

The Research Interview as a Dialogical Context for the Production of Social Life and Personal Narratives

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The aim of the present article is to consider the research interview as a dialogical context for the production of social life and personal narratives. It is emphasized that interviews are inevitable, dialogical social events based on repertoires of socially and culturally embedded and constantly changing words and discourses. Rather than viewing the interview as a setting for unfolding an inner and subjective lifeworld uninfluenced by the interview setting, it is suggested that the interview is better described as a setting in which dissenting opinion, diverse discourses, and personal narratives are produced through the social, dialogical context of the interview. In this sense, one major objective of qualitative research interviewing is to identify general discursive repertoires in speaking within particular social settings and to fuel public dialogue about research themes beyond the specific interview setting.

Keywords: *dialogue; Bakhtin; polyphonic research interviewing*

The aim of the present article is to extend the framework of research interviewing that was recently presented by Kvale and Brinkmann. Within their agenda, the purpose of research interviewing is stated as follows: "The purpose of the qualitative research interview discussed here is to understand themes of the daily world from the subject's own perspective" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 24). Kvale and Brinkmann arrive at this statement through inspiration from Giorgi's (1975) phenomenological interview analysis that focused on meaning structures in the subject's psychological lifeworlds. However, later in the text, Kvale and Brinkmann also stress that discourses voiced in an interview

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need to be approached in their own right and not as an expression of the essence of psychological meaning structures hidden behind language: “Discourses are used to create, maintain and destroy social bonds” (p. 226). Language “does something” and because it is a means of data production in an interview, this is a significant issue. Accordingly, the viewpoint to be emphasized in the present context is that interviewing constitutes a specific setting for the dialogical production of personal narratives and social life. Within such a perspective, interviewing should not be seen as a channel for tapping the subject’s own viewpoint. The central analytical unit is not a bounded and static self but rather the diverse discursive repertoires spoken by persons within particular social settings; that is, interviewing provides a context for revealing how language “makes” people, produces and changes social life.

To help clarify the above statements, I draw on the Russian philosopher Bahktin (1981, 2003), who wrote about the character of dialogues in everyday life, as produced against the background of a cultural repertoire of words and discourses. To further differentiate this point, the article draws on empirical interview material from the author’s own research, which illustrates how interview dialogues can be seen as social activities taking place through touching on dissenting opinion and discourses within the particular field of research. In the case presented in this article, the theme of the interview and the overall research project was psychologists’ work practices with children, in which different discourses about sound psychological work seem to both converge and diverge. As such, a thoroughly dialogical interview can give voice to dissenting discourses within the specific interview settings that are embedded within and reflect broader diversity within institutional talk and practices.

Why Bahktin and Interviewing?

Bahktin did not concern himself with research methods, and his field of study was about the novel as a modern literary genre (Bahktin, 1981, 2003). It may, therefore, seem odd to deal with his work in relation to research interview processes. Nevertheless, the essential benefit of working with Bahktin is that he enables us to determine quite precisely that no dialogue in a research interview is conducted only on the basis of our own exclusively subjective words or just one general language. A research interview will inevitably be polyphonic—replete with the use of many voices, words, and discourses that structure the conversation.

Likewise, discursive social psychologists have argued that structured discursive resources or repertoires underlie and sustain social interaction (Potter,

2003; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Parker defines 'discourse' as "the organization of language into certain kinds of social bonds" (p. 88). A variety of discourses often stand out when examining interview transcripts or listening to interview talks. The emphasis among qualitative researchers on discourse analysis is part of the linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities that emphasizes the role of language in the construction of social reality. Some texts about discourse analysis have also been inspired explicitly by the work of Bahktin (Parker, 2005). However, few advocate a 'Bahktian' approach to interviewing.

The aim of the present article is not to consider discourse analysis per se, but to examine the implications of a Bahktian' approach in relation to conducting research interviews. With reference to Bahktin, it is proposed that interviewing is viewed as a social setting for the proliferation of polyphonic dialogues, in which there are many voices and discourses that cross each other simultaneously to produce knowledge about personal narratives and social life. Arguments along this line have been presented in previous articles, in which I have regarded the interview basically as a setting for the negotiation of meaning in social conversation (Tinggaard, 2007, 2008). Other proponents of a similar perspective are Fontana and Frey (2005), Fontana and Prokos (2007), and Holstein and Gubrium (2003). Kvale (2006) has also argued that we need to advance our ideas about what it means to engage in dialogue.

Within the present context, interview dialogues are seen as productive and fundamental to what can be and is said in an interview. Accordingly, researchers do not conduct interviews to determine whether the meaning expressed in an interview actually corresponds to events that have really occurred. As recently argued by Polkinghorne (2007), the 'truth' sought by many interview researchers are 'narrative truths' and not 'historical' truths: "Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the actual occurrence of the events reported in the stories" (p. 479). To argue further along the lines of Bahktin, personal meaning is dialogical and performed in a borderline area between oneself and others. "Personal meaning" is not something purely private and subjective, nor is it exclusively public and "true." To tell our stories in an interview, we have to perform in a borderline area:

Language . . . lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word of language is half someone else's. It becomes & apos; one's own & apos; only when the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . , but rather it exists in

other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (Bahktin, 1981, p. 294)

While my speaking creates the illusion of unity and a consistent train of communication, I am, in fact, says Bahktin, constantly expressing a plentitude of meanings, some intended, others less so or not at all. There is no one stable and true story to be told about participants in an interview study. One can clearly identify general themes or discursive repertoires across and within different kinds of interviews within a particular social setting, but each participant can talk with different voices because narratives are dialogical and multivoiced. Gilbert and Mulkey (1984, p. 2) argued that not only do different actors tell different stories in each interview but over an entire interview it is often exceedingly difficult to reconstruct or summarize the views of one participant because each actor has many different voices crossing, delimiting, or refusing to interact with one another.

An Example

When conceiving of a dialogue as an active production of social 'facts' and personal narratives, the emphasis of the interview researchers is on how speakers (both interviewees and interviewer) are positioned in social networks of power that grant different rights and obligations to speakers. The following example shows one instance of such an emphasis. The example is taken from one interview (out of 15) conducted as part of a research project on "Changing Practices in Educational Psychological Practice" (CPEPP) in Denmark by the present author in collaboration with Claus Elmholdt. The aim of this public institution of educational psychological service in Denmark is to ensure the growth and well-being of children (0-18 years) in school and day care centers. Over time, policy maker perceptions of the role and activities of the psychologist in educational services have changed. Traditionally, the psychologist focused on individual testing, assessment, and visitation with respect to special pedagogical arrangements (Baltzer & Tetler, 2003). However, an educational service institutionalizing individual testing, assessment, and visitation is increasingly identified as a problem interfering with the prevailing political agenda of developing an inclusive "school for all." Recently, consultative approaches have been introduced into educational psychological practice, aiming at systemic and preventive measures to resolve problems associated with children in day care and school. This current organizational change is forcing many psychologists to

change their earlier and often dominant work modes to those of psychological work focused on individual testing and assessment. It is a challenge to learn new approaches to their job, and psychologists face new dilemmas. By focusing on trajectories of learning, we have, in earlier studies, contributed to understanding how psychologists manage to combine, refuse, and/or create a meaningful stance toward politically motivated pressure upon them to change existing work modes—in this respect to reduce the number of assessment tasks (Tanggaard & Elmholdt, 2007). The interview presented below shows how the practice of CPEPP is a conflict-ridden process with many different and colliding discourses about ‘proper’ psychological work. The following interview sequence is from a 35-page interview transcript with one psychologist. The dialogue takes place on pages 14 and 15 of the interview transcript in which the interviewer and interviewee attempt to reach an understanding of the work perspective of the psychologist. They are talking about the basic theoretical justification of the psychologist’s work and how this informs the actual work practice:

IE (Interviewee): Yes, but I am more a social constructivist in my understanding . . .

I (Interviewer): . . . you are more social constructivist. Does that mean you would say that children’s problems are socially constituted?

IE: Well, yes, but again, that is not really true. And it is also not what I am saying. I am just saying that it might be the case, you know. If I do a psychological test, then something will eventually show up, there will be something with this child. But the question is, What should push me to thrash this child through a test? It will need to have a purpose. The problems might be minimized by working with the teachers or caretakers instead of testing the child. This is actually often the case right?. . . because the other kind of thinking, to me it becomes a bit like, either there is a problem with the child or there is no problem, and this is not how the world actually is. If a child is tested and nothing shows up, it’s just because the child is not tested accurately. There is always something, we are all so different. So it’s not about being sick or healthy. And it is so dependent on adults’ understanding. They need to see that the child is not a devil. “She is lying most of the time.” This is how I often hear grown-ups talking about children, right? You know, they need to understand that this boy might have some difficulties coping with an open-space educational design or whatever, everybody is unruly, right? If we rearrange the classroom, well then he might calm down, and there is no need to test him. Did you catch any of this?

A lot of things are happening in the above interview sequence. At the beginning, there is a brief interchange between the interviewer and the

interviewee in which the psychologist diverges from the interpretation voiced by the interviewer and regards children's problems as socially constituted. A negotiation of meaning occurs in order to arrive at a clearer description of the psychologist's approach that emphasizes that some kinds of problems should be seen as socially constituted. The psychologist furthermore queries the traditional testing approach because, in her perspective, this will always create problems. The materialization of the discourse of testing achieves something because it categorizes children as being either with or without problems. What is furthermore evident from the above quote is that the psychologist paraphrases many different voices in relation to children. Examples of adult interpretations of children's behavior are rephrased, and the interviewee asks imaginary questions intended to illustrate particular perspectives. The dialogue is polyphonic, replete with the use of many different voices that reveal the diverse ideas of children's problems.

A possible criticism of the above interpretation is that we cannot be sure that the psychologist's interpretations are actually true? Does she provide an accurate description of her actual work practices, and do adults really insinuate that children are lying? In a dialogical interview context and later in the analysis of the interview material, the researcher generally does not consider these kinds of questions. Rather, the above sequence will be seen as a perfect illustration of the contradictions and dissenting discourses within the social field of psychologists working with children. Also, the above issue can be regarded as part of a narrative about how one can be a psychologist and simultaneously confront the dominant test regime in much psychological work with children.

Considering the above sequence, it would be a mistake to regard the subject as the "sole agent" of the story. In the dialogical sense of a Bakhtian approach, the stories and utterances are polyphonic. Accounts given by the interviewee are seen as embedded in a context, within the specific social relationship of the interview and set against a particular cultural background. In the above situation, this cultural background is the change occurring in educational psychological counseling in Denmark. The interviewee is reworking elements of certain cultural narratives about children, parents, and psychological treatment to produce something that captures their own experience. However, there is not necessarily consistency within one story. The psychologist in the above interview talks about the conflict inherent in working with psychological tests because she often identifies problems as belonging to individuals, whereas they may also originate in the social organization of schools. Later in the interview, the interviewee denies facing any dilemmas, particularly in her job:

I (Interviewer): What do you experience as the greatest dilemmas in the job?

(pause)

IE (Interviewee): . . . Well, actually, I cannot think of any dilemmas right now, in fact, I don't think, I face any dilemmas. Or yes, perhaps there are dilemmas, I think . . .

I: What you were talking about before, could one say . . .

IE: Yes, of course, but I have already told it right! But we are quite independent; I have found a job where I am able to work my own way. But it would be nice if things were more consistent, if we agreed a bit more about our ways of working.

Indeed, the psychologist faces dilemmas, but they are not necessarily perceived as being individual. She is able to work as she prefers, but the institution as such might be seen as a social setting with diverse interpretations of what good psychological work entails. As such, the interview enables us to learn about interpretative resources within the institution of psychologists who work with children in day care centers and schools as such, and not just about subjective viewpoints.

However, we need not look for a reality behind the words or try to ensure a correspondence between words and reality—is what the interviewee tells us really a true reflection of the institution in which she is working? This is not an issue, even if we acknowledge that storied experiences are constructed around a core of 'facts' or life events. The real text to be analyzed afterwards is the talk fashioned within the social and creative interaction of the interview setting, and we pay attention to how the interviewee uses particular stories to make sense of things that happened to them, and how they relate events in a certain order.

In the particular example above, the interviewee says something about the feelings, experiences, and attitudes toward herself as a psychologist, but the word *psychologist* and the specific cultural narratives of psychological work convey substantial cultural, social, and historical meanings that emerge as part of the conversation. When spoken, in addition to referring to memories, experiences, and attitudes toward particular instances of being a psychologist, the story may also touch upon specific cultural "plots" about what constitutes a "good" psychologist. Each personal narrative produced as part of a research interview needs to be seen as located within the wider structures of discourse and power, which frame storytelling in the context of what is considered important in life within a specific culture. Our stories are closely intertwined with those of others and must, within the framework proposed in this article, be analyzed as such.

Dissenting Discourses in Interviewing

As a consequence of the above and in order to view interviewing as a social creation of meaning and personal narratives, it is necessary to acknowledge the possible existence of conflicts, opposition, and struggle between the different discourses voiced in the interview. According to Bahktin, a living language comprises a temporally parallel combination of different social languages, each attached to specific ideologies and perspectives. Examples of these social languages include the professional jargon of psychologists and teachers or of lawyers, teenage peer groups or the language of political campaigns. The voice of one group may be authoritative and hegemonic, suppressing other voices, but in any society, there are counterhegemonic voices that may weaken and subvert the more authoritative ones (Bahktin, 1981, p. 240). For Bahktin, therefore, language is "heteroglossic," composed of a combination of social languages, some of which are engaged in opposition and struggle (Bahktin, 1981, p. 294). In an interview setting, we can explore these social languages and their potential opposition and struggle. In other words, interviewees can engage in discourses so as to demonstrate their disagreement with particular discourses about their own situation. Another example might clarify the point. This example is from the same interview as the one discussed earlier and concerns the psychologist's memories of her own job recruitment.

IE (Interviewee): And I do remember, I had to be approved by the psychiatrist and the psychologist in charge, and I remember how she said, "Well, yes, she is not trained as a clinical psychologist, she is a school psychologist and normally, we don't employ such people because their education is not nearly as good as that of the clinical psychologists." I sat here, I felt like strangling her.

I (Interviewer): Really?

IE: Yes, I needed them to approve me, so I could not say anything. I will never forgive her, I can still feel it. Because, I really felt put down, right? Because I do know many clinical psychologists who are fucked up, right? Who haven't gotten much out of their education.

In the above dialogue, the psychologist is telling a story of the approval process she encountered in her first job interview. In Denmark, it has been traditional to educate former school teachers as school psychologists within educational university settings, while the clinical psychologists have had their own education at other universities. Conventionally, there have been many conflicts concerning who were the "real" or best psychologists. The school

psychologists had higher wages because of their position within the strong teacher union in Denmark, while the clinical psychologists claimed a superior training and sophistication because they studied psychology exclusively. The above interview sequence clearly demonstrates this general conflict concerning dissenting discourses about which education provides the best background for psychological work with children. Evidently, the psychologist felt pressured by having to be approved by higher ranking professionals in this social field (the psychiatrist and the psychologist in command). We do not know whether this sequence of the interview is an accurate picture of what happened in the particular situation, but it clearly demonstrates the more general conflict between psychologists with different educational backgrounds. We witness how discourses about “proper” psychological work “cross swords” within this social field and lead to dispute, anger, and social conflict.

Thus, the above sequence from the interview transcript shows how language is heteroglot: It can give voice to the coexistence of socioideological contradictions, as in the example of the education of psychologists and within the different psychological schools and communities. In the research interview, these “languages” of heteroglossia intersect with one another in a variety of ways. Discourses evoked by the interviewee or the interviewer may belong to particular communities or groups and they may stand in opposition to official or dominant political discourses—this is heteroglossia. Another and related example of heteroglossia is given in Tanggaard (2007), which contains an analysis of the difference between the researcher’s “obsession” with learning and the apprentices’ refusal to talk about their own lives and education in terms of the learning discourse. In this case, the negotiation of meaning that took place when these different discourses “meet” in the interview was productive because it allowed for opposition to the learning discourse voiced by the apprentices.

As such, individual expressions do not represent one general language, but everyday speech is rather a subject for the transmission and mediation of past, present, and sometimes conflicting discourses that are given an embodied and social form in an interview. Furthermore, as argued by Bakhtin, the degree of dialogical influence on what is said in a specific context is substantial because entering a speech context frames any given utterance:

In order to assess and divine the real meaning of other’s words in everyday life, the following are surely of decisive significance: who precisely is speaking, and under what concrete circumstances? . . . and the entire speaking situation is very important: who is present during it, with what expression or mimicry is it uttered, with what shades of intonation? (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341)

In each and every interviewing context, people must, therefore, be seen as actors trying to convey meanings as precisely as they can within the available, socially embedded discursive repertoires. In order to arrive at the “true” meaning of what is said, we must pay attention to the speech frames of the situation; to who exactly is present; and to what is said and with what kind of expression, mimicry, and shades of intonation? In the interview situation discussed earlier and considered in the present context, the interviewee’s statements might have a different implication in a different situation corresponding to which the consequences of criticizing her colleagues may also vary. More important, with Bahktin in mind, what is said is not the clear expression of some inner state of the subject, but rather a discursively situated account of a personal narrative, which might induce conflicting discourses about particular phenomena. Each utterance is both the subject and the result of social and cultural discourses that can be identified through careful analysis.

Again with Bahktin in mind, one could, therefore, state more precisely that dialogues in interviews are heteroglot. As argued recently by Brinkman and Kvale (2005), Kvale (2006), and Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), an interview dialogue is not necessarily free of dominance and manipulation. As interviewers, we need to be aware of this possibility, rather than regarding interviews as always constituting a progressive and harmonious exchange of meanings and experiences in which the hidden voices of the interviewee are brought into the public sphere. In the context of Bahktin, it is possible to identify the heteroglot and polyphonic character of dialogues. Surely, an interview often displays both centrifugal and centripetal forces—and the conflict between different discourses. As argued elsewhere (Tanggaard, 2008), this should not be seen as bias, but rather as a productive condition for coming to know more about the social life within particular communities and the personal narratives of interview participants.

Suggestions for the Research Interview

Can the above points from the Bahktian context and the examples from a particular interview project suggest ways of approaching the conduct of interview practices and analysis of interview text? Within the field of psychology, for example, the linguistic turn and discourse analysis often evolve into a version of conversation analysis (CA) using, for example, Jefferson’s transcription system (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). In this sense, the researcher makes a careful moment-to-moment analysis of linguistic interaction, which

Table 1
Interviewing for Personal Narratives:
Suggestions for the Interview and Analysis

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- Make clear why you have chosen this particular topic and what stakes you have in it—what theoretical resources might be useful?
 - Look out for the multivoicedness of language, instead of searching for an underlying psychological or sociological essence, factor, or force. Stick to the narrative as built from cultural elements and given an idiosyncratic twist.
 - Carefully describe the social interaction in the interview. Who is present? Be aware of the flow of the conversation, the timing of questions and answers, possible tensions, and nature and timing of pauses.
 - If dissenting opinions or opposing discourses are voiced, describe in sufficient detail. Be careful to attend to unexpected and unusual participant utterances.
 - Remember that language not only describes the world, it *does* things! You need to focus on the way a narrative is told as a performance. We cannot reveal how it really was. Avoid intrusion into painful, private material. You cannot decode the story to discover what they really thought about it, or, worse, what underlying psychological processes would explain it.
 - What social origin and effect do the discourses in the interview have, for example, how are the interviewees talking about themselves, what kinds of words do they use for this description, is it a powerful discourse, do they voice counter discourses?
 - What is the story about, what does the interviewee aim to say?
 - What social bonds or conflicts may be created and spoken in the interview, how are the spoken words linked to and/or integrated into discourses, and how are those discourses linked to each other?
 - How does the text conform to or challenge patterns of power?
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may entail a complicated technical process. According to Parker (2005, p. 91), this gives the analysis a rigorous appearance, but the cost may be high because it can turn into “textual empiricism” in which the researcher can talk only about what can be seen in the text. The analyst may overlook aspects of power that are not talked about more directly in the text. In the present context, it is acknowledged that the analysis may benefit from specific transcription systems, but I suggest a more overall discursive awareness in conducting and analyzing the interviews below. Table 1 contains some fundamental concepts and ideas for such an interview practice and analysis.

The Aim of Qualitative Interviewing, When Considered as a Social Context for Personal Narratives

As emphasized in the Table 1 above, the aim is not to capture participant intentions, meanings, or experiences, seen as a verbal expression of the inner

self or soul, with the research interview being seen as a context for the production of personal narratives and social life. Rather, the utterances in an interview situation are regarded as discursively created phenomena of cultural, social, and material origin in already existing words and discourses. As may therefore already be evident, the present article does not accept the notion of a radical distinction between subjective and objective knowledge. However, in a traditional view on research, researchers frequently have to choose between a “humanistic,” subject-centered approach aiming at capturing participants’ indigenous meanings and experiences, and a “hard,” statistical approach describing concrete facts or broader societal, structural processes.

However, with interviewing regarded as a shared, dialogical affair, revealing the conflicts embedded in social life, there is no inherent dichotomy between subjective meanings and objective reality. It is only possible for the interviewee to produce meanings when both one’s own and others’ discourses and words are engaged. The meanings produced about particular things or events by the interview participants may be seen as subjective and personal because they are produced by one or more individuals. However, from the dialogical viewpoint presented here, the meanings are not subjective ones expressed in a general and neutral language. They are the local and personal manifestation of socially embedded discourses crossing and touching each other within heteroglot dialogues. The negotiation of meanings and the particular constellation of relationship between interviewer and interviewee are of paramount importance for the meanings produced in a qualitative research interview.

When the researcher considers the social production of meaning in dialogues, it is important to bear in mind that in a specific context, words can have different meanings, depending on who is talking and on the particular communication situation. In the Bahktin sense, words are seen as having both a social and a personal and historical or temporal dimension. Each word may contain different meanings, and there are complex relationships between current, previous, and future utterances. As elegantly explained by Bahktin, “Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (Bahktin, 1981, p. 280). The anticipated answer or question from an interviewer constitutes the horizon of speaking for both parties in the communication process.

In Bahktin’s view of communication, there is accordingly, not one, but several centers of communication and utterances that cannot be conceived of as a systematic manifestation that is independent of context. Within this scenario, there is no sovereign ego capable of sending messages to another, but each party in a conversation appropriates and coproduces a specific mix of discourses that are capable of effectively conveying their own intentions.

Words and discourse are socially charged; dialogically engaged with past, present, and future audiences; and imbued with by the intentions of the unique speaker (Bahktin, 1981, p. 293).

Within this perspective, interviewing is a context for creating polyphonic, multivoiced knowledge about personal narratives and social life. It is not, as some researchers suggest is the case with so called multivoice interviewing, merely a matter of representing the knowledge from an interview, such that the voices of the respondents are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). All types of talk are coproduced. Even an interviewer who tries to ask relatively few questions is part of a coproduction of meaning when setting up an interview or undertaking an informal conversation as part of fieldwork studies. It is possible that interviews in general give us access to a coproduction of personal narratives within social conversation. Even when the interviewee talks for several minutes without being interrupted by the interviewer, he or she speaks by vocally producing socially and historically shaped words. Through the seemingly individual account of the interviewee, we are most likely exploring a variety of discourses coproduced by the speakers and made available through common and sometimes diverse and variant social language repertoires.

The present article is based on the premise that, given a local form in the interview setting, the knowledge produced in an interview reflects collective and sociocultural discourses. The discourses voiced in an interview situation mediate and/or influence both subjective and broader sociocultural experiences; that is, someone owned or used the words before I uttered them. As argued below, this is also the reason why an interview study may trigger dialogues in extrainterview settings about how to interpret and understand a particular phenomenon. Within this perspective, the main aim of qualitative research interviewing surely is also to fuel dialogues beyond the specific context of the interview setting.

On the basis of relatively few interviews, researchers may manage to identify central aspects of typical variations in social discourses about particular phenomena. My claim is that this *is* possible because interview dialogues are not merely local. There are many authors and voices present because an interview is basically a multivoice scenario. Of course, it is the individual who speaks to another person, but we ourselves have invented few, if any, of the words we use. There are other authors and writers. This point has also been made by MacIntyre (1985):

A conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only actors, but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreement the mode of their production. (p. 19)

If interviews are seen as a form of joint production, the result should be considered as a creation of texts. Furthermore, what happens to the interview when it is analyzed by the researcher and when the results are read by others should also be seen as part of the production. Readers may identify with the stories; they may learn from them or they may find them irrelevant. Pragmatist, constructionist, and discursive approaches conceive of social knowledge as socially and historically contextualized modes of understanding and acting in the social world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). My point is that the general value of conducting an interview is that we may, through words and discourses, explore our socially and historically contextualized modes of understanding and acting and also identity or encounter the possible conflicts between different types of acting and understanding. According to Foucault (1972), one criterion for the existence of a "discourse" is that it be used in a variety of contexts and, therefore, can be applied (potentially) to a variety of themes. If the analysis of interviews can be extended, by making explicit comparisons between discourses in different settings or contexts of discussion, the research does have a general value.

If 'generalization' can refer to what may inspire us and tell us how a phenomenon could be interpreted, why not argue that the social conversation produced in qualitative research interviewing can do exactly this? Indeed, qualitative studies can open up potential for new kinds of dialogues, both within the context of research and in public life. An interview study may help us understand how a phenomenon or particular life situation can be discussed, analyzed, and interpreted by the interview participants. We may get to know the discourses present in particular social communities and inquire into the possible conflicts between them; that is, we may explore variation and diversity in personal narratives produced through social discourses.

In summary, the present article underlines that, when conducting interviews, we may explore the variation in discourses employed by interviewees when they tell their stories. This could explain why people often respond to stories conveyed through interview-studies, "Hey, I know that feeling" or "This is strange, I have never thought that way before." When reading the results of a particular study, we frequently compare ourselves with the cases described and look for similarities and differences between our own story and those of others. We can do this only against the background of knowing the words, or of having experiences with the same 'plot,' either from ourselves or from the stories of others. While an interview study does not reveal how many people live, think, and function the same way across different settings, they are surely often the basis for perceiving or interpreting a particular phenomenon. Occasionally, we identify

with the reading and may be inspired to search for something new in our lives. In this way, dialogue within the interview setting enables us additionally to develop dialogues in the extrainterview “reality.”

Hammersley (2008) recently argued that an emphasis on the socially constructed meanings in interviews and the resulting radical critique of interviews as windows into the minds of informants “is unconvincing” (p. 98). Hammersley points out that the use of interviews as a window to the head of informants or as representation of their life outside the interview context is still a legitimate aim of qualitative interviews. We only have to “think more carefully about how we use data from this source” (p. 98). However, what seems to be lacking in Hammersley’s critique is the notion that a discursive approach to the conduct of interviewing does not necessarily imply that the interview locks itself into its own context and can only be a study of behavior in interviews. Drawing inferences from interviews to other situations can still be an issue. For example, discourses voiced in one interview might, in some sense, be shared by other individuals or groups than the ones participating in the interview. However, discourses cannot, as seems to be implied by Hammersley, constitute witness information about a reality beyond language.

Where to Go Now?

In the perspective of this article, the emphasis on knowledge and meaning, seen as produced through social discourses both within and beyond the interview setting, does not rule out the use of research interviews. On the contrary, one way forward would be to encourage qualitative research interviewers to pay more attention to the futility of exploring discourses voiced in an interview. Interview researchers might, in this way, be enabled to explore and also sometimes even challenge the discourses voiced by participants. What we might also challenge is the idea that interviews can reveal one coherent narrative about the self of the interviewee. Voices in an interview may cross, fuel, or constrain one another, and interviews may produce many voices that do not necessarily connect. Furthermore, interviews enable us to learn about the interpretative resources within a particular institution and not just about subjective viewpoints. In this way, research interviews can become part of public discussion and debate. The goal of interviewing should, therefore, not be to arrive at “fixed knowledge” of the self or the world once and for all but to help human beings improve the quality of their conversational reality and to debate the goals and values that are important in their lives.

Conclusion

The present article was inspired by Bakhtin, and the objective was to explore what it means to engage in a dialogue in an interview setting. It was argued that dialogues are heteroglot and polyphonic because they are socially embedded, and they contain many, and sometimes opposing, voices and discourses.

When conducting research interviews, it is possible for the researcher to learn from the negotiation between different voices and discourses produced or voiced in a particular interview setting. As an example of this, interview sequences from an interview with a psychologist were analyzed.

Accordingly, the conclusion is that there are many authors and voices in an interview, which is basically a multivoice scenario, constituting a context for the production of personal narratives. As such, this conception of dialogues “refuses” to provide clear-cut distinctions between what is subjective, as opposed to objective, and what is specific, as opposed to general. As argued, a discursive approach conceives of social knowledge as socially and historically contextualized modes of understanding and acting in the social world. The interviewer and the interviewee together create the stories through their dialogue, and language in itself is dialogical and can refer to a multiplicity of voices and discourses, which are organized into social bonds. The interviewer needs an awareness of the fact that interviewee descriptions and words are not necessarily one and the same thing and may in fact be quite different. For example, it makes a difference whether a psychologist talks about herself as a clinical or a school psychologist because these alternative scenarios create divergent speaking positions.

In summary, the present article underlines that, when conducting interviews, we may explore the variation in discourses employed by interview participants so as to produce their personal narratives. My point is that the general value of conducting an interview is precisely that we may explore, through words and discourses, peoples’ socially and historically embedded modes of understanding and acting and also the possible “conflicts” between different types of acting and understanding. Interviewing presents a good case for revealing how language “makes” people and produces social life and for opening up public discussions. An interview study should not, perhaps, be seen as particularly well suited for obtaining access to *subjective* experiences but rather as a research mode that is *objectively* attuned to investigating and exploring the discourses and narratives through which people live their everyday lives.

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