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DIALOGUE AS OPPRESSION AND INTERVIEW RESEARCH

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A qualitative research wave has in the last decades swept through the social sciences. Interviews, textual analysis, and participant observation have come into general use as research methods. There has appeared a multitude of literature on qualitative methods in new qualitative journals and textbooks on qualitative methods; a good overview of this development is provided in "Handbook of qualitative research", edited by Denzin and Lincoln (2000). I have contributed to the qualitative literature with articles since 1979, and with a book "InterViews" (1996). I have long been puzzled by, and now worried about, the current popularity of interviews in the social sciences. Twenty-five years ago qualitative research interviews hardly existed in textbooks on social science methodology.

I will here discuss reasons for the popularity of research interviewing today. I will first discuss some internal scientific reasons, such as changes in conceptions of knowledge, the feasibility of interviewing, and political conceptions of interview research. Then I turn to the broader social contexts for understanding the interest in dialogues and interviews. First, I point of the use of dialogues by the excerpption of power in management worker and teacher pupil relations. Then, in contrast to a conception of interviews as a dominance-free dialogue, the asymmetrical power relations of the research interviewer and the interviewed subject are outlined. I also suggest some forms of openly agonistic interviews. Thereafter the immersement of interview research in a current interview culture is pointed out, and finally the intrinsic webs of qualitative interviews to the consumer society and its marketing are described. I shall conclude by positing that one reason for the current popularity of the interview as a research method is that it provides liberal humanistic researchers with an illusion of equality and common interests with their interview subjects, while they at the same time retain sovereign control of the interview situation and the later use of the interview produced knowledge.

Some common conceptions of interview research

The qualitative research interview may be defined as a conversation with the aim of obtaining descriptions of the interviewee's life world, with the purpose of interpreting the meaning of the phenomena described. I will here suggest some science internal reasons for the popularity of this research method, such as changes in knowledge, the apparent easiness of interviewing, and what I call a progressivity myth of qualitative interview research.

Changed conceptions of knowledge. Within the social sciences there has in the last decades been a move from a predominantly theoretical interest in abstract knowledge, to also focus upon concretely situated knowledge. This concerns an interest in everyday knowing, in the knowledge people act from in their daily lives. And it encompasses professional knowledge, how professionals act and reflect upon their practice, which may diverge from scientifically derived knowledge about

practice. The qualitative research interview gives a unique access to the lived world of common people and of professionals.

There have also been changes in epistemological conceptions of the nature of knowledge; whereas scientific conception of knowledge as consisting of facts and rules have earlier dominated the social sciences, there has in the last decades been an opening towards broader conceptions of knowledge. This encompasses phenomenological descriptions of consciousness and the lived world, the hermeneutical interpretation of the meaning of texts, and postmodern emphasis on knowledge as contextual, interrelational, conversational, linguistic and narrative. Within these alternative conceptions of knowledge, the interview and the knowledge it produces appear as a central access to the domain of the social sciences.

The apparent lightness of interview research. At first the qualitative interview may appear as an easy research method to use, it seems so close to the everyday conversations we already master. The difficulties by interview research will – as some also are familiar with – go forth later in the research process. A simple, but perhaps not entirely invalid reason for the frequent use of qualitative interviews today may be that one is relieved of using complicated statistics in one's research project.

The qualitative progressivity myth. When I started with interview research in the late 1970s, I found interviews often presented as a progressive dialogical form of research, giving voice to common people for presenting their lived world in their own words, and allowing the researchers a solidary identification with interviewed subjects. The interviewer's power position has seldom been discussed. In particular within some humanistic and feminist circles the qualitative interviews have been regarded as emancipatory. Qualitative depth interviews are in line with feminist emphasis on experiences and subjectivity, of close personal interaction with and intersubjectivity of researcher and the researched. It has also been maintained that while the linear thinking of men may be captured by questionnaires, the soft qualitative data come closer to the female life world.

Qualitative interviews may undoubtedly function progressively in many contexts. I shall, however, in the following call attention to some less discussed functions of qualitative interviews. I will address dialogue as oppression, the power asymmetry of the research interview, the research interviews reflecting an interview culture, and the intrinsic webs of interview research to the marketing of a consumer society.

Dialogue as social oppression

Dialogue is a term sometimes used about the qualitative research interview. Before addressing the social uses of dialogue by the exertion of power, a brief presentation of the original philosophical concept of dialogue shall be given. Within philosophy one discerns between a Platonic dialogue and an I-thou dialogue after Buber. Plato used the dialogue as a method to obtain true knowledge. Gadamer goes back to the Platonic dialogue and depicts it as a conversation where two persons understand each other, they open themselves to the other and attempts to understand what the other says. It is not the will of the individual persons, which matters in this dialogue, but a law of the subject matter, which releases statements and counter-statements and plays them out against each other, so the participants may reach an agreement about the topic of the conversation. Within the I-thou philosophy of Buber and Marcel the dialogue is a precondition for an I to exist, the I is constituted in a conversation between an I and a Thou. A popularised conception of this latter form of dialogue has become popular in some educational and health settings, where the emotional close-

ness and empathy in the dialogue has prevailed, with the dialogue appearing as a humanistic mantra, where conflicts and power dissolve.

In contrast to the avocation of dialogues as progressive, I will call attention to the use of dialogues today as a power instrument in settings of social conflicts – in management, education, and also in social research. I will ask whether one reason for the current popularity of the dialogue may be due the soft forms of power excretion and power concealment it may involve.

From the 1970s I remember from Norway that when managers had conflicts with their workers they would emphasise a need for dialogue. It was necessary to go away from conflicts and violent actions and enter into dialogue, it was necessary to talk together about the common problems. There were also some critical voices to the much talk of dialogue – labour leaders and Marxist-Leninist workers would point to the unequal power positions in a dialogue of managers and workers, whereby the employers would set the agenda for the dialogue. There would not be a dialogue between two equal partners, on the contrary, one part had the legal right to manage and distribute (“lede og fordele”) the work, and the right to hire and fire the other part. (When writing this paper today I see in Time magazine (Dec 17, 2001) a caption to a picture of a violent demonstration “No talk: Algerian Berbers demand rights, not dialogue”).

Some years later I read about dialogue in education, which should be a humanistic and progressive alternative to the monologues of authoritarian teachers. In a Danish dictionary I found the following definition of an educational dialogue: “*Dialogical pedagogics* - education where teachers and students together and on an equal level share each others knowledge and experiences, intentions and attitudes” (Psykologisk-pædagogisk ordbog, 12. udg, 1999: “*Dialogpædagogik* undervisning hvor lærere og elever i fælleskab og på lige fod delagtiggøres i hinandes viden og erfaringer, hensigter og holdninger”).

On a terminological level it is somewhat incongruous to use the word “teacher” in a context where the teacher possesses no substantial or institutional authority. Within an educational context, teacher pupil interactions tend to take place in situations where the teacher will later be in a power position with regard to the students in the coming examinations. Students appear aware of the power differences between teachers and students, teachers may tend to overlook their power regarding the students, a finding also common in interview studies (see e.g. Kvale, 1972, 1980).

Today we see dialogical and personalised forms of social control through counselling - in business in the form of “your personal bank counsellor”, “your personal customer advisor” (“kundevejleder”) – taking over in education. The teacher as a counsellor is now expected to bring the pupil safely and painlessly through a threatening examination (Kvale, 2000).

Løvlie (1984) has given a principal critique of a therapeutic counselor inspired dialogical pedagogics for overlooking the principal asymmetrical relation of teachers and students. Løvlie replaces a romanticised concept of dialogue with a Habermas inspired concept of discourse, and he argues for an open and strict Socratic discourse with a common search for truth as the ideal pedagogical relation. Kallos (1980) has criticised dialogical education on a political level. In a critique of the soft concealed power excretion of the “pink road of Swedish education” Callawaert & Kallos (1976) drew in Bernstein’s (1975) analysis of an invisible class education in line with middle class values which correspond to the internalised control mechanisms of a late capitalist society.

Within nursing qualitative interviews, with their emphatic access to the patients’ situation, have been contrasted with the medical doctors’ natural science approach to the patients. Qualitative interviews, understood as I–thou dialogue, may here enter into a professional conflict of how to

define the health situation. The dialogue has become part of a romanticisation of the nursing profession, a development recently criticised as a “warmth wave” of empathy and holism (Heggen, 2000).

I have here attempted to demonstrate that dialogues may serve as a concealed manipulation within work and education. The dialogue may create an impression of personal freedom and equality in social relations characterised by asymmetrical relations of power – in economical life between employer and employees, between the bank counsellor and the client loan-seeker; in education between teacher and student, between counsellor and the counselled. In the next section I will show that the concealment of unequal power relations may also pertain to the dialogues of research interviews.

The use of permissive social relations, with illusions of freedom and equality, to conceal power exertion, as described above for dialogues, is not new. One writer on education depicted in 1762 the soft indirect forms of control 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, 1911, p. 84-5).

The asymmetrical power relation of the interview

I will now outline some aspects of the power structure in the research interview, which distinguishes it from as well from everyday conversations between equal partners and from a Socratic dialogue. The qualitative research interview contains an asymmetrical power relation, it is a one-way dialogue, it is indirect and an instrumental conversation, and the interviewer upholds a monopoly of interpretation.

The asymmetrical power relation of the interview. The research interviewer has a research competence and defines the interview situation. He initiates the interview, determines its theme, poses questions and critically follows up the answers, and terminates the conversation. The research interview is not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners; the interviewer’s research project and knowledge interest rules the conversation.

The interview is a one-way dialogue. An interview is a one-way questioning. The role of the interviewer is to ask, and the role of the interviewee is to answer. It is bad taste if the interview subject breaks with his ascribed role and starts to question the interviewer. We are here far from the reciprocal change of questioning and answering in a spontaneous conversation and in the Socratic dialogue.

The interview is often an indirect conversation. A research interview pursues often 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”. Also in Plato’s dialogues the questioning procedures by Socrates could be part of cunning strategy of leading the Sophist opponent to the truth Socrates wants to arrive at.

The interviewer between a participant and an observer role. In the interview situation the interviewer may appear as a participant, becoming engaged in the topic of the conversation, while also adapting an observer role towards how and why the interviewee tells a story. In the later analy-

sis and categorisation of the interview transcript an observer role towards the joint conversation will prevail.

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

The interviewer's monopoly of interpretation. In social science research the interviewer has obtained 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 hereto, the research interviewer, as the "big interpreter", maintains an exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant.

We may conclude that a research interview is no open and dominance-free dialogue between equal partners, but a specific form of conversation, which the interviewer controls in accord to his research interests. One possible reason for the popularity of the research interview today may be that it can provide the researcher with a feeling of equality, personal closeness and common interests with the interviewee, while at the same time excerpting power over the interview interaction and the later use of the interview produced knowledge.

Agonistic alternatives to interviews as harmonious dialogues

Before turning to further reasons for the current popularity of interview research, I will suggest some alternatives to a subjectivistic consensus-seeking understanding of the interview dialogues. They are: researcher abdication, the platonic dialogue, the psychoanalytic interview, agonistic interviews, dissensus and advocacy research.

Abdication of the interviewer as researcher. One solution regarding the power asymmetry of the interview would be to equalize the interviewer and the interviewee by placing the interviewer's research competence at zero. With an emphatic identification with the interviewed subjects, the interviewer abdicates as a critical researcher and adapts the role of a "microphone holder" (?) for the opinions the interviewee wants to express. In a consensus-seeking approach the interviewer may refrain from critical interpretations and only report the interpretations the interviewee accepts, following the principle that the client/the consumer is always right.

The psychoanalytic interview. In contrast to a harmony understanding of the interview dialogue, the psychoanalytic interview entails a clear power asymmetry between therapist and patient. It is a situation, which takes place in the patient's interest in being cured for his suffering, and has a side effect produced significant psychological knowledge (Kvale, 1999). The therapist critically interprets what the patients tell him, and he accepts neither, the patient's "yes" or "no" at face value as validation of an interpretation. The psychoanalytic situation is designed to provoke maximum resistance from the patient towards the therapist's interventions. According to Freud the psychoanalytic theory is built upon the resistance the patient offers to the therapist interpretations.

The Platonic dialogue. Another different alternative to the asymmetry of power in the interview could be to attempt an interview conversation close to Plato's dialogues. This would entail a reciprocity where both parts poses questions and give answers, with a reciprocal critique of what the other says. Some forms of current elite interviews with experts, where the interviewer also contributes with his conceptions of the interview theme, approach such a dialogue. A platonic dialogue

approach would involve a depsychologisation of the research interview; the interview is then no longer understood as a *via regia* to the authentic inner self of the subject interviewed. Rather, the interview becomes a conversation, which stimulates the interviewee to formulate his ideas about the research theme, and which may increase the understanding of the theme of interest for interviewee and interviewer.

Dissensus research. A further contrast to the common harmony search for consensus through dialogue would be to encourage, and report, dissensus in interview research - following a motto of “*vive la difference*”. While Plato’s dialogues may involve a unitary conception of truth, the dialogues are reported in full, with the opponents’ arguments. Hereby the readers may follow the entire truth seeking process, and themselves take a position on the arguments and counter-arguments. Such an open book access to interviews could open for a manifold of alternative and conflicting interpretations of the same texts. And, as by political negotiations, both majority and minority opinions would be included in the reports. A side effect of reporting interview investigations in a dialogue form could be that they, in contrast to many current fragmented interview quoting reports, became interesting to read.

Dominance and resistance. Scheurich (1995) has given a postmodern critique of the understanding of research interviewing from a liberal humanist idea of discourse as a jointly constructed conversation. He addresses the power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee and presents a dominance-and-resistance view of the play of power. The research interviewer is overlaying the indeterminacy of the interview interaction with the determinancies of his meaning-making, replacing ambiguities with findings or constructions. The interviewee asserts his or her control of the interview, such as by answering different questions than those the interviewer poses. The final interpretation is overloaded with the researchers interpretive baggage, and Scheurich stresses the need for interviewers to highlight the conceptual baggage they bring to the research enterprise and its role in the play of dominance and resistance of the interview.

Agonistic interviews. A dissensus approach may be radicalised by focusing on the conflict and power dimensions of the interview. This could be done by regarding the conversation as a battle field, as suggested by Aaronson’s Bakhtin inspired analyses (“*Samtalet som slagfält*”, 1999). Lyotard also goes back to such an agonistic understanding of the conversation in his discussion of knowledge in the postmodern society. He regards every statement as a move in a game, which provides the understanding “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” (1984, p. xx). An agonistic interviewing would apply confronting forms of interviewing, deliberately provoking conflicts and divergencies of interests, as seen in some forms of journalistic interviews. In contrast to a harmonising consensus-directed dialogue of interview research, the interview would become a battle where the goal is to defeat the opponent, such as in the agonistic and dialectical questioning of the Sophists, leading to insight through dialectical development of opposites.

Latour’s (2000) discussion of objectivity in social science research implies an agonistic approach. Objectivity in social science, he maintains, is obtained by allowing “the objects to object”. If social scientists wanted 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; where the objects are allowed to raise questions in their own terms and not in the researchers terms, a researcher whose interests they need not share. Then human beings would behave as interestingly towards social science researchers as natural objects behave towards the natural scientists. As an example from the social sciences today he points to how feminism has contributed to make women recalcitrant against the social researchers interview approaches.

Advocacy research. We may follow up the dissensus and agonistic approaches to interviews by conceiving of social research openly partisan. Advocacy research would provide representatives of different positions and social groups - such as managers and workers, teachers and pupils - access to the same interview texts, and potentially also the same interview subjects. As lawyers in court the representatives of the different positions could critically interpret the texts, and potentially, as in court, cross-examine the witnesses. The different parts involved may also have the option of engaging social scientists to openly address the research material from their interests. The outcome of such an advocately research need not be a harmonious consensus, but just as well documented and well argued dissensus.

I have now mentioned some alternatives to a common subjective harmony conception of research interviews, and hereby emphasised an acceptance of conflicts and dissensus as contributing to the objectivity of interview research. I will now return to the issue of the current popularity of an emphatic harmonious interview research.

The interview culture

Social research has often been criticised for objectivation and manipulation of human relations through quantification and experimentation. This has undoubtedly been so, most conspicuous within behaviourist psychology. Today, however, objectivation and reification as manipulative techniques are followed up by power excretion in form of subjectivation through intimacy and empathy. We see today an increasing therapeutisation of society, where manipulation in direct human encounters, and in the consume sphere, to a large extent takes place through places through emotional dialogues and emphatic identification with the other. The individual subject, with its experiences, emotions, motives and personal self is in focus. Private life is made public, in the media talk shows, and in social research.

Dialogue as a mode of control relates to a new intimisation of social relations, as described by Ziehe as the new cordiality and heartiness (“den nye inderlighed”), and by Sennett (1998) as the tyranny of intimacy. We may ask whether the recent interest in applying interviews as a research method may not only be an internal scientific development, but may also be related to a general social development towards an interview culture.

Two British interview researchers – Atkinson and Silverman (1997) – have posed the question of why the interview and its narrative products have come to play such a dominating role in social science research today. They point to a general culture where the production of the self has come in focus and where the interview serves as a social technique. Within a neo-romantic cult of the spontaneous narrating self, the interview is regarded as giving access to an authentic gaze into the other’s soul, and the experiential narratives as a dialogical revelation of the authentic inner self. The media, in particular 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 emphatic listener, personal confessions are produced to the open screen. The interview becomes an emphatic social technology for biographical reconstruction and reconfirmation of a fragile self. The emphatic access to authenticity in interview research thus recapitulates central cultural themes by placing the biographical narrating self in the centre of social research.

The interview culture of a consumer society

We may ask further to the social bases of the hegemony of an interview culture which emphasises subjective experiences and narrative constructions of the self. I shall here go beyond a general spirit of the age – “Zeitgeist” as evoked by Silverman & Atkinson – and regard the current dominance of the interview in relation to a transition of the economic system from a dominance of industrial production to consumption as the key to economic growth (Kvale, 2002). In a consumer society social reality and personal identities are constructed and reconstructed through the purchase of commodities, with a planned obsolescence built into the construction of the products and their fashion designs. Our purchases are directed less by the concrete use values of the products, than by the experiences, dreams and lifestyles associated with the products through a sophisticated marketing. The meaning of life is found in consumption, an empty self is filled and reshaped by the purchase of products with the appropriate logo. An insecure self, emptied by loss of tradition and social bonds, is now filled with the consumption of experiences in a continual identity shopping. As depicted in a painting by the American artist Barbara Kruger: “I shop, therefore I am”.

With the transition from sale of products for use to sale of experiences, life styles and identities it becomes paramount for a market sensitive capitalism to carefully investigate the consumers experiences and the meanings the products have for them. Trend-spotting the consumers meanings and styles has become important for the fabrication of new individual life styles the products may be attached to.

Qualitative interviews have become a key access to the consumer’s world. Qualitative interviews were used in marketing in the 1930s (Dichter, 1962) nearly half a century before the breakthrough of qualitative interviews in the social sciences. The consumers’ experiences, wishes and desires were sensitively traced through therapeutically inspired interviews for the design and marketing of new products. Market interviews are today usually carried through in focus groups, both by the promotion of new products and politicians. The interview method today probably dominates more in market research than in social science research; in year 1990 there were thus in the United States carried out more than 110 000 focus group interviews (Vaugh et al., 1996).

Concluding perspectives

I have here attempt to go beyond internal science reasons for the recent breakthrough of qualitative interviews in social science research, to also draw in broader social developments of the last half of the 20th century. Interviewing corresponds to a general trend in forms of power excerption – from direct open forms of excerpting power to more indirect softer forms of social control, of which the dialogue may be one instrument. Research interviews are in line with a pervasive interview culture of making the private public, with individual confessions and a stabilisation of vulnerable selves through the interview production of narratives of the self. The interview has become a key technique in a consumer society; the interview’s access to the consumer’s experiences, desires and self-narratives provides knowledge to be employed by marketing new products and logos as essential to the design and social construction of life styles and identities today. The qualitative research interview has come to reflect in form, content and use essential dimensions of a dialogical consumer society.

Pointing out of the immersion of the qualitative research interview in the interview culture of a consumer society is no argument against its the value as a research method for providing knowledge of the human situation. It may though suggest a caution with regard to declaring the qualitative interview as a unique authentic and an emancipatory research method. I have also mentioned

some alternative agonistic approaches to interviewing, which openly emphasise their power and conflict potentials. I do not regard it as criticisable that research methods reflect general developments of society. What may be criticised, however, is if research interviewers uncritically reproduce general social forms of domination and the trends of the consumer society they live in, without investigating and relating their research to the social bases of their social research.

We are today so totally involved in a dialogical interview culture that we have difficulties in seeing its pervasiveness in the many domains of life, including social research. The philosopher Hans Skjevheim has rephrased a Biblical statement to: we do not see the beam in our own eye because it is the beam we see with. In our context we may rephrase again: we do not see the dominance of the dialogue in our culture because the dialogue is the beam we see this culture through.

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