

Tom Wengraf (2001, this version reprinted 2004). **Qualitative Research Interviewing**. Sage Publications. 398 pages.

Reviewed by: *Lene Tanggaard*, assistant professor, Department of Communication, Aalborg University.

Let me begin this review with a statement learned from reading this book on qualitative research interviewing – 90% of all social science research involves interviews, but interviews are in themselves very seldom the object of research. There has been very little social research into the semi-structured research interview as a historically produced and socially proliferating practice (p. 37). With the increasing use of qualitative interview in social research there is a need – not just for the important writings on the “why and how” of the interview as exemplified by this book of Wengraf, and for example Kvale (1996, 2005, in prep.) but also for a research on the particular uses and character of interview research and interview settings. That would be one of the ways to enhance our knowledge of the possibilities and pitfalls using interview research as intensively as it is assumingly the case in today’s social sciences.

As already mentioned this book is a text on the “why and how” of the interview and, given its sublime quality and intense richness of detailed analysis of the processes in interview studies, it may become a classic in this field of useful practitioner books on interview research suited for teaching courses in qualitative interviewing.

The book is overall concerned with the differences between on the one hand the biographic-narrative interviews and on the other hand the more classical semi-structured depth interviews with an initial theoretical framework and partially prepared questions. By depth interview this author means that the interview can go in depth “*to get a sense of how the apparently straightforward is actually more complicated, of how the `surface appearances` may be quite misleading about `depth realities`*” (p. 6). The overall aim of the qualitative interview according to Wengraf is to interfere from the facts of the interview to the many subjective, social and cultural extra-interview realities.

In the first parts of the book the author discusses the issue of how to conduct an interview planned in advance, but with improvisations along the way in a careful and theoretically informed way as regards the particular interview-questions to the interviewee. One of the main points is that the often artful improvisation by the experienced interviewer requires more training and more mental preparation before each interview than simply delivering lines prepared and rote-learned in advance.

One of the strengths of the book is its instructive use of examples from reported interview studies and from the work of the author supervising his own students doing interview studies. The many concrete examples throughout the book are used to illustrate complex theoretical

problems and to highlight the practical abilities necessary to the use of interviews in a research project. In chapter 2 for example the author uses the example of a very mal-prepared and ill-conducted interview to illustrate how not to ask questions in an interview. The example is analysed very intensively over several pages in the book, and the author suggests his version of a possibly better interview. The analysis and suggested revisions of the interview questions give the reader a very concrete understanding of the usefulness of open questions and the productive use of active listening on behalf of the interviewer. In chapter 3 Wengraf gives us another vivid example on the importance of open and everyday life formulations in the interview questions in the semi-structured research interview. The example comes from an interview on eating disorders. Here the interviewer asks the interview person to differentiate between her ideal self and actual self. As it would be evident this very 'psychology-theory-language' does not generate any useful descriptions from the interview person on the issue of living with an eating disorder. On the contrary it creates a lot of confusion (p. 65).

During the first 5 chapters Wengraf proposes what he calls a Pyramid Model of interview research - CRQ→TQ→IQ/II (p. 63). By this model is meant the progression from the Central Research Questions (CRQ) differentiated into a number of Theory Questions (TQ) and the particular Interview Questions (IQ) and the non-verbal Interview Interventions (II). Some readers may dislike the formal language referring to the processes of interview research. From my point of view I like the visual mediation of complex processes that formal algorithms may convey. The use of formal language may also signal an assumption on behalf of the author that there is a need of a scientific language to acquire a scientific recognition of interview research.

As a parallel to the formulation of the formal pyramid model the author also illustrates his points using an example of his own supervision on the work of a student going from an initial research proposal to the formulation of both theoretical questions and interview questions. The example shows the importance of having a clearly defined research topic informed by earlier research in the field. By the use of the concrete examples from interview sequences Wengraf on the one hand suggests a high sensitivity on behalf of the reader of interview reports paying attention to both the utterances and roles of the interviewer and the interviewed. On the other hand he addresses the power relations at play in the interview situations also highlighted by the Foucault inspired feminist writers on qualitative interviews.

In chapter 6 and 7 Wengraf goes into the concrete and practical differentiation between the very structured and the highly unstructured interview sessions. He discusses the design of lightly structured depth interviews (LSDI) and a particular type of LSDI, namely that developed by the biographic-narrative-interpretive method (BNIM) inspired by the interactionist and phenomenological research traditions. This is a version of research interviewing with minimalist interviewer interventions. The argument of Wengraf is that learning this type of minimalist interviewing really trains the ability to listen and not-intervene on behalf of the interviewer (who may love to engage in conversations!). Wengraf gives a detailed description of how to conduct a biographical-narrative interview, and he points at the many possible misbehaviours of the interviewer in this type of interview encounter. For example he makes the

argument that the interviewer who goes for narratives must not use open questions as in the more semi-structured interviews, but must rather use very close questions going directly for a narrative. In chapter 7 Wengraf once more elaborates on the relations of the theoretical and the interview questions. To enhance an active acquisition of the points made in the interview Wengraf introduces some practical exercises for the reader. If the book were to be used in teaching qualitative research some of the exercises might be useful for students.

Chapter 8 and 9 are devoted to issues around the interview. Wengraf discusses the formal contractual and ethical dilemmas initiating an interview study. He discusses confidentiality and anonymity and advises everybody to rehearse their coming interview sessions with friends and colleagues. He also touches on all the technical matters managing the interview sessions.

In the chapters 10, 11, and 12 Wengraf refers to the strategies for working up the interview material.

In chapter 10 he goes into considerable lengths with the techniques of transcription and the usefulness of a verbatim transcript communicating all the hesitations, gaps, difficulties of formulation and inconsequentialities in the interview session. He also points at the usefulness of supplementing the verbatim with theoretical and personal memos of the interview session to enhance the coming analysis of the material. On the other hand he also acknowledges the sometimes necessary reduction of the interview material editing out all the “urms”, “ars” and “øhs”.

In chapter 11 and 12 Wengraf advises a model for the interpretation of interview material being the reverse of the Pyramid model presented earlier in the book  $RP \rightarrow CRQ \rightarrow TQs \rightarrow IQs/IIs$ . The formula for the interpretation of the interview model goes as follows:  $IM \rightarrow ATQs \rightarrow ACRQ$  (p. 225). The procedure now goes from the initial interview material (IM) to the answers to the theory questions (ATQ) and the central research questions (ACRQ). As a result of the analysis of the material a new theory question may arise (TQZ) and there is always a TQ0 which is the interview processes as the occurred. While these formulas are rather arbitrary and abstract they do catch the overall process and the interpretation of interviews. In practice the movement back and forth between the arrows are more usual than not. For the positivist qualitative researcher the impersonal power of these technical procedures might seem appealing while the more enthusiastic qualitative researcher might anger the need for relatively mechanical and routine activity before the idiosyncratic interpretative activity of the individual researcher are making its way through. Wengraf goes into very much detail with different variants of structuring analysis of interview material. He identifies a DARNE-model looking for Descriptions, Argumentation, Report, Narrative and Evaluation. The issue is how to identify patterns, themes and for example the life history told in narrative interviews and the structure of the story told. Wengraf constantly advises that the work on the analysis and interpretation of interview material are done collectively. The researcher has to constantly suggest herself counter-hypotheses counter-intuitive to the initial interpretation of the material. The more the diversity of those involved in the work of analysis, the better and more interesting the work of analysis becomes. To ensure a systematic analysis of the inter-

view material Wengraf advises that the researcher uses as many structured tools and models for the analysis as possible and relevant. This strategy leaves relatively little to the variability of the researcher. From my point of view keeping a straight focus on a model mediated analysis may be a very useful guide for the inexperienced researcher. The experienced researcher might though find the proposed technical models for the analytical work too inflexible in themselves and would maybe just consult them to get new ideas on analytical and interpretative viewpoints onto the interview material.

In the last chapters of the book, most considerably from chapter 15 and until the last chapter 17 Wengraf discusses different conceptual frameworks and strategies for writing, presentation and representation of qualitative interview studies. He discusses Polkinghorne's distinction between a paradigmatic and a narrative model for representing knowledge, and he criticises the implicit downgrading of 'generalisation' and 'common elements' characteristic of Polkinghorne's conceptions of narrative knowledge. From Wengraf's point of view a detailed representation of a narrative, and not least comparisons across narratives can lead into kinds of general knowledge. Wengraf also directs our attention to the many different and varied voices in the representation of interview material, and he gives a range of illustrative examples of failures in representing the differences between for example the viewpoint of the researcher and the informants in the reports from interview studies. It is always a key point separating the analytical concepts of the researcher and the actual words used by the informants in the research representation. In this respect Wengraf also contributes with excellent examples of useful and productive "going forth and back" between a presentation of the research material and reflections on this from the perspective of the researcher and the existent literature on the subject matter of the research. Wengraf also suggests that "a confessional tale" (initially defined by Van Manen through his ethnographic field work) might be a supportive tool for the reader following the researcher's struggle to arrive at a matching of theory and data (p. 333).

I have to end my review of this enormously systematic, detailed and well-written book on the qualitative interview. I must recommend the book as a guide to both the inexperienced researcher wanting to comprehend the different styles and analytical tools of interview research, but also to the more experienced researcher. For her or him the book represents a systematic overview of the not well-described biographic narrative interview model, and the book may also contribute to the overall legitimacy of qualitative interviewing with its representation of the many systematic analytical tools available for the knowledge generating efforts of qualitative research.