

Arksey, Hilary and Knight, Peter (1999) **Interviewing for Social Scientists**. London: Sage.

Reviewed by *Peter Musaeus*, Ph.D. student, Department of Psychology, Aarhus

The aim of this book is, as the title says, to cover the essential aspects of interviewing for social scientists. It contains chapters on for instance justifications of using interviews to challenges in planning, transcribing and making meaning out of interviews and disseminating the findings. A bottom line of the book is that the research situation is never ideal and, therefore, the good researcher must take pains to explain how his decisions represent the best answers to concrete problems. The authors' theoretical stance derives from phenomenology. This is prevalent for instance in their predilection for small-scale studies, where the researcher and interviewer is one and the same person. Furthermore it is evident in a ground metaphor of (qualitative) research. Here the (qualitative) researcher is likened to a jazz musician in a jam session, who has to orchestrate and know his trade and yet improvise greatly as he goes along. But the peculiarity of the book is that it also deals with quantitative interviewing.

The strength of the book is neither the discussion of ideologies (which theoretical stances produce which interpretations) nor of quantitative aspects of interviewing (the sections on coding and analyzing data quantitatively are very basic). The book is at its best, when it poses pragmatic questions for the social scientist going about doing qualitative interviewing. For instance it raises the question about proper procedures for triangulating results. This should be done not only by collecting more data, but also by asking the right question as to what aims the data serve. Here the book gives suggestion as to what measures to take if different sources of data yield various results.

There are a growing number of introductory books about qualitative interviews. However, this is not an ordinary recipe book with procedural prescriptions covering every thinkable aspect of interviewing. Rather it takes some common problems and deal with them in a factual way drawing on personal examples. Thus throughout the book, factual material is interweaved

with gems from the authors' fount of personal experiences. For instance Peter Knight relates his experiences with using computer-assisted transcription. Another positive thing is that this book never resorts to populism. On the opposite it contains many facts and reflections about the troubles of carrying out, transcribing and analyzing qualitative interviews. To this extent the book does a fine job in opening the scientist's eyes to the pitfalls of doing research by means of interviewing.

It is an ambitious book. It intends to cover both semi-structured interviews as well as survey interviews in depth. This obviously stretches over a vast field. The result is to some extent a well-rounded book, but also, in my opinion, not always as riveting as the author's experiences could have warranted. I think that I would have liked to see a bit more enthusiasm for conducting interviews on behalf of the authors. To be more to the point and follow up on the line of criticism: Matters concerning the philosophy of science are, probably in the name of science, repeated throughout the book. This is not least the case with the frequent allusions to post-modernist approaches. But on the other hand this discussion illustrates another fact about the book as a whole, namely that it is a scholarly piece of work.

This book can be read both by the graduate student and by the novice. The graduate student may enjoy reading about interviewing in specialized contexts such as interviewing children with learning disabilities. The novice can benefit from a chapter on the practicalities of achieving a successful interview: What language to use, the problems of writing and rewriting etc. However the novice might be somewhat put off since the ideas of the book are not completely transparent. Thus there are not as many diagrams, summaries, introductions, overviews, connections between chapters etc. as one can find in standard introductory texts. Furthermore there is the issue of layout: The text is somewhat jammed on the pages. Lastly, given that this is a book with around 200, quite dense pages, I find a conclusion of 1/3 page in the final chapter to be a limitation. Nevertheless, as mentioned, the book gives some invaluable examples of the author's personal findings. All in all this book is as an interesting voice dealing with both quantitative and qualitative interviewing, though the latter gets the best of it.