

Dominance Through Interviews and Dialogues

Steinar Kvale

University of Aarhus, Denmark

Qualitative Inquiry
Volume 12 Number 3
June 2006 480-500
© 2006 Sage Publications
10.1177/1077800406286235
<http://qix.sagepub.com>
hosted at
<http://online.sagepub.com>

The article discusses common conceptions of interviews as dialogues and the extensive application of qualitative research interviews in a consumer society. In the first part, an understanding of research interviews as warm, caring, and empowering dialogues is questioned by highlighting power asymmetries in interview relationships. Agonistic interview techniques, which play on contradictions and power differences, are outlined. The second part of the article points to the prevalence of dialogues as exercises of power in politics, management, and education. The third part outlines the interview production of knowledge for consumption in a postmodern society. The article concludes that recognition of power dynamics by the social construction of knowledge in interviews is necessary to ascertain objectivity and ethicality of interview research.

Keywords: *interview; dialogue; agonistics; power; management; consumption; ethics*

The Peruvian military regimes of the 1970s regularly held what they called *diálogos* with peasants and workers, in which a military officer would deliver exhortations to an assembled group of peasants or workers, and the worker peasant-leaders would praise the political approach of the military government.

—Tedlock and Mannheim (1995, p. 4)

During the past decades, qualitative research interviewing has become a sensitive and powerful method for investigating subjects' private and public lives and has often been regarded as a democratic emancipating form of social research. Research interviews are sometimes referred to as dialogue, a concept that has become popular in political, managerial, and educational

Author's Note: This article is an edited version of a presentation at the Skjervheim seminar in Voss, Norway, in 2001, in honor of the philosopher Hans Skjervheim. I want to thank Tone Saugstad and Svend Brinkmann for valuable comments while preparing the article and Annelise Goldstein for assistance with the English language.

contexts. In contrast to a disregard of power and conflict in warm and caring dialogical conceptions of interviewing, I first depict the power asymmetries of interview relationships and outline agonistic interviews, which deliberately play on power differences and contradictions. I then turn to societal contexts of dialogical interviewing, which includes the use of dialogues for exercise of power in politics, management, and education. Finally, I discuss interviews in relation to seductive forms of manipulation in the interview culture of a postmodern consumer society.

The Prevalence of Caring Interview Dialogues

In qualitative interviews, social scientists investigate varieties of human experience. They attempt to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. The interviews give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own words, and open for a close personal interaction between the researchers and their subjects. When qualitative interviews came into general use in the social sciences in the 1980s, they were often regarded as a progressive dialogical form of research that provided a personal alternative to the objectifying positivist quantification of questionnaires and the harsh manipulation of behaviorist experiments. In contrast to such alienated relations of researcher and subjects, dialogue suggested mutuality and egalitarianism; with their gentle, unassuming, nondirective approaches, qualitative interviewers entered into authentic personal relationships with their subjects.

Qualitative interviews undoubtedly function progressively in many contexts. Thus, interviews give voice to the many. For example, the marginalized, who do not ordinarily participate in public debates, can in interview studies have their social situations and their viewpoints communicated to a larger audience. Oscar Lewis's (1964) book *The Children of Sanchez* used interviews to bring attention to the living conditions of exploited groups in Mexico. Bourdieu et al. (1999) reported, in *The Weight of the World*, interviews with French immigrants at the bottom of society and brought forth their oppressive situation to a wider public.

We may, however, also encounter a qualitative progressivity myth, where dialogical interviews in themselves are good and emancipating (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Qualitative depth interviews have been regarded as in line with feminist emphasis on experiences and subjectivity, on close personal interaction, and on reciprocity of researcher and the researched. It has also been maintained that whereas the linear thinking of men may be captured by questionnaires, soft qualitative data come closer to the female life world

(Scott, 1985). Although early endorsement of qualitative interviews as caring and liberating was pronounced in feminist circles, feminist researchers have later pointed out their exploitive potentials. Burman (1997) criticized the alleged ethical superiority of qualitative interviewing as free of manipulation and instrumentality within a humanistic ethos of mutuality, co-authorship, and emancipation. She addressed the power relations of qualitative interviewing, where relationships of empathy and trust may serve as social lubrication to elicit unguarded confidences. Here, a fantasy of democratic relations masks the basic issue of who gains materially and symbolically from the research and where claims of participation disguise the exertion of power.

A book on ethics in interview research by a group of feminist researchers has described how warm and caring interviews through “faking friendship” may involve an instrumentalism of human relationships (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002). When under external pressure from a deadline for a dissertation or a commercial project, interviewers may be tempted to profit from a warm personal relation to their subjects, stretching ethically the respect of their subjects’ privacy to get some printable information on tape. Mauthner et al. (2002) point out how interviewers, through careful management of their appearance, build rapport and trust with their interviewees, as expressed in an introduction to qualitative research (Gleshne & Peshkin, 1992):

Trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make. . . . In an effective interview, both researcher and respondent feel good, rewarded and satisfied by the process and the outcomes. The warm and caring researcher is on the way to achieving such effectiveness. (p. 87)

Creating trust through a personal relationship here serves as a means to efficiently obtain a disclosure of the interview subjects’ world. The interviewer may, with a charming, gentle, and client-centered manner, create a close personal encounter where the subjects unveil their private worlds. A quasi-therapeutic interviewer role, building on emotional rapport and therapeutic knowledge of defense mechanisms, can, as expressed by therapist Jette Fog (2004), serve as a “Trojan horse” to get behind defense walls of the interview subjects, laying their private lives open and disclosing information to a stranger, which they may later regret. Close emotional relationships between interviewer and interviewee can open for more dangerous manipulation than the rather distanced relationships of an experimenter and experimental subjects. In particular, with the proximity of intimate personal research interviews to therapeutic interviews, ethical issues of mixing the

roles of research interviewer and therapist need to be addressed (Kvale, 2003b).

This critique does not affect the use of personal relations and of asymmetrical relations in research interviews but concerns a disregard in much interview literature of their manipulative potentials. The neglect of domination in interviews may be supported by empathetic dialogical conceptions of the research interview as a conflict- and power-free zone. The following discussion will be rather critical and one-sided. Today, there are sufficient writings on the virtues of empathetic qualitative interviews, including my own book *InterViews* (Kvale, 1996), where the power asymmetry and conflicts in qualitative interviewing were given little attention.

The Asymmetrical Power Relation of the Interview

Referring to the interview as dialogue is misleading, although a common practice. An interview has been defined as a meeting where a reporter obtains information from a person, as a meeting with another person to achieve a specific goal, and more generally, as a conversation with a purpose. A dialogue is a joint endeavor where egalitarian partners, through conversation, search for true understanding and knowledge. Within philosophy, one discerns between a Platonic truth-seeking dialogue and an I-thou self-constituting dialogue after Buber. A simplified version of the latter has permeated a social and health science understanding of interviews as warm personal dialogues. In contrast to the mutuality of dialogue, in an interview, one part seeks understanding and the other part serves as a means for the interviewer's knowledge interest. The term *interview dialogue* is therefore a misnomer. It gives an illusion of mutual interests in a conversation, which in actuality takes place for the purpose of just the one part—the interviewer.

The power dynamics in research interviews, and potential oppressive use of interview-produced knowledge, tend to be left out in literature on qualitative research. There are some exceptions, such as Scheurich's (1995) postmodern critique of a liberal humanist understanding of research interviews as jointly constructed conversations, where he analyzes their complex dominance-and-resistance play of power. Briggs (2002) has scrutinized the asymmetries of power that emerge in interview situations, investing interviewers with control over what is said and how it is said, and the subsequent circulation of the interview knowledge. Burman's (1997) depiction of a humanistic glossing-over of the power asymmetry of interviews was mentioned above, and we can add Gubrium and Holstein's (2002) analysis of the power asymmetries of research interviewing in a societal context. Wengraf

(2001), who has written one of the few textbooks specifically addressing power/knowledge, domination, and resistance in research interviewing, points out how the power dimension of interviewing is dangerously likely to be overlooked by well-intentioned interviewers.

Here, I follow up on these analyses and give an overview of some of the power dynamics in research interviews. The qualitative research interview entails a hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution of interviewer and interviewee. It is a one-way dialogue, an instrumental and indirect conversation, where the interviewer upholds a monopoly of interpretation.

The interviewer rules the interview. The research interviewer has a scientific competence and defines the interview situation. The researcher determines the time, initiates the interview, decides the topic, poses the questions and critically follows up on the answers, and also closes the conversation. The research interview is not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners. The interviewer's research project and knowledge interest set the agenda and rule 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. If interview subjects break with the ascribed interviewee role and by themselves start to question the interviewer, it is considered bad taste and perhaps interpreted as a challenge of the authority of the researcher. Here, we are far from the reciprocal change of questioning and answering in a spontaneous conversation or a philosophical dialogue.

The interview is an instrumental dialogue. In the research interview, the conversation is instrumentalized. A good conversation is no longer a goal in itself, or a joint search for truth, but a means serving the researcher's ends. The interview is an instrument for providing the interviewer with descriptions, narratives, and texts, which the researcher then interprets and reports according to his or her research interests.

The interview may be a manipulative dialogue. A research interview may often 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—in Shakespeare's terms—"By indirections find directions out." Modern interviewers can attempt to use subtle therapeutic techniques to get beyond the subjects' defenses and obtain the information they seek.

The interviewer's monopoly of interpretation. In social science research, the interviewer generally upholds a monopoly of interpretation over the interviewee's statements. In daily conversations, as well as in philosophical dialogues, there may be a conflict over the true interpretation of what has been said. In contrast, the research interviewer, as the "big interpreter," maintains exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant and to frame what an interviewee says in his or her own theoretical schemes.

The power asymmetry of the research interview needs not be as one sided as depicted above, as the interviewees and the interviewers may also have their countermeasures.

Counter control. The interview subjects have their own countering options of not answering or deflecting a question, talking about something other than what the interviewer asks for, or merely telling what they believe the interviewer wants to hear. Some interviewees can themselves start to question the interviewer or, in rare cases, withdraw from the interview. The strength of the different counterstrategies differs among interview subjects, with child interviews and elite interviews as two extremes.

Membership research. Some interview researchers attempt to reduce their dominance over their research subjects, such as by giving their interpretations back to the interviewees for validation in the form of "member checks" as an attempt to obtain consensual knowledge. However, there are limits to such attempts to equalize the roles of the researchers and their subjects. There may be emotional barriers for the interviewees to accept critical interpretations of what they have told the interviewer, as well as limitations of the subjects' competence to address specific theoretical interpretations. In practice, few interview researchers let their subjects have the final say on what to report and what interpretations to present in their dissertations.

*

It may be concluded that a research interview is not an open and dominance-free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his or her research interests. The use of power in interviews to produce knowledge is a valuable and legitimate way of conducting research. With interview knowledge jointly constructed by interviewer and interviewee, overlooking the complex power dynamics of the social con-

struction process may, however, seriously impair the validity of the knowledge constructed.

The use of the term *dialogue* for the research interview is misleading, as the interview is neither an open conversation, in the sense of an informal exchange of ideas, nor a dialogue in the philosophical sense of a reciprocal search for true knowledge by egalitarian partners. A conception of interviews as personal dialogues may provide liberal and humanistic interviewers with an illusion of equality and common interests with their subjects, whereas the researchers at the same time dominate the interview situation and retain sovereign control of the later use of the interview-produced knowledge.

Agonistic Interview Alternatives

There exist alternative conceptions and practices to the warm personal and consensus-seeking research interviews. As different as the following alternatives may be, they all acknowledge power differences and conflicts in the interview: the Platonic dialogue, actively confronting interviews, agonistic interviews, dissensus interviews, advocacy interviews, and the psychoanalytic interview.

The Platonic dialogue. Plato used the dialogue as a joint search for true knowledge. Following Gadamer (1975), the Platonic dialogue is a conversation where two persons understand each other, where it is not the will of the individual persons that matters but a law of the subject matter. Statements and counterstatements are released and played out against each other, so the respondents may reach an agreement about the topic of the conversation. A Socratic approach to interviewing would imply emphasizing conflicts in interpretations and an approximate egalitarian power distribution. It would entail a mutuality where both parts pose questions and give answers, with a reciprocal critique of what the other says. Some current elite interviews with experts, where the interviewer confronts and contributes with his or her conceptions of the interview theme, come close to a Socratic dialogue. The research interview is then no longer understood as via regia to an authentic inner self of the interviewee but becomes a conversation that stimulates the interviewee and interviewer to formulate their ideas about the research theme, potentially increasing their knowledge of a common theme of interest. The openness of Socrates' dialogues is, however, debatable. It is possible to read several of the dialogues as Socrates, through a cunning strategy of

flattery and leading questions, manipulating his Sophist opponents through their own answers toward the truth Socrates wants to arrive at.

Actively confronting interviews. There are academic interview studies that actively follow up and confront the subject's answers. Inspired by Socrates, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, and Tipton (1985) practiced what they called active interviews, which create the possibility of public conversation and argument. Active interviews do not necessarily aim for agreement between interviewer and interviewee, as the interviewer critically questions what the interviewee says, for example, if he contradicts himself. The Socratic attitude is explained as follows: "Though we did not seek to impose our ideas on those with whom we talked, . . . we did attempt to uncover assumptions, to make explicit what the person we were talking to might have left implicit" (p. 304). Bourdieu et al. (1999) likewise depict their interviewing as a Socratic maieutics, where aiding explanations aim to propose and not to impose. We may also call to attention Piaget's interviews with children as actively confronting their understanding of physical and moral concepts.

Agonistic interviews. A confronting approach may be radicalized by regarding the conversation as a battlefield, as suggested by Aaronson (1999) in her Bakhtin-inspired analyses of conversations. Such an agonistic understanding of the conversation is in line with Lyotard's (1984) depiction of knowledge in a postmodern society. He regards every statement as a move in a game, which is "at the base of our entire method: namely, that to speak is to fight, in the meaning of a game, and that speech acts go forth from a general agonistics" (p. xx). An agonistic interview is confrontational, as the interviewer deliberately provokes conflicts and emphasizes divergences, similar to some journalistic interviews. In contrast to the popular consensus-seeking dialogue, the interview becomes a battle where the goal is to overcome the opponent, such as in Socrates' dialectical questioning of the Sophists.

Dissensus research. A further contrast to the harmonious search for consensus through dialogue is to encourage, and report, dissensus in interview research, following a motto of "vive la difference." Although Plato's philosophy may involve a unitary conception of truth, in his dialogues, the arguments of the opposing sides are carefully reported. Hereby, the readers can follow the entire truth-seeking process and themselves take a position on the arguments and counterarguments. Such an open-book access to interviews allows for a manifold of alternative and conflicting interpretations of the same texts. As in political negotiations, both majority and minority opinions could be included in the final report. Parker (2005) argues for making the

research interview a place for different competing perspectives to emerge: allowing for a multiplicity of competing stories, opening up for conflict and provoking the interviewees to come forth with contrasting perspectives on the topic of study, aiming to make differences of perspectives between interviewer and interviewee explicit. One example is Tanggaard's (2003) Foucault-inspired approach of analyzing her interaction with the interviewees as "discourses crossing swords." A potential side effect of reporting interview investigations in dialogue form with dissenting voices could be, in contrast to many current fragmented interview-quoting reports, that they become interesting to read.

Advocacy research. We may extend the agonistic and dissensus approaches to interviews by regarding social research as openly partisan, taking place according to specific group interests. Advocacy research provides representatives of different positions and social groups—such as managers and workers; teachers and pupils; doctors, nurses, and patients—access to the same interview texts and, potentially, also the same interview subjects. Similar to lawyers in court, social scientists representing the different positions critically interpret the interviews from the opposing side and possibly, as in court, cross-examine their witnesses. The outcome of such advocacy research need not be consensus but well-documented and well-argued dissensus.

The psychoanalytic interview. In contrast to a harmonious understanding of an interview as a dialogue between egalitarian partners, the psychoanalytic interview entails a clear hierarchical power asymmetry, symbolized by the patient lying down and the therapist sitting up. The psychoanalytic interview is based on the patient's interest in being cured for his or her suffering and has had a side effect of producing significant psychological knowledge (Kvale, 2003b). The therapist gives the patient his or her critical interpretations of what the patient has told him or her and does not accept the patient's "yes" or "no" at face value as validation, or disconfirmation, of an interpretation. The psychoanalytical situation is designed to create conflicts, provoking maximum resistance from the patient toward the therapist's interventions. According to Freud, psychoanalytic theory is built on the resistance the patient offers to the therapist's interpretations.

*

Here, I have depicted some agonistic alternatives to an empathetic harmonious dialogue conception of research interviews. Agonistic interviewing may lead to objective knowledge in line with Latour's (2000) pragmatic con-

ception of objectivity. He argues that objectivity in social science is obtained by allowing “the objects to object.” If social scientists want to become objective, they should seek the rare, extreme situations where their objects have maximum possibilities for protesting against what the researchers say about them—situations where the objects are allowed to raise questions in their own terms rather than the researchers’ terms, whose interests they need not share. In this case, human beings would behave as interestingly toward social science researchers as natural objects behave toward the natural scientists. As an example from the social sciences, Latour points to how feminism today has contributed to making women recalcitrant against the social researchers’ interview approaches.

The contrasting empathetic and agonistic interview practices may produce different kinds of knowledge. With interview knowledge socially constructed in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee, we need to investigate empirically the specific effects of the different power dynamics of empathetic and agonistic interviews on the knowledge produced by the different forms of interviewing. Here, I have emphasized transparency and acceptance of power, conflicts, and dissensus as contributing to the objectivity of interview research, in line with a dialectical conception of knowledge as developed through contradictions. The knowledge potential of agonistic interviews has been relatively undeveloped in current qualitative research, which may be due to the hegemony of consensus-seeking dialogical conceptions of social research.

Dialogues in Politics, Management, and Education

Recent interest in applying dialogical interviews as a research method does not only reflect internal scientific developments, such as a decline of positivist philosophy and the acknowledgment of phenomenological, hermeneutical, and discursive philosophy. Dialogical conceptions of interviews also relate to a general societal development toward a dialogical culture. Today, we are so immersed in a dialogical culture that it may be difficult to see its specific modes of power exertion. Domination and inequality can be masked through authentic and egalitarian dialogical conceptions of hierarchical and commercial social relationships. In the present context, I do not address the sophisticated dialogical analyses in the philosophical and literary traditions of Gadamer and Bakhtin, nor Freire’s use of dialogues in an emancipatory pedagogy, but discuss a jargonized and instrumental use of dialogues in politics, management, and education, as one frame of reference for highlighting power exertion in dialogically understood research interviews.

An invitation to an egalitarian dialogue tends to come from the one at the top of a hierarchical relationship. In the 1970s in Norway, when managers had conflicts with their workers, they would call for a dialogue. They would maintain that it was necessary to move away from conflicts and violent actions and enter into a dialogue where one talks together about the common problems. There were also critical voices to the calls for dialogue. Labour leaders and Marxist workers pointed to the unequal power positions in a dialogue of managers and workers, where the employers set the agenda for the dialogue. It was not a dialogue between two equal partners; on the contrary, one part had the legal right to manage and distribute the work of the other part and to hire and fire the other part. More recently, in the December 17, 2001, issue of *Time* magazine, a picture of a violent demonstration depicted workers throwing stones at the police. The accompanying caption read "No Talk: Algerian Berbers Demand Rights, Not Dialogue."

The epigram introducing this article depicted the Peruvian military in the 1970s using dialogue meetings to admonish their peasants and workers. Today, dialogues are a mainstream method to involve citizens to yield obedience to the demands of their rulers, such as expressed in the budget proposal of the Danish Department of Finances:

At the moment the political leader enters into a dialogue with the institutions and genuinely requests a given course, the institutions will be far more obliged to seek to carry out the superior political aims. (Finansministeriet, 1995, p. 32)

Whereas a human relations management philosophy, as inspired by humanistic psychology, today speaks of authentic, open, and egalitarian dialogues between a company and its clients, some social scientists argue that there are few indications that dialogue between companies and the public has become more egalitarian. They recommend that communicative relationships, which today present themselves as symmetrical, should be examined closer for their asymmetric tendencies (Christensen & Jones, 1996). In an anthology on dialogue and power within organizations, the authors analyze problems by introducing dialogical communicative relationships in hierarchical organizations ruled by profit. In some cases, the initial humanistic ideals of the innovators who enter organizational practice may come to mask the use of "pseudo-dialogical techniques of manipulation" (Alrø & Kristiansen, 2004). In successful management through dialogue, employees can themselves come to assume responsibility for their own domination.

Within education, dialogue has been regarded as a humanistic and progressive alternative to the monologues of authoritarian teachers. A Danish dictionary (Hansen, Thomsen, & Varming, 2001) offers the following definition:

Dialogical pedagogy—education where teachers and students together and on an equal level share each other's knowledge and experiences, intentions and attitudes.

On a conceptual level, it is somewhat incongruous to use the word *teacher* in a setting where the teacher possesses no substantial or institutional authority over the pupil. If a teacher literally interacts with the pupils on an equal level, this would imply an abdication of the teacher as a teacher. Within educational contexts, teacher-pupil interactions tend to take place in situations where the teacher will be in a power position with regard to the students by grading and examinations. Students appear well aware of the power differences between teachers and students, whereas teachers may tend to overlook their power with regard to the students, a finding common in interview studies (e.g., Kvale, 1980). Within educational theory, Løvlie (1984) presented a principal critique of a therapeutic and counselor-inspired dialogical pedagogy for overlooking the asymmetrical relation of teachers and students. He replaces a romanticized Rogerian concept of dialogue with a Habermas-inspired concept of discourse and argues for an open and strict Socratic discourse with a common search for truth as the ideal pedagogical relation.

With the widespread use of dialogues today—creating impressions of personal freedom and mutuality in hierarchical power relationships between employer and employees, between teacher and students—it becomes relevant to also address dialogically conceived relations between researcher and interviewee with respect to exertion and masking of power. Today, the harsh objectifying manipulative techniques of human engineering management are followed up with milder subjectifying forms of manipulation of human relationships management, where the subjects, through dialogical relationships, learn to want to do what they socially have to do. The use of illusions of freedom and equality to encounter resistance by embellishing and masking power exertion is not new. In 1762, a writer on education depicted the soft indirect forms of manipulation, now used in modern management and dialogical education, in the following way:

Let him [the child] always think he is master while you [the teacher] are really master. There is no subjection so complete as that which preserves the forms of freedom; it is thus that the will itself is taken captive. . . . No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. (Rousseau, 1762/1911, pp. 84-85)

The Interview Culture of a Consumer Society

August Comte (1830-1842/1975, cited in Houillebecq, 2001) observed almost two centuries ago that

those who in revolutionary epochs, with a strange form of pride, boast of the cheap merit to have inflamed the anarchistic passions of their contemporaries, do not at all recognize that their regrettable apparent triumph is in particular due to a spontaneous, predetermined tendency of the corresponding total societal situation. (Lesson 48)

We may note today how the buoyant breakthrough of dialogically conceived research interviewing from the 1980s was foreshadowed by strong trends of the total societal situation. These include the dialogical forms of power exercise in human relations management discussed above and the interview culture of a consumer society. I shall now address research interviewing in relation to four trends of the consumer society: first, the extent of interviewing strangers in a culture with an intimization of social relations, and second, the role of the interview as a social technique for construction and reconstruction of fragile selves. Third, I address the importance of the knowledge produced by interviews for manipulation of consumers, and fourth, I point out how an extensive interviewing for marketing preceded and, today, likely eclipses interviewing for academic purposes.

We live in a dialogical culture, where the interview has attained a key role. Historically, the interview is a relatively new genre. The first journalistic interview—with the Mormon leader Brigham Young—was published in 1859 in the *New York Tribune* (Silvester, 1993). In the following decades, interviews were a rather controversial undertaking, regarded by some, such as Kipling, as an offense, as an assault on the person. In the current consumer society, the individual consumer, with his or her experiences, emotions, motives, and personal selves, is in the center and interviews are everywhere. Private life is made public, in the media talk shows and through research interviews. Sennett (1974/1993) depicted in *The Fall of Public Man* how a decay of public life led to a therapeutization of social life. There arose a cult of authentic experiences and a genuine personal life, with a search for the meaning of life in close warm emotional relations, leading to a tyranny of intimacy. The qualitative interview, as discussed above, provides strangers access to the subject's authentic inner personal life through creation of warm and personal relationships. Sennett (1974/1993) noted a relationship of interviewing to the market society, describing how novice interviewers receive their initial ideals of intimacy as market exchange from assumptions, which

rule the larger society, whereas the experienced interviewer grows out of the simple marketing of mutual revelations:

In their first sessions, beginning interviewers are often anxious to show that they regard their subjects as real people, not just as "data sources." The interviewers want to deal with their subjects as equals making discoveries. This laudable desire results in a peculiar initial situation: every time the subject reveals some detail or feeling of his private life, the interviewer will counter by revealing a detail from his own. Treating someone else as a "real person" in this situation becomes like a market exchange of intimacies; they show you a card, you show them one. (pp. 9-10)

Gubrium and Holstein (2002) have analyzed how the individual interview is immersed in an interview culture, where the spread of the discourse of individualized subjectivity has now prepared us as both questioners and answerers to produce readily the society of which we are a part. Briggs (2002) has addressed the key role of interviews in the political technologies of the postmodern era; in a global and bureaucratic world, fragmented in time and space, the personal interviews serve to create an illusion of individual perspectives and face-to-face communication by the decision making of distant social and political institutions.

Two British interview researchers—Atkinson and Silverman (1997)—posed the question of why the interview and its narrative products have come to play such a dominating role in social science research. They point to a general interview culture where the production of the self has come into focus and where the interview serves as a social technique by construction of the self. Within a neo-romantic cult of the spontaneous narrating self, the interview is regarded as providing an authentic gaze into the other's soul, and the experiential narratives as a dialogical revelation of an authentic inner self. The interview may be regarded as a politically correct dialogue of mutual understanding without reference to the asymmetry of interviewer and interviewee. The media, most conspicuously in the many talk shows, are dominated by a new subjectivity and a culture of confession, where the self is revealed and reconstructed by narrating the personal life history. With the interviewer as the sympathetic listener, personal confessions are produced to the open screen. The interview becomes a soft social technology for biographical reconstruction and reconfirmation of a fragile self. Atkinson and Silverman conclude that the empathetic access to authenticity in interview research recapitulates central cultural themes by placing the biographical narrating self in the center of social research.

I shall now turn to the societal bases of an interview culture, which emphasizes subjective experiences and narrative constructions of the self. I go beyond a “Zeitgeist”—spirit of the age—as evoked by Atkinson and Silverman and address the economic and material bases of the interview culture. The pervasiveness of interviews may be traced to a transition of the economic system from a dominance of industrial production to market consumption as the key to economic growth (Kvale, 2003a). In an economy of consumption increasingly based on selling experiences and lifestyles, qualitative interviews have become a key tool in the investigation and control of consumption. In a consumer society, social reality and personal identities are socially constructed and reconstructed through the purchase of commodities, with a planned obsolescence built into the products and their fashion designs. Our purchases are directed less by the value of concrete use of the products than by the experiences, dreams, and lifestyles associated with the products through sophisticated marketing techniques. The meaning of life is found in consumption, an empty self is filled, shaped, and reshaped, by the purchase of products with the appropriate logo. An insecure self, emptied by loss of tradition and social bonds, is now saturated by the consumption of experiences in continual identity shopping.

With the transition from dominance of the sale of products for concrete use to the sale of experiences, lifestyles, and identities, it becomes paramount for a market-sensitive capitalism to investigate carefully the meanings the products have to the consumers. Trend-spotting the consumers’ meanings and styles has become decisive by the fabrication of new individual lifestyles that the products may be attached to. The knowledge about the consumer’s experiences, dreams, and desires produced through qualitative interviews is essential for marketing. Therapeutically inspired interviews, and in particular focus group interviews, provide the knowledge needed for designing and promoting new products. Interview investigations of consumer experiences and motives have multiple functions. They may serve to improve the products and enrich the consumers’ choice of products, and they may serve business profits by manipulating consumer behavior in the direction of increased consumption.

Research interviewing not only recapitulates dialogical forms of control of a consumer society and provides knowledge for the manipulation of consumers, but it is also historically linked to the advent of a consumer society. Qualitative research interviews were introduced in consumer research in the 1930s (Dichter, 1960), nearly half a century before the general expansion of qualitative interviews in the social sciences. Today, the most extensive application of qualitative research interviews probably takes place within consumer research, in particular, in the form of focus groups. Thus, in 1990, more

than 100,000 focus-group interviews were conducted in the United States (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). It has been estimated that qualitative market research—most commonly in the form of focus group interviews—accounts for perhaps \$2 billion to \$3 billion a year of a worldwide market industry (Imms & Ereat, 2002). In addition, what may be the largest single interview investigation ever conducted took place in management. In the 1920s, industrial counselors at the Hawthorne electrical plant, following up on experimental findings on the importance of management interest in the workers by changes in their work conditions, carried out more than 21,000 qualitative interviews with the workers (see Kvale, 2003b). The interview findings led to a human relations school of management in industry, where the old harsh industrial discipline of human engineering management was replaced by a softer, less resistance-provoking, manipulation through the display of personal interest, understanding, and empathy.

In conclusion, qualitative research interviews not only recapitulate central cultural themes of a tyranny of intimacy in an interview culture and its dialogical construction and reconstruction of selves, but also produce knowledge essential for an economy of consumption and human relations management. With probably more than 90% of all qualitative research interviewing today taking place for commercial interests in marketing and management, it is difficult to conceive of qualitative interviews, in contrast to quantitative questionnaires, as in themselves emancipating and empowering, giving voice to the marginalized and the oppressed. Qualitative interviewing may just as well explore and exploit the experiences and desires of workers and consumers, to better predict and control their behavior for consumption. The present situating of interview research in a consumer society is no argument against research interviewing. However, it could perhaps inspire the careful investigation of the power exertion in and by social science interviews in light of dialogical management and interviewing for consumption.

Power is everywhere, and the forms of power exertion change. Today, we are so immersed in a dialogical culture that it may be difficult to see its specific dialogical forms of power exertion. I call attention to the Biblical statement, “You see the splinter in your brother’s eye, but not the beam in your own eye,” as rephrased by the Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1996): “We do not see the beam in our own eye because it is the beam we see with.” In our context, it can be rephrased again—we see the alienated forms of power exertion of quantitative behavioral research, but not our intimate dialogical exertion of power in qualitative interview research, because the dialogue is the beam we see the dialogical culture through.

Concluding Perspectives

In this article, I have addressed power dynamics within a research interview and also the immersion of interviews in the societal exertion of power. The ascent of qualitative interviewing corresponds with societal changes in the exercise of power, with a transition from harsh objectifying forms of domination to milder subjectified forms of social control. A conception of research interviews as personal egalitarian dialogues masks the power asymmetry of hierarchical interview relationships. Research interviewing is in line with a pervasive interview culture of making the private public, where intimate qualitative interviews with strangers provide a *via regia* to the consumers' experiences and desires and the subsequent manipulation of their consumption.

The pointing out of the power asymmetry within an interview situation, in empathetic as well as agonistic interviews, and the immersion of research interviewing in the dialogical interview culture of a consumer society, does not dispute the value of research interviewing for producing knowledge of the human situation but raises conceptual, methodological, and ethical concerns by the further development of academic interview research.

A conceptual distinction should be upheld between the two genres of the research interview with its asymmetrical power distribution, serving the interviewer's instrumental knowledge interests, and the philosophical dialogue with an ideally symmetrical power relation in an egalitarian joint search for true knowledge. A jargonized use of dialogues, with an understanding of interviews as caring consensual dialogues, may have masked the power exertion in empathetic interviews. If the term *dialogue* is to be retained in interview research, an effort could be made to carefully distinguish among current meanings and uses of dialogue, ranging from dialogical philosophy to dialogical management. Some of the many aspects of dialogues, which may be reflected in relation to interviews, are power and manipulation, equality and mutuality, empathetic and agonistic relations, conflict and resistance, consensus and dissensus about knowledge, and knowledge interests in the dialogues.

In a methodological context, close analyses of the specific power dynamics within different forms of interviews are warranted. With knowledge produced in the social interaction of interviewer and interviewee, the power play of this interaction could be made transparent by the presentation of the method of an investigation, so that readers may ascertain the potential effects of the power play on the knowledge reported. The deliberate play on power and conflicts in agonistic interviews may be taken up, such as by provoking "the object to object." Further, with probably a major part of interview

knowledge today stemming from empathetic interviews disregarding power dynamics, potential biases of the dominating warm consensual interview relationships on the validity of major parts of the knowledge produced by interviews need to be considered.

With the close personal interaction of qualitative interviews, and the potentially powerful knowledge produced, ethics becomes as important as methodology in interview research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). If we go beyond a conception of interviews as dialogues good in themselves, a series of ethical issues appears in the private conversations for public use. On a microlevel, this concerns, in particular, the ambiguity of the interview relationship between a close personal and an instrumental relation, with the interviewer being both a participant in, and an observer of, the interview relationship. The dominant position of the interviewer may lead to an invasion of the subject's privacy, with a temptation to masquerade as a friend to get the information the researcher needs. A conception of research interviews as egalitarian dialogues may further gloss over conflicts of interests between interviewers and subjects.

On the macrolevel, the ethical-political issues of the use of the interview-produced knowledge warrant attention. In the present context, the commercial use of interviewing in management and consumer manipulation has been brought up. Also, the societal uses of the knowledge produced by academic social science interviews warrant close consideration. When it comes to politics, we may depict two uses of interviews. In the political domain, there has taken place a transition from debates in public voter meetings with politicians to private focus group interviews, where knowledge is extracted from the voters for the use of political experts to manipulate voters through political media campaigns. Interviews may also, when critically carried out and well presented—such as the interview studies by Bellah et al. (1985) on individualism in the United States and by Bourdieu et al. (1999) on the plight of the downtrodden in France—incite the reader, as suggested by Bellah et al., to enter the conversation and argue with what is said, stimulating a public opinion tested in the arena of public discussion.

Interviews are a sensitive and powerful method; they are, in themselves, neither ethical nor unethical, neither emancipating nor oppressing. In a critical social science, interviews may contribute to the empowerment of the oppressed. In management and consumer research, interviews can contribute to the disempowerment of workers and consumers. A key issue concerns who obtains access and who has the power and resources to act on and consume what the multiple interview voices tell the interviewing stranger.

I shall conclude with a fairy tale cautioning of entering apparently warm and caring relations with strangers: Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her

grandmother's house to find a big wolf in her grandmother's bed and clothes, masking as the nice grandmother. (Little Red Riding Hood is the questioning interviewer of this tale; I shall, however, focus on the friendly appearing wolf as portraying an interviewer role.) The little girl is puzzled by her grandmother's appearance and remarks,

Grandmother, what big eyes you have!
 All the better to see you with, my child.
 Grandmother, what big ears you have!
 All the better to hear you with, my child.
 Grandmother, what big teeth you have!
 All the better to eat you up with.
 And saying these words, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood, and ate her all up.

There are many kinds of wolves. Today, we could perhaps include some interviewers who, through their gentle, warm, and caring approaches, may efficiently circumvent the interviewee's defenses to strangers and invade their private worlds. Their big eyes and ears sensitively grasp for potential consumption what the multiple interview voices tell them. We may note the admonition by Charles Perrault (1697/1889), who authored the French version of *Little Red Riding Hood*:

Moral: Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say, "Wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.

References

- Aaronson, K. (1999). Samtalet som slagfält [The conversation as battlefield]. In K. Setterlund Larsen & K. Berggquist (Eds.), *Möten—En vänbok til Roger Säljö* (pp. 63-82). Linköping: Tema kommunikation.
- Alrø, H., & Kristiansen, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Dialog og magt i organisationer* [Dialogue and power in organizations]. Aalborg: Aalborg Universitets Forlag.
- Atkinson, P., & Silverman, D. (1997). Kundera's immortality: The interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 304-325.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M. S. A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P., et al. (1999). *The weight of the world*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Briggs, C. L. (2002). Interviewing, power/knowledge, and social inequality. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 911-922). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2005). Confronting the ethics of qualitative research. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18*, 157-181.
- Burman, E. (1997). Minding the gap: Positivism, psychology, and the politics of qualitative methods. *Journal of Social Issues, 53*, 785-801.
- Christensen, L. T., & Jones, R. (1996). En symmetrisk dialog om miljøspørgsmålet? En kritisk analyse af nye dialogformer mellem virksomheder og forbrugere [A symmetrical dialogue about environmental issues? A critical analysis of new forms of dialogues between enterprises and consumers]. In J. P. Ullhøj & H. Madsen (Eds.), *Miljøledelse—tanker, erfaringer og visioner*. Copenhagen: Børsens Forlag.
- Dichter, E. (1960). *The strategy of desire*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Finansministeriet [Danish Department of Finances]. (1995). *Budget95 redegørelse*. Copenhagen: Finansministeriet.
- Fog, J. (2004). *Med samtalen som udgangspunkt* [With the conversation as basis]. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Gleshne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2002). From the individual interview to the interview society. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 3-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hansen, M., Thomsen, P., & Varming, O. (2001). *Psykologisk-pædagogisk ordbog* [Dictionary of educational psychology]. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Houllébecq, M. (2001). *Elementarpartikler* [Elementary particles]. Copenhagen: Borgen.
- Imms, M., & Ereat, G. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative market research*. London: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (1980). *Spillet om karakterer i gymnasiet—elevinterviews om bivirkninger af adgangsbegrænsning* [The grading game in high school—interviews with pupils about side effects of restricted admissions]. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews—An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (2003a). The church, the factory and the market—Scenarios for psychology in the postmodern age. *Theory & Psychology, 13*(5), 579-603.
- Kvale, S. (2003b). The psychoanalytic interview as inspiration for qualitative research. In P. Camic, J. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 275-297). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Latour, B. (2000). When things strike back—A possible contribution of “science studies” to the social sciences. *British Journal of Sociology, 51*, 107-123.
- Lewis, O. (1964). *The children of Sanchez*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Løvlie, L. (1984). *Det pædagogiske argument* [The educational argument]. Oslo: Cappelen.
- Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J., & Miller, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Ethics in qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- No talk: Algerian Berbers demand rights, not dialogue. (2001, December 17). *Time*.
- Parker, I. (2005). *Qualitative psychology—Introducing radical research*. London: Sage.

- Perrault, C. (1889). Histoires ou contes de temps passé, avec de moralités: Contes de ma mere l'Oye [Fairy tales of times past, with morals: Mother Goose tales]. In A. Lang (Ed.), *The blue fairy book* (pp. 51-53). London: Dover Publications. (Original work published 1697)
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1911). *Emil*. London: Dent. (Original work published 1762)
- Scheurich, J. (1995). A postmodern critique of research interviewing. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8, 239-252.
- Scott, S. (1985). Feminist research and qualitative methods. In P. Burgess (Ed.), *Issues in educational research* (pp. 67-85). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
- Sennett, R. (1993). *The fall of public man*. London: Faber & Faber. (Original work published 1974)
- Silvester, C. (1993). Introduction. In C. Silvester (Ed.), *The Penguin book of interviews*. London: Penguin.
- Skjervheim, H. (1996). *Deltakar og tilskodar og andre essays* [Participant and observer and other essays]. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Tanggaard, L. (2003). Forskningsinterviewet som diskurser der krydser klinger. Når lærlingens og forskerens vejer brydes [The research interview as discourses crossing swords. When the road of the apprentice and the researchers cross]. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 3, 21-32.
- Tedlock, P., & Mannheim, T. (Eds.). (1995). *The dialogical emergence of culture*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steinar Kvale, PhD, is a professor of educational psychology and director of the Centre of Qualitative Research at the Department of Psychology, University of Aarhus. He graduated from the University of Oslo with the doctoral dissertation "Prüfung und Herrschaft" [Oppression and Examinations] (1972). He has conducted interview research on examinations and on apprenticeship learning. His books include *Issues of Validity in Qualitative Research* (Studentlitteratur, Sweden, 1989), *Psychology and Postmodernism* (Sage, 1992), and *InterViews* (Sage, 1996).