of qualitative interviews		
Conception of interviewing	Research instrument	Social practice
Conception of interview data	Reports, interview data as resource	Accounts, interview data as topics
Analytic focus	Lived experience—the "what"	Situated interaction—the "how"
Main challenge	Validity of interviewee reports	Relevance of interviewee accounts
Paradigmatic background	Phenomenology, grounded theory	Discourse analysis, conversation analysis

receptively in order to affect as little as possible the interviewee's reporting. Consequently, when one approaches interviewing primarily as a research instrument, the validity of the interviewees' reports becomes a significant methodological problem (we treat validity in great detail in Chapter 15). And because interviews normally concern things experienced in the past, this centrally involves considerations about the capacity of subjects to remember what they have experienced.

Few researchers have discussed the role of memory in interviewing, but Thomsen and Brinkmann (2009) recommend that interviewers reflect on the following points if they want to help interviewees' improve the recollection of past events and the validity of their reports (see also Chapter 7 on conducting an interview):

- Allow time for recall and assure the interviewee that this is normal
- Provide concrete cues, e.g., "the last time you were talking to a physician/nurse," rather than "a communication experience"
- Use typical content categories of specific memories to derive cues (e.g., ongoing activity, location, persons, other people's and own affect)
- Ask for recent specific memories
- Use relevant extended time line and landmark events as contextual cues, e.g., "when you were working at x," to aid the recall of older memories
- Ask the interviewee for a free and detailed narrative of the specific memory

These guidelines are meant to help assure interviewee descriptions that are both valid (which means that they are about what the researcher intends them to be about) and close to the "lived experience" of life world phenomena.

In contrast to those approaches that see interviewing as a research instrument designed to capture "what" is reported as accurately as possible, others working from more constructionist and interactionist perspectives tend to have more focus on the "how" of interview discourse. They view interviewing as a social practice; as a site for a specific kind of situated interaction. According to these perspectives, interview data come to reflect "a reality constructed by the interviewee and interviewer" (Rapley, 2001, p. 304). The ambition behind attaining valid reports that correctly reflect a reality outside the conversational

situation is thus questioned, and the main challenge moves from obtaining correct recollections of the past to explaining and justifying the relevance of analyzing interview talk. For if what is said in an interview is a product of this social practice itself, why is it relevant to conduct interviews in the first place? Some qualitative interviewers answer this question by saying that if interviews do not connect neatly with a reality outside themselves, they can instead be used to perform or facilitate social change (Denzin, 2001).

People belonging to the traditions depicted on the right-hand side of Table 2.1 argue that interview talk should be conceived as accounts. Unlike reports, which refer to experiences in the interviewee's past that can be articulated when incited, accounts are answers that are "normatively oriented to and designed for the questions that occasion them" (Talmy, 2010, p. 136). Understanding interviewee talk as accounts implies seeing talk in general as a kind of social action that has effects and *does* something in the situation of which it is a part. This perspective on interviewing is shared by many discourse analysts and conversation analysts, who deliberately limit themselves to analyzing interview talk as situated interaction, drawing only on the features of discourse found in the speakers' statements.

In this book we take a balanced position that none of the approaches should be brought to an extreme: There are indeed problems associated with the view of the interview as a conversational channel for untainted reports of the past (we know too much about the constructive role of human memory, and of how the social practice of interviewing mediates what is said, to take this seriously), but there are problems associated with denying that we can refer more or less accurately to past experiences. Most human communication is based on the premise that we can use language to refer to past events, albeit not necessarily in a pure and unpolluted form. Taken to extremes, both approaches become almost absurd, and we believe the two approaches in fact highlight complementary rather than contradictory dimensions of qualitative interviews. The human and social sciences are full of dualisms with researchers taking sides for either an individualist or collectivist perspective on the social process, for agency or structure, or for a materialist or idealist perspective on society. Constructing a dualism between the two sides of the table seems to be a methodological variant of these more theoretical dualisms, one that should be overcome by appreciating the mutual coconstitution of the *what* and the *how* of human talk and interaction. Human talk can at the same time be conceived as reports that people articulate and accounts occasioned by the

situation. Concrete research projects may of course choose to focus on just one of these dimensions, but it is also possible to include both in a given analysis.

In this chapter, we have attempted to exemplify and outline the mode of understanding a phenomenological life world interview. We have further drawn in the philosophical dialogue and the therapeutic interview as related but contrasting forms of interviewing and pointed to their relevance for understanding current research interviewing. We ended by presenting contrasting approaches to qualitative interviews that will be relevant throughout the book. In the next chapter, we turn to the nature of the knowledge produced by research interviews.