Varieties of interviewing: Epistemic and doxastic[1]

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In what follows, I shall address a seemingly very simple question: Could we, by means of qualitative research interviews, gain knowledge? A first reaction to this question is likely to be: "What an insult! What do you think we have been doing all these years, talking to people about their experiences, desires, and opinions? Do you have the nerve to question whether we have gained knowledge along the way? Of course we have!"

In a certain respect, I accept this reaction. There is no doubt that qualitative interview researchers produce relevant knowledge about people's experiences, desires, and opinions by interviewing them about these matters. But the question I would like to raise is this: What is this kind of knowledge *about*? And the answer is – to use a word from classical Greek philosophy – it is about *doxa*. That is, about the interview respondents' experiences and opinions, which no doubt can be 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. To put my idea in simple words: By probing their respondents' experiences and opinions (the *doxa*), interview researchers are often engaged in what seems like a time-consuming kind of opinion-polling, for which quantitative instruments such as questionnaires often appear to be much more efficient. If we should really take advantage of the knowledge producing potentials inherent in human conversations, such as research interviews, ought we not to frame the interview situation differently? In what follows, I am inspired by Socratic dialogues, whose purpose 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 believe is the case.

Qualitative researchers are increasingly becoming aware that interviewing, as Charles Briggs (2003, p. 497) has argued, is "a 'technology' that invents both notions of individual subjectivities and collective social and political patterns". Different conversational practices, including research interviews, produce and activate different forms of subjectivity. I shall discuss a form of interviewing, epistemic interviews, that address respondents as accountable, responsible citizens, which I intend to present as an alternative to experience-focused, psychologized interviews that aim to probe the intimate and private worlds of respondents, often with inspiration from psychotherapy. I believe that the latter forms of interviewing are suitable for some research purposes, but they are also in my view inadequate for a number of other purposes, though they square very well with the confessional conversations that are prevalent in today's consumerist interview society (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), where people's private experi-

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ences and narratives become commodities to be collected and reported by interviewers (Denzin, 2001, p. 24).

Interviews are, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have argued for long, unavoidably interpretively active, meaning-making practices. I consider the epistemic interview discussed in this paper as, in certain respects, a continuation of the Holstein-Gubrium line of active interviewing, but with more emphasis on the socio-political, indeed *civic*, context in which research interviews are carried out, and in relation to which the research themes are debated.

Doxastic interviews

What I shall here refer to as doxastic interviews often find their inspiration in psychology, implicitly or explicitly. An influential approach from within the field of qualitative psychology is represented by empirical phenomenology and its ways of asking questions about the life world(s) of respondents. This method has long been advocated and brought to considerable sophistication by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). During the interview, the phenomenological interviewer will ask for descriptions of concrete experiences such as "Please describe for me a time in your life when you experienced internalized homophobia." (p. 263). The interviewer follows up on the descriptions by asking the respondent to "tell more", and "what happened next?" etc. (p. 264). As seen in this illustration, analyzed as exemplary and in great detail by Giorgi, there are no questions concerning the meaning of internalized homophobia, for example, and very few questions where the respondent is challenged and asked for justifications or abstract reflections.

An influential introduction to qualitative research interviewing – Steinar Kvale's *InterViews* (Kvale, 1996) – likewise advocates that interviewers primarily ask questions about concrete episodes and experiences, rather than invite more abstract reflections. In line with phenomenological philosophy, Giorgi and Kvale posit a primacy of the life world, and the interviewer is cast in the role of someone who should elicit descriptions and narratives from the respondents that reflect experiences of the life world. The purpose of qualitative interview research, argues Kvale, "is to describe and understand the central themes the subjects experience and live toward." (p. 29). There is thus a unique emphasis on people's experiences. I should say that I find nothing wrong in the practice of life world interviewing, and it is indeed the standard approach that I have applied in my own research, but what I would like to do in this paper is to examine whether qualitative interview research could gain from *also* involving other kinds of interviews: non-experiential, non-psychological, non-phenomenological, non-doxastic.

In addition to the descriptive phenomenological psychology that inspires Giorgi and Kvale, others have found inspiration not just in psychology, but also in psycho*therapy* proper, for example psychoanalysis. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's psychoanalytic idea of "the defended subject" is a case in point (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In their eyes, the qualitative interview researcher is always closer to the truth than the research subject, for "subjects are motivated *not* to know certain aspects of themselves and […] they *produce* biographical accounts which avoid such knowledge." (p. 169). In this perspective, the respondents can give away only *doxa* and the researcher-therapists are in a unique position to obtain *episteme*, given

their superior theoretical knowledge and psychoanalytic training. The model for the relation between interviewer and interviewee consequently becomes that of psychotherapist and patient, where the patient is cast in the experiencing, suffering position and the therapist in the knowing position.

There are many other schools of psychotherapy, however, and a quite different psychologization of the interview is found in Carl Rogers' early "non-directive method as a technique for social research". As Rogers explained as early as 1945, the goal of this kind of therapy/research is to sample the respondent's attitudes toward herself: "Through the non-directive interview we have an unbiased method by which we may plumb these private thoughts and perceptions of the individual." (Rogers, 1945, p. 282). In contrast to psychoanalytic practice, the respondent in client-centered therapy/research is a client rather than a patient, and the client is the expert. Although often framed in different terms, I believe that many contemporary interview researchers conceptualize the research interview in line with Rogers' humanistic, non-directive approach, valorizing the respondents' private experiences, narratives, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which can be captured with the concept of *doxa*. This is the case with much qualitative psychology, but also scholars outside psychology conduct interviews that approach a therapeutic, Rogerian form. "Empathetic interviewing" (I take this from a chapter by Fontana & Frey, 2005), for example, involves taking a stance in favor of the persons being studied, not unlike the positive regard displayed by Rogerian therapists, and the approach is depicted as at once a "method of friendship" and a humanistic "method of morality because it attempts to restore the sacredness of humans before addressing any theoretical or methodological concerns" (p. 697). In line with an implicit therapeutic metaphor, the interview is turned "into a walking stick to help some people get on their feet" (p. 695). This is a laudable intention, but there seems to be significant limitations to such forms of interviewing as well, not least that it becomes difficult to interview people with whom one disagrees and does not want to help (e.g. neo-Nazis).

In doxastic interviews that focus on experiences, opinions, and attitudes, knowing the experiencing self is seen as presupposed in knowing as such (this was very different in Socrates' epistemic conversations, as we shall see below). A key point in these forms of interviewing, I believe, is that "*Understanding ourselves is part of the process of understanding others*." (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 486). This can be interpreted as analogous to therapists' own need for therapy in their professional development. As Rogers knew, the most efficient way of eliciting private doxastic elements is by engaging in a warm and accepting relationship, in line with the principles of client-centered psychotherapy (Rogers advocated what he called unconditional positive regard).

The use of what I here refer to as doxastic interviews go back at least to the famous, or infamous, Hawthorne studies of the 1930s. Elton Mayo and coworkers then developed a sophisticated method of interviewing, which Mayo described in great detail in his book *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1933). As recently discussed by Eva Illouz (2007), Mayo's approach was much inspired by psychoanalytic therapeutics and an emerging emotional ethos, and his recommendations for interviewers prove to be surprisingly contemporary.

As Mayo recounts, it was necessary to train interviewers ”how to listen, how to avoid interruption or the giving of advice, how generally to avoid anything that might put an end to free expression in an individual instance.” (Mayo, 1933, p. 65). The guiding rules for interviewers were set down as follows, and these could – without much change – appear in most introductory books on qualitative interviewing today, illustrating the doxastic approach:

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. (Mayo, 1933, p. 65).

Eva Illouz sees Mayo’s therapeutic approach to (research) interviewing as belonging to the roots of the contemporary ”emotional capitalism”, where the making of a new form of capitalism has gone hand in hand with the making of a specialized emotional culture with a quest for authenticity, intimacy, and consumerism. People’s problems and conflicts at work were for the first time in Mayo’s qualitative investigations understood as a result of tangled emotions, rather than a matter of competition over limited resources, for example (Illouz, 2007, p. 14). A woman worker in Mayo’s study thus ”discovered during an interview that her dislike of a certain supervisor was based on a fancied resemblance to a detested stepfather.” (Mayo, 1933, p. 69). The studies carried out by Mayo are significant in the history of qualitative research interviewing, because they demonstrate how the development of a certain method of interviewing, conducted by an accepting, empathetic, and listening interviewer, who much resembles a psychotherapist, is closely connected to a nascent culture of consumerist, emotional capitalism. Qualitative methods are not ahistorical, but are, like other human practices, situated in specific social and historical contexts.

Epistemic interviews

In order to begin to work out an alternative to doxastic interviews, viz. “epistemic interviews”, I shall give just a simple and very short example from Plato. This is one of my favorite examples since it demonstrates very elegantly that no moral rules are self-applying and self-interpreting, but must always be understood contextually. Socrates is in a conversation with Cephalus, who believes that justice (*dikaiosune*) – here “doing right” – can be stated in universal rules, such as “tell the truth” and “return borrowed items”:

> ‘That’s fair enough, Cephalus,’ I [Socrates] said. ‘But are we really to say that doing right consists simply and solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed? Are those not actions that can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong? For instance, if one borrowed a weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, not to consent to tell the strict truth to a madman?’
>
> ‘That is true,’ he replied.
>
> ‘Well then, I [Socrates] said, ‘telling the truth and returning what we have borrowed is not the definition of doing right.’ (Plato, 1987, pp. 65-66).

Here, the conversation is interrupted by Polemarchus who disagrees with Socrates’ preliminary conclusion, and Cephalus quickly leaves in order to go to a sacrifice. Then Polemarchus takes Cephalus’ position as Socrates’ discussion partner and the conversation continues as if no substitution had happened.

Initially, we may notice that Socrates violates almost every standard principle of qualitative research interviewing. First, we can see that he talks much more than his respondent. There is some variety across the dialogues concerning how much Socrates talks in comparison with the other participants, but the example given here from *The Republic*, is not unusual, although the balance is much more equal in other places. Second, Socrates has not asked Cephalus to “describe a situation in which he has experienced justice” or “tell a story about doing right from his own experience” or a similar concretely descriptive question, probing for “lived experience”. Instead, they are talking about the definition of an important general concept. Third, Socrates contradicts and challenges his respondent’s view. He is not a warm and caring conversationalist, or working with “a methodology of friendship”. Fourth, there is no debriefing or attempt to make sure that the interaction was a ”pleasant experience” for Cephalus. Fifth, the interview is conducted in public rather than private, and the topic is not private experiences or biographical details, but justice, a theme of common human interest, at least of interest to all citizens of Athens. Sixth, and finally, the interview here is radically anti-psychologistic. Interestingly, it does not make much of a difference whether the conversation partner is Cephalus or Polemarchus – and the discussion goes on in exactly the same way after Cephalus has left. The crux of the discussion is whether the participants are able to give good reasons for their belief in a public discussion. The focus is on *what* they say – and whether it can be normatively justified – not on dubious psychological interpretations concerning *why* they say it, neither during the conversation, nor in some process of analysis after the conversation.

Principles of Socratic interviewing

Christine Sorrell Dinkins has recently outlined the general principles of Socratic interviewing, which she refers to as “Socratic-hermeneutic interpre-viewing” (Dinkins, 2005). Dinkins is dissatisfied with “phenomenological interviewing”, which “calls forth long narratives from the respondent, with few interruptions or prompts from the interviewer, in order to allow the re-

spondents' stories to unfold naturally." (p. 112). Although not couched in exactly these terms, I believe that Dinkins here has in mind what I call doxastic interviewing, and the Socratic alternative to be presented corresponds to my epistemic version of interviewing. Socrates' "method" is not a method in the conventional sense, as Dinkins makes clear, but an *elenchus*, a Greek term that means examining a person and considering his or her statements normatively. The Socratic conversation is a mode of understanding, rather than a method in any mechanical sense (cf. Gadamer, 1960). In Dinkins' rendition, the *elenchus* proceeds as follows (and we can bear in mind the small excerpt from *The Republic* discussed earlier):

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' 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 (adapted from Dinkins, 2005, p. 124).

Sometimes, the conversation partners in the Platonic dialogues settle on a definition, but more often the dialogue ends without any final, unarguable definition of the central concept (e.g. justice, virtue, love). This lack of resolution – *aporia* in Greek – can be interpreted as illustrating the open-ended character of human social and historical life, including the open-ended character of the discursively produced knowledge of human social and historical life generated by (what we today call) the social sciences.

Michel Foucault (2001) also discussed Socrates' conversational practices in some of his last writings, and the quotation below nicely brings out the normative and epistemic dimensions of Socratic interviewing (see also the analysis in Butler, 2005). When Socrates asks people to give accounts, "what is involved is not a confessional autobiography", Foucault makes clear (p. 97), but rather:

> In Plato's or Xenophon's portrayals of him, we never see Socrates requiring an examination of conscience or a confession of sins. Here, giving an account of your life, your *bios*, is also not to give a narrative of the historical events that have taken place in your life, but rather to demonstrate whether you are able to show that there is a relation between the rational discourse, the *logos*, you are able to use, and the way that you live. Socrates is inquiring into the way that *logos* gives form to a person's style of life. (Foucault, 2001, p. 97).

Socrates was engaged in conversational practices where people, in giving accounts of themselves, exhibited the logos by which they lived (Butler, 2005, p. 126). The conversation partners were thus positioned as responsible citizens, accountable to each other with reference to the normative order in which they lived, and the topic would therefore not be the narrative of the individual's life, or his or her experiences, but rather people's epistemic practices of justification.

Examples of recent epistemic interviews

What the sociologist Robert Bellah and co-workers (1985) refer to as "active interviews" correspond, I believe, quite well to what I address here as epistemic interviews, and they represent one well worked-out alternative to the standard doxastic interviews that probe for private meanings and opinions. In the appendix to their classic study of North American values and character, *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah and co-workers 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, of which some were interviewed more than once. In contrast to the interviewer as a friend or therapist, probing deep in the private psyche of the interviewee, Bellah and co-workers practiced active interviews, which were intended to generate public conversation about societal values and goals. The interviewer is allowed to question and challenge what the interviewee says. In one of the examples cited, the interviewer, Steven Tipton, 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, Tipton repeatedly challenges the respondent's claim of not being responsible for other human beings. With the Socratic principles outlined by Dinkins 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 the definition apparently plays such a central role in the person's life that she is unwilling to give it up. I would argue that this way of interviewing, although not asking for concrete descriptions or narratives, gives us important knowledge *primarily* about the doxastic individualist beliefs of Americans in the mid-eighties, but *secondarily* about the idea of responsibility in an epistemic sense. For most readers would appreciate the above 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 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 (epistemic) interviews "create the possibility of *public* conversation and argument" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305). The view that interviews should stimulate public argument is quite different from the traditional doxastic view of social science interviews, portraying these as ways of understanding what people privately think, feel and want.

Qualitative research in social science serves – and should serve – many different purposes. One legitimate purpose is to throw light on people's private experiences and opinions. It is difficult to learn about lived experience in prisons, schools, and factories, for example, without the use of experience-focused interviewing. But according to an older view of social science that goes back to Plato and notably Aristotle (1976), the social sciences are *practical* sciences that should ideally enable the creation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of discussing matters of communal value. Social science should serve the political community in the sense of engaging this community in conversations about ethical, political, and other normative issues. Qualitative social science, according to this view, should serve the *Res Publica*, i.e., the ethical and political relations between human beings that are not constituted by intimacy (Sennett, 1977).

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett warned against seeing society as a grand, psychological system (Sennett, 1977, p. 4), where the question "who am I?" is constantly pursued, and where psychological categories invade and destroy public life, making us forget that political questions cannot be dealt with alone through trust, empathy, warmth and a disclosure of private opinions (p. xvii). Under the conditions Sennett describes as "the tyranny of intimacy", public, social, civic, and political phenomena are transformed into questions of personality, biography

and individual narratives (p. 219). As an antidote, Sennett calls for more "impersonal" forms of action in public arenas (p. 340).

My worry is that some of the social science interviews, which I have referred to as doxastic, can be said to uncritically reproduce and reinforce the view of social life as reducible to "psychology" in the form of people's experiences and opinions. What Sennett said of contemporary life in general also applies to much interview research: "Each person's self has become his principle burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world." (Sennett, 1977, p. 4). Current doxastic interviews are often about getting to know people's selves, which is often portrayed as an end in itself in the contemporary "interview society" (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), and I would echo Sennett's claim that we need a forum "in which it becomes meaningful to join with other persons without the compulsion to know them as persons" (Sennett, 1977, p. 340) – also in the contexts of qualitative interview research. No doubt, we also often need to know others "as persons", and here doxastic interviews have proved to be very efficient, but if we genuinely want to examine ethical and political issues for the sake of the public good, one way could be to add epistemic interviews to the repertoire of qualitative inquiry to a larger extent.

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