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7 What are the power and emotional dynamics of qualitative interviews?

Introduction

Issues of power and emotion in social research generally, and within the qualitative interview situation especially, have been the subject of attention in the methods literature for some time, across a range of philosophical approaches. In qualitative interviewing, researchers attempt to create an interaction that goes beyond a conversational exchange, where their interviewees feel safe enough to talk openly about their experiences and understandings. To some extent then, researchers attempt to exercise power to generate an atmosphere in which interviewees will experience emotions of rapport that are beneficial for the interview. But researchers also pay attention to the dynamics of power and emotions in interviews because they are concerned about the ethics of the research process, as well as the insights into the topic under investigation that such reflection can generate. These two sides of interviews have been termed ‘conquest or communion’, with interviewers exercising power through the application of questioning techniques such as probing in order to generate data from interviewees (see Chapter 6), but also experiencing an emotional interdependency with their interviewees (Ezzy 2010).

From a psychosocial perspective in particular, power and emotions come together in both conscious and unconscious ways in a qualitative research interview. As noted in Chapter 2, at the heart of a psychoanalytic perspective on the interview is the notion of a ‘defended subject’. In this view, anxiety is inherent in the human condition and consequently unconscious defences against anxieties come into play for both interviewee and interviewer and are part of the dynamics of the interview (as in all types of relations between people) (Hollway and Jefferson 2012). But power and emotions are also present in everyday lives and interactions in a more social-structural, relational manner. Society consists of groups of people sharply divided from one another. Social divisions refer to social patterns

of substantial and distinctive material and cultural differences between people – around race, social class sexuality, religion and so on – where the social positioning of members of certain categories is better than others, giving them a greater share of resources and power over the way that society is organized (Payne 2006). These hierarchies and inequalities can shape and be traced in interview interactions.

In this chapter we consider some of the dynamics of power asymmetries and interplays of emotion discernable when interviewer and interviewee come together in the qualitative interview situation.

The dynamics of power in interviews

By its nature interview research involves asymmetries of power; it is the interviewer who defines the situation and who frames the topic and course of the interview (Kvale 1996). But the situation is more complex than this. The minimal structure of an in-depth qualitative interview in particular invites and enables multifaceted power shifts between interviewer and interviewee across the course of an interview. Elizabeth Hoffman describes this as ‘the interview dance’, and details some of the basic steps:

The researcher will initiate contact, a somewhat powerful gesture, but then the interviewee might have strong preferences as to where and when to meet . . . Once the interview actually takes place, the interviewer begins by asking questions . . . The researcher’s questions, however, are of little value without the responses from the interviewee. Here, again, the power shifts back to the respondent. Interviewees might condition their replies on various responses of the interviewer . . . Sometimes the interview process itself can seem threatening [to the interviewee]. (2007: 337)

Integral to the interview dance is the power of knowledge: who is a knowing and approving expert and who is a vulnerable knowledge seeker. Hoffman describes some exchanges in her research with homecare workers looking after elderly or sick clients in which these positions shifted around:

Occasionally the homecare workers I interviewed felt ‘exposed’ and wanted my reassurance that the responses and actions they described to me were appropriate and professional. This put me in the role of confessor and, perhaps, therapist, as they told me how

they dealt with situations that were emotionally difficult for them. While, on the one hand, this vulnerability might have made the interviewee feel less powerful and threatened by my questions . . . , it also thrust them into a more powerful role: I needed to successfully fulfill the role of therapist and confidant before the respondent would move the interview forward. (2007: 338)

Hoffman's describes such interview encounters as involving the interviewer in extensive emotional labour (a topic we return to later) which in itself demonstrates the power of the interviewee in the interview relationship.

So far we have been concerned with the way that power can shift around over the course of an interview as a result of the positioning of both interviewer and interviewee within the interview situation itself. However, we also need to take into account the way that social divisions and hierarchies around class, gender, race/ethnicity, age and other aspects of social status articulate with this situation and further mediate power relations (see too Chapter 4). Here we consider marginality and elite group membership. A recurring theme is the extent to which interviewers are insider members or outsider non-members of the interviewee group.

Interviewing members of marginalized groups

Quite a lot of interview research is carried out with social groups who are marginalized in society. Indeed some time ago Colin Bell characterized empirical sociology as 'done *on* the relatively powerless *for* the relatively powerful' (1978: 25; original emphases). Some argue that a focus on the interview accounts of marginalized groups serves only to perpetuate their exclusion and increase perceptions of them as problematic, confirming and legitimizing the status quo of inequality (Biggs 2003). But researchers can feel a commitment to making audible what they regard as the 'silenced' voices and perspectives of the marginalized, for example, those who are working from feminist or emancipatory approaches that seek to minimize the power differential in the research setting (see Chapter 2).

The implications of an interviewer's 'positionality' (social status and identity) in relation to an interviewee is a key focus of discussions, with recurring themes being how social divisions between interviewer and interviewee may shape an interview, and the extent to which unspoken assumptions are a feature of interviews where interviewer and interviewee share membership of a marginalized group. In this section we look first

at situations where an interviewer may or may not share a marginalized status with their interviewee – gender and race/ethnicity – before moving on to situations where in the past they may have been positioned similar to their interviewees in terms of social class or age but no longer can be. This is by no means a comprehensive coverage of marginalized groups (e.g. see Melanie Nind 2008, on interviewing and other qualitative methods with people with disabilities), but it does highlight some general issues of power in interviews.

As we have noted already there is a considerable literature about power issues and gender in interviews. Several decades ago, in a highly influential article, Ann Oakley challenged the paradigm of the research interviewer as objective and detached, disengaged from the interviewee on a personal level. She argued that in a situation where interviewer and interviewee were women, they were both ‘inside the culture’ of being women in a male-dominated society and engaged with each other on that level: ‘A feminist interviewing women is by definition both “inside” the culture and participating in that which she is observing’ (1981: 53). Oakley also presented the feminist interview as a non-hierarchical exchange. Across the years, other feminists have raised concerns about the way that this very connection could be to the detriment of interviewees, where rapport is used instrumentally to draw them out in order to get ‘good data’ (Cotterill 1992; Duncombe and Jessop 2007; Finch 1984). We return later to the point about the danger of exploitation being inherent in pursuing rapport in the section discussing emotions in the interview process.

Yet other social divisions articulate with gender, such that women are not all similarly socially positioned nor sharing cultural experiences. In particular, race and ethnicity has been the subject of attention in the interview situation, with debates about whether or not interviewers who are researching people from minority ethnic backgrounds need to share ‘race’ with their interviewees in order to generate ‘better’ or more ‘authentic’ data (e.g. Bhavnani 1993; Bhopal 1997; Phoenix 1994). For example, one of us has discussed the way that race infused the research relationship where she, as a white woman, was interviewing black women and argued that acknowledging racial difference was important to establishing rapport (Edwards 1990).

Even where interviewee and interviewer share membership of a marginalized minority group, however, social divisions and power are not eradicated. For example, Tracey Reynolds (2004) has discussed how her stress

on her 'sameness' with her second/third generation British-born Caribbean interviewees could nonetheless mean that she was quizzed extensively about her personal background as well as the nature and purpose of her research. She places this in the context where the Caribbean community in Britain has a sophisticated understanding of a research process that tends to problematize and create misconceptions about the Black community. Minelle Mahtani also challenges any simplistic notions of shared identities between interviewers and interviewees on the basis of race in a critical reflection on her own research process in a study of mixed-race women. While she and interviewees shared rapport and expectations of mutual recognition around mixedness, she shows how these are cross-cut with various social cleavages that separated them. Mahtani also reveals the potential drawbacks of similarity for the interview as a data generating process:

During the research process, there were certainly times when my own status as a mixed-race woman of Indian and Iranian descent did foster dialogue . . . During a pivotal point in our interview, one participant explained to me how she felt comfortable talking to me as a woman of mixed race . . . However, at the same time, I was well aware that my own identification as a woman of mixed race played other roles in the interview process. For example, peppered through many interviews emerged the phrase, 'you know what I mean, Minelle' followed by a knowing glance or smile. This sort of shared complicity may have created a more comfortable space for these women to tell their stories – but also prevented them from divulging further detail. (2012: 158–159)

Many researchers from working-class backgrounds, including Val Gillies, have pointed out: 'My education and salary mean I can no longer claim to be working class' (2004: 17). Gillies discusses how as a consequence of moving into higher education and an academic career she has gradually been detached from the day-to-day context that frames the lives of her working-class family and friends, but that what she is left with is a commitment to making her marginalized interviewees' voices heard through the collection and presentation of interview data (see also Skeggs 1997: 14–15).

Similarly, while researchers may once have been children and young people, they no longer are. As with Gillies, though, those undertaking interview-based research with what they consider to be a marginalized

social group – children – are often motivated by a desire to counter wider societal silencing of their voices, from an empowerment perspective (see Alderson and Morrow 2004; Greene and Hogan 2005; MacNaughton et al. 2010). For example, Pauline Davis (2007) argues that the storytelling technique that she used in interviews with children is a democratic, socially inclusive approach. She asked 7–8 year-old children who were ‘poor readers’ to recount a story about ‘The child who didn’t like reading’. Davis asserts that this technique shifts the equilibrium towards the storyteller, and leads the interviewer to take on a less dominant role, and illustrates this with two contrasting interview extracts from a boy called Dominic (175):

- Pauline: And why do you think children read?
 Dominic: Because they like reading.
 Pauline: So what do you think it is that they like about reading then?
 Dominic: They like the books!? [*questioning intonation*]
 Pauline: Can you think of anything else?
 Dominic: [*thinking*] I don’t know. My Nana’s got a new kitten; shall I tell you about it?

Compare Dominic’s use of language in the extract above with a story I asked him to tell me, titled ‘The child who didn’t like reading’:

The boy who didn’t like reading was reading his library books. Boys picked on him and then he didn’t like it. A boy who didn’t like reading was so behind and then he didn’t like reading forever so he didn’t take his reading book home so he didn’t read. He was behind with the lower books. Mum said: ‘Where is your reading book?’ The boy said: ‘I left it at school because I don’t like reading any more.’

For Davis, the storytelling method during an interview raises the status of children though demonstrating how power can shift as they shape the interview themselves in a context where adult power over children is likely to complicate the interaction that takes place during an interview.

Interviewing members of elite groups

In contrast to the situation where a researcher has more power than the people they are interviewing, at least in the context of wider society, it is

the other way around in what is sometimes referred to as 'studying up'. Just as researchers can feel a commitment to 'giving voice' to powerless groups, they can also regard it as important to demystify the worlds of people in positions of power and privilege in society.

Those with experience of interviewing elites often emphasize the need for interviewers to have 'done their homework' before the interview and be well-prepared for it, in terms of familiarizing themselves with interviewees' background and career, or the company that they represent, and/or their published views and so on, as well as ensuring that they have an in-depth grasp of the key issues concerning the topic under discussion (e.g. Mikecz 2012; Phillips 1998). Such strategies are regarded as a means for the researcher to attempt to decrease the status imbalance between themselves and their interviewee, and to position themselves as someone who can be considered equal in terms of situated knowledge.

Several writers mention that interviewers will find themselves subject to subtle probing about their agenda and intentions for use of the interview data, and Karen Ross (2001) even found that a few of the women MPs she interviewed in Australia and South Africa audio-recorded the interview themselves (in addition to Ross's own recording for research purposes). Interviews with elite groups are often posed as a power game in which both interviewer and interviewee jockey for the upper hand. The interviewee is seeking to set the agenda and create a 'discourse within which research becomes enmeshed and to a considerable degree reproduces' (Fitz and Halpin 1994: 40), while the interviewer attempts control through asking their questions.

Researchers can take different positions on how best to ensure that they are not intimidated or overwhelmed, and to follow their own research agenda rather than that of their participants. Karen Duke found a set of tools of the profession helpful in asserting authority in her interviews with policymakers in the criminal justice field: 'bringing along a typed topic guide which was always visible to the respondent, and being prepared with pen, paper, clipboard and tape-recorder. Armed with these props, I felt better able to retain control by ensuring that my agenda was covered during interviews' (2002: 53). Ross, though, regards finding common ground on which to build trust as important in oiling the wheels of talk and disclosure in interviews (see also Klatch 1988):

I adopted slightly different modes of being and modes of saying which were mostly contingent (but not exclusively so) on my interviewee's

political 'colours'. Thus with the socialist women, I nearly always introduced somewhere into the conversation the fact that I was politically active in my local Labour Party. This disclosure almost always elicited an immediate interest in what I had been doing and questions about my own political career and future. With the Liberal and Tory women, I did not use such a strategy but found alternative points of identification: often our shared gender and experiences as women in male-oriented professions was a salient and important feature of developing good rapport. (Ross 2001: 162)

In contrast to the power battles portrayed by some interviewers of elite groups, Ross asserts that her women MP participants usually were courteous and helpful, and puts this down to their shared gender. On the basis of her interviews with right-wing women active in the conservative movement in the United States, Rebecca Klatch (1988) believes that young female interviewers in particular may have an advantage in being perceived as non-threatening and eliciting open accounts, and also argues that a 'non-argumentative approach' on the part of the interviewer is important. However, Roslyn Mickelson (1994) fears that this type of rapport-building can result in bland, public relations type responses. She thus advocates asking blunt questions of powerful interviewees such as the education policymakers she interviewed, and challenging any evasive answers. Both age and gender play important parts in 'interviewing up', and being a young woman, for example, can also result in older male participants wanting to exercise control and exert power. This reaction, as noted later, is not limited to 'interviewing up'.

The status positioning of powerful people within society means that, on the one hand, they are familiar with being asked their opinion, talking and being listened to – though as we note above, not necessarily answering the questions that they are being asked. Yet, on the other hand, elite interviewees may also be subject to formal constraints on disclosure such as the Official Secrets Act, or informal rules of political, administrative or corporate reputation and loyalty and an 'official line' to be put forward. Both have implications for what they are prepared to say in qualitative interviews. John Fitz and David Halpin (1994) reflect on their interviews with civil servants involved in national education policymaking: they only ever accessed a partial and incomplete picture. This is likely to be the case to varying extents with any interview – the point is to be aware of it.

Several researchers who discuss conducting research interviews with members of social, economic or politically powerful groups mention variously being comfortable with or excited by their high status participants, feeling grateful to them or steam-rolled by them, feeling privileged or patronized, and/or impressed or uncomfortable about betraying their own beliefs and position. This raises the issue of emotions in the dynamics of interviews.

The dynamics of emotions in interviews

By virtue of being human, researchers are not neutral and objective enquirers in qualitative interviews but are emotionally engaged participants who are sharing an experience with the interviewee. Indeed, those taking feminist and interpretive approaches to scholarship have questioned the binary opposition between reason and emotion in much Western thought, and argued that emotion is necessary to knowledge – people make sense of the social world through emotions as well as cognition or intellect (e.g. Game 1997; Jaggar 1989). One of us (Holland 2007, 2009) has reviewed discussions of the different ways that emotions can and do come into the research process, and notes how important acknowledgement of and reflection on these emotional dynamics can be for the production of knowledge. Key themes from that review that relate to interviews that we pursue here are:

- the importance of emotions in interviews, both those of the interviewee and the interviewer;
- the considerable amount of emotion work called for in qualitative interviews, and the potential dangers consequent on this.

The open-ended qualitative interview, with its possibilities for discussing unexpected topics, means that emotional dynamics can be significant for the interview process. Hoffman notes one of her dilemmas: 'How would my displays of emotion affect my informants' abilities to share the emotional components of their stories? If I shared too much of my own emotions, would I silence them? If I shared too little emotion, would I appear unresponsive, hostile, or unable to understand their predicaments?' (2007: 340). Maxine Birch and Tina Miller point out that qualitative interviewers often work with an understanding of a 'good' interview as one in which they elicit a particular style of narration from their interviewee, involving self-disclosure: 'as interviewers we need to try to suspend the belief that

a more personal story reveals a more authentic story' (2000: 200). As we noted earlier, several researchers express concern about the way that the interviewers' exercise of emotional research skills, used to 'invite intimacy' through creating rapport and an atmosphere of disclosure, runs the risk of exploiting research participants.

But researchers can also feel contaminated with the emotional effort of creating rapport, and the emotional management work required to elicit interview accounts. For example, Shaminder Takhar (2009) has described how her interviews with conservative Muslim South Asian women about 'covering up' in dress involved her 'covering up' her own emotional responses to the content of those interviews. Of one woman interviewee's assumptions about shared Asian-ness meaning shared values, Takhar writes:

[She] was under the impression that I would understand what she meant. Far from identifying with these women on the basis of being South Asian, I had distanced myself from such a position. I left this interview agitated as I had not expected such statements to be made [that western women invite rape through their provocative dress] and neither had I responded to them . . . I felt my feminist principles were compromised and wondered why I had endured it. I had not responded to them . . . I had made a judgment on the need to acquire data . . . When I left the venue, I felt an enormous weight lifting off my shoulders because during the interview I had felt suffocated. (2009: 35)

In contrast, there are also dangers in empathy and engagement, and some voice concern about the emotional cost for researchers in undertaking interviewing people who may tell stories redolent with grief, loss, anger and resentment (Bloor et al. 2007; Dickson-Swift et al. 2006; Hubbard et al. 2001; Watts 2008). As well as sensitive topics that concern death, violence and so on, more mundane subjects can raise both conscious and unconscious emotions for interviewer and interviewee. Helen Lucey and colleagues (Lucey et al. 2003: 281) have described what they regard as unconscious negative transferences between Helen and a couple she interviewed, Mr and Mrs Green, as part of a qualitative longitudinal study of girls growing up:

Helen's request for Mr and Mrs Green to engage with the idea of their daughter Erica one day leaving home provoked some unconscious anxiety in them indicated by the difficulty they had in imagining it.

- Helen:* Just talking about Erica's independence, can you see her moving away from home and living independently? Sooner or later?
- Mrs Green:* No.
- Mr Green:* I don't know. Maybe when she marries. I don't know, it depends.
- Mrs Green:* We've been told that we're not allowed to sell the house and when me Mum's gone Darren's going to have this side, because it's a bigger house and Erica's going to have that side, and we're going in an old peoples home. (*laughs*)
- Helen:* One up the road? (*laughs*) (*Mr and Mrs Green laugh*)

However, this discussion was not only making Mr and Mrs Green anxious. It is at this point that Helen's own unconscious anxieties got the better of her and forcibly made their presence known.

- Mr Green:* I can't see her moving away to work. Is that what you mean?
- Helen:* For any reason? I mean, one of my fantasies when I was 16 was to get away as soon as possible and live in a bedsit.

Although consciously feeling 'connected' with the Greens on more than one level, their resistance to the idea of Erica leaving home provoked in Helen intense feelings of being trapped.

Thus for qualitative researchers, the emotional dynamics of interviews can be intensely personal, as for Lucey and the resurrection of her feelings as a young woman living at home, but also socially informed processes, as with Takhar's judgement about covering up to hear data about covering up.

Again and again, researchers writing about the power and emotions in qualitative interview research argue that attending to their existence and dynamics can only enhance the knowledge generation process. Such reflection will enhance researchers' understanding of the data and their insights into the nuances of the research topic.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered some of the asymmetries of power and generation of emotions in interviews. We considered how the cross-cutting social positions of both interviewer and interviewee can shape and shift power dynamics during the interview in complex ways, and the gamut of emotions and emotion work that interviewing can generate and involve for both parties. Along the way, we have noted how reflecting on the dynamics of power and emotions in the interview process can provide insight about the substantive research topic. In the next chapter, we step back to the part that qualitative interviews play in the knowledge generation endeavour more broadly. We consider the strength of this method, the challenges it has and is facing and what the future might hold.