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Qualitative Inquiry 2007; 13; 1116
DOI: 10.1177/1077800407308222

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Could Interviews Be Epistemic?
An Alternative to Qualitative Opinion Polling

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The author explores using qualitative research interviews to gain knowledge rather than mere opinions about a given topic. Current interviews typically aim to probe the respondents’ experiences and opinions—doxa in Greek. An implicit model for much doxastic interviewing is client-centered therapy, in which the respondent–client is the only authority concerning his or her experiences and opinions. The author argues that doxastic interviews do not take advantage of the knowledge-producing potentials inherent in human conversations. Instead, the author examines the Socratic dialogue as an interview form that addresses not opinions but knowledge (episteme). In epistemic interviewing, both parties are engaged in dialectically examining a topic, with the aim of gaining knowledge in a normative–epistemic sense. The author presents examples from different interview studies that illustrate the epistemic interview in practice. Finally, the author asks whether epistemic interviews are suitable only for “elite interviews” and whether they are particularly ethically problematic.

Keywords: interview; qualitative research; epistemic interviewing; knowledge

In this article, I address a seemingly very simple question, Could we, by means of qualitative research interviews, gain knowledge? A first reaction to this question is likely to be, “What an insult! What do you think we have been doing all these years—talking to people about their experiences, desires, and opinions? Do you have the nerve to question whether we have gained knowledge along the way? Of course we have!”

In a certain respect, I accept this reaction. There is no doubt that qualitative interview researchers produce knowledge about people’s experiences, desires,

Author’s Note: For helpful comments, I warmly thank Lene Tanggaard and Steinar Kvale.
and opinions by interviewing them about these matters. But the question I would like to raise is this: What is this kind of knowledge about? And the answer is—to use a word from classical Greek philosophy—it is about *doxa*. That is, it is about the interview respondents’ experiences and opinions, which no doubt can be very interesting and important to learn about, but which—when viewed through the lenses of classical philosophy—rarely constitute knowledge in the sense of *episteme*, that is, knowledge that has been found to be valid through conversational and dialectical questioning.

To put my idea in simple words: By probing their respondents’ experiences and opinions (the *doxa*), interview researchers are often engaged in what seems like a time-consuming kind of opinion polling for which quantitative instruments such as questionnaires often appear to be much more efficient. If we should really take advantage of the knowledge-producing potentials inherent in human conversations, such as research interviews, ought we not to frame the interview situation differently? Perhaps we should frame it with inspiration from Socrates’ dialogues, whose purpose was to move the conversation partners from *doxa* to *episteme* (i.e., from a state of being simply *opinionated* to being capable of *questioning* and *justifying* what they believe is the case). This is the possibility that will be explored in what follows.

My project is allied with other recent explorations of alternative interview forms, for example Norman Denzin’s (2001) idea of performance interviews in the “cinematic-interview society.” Denzin formulates “a utopian project,” searching for a new form of the interview, which he calls “the reflexive, dialogic, or performative interview” (p. 24). In what follows, I shall engage in a related “utopian project” concerning the practices and functions of interviews in modern societies, although with more explicit emphasis on civic responsibility. Qualitative researchers are increasingly becoming aware that interviewing, as Charles Briggs (2003) has argued, is “a ‘technology’ that invents both notions of individual subjectivities and collective social and political patterns” (p. 497). Different conversational practices, including research interviews, produce and activate different forms of subjectivity. I discuss a form of interviewing, epistemic interviewing, that addresses respondents as accountable, responsible citizens, which I intend to present as an alternative to experience-focused, psychologized interviews that aim to probe the intimate and private worlds of respondents, often with inspiration from psychotherapy. I believe that the latter forms of interviewing are suitable for some research purposes, but they are also, in my view, inadequate for a number of other purposes, though they square very well with the confessional conversations that are prevalent in today’s consumerist interview society (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), where people’s private experiences and
narratives become commodities to be collected and reported by interviewers (Denzin, 2001, p. 24).

Cutting-edge discussions of qualitative interviewing today mainly take place in sociological and ethnographic circles, and the reader should know that this author comes to the field with a background in psychology, and that will no doubt color the arguments that follow. From a psychological viewpoint, it is noteworthy that the authoritative *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) contains very few references to those leading psychologists who have influenced the field of qualitative inquiry, also outside academic psychology. Carl Rogers and Jean Piaget, for example, are not mentioned in the author index, although different forms of qualitative interviewing were central to their research. Rogers’s (1945) form of interviewing presaged what is today discussed (without reference to Rogers, however) as “polyphonic interviewing,” recording respondents’ voices with minimal influence from the interviewer (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709), and Piaget’s groundbreaking interviews with children, inspired by psychoanalysis (see Kvale, 2003), are simply ignored (*psychoanalysis* is not even listed in the handbook’s subject index).

Freud, perhaps the most influential scholar of the 20th century, whose work was based on qualitative research (Kvale, 2003), is mentioned only once in the handbook, and this is in a footnote that has nothing to do with qualitative inquiry as such. That psychology is overlooked by much of today’s qualitative community is all the more surprising given the influence of the psychological client–therapist relation on how the respondent–interviewer relation is framed in much literature on interviewing, as I shall indicate below. A significant therapy culture (Furedi, 2004) is part of the contemporary interview society, also in qualitative research contexts. I shall not engage in any grand overview and critique of current interview forms, however, for my main aim is constructive and “utopian”—arguing with inspiration from Socrates that interviews can work epistemically to produce knowledge by engaging citizens in public discussions about societal goals and values rather than private experiences and opinions. This echoes Denzin’s (2001) call for qualitative research to move beyond “merely” (this is my word) telling tales from the field:

At the beginning of a new century it is necessary to re-engage the promise of qualitative research as a form of radical democratic practice. The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken. We have told our tales from the field. Today we understand that we write culture, and that writing is not an innocent practice. We know the world only through our representations of it. (p. 23)
We write culture, and, as interview researchers, we also jointly speak and write subjectivities into being when we interview and report our findings. Interviews are, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have argued for long, unavoidably interpretively active, meaning-making practices. I consider the epistemic interview discussed in this article as, in certain respects, a continuation of the Holstein–Gubrium line of active interviewing, but with more emphasis on the sociopolitical, indeed civic, context in which research interviews are carried out and in relation to which the research themes are debated. Although Holstein and Gubrium have been on the front line, developing exciting new forms of interviewing, the approach in the present article tries to go beyond the experiential focus that still dominates active interviewing, including the practices of those researchers who have experimented “with alternative representational forms that they believe can convey respondents’ experience more on, if not in, their own terms” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 20). Epistemic interviews are not primarily about conveying experience (doxa) but are about a practice of developing knowledge (episteme).

**Doxastic Interviews**

What I refer to here as doxastic interviews often find their inspiration in psychology, implicitly or explicitly. An influential approach from within the field of qualitative psychology is represented by empirical phenomenology and its ways of asking questions about the lifeworlds of respondents. This method has long been advocated and was brought to considerable sophistication by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The first step in the descriptive phenomenological psychological method, according to Giorgi, is to obtain “descriptions of experiences from others” (p. 247), before entering into a scientific phenomenological reduction, ending up with “the essential structure of the experience” (p. 247). Although Giorgi’s starting point is in the respondents’ experiences, the goal of phenomenological interviewing is without doubt to arrive at knowledge in the sense of episteme. The point is, however, that the central part of the process of reaching episteme is confined to what happens after the interview conversation, when the interviewer can engage in the scientific phenomenological reduction (thereby taking the acts of consciousness as they present themselves) and the epoché (bracketing past knowledge). During the interview, the phenomenological interviewer will ask for descriptions of concrete experiences such as, “Please describe for me a time in your life when you experienced internalized homophobia” (p. 263). The interviewer follows up on the descriptions by asking the
respondent to “tell more,” and “what happened next?” and so on (p. 264). As seen in this illustration, analyzed as exemplary and in great detail by Giorgi, there are no questions concerning the meaning of internalized homophobia, for example, and very few questions with which the respondent is challenged and is asked for justifications or reflections.

An influential introduction to qualitative research interviewing—Steinar Kvale’s *InterViews* (Kvale, 1996)—likewise advocates that interviewers primarily ask questions about concrete episodes and experiences rather than inviting more abstract reflections. In line with phenomenological philosophy, Giorgi and Kvale posit a primacy of the lifeworld, and the interviewer is cast in the role of someone who should elicit descriptions and narratives from the respondents that reflect experiences of the lifeworld. The purpose of qualitative interview research, argues Kvale (1996), “is to describe and understand the central themes the subjects experience and live toward” (p. 29). There is thus a unique emphasis on people’s experiences. I should say that I find nothing wrong in the practice of lifeworld interviewing, and it is indeed the standard approach that I have applied in my own research, but what I would like to do in this article is to examine whether qualitative interview research could gain from also doing other kinds of interviews: nonexperiential, nonpsychological, nonphenomenological, nondoxastic.

In addition to the descriptive phenomenological psychology that inspires Giorgi and Kvale, others have found inspiration not just in psychology but also in psychotherapy proper, for example, psychoanalysis. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson’s (2000) psychoanalytic idea of “the defended subject” is a case in point. In their eyes, the qualitative interview researcher is always closer to the truth than the research participant, for “subjects are motivated not to know certain aspects of themselves and . . . they produce biographical accounts which avoid such knowledge” (p. 169). In this perspective, the respondents can give away only *doxa* and the researcher–therapists are in a unique position to obtain *episteme*, given their superior theoretical knowledge and psychoanalytic training. This, I would say, is not just a psychological framing of the interview but also a *psychologistic* framing, which states that we only know what is going on in human conversations because of special psychological training. The model for the relation between interviewer and interviewee consequently becomes that of psychotherapist and patient, where the patient is cast in the experiencing, suffering position and the therapist in the knowing position.

There are many other schools of psychotherapy, however, and a quite different psychologization of the interview is found in Rogers’s early “non-directive method as a technique for social research,” recently discussed by
Tanggaard (2007a). As Rogers explained in 1945, the goal of this kind of therapy–research is to sample the respondent’s attitudes toward himself or herself: “Through the non-directive interview we have an unbiased method by which we may plumb these private thoughts and perceptions of the individual” (p. 282). In contrast to psychoanalytic practice, the respondent in client-centered therapy–research is a client rather than a patient, and the client is the expert. Although often framed in different terms, I believe that many contemporary interview researchers conceptualize the research interview in line with Rogers’s humanistic, nondirective approach, valorizing the respondent’s private experiences, narratives, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, which can be captured with the concept of *doxa*. This is the case with much qualitative psychology, but scholars outside psychology also conduct interviews that approach a therapeutic, Rogerian form. “Empathetic interviewing” (Fontana & Frey, 2005), for example, involves taking a stance in favor of the persons being studied, not unlike the positive regard displayed by Rogerian therapists, and the approach is depicted as at once a “method of friendship” and a humanistic “method of morality because it attempts to restore the sacredness of humans before addressing any theoretical or methodological concerns” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 697). In line with an implicit therapeutic metaphor, the interview is turned “into a walking stick to help some people get on their feet” (p. 695). This is a laudable intention, but there seems to be significant limitations to such forms of interviewing as well, not least that it becomes difficult to interview people with whom one disagrees and does not want to help (e.g., neo-Nazis). Attempts to include the researcher’s experience in interview research, described by Ellis and Berger (2003), also often focus on doxastic experience, and the interviewer is presented in a therapeutic vein as someone who “listens empathically” and “identifies with participants, and shows respect for participants’ emotionality” (pp. 469-470). Ellis and Berger also refer to a number of researchers who “emphasize the positive therapeutic benefits that can accrue to respondents and interviewers who participate in interactive interviews” (p. 470), and one experiential form of qualitative inquiry in particular, “mediated co-constructed narratives,” is presented as “similar to conjoint marital therapy” (p. 477), where a couple jointly constructs an epiphany in their relationship, with the interviewer–therapist acting as moderator.

In doxastic interviews that focus on experiences, opinions, and attitudes, knowing the experiencing self is seen as presupposed in knowing as such (this was very different in Socrates’s epistemic conversations, as we shall see below). A key point in these forms of interviewing, I believe, is that “understanding ourselves is part of the process of understanding others”
(Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 486). This can be interpreted as analogous to therapists’ own need for therapy in their professional development. As Rogers knew, the most efficient way of eliciting private doxastic elements is by engaging in a warm and accepting relationship, in line with the principles of client-centered psychotherapy (Rogers advocated what he called unconditional positive regard). A clear example of this is found in *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), which implicitly also illustrates what I take to be an ethical danger inherent in the client-centered approach: that human feelings are instrumentalized to achieve a successful outcome, namely a “full disclosure” of the respondent’s private world (the ethical problems of this are discussed in Brinkmann and Kvale [2005] and Duncombe and Jessop [2002]):

> Trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make. . . . In an effective interview, both researcher and respondent feel good, rewarded and satisfied by the process and the outcomes. The warm and caring researcher is on the way to achieving such effectiveness. (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, pp. 79, 87)

What is needed, I believe, is for qualitative researchers to consider the spread of Rogers’s humanistic interviews and other psychologistic or doxastic interviews as a reflection of the contemporary consumer society in which the client is always right, in which his or her experiences and narratives are always interesting because they are some individual’s experiences and narratives and in which the interviewer (or therapist) merely acts as a mirror of the respondent’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. We live in an *experience society*, to quote the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze (1992), and the interview is a central technology for sampling and circulating experiences, not just in research contexts but also in confessional talk shows and marketized focus groups (Kvale, 2006).

## The Normativity of Knowing

Instead of deconstructing the doxastic interview in light of the current economical situation, I present a different way of doing qualitative research interviews, a way that may give us knowledge in the sense of *episteme* rather than *doxa*. Before moving on with this, however, I need to address the dangerous word *knowledge*, without getting entangled in endless epistemological debates, for if *doxa* concerns our opinions and beliefs, *episteme*
concerns our knowledge. But what does it mean to know something? I believe that the term knowledge is immensely complex, and the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing is probably futile. Knowledge is most likely a concept with a family resemblance structure, such as that described by Wittgenstein (1953) in *Philosophical Investigations*. Yet, I believe that an essential normativity runs through the processes and states that we refer to as knowing. This is not an uncontestable claim, of course, but it will form the argumentative backbone to what I propose in what follows. In his 1956 classic *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Wilfrid Sellars (1956/1997) argued as follows:

The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (p. 76)

Sellars wanted to emphasize that when we talk about an episode as one of knowing, we necessarily raise the issue of its normative status. He found that knowledge is a normative concept, necessarily presupposing a difference between correctness and incorrectness. Thus, for something to count as knowledge, we have to be able to justify what we think we know. That a belief is true is not enough for it to count as knowledge, for example, for the true belief may be the result of a lucky guess. So saying that something is knowledge does not involve describing it empirically, or placing it in what Sellars called “the space of causation.” A belief may be caused by many different processes in my brain, my mind, my social group—or what have we—but when we call it “knowledge,” we are not talking about what caused it empirically but about whether it can be justified normatively. That is, we place it in what Sellars called “the logical space of reasons,” “of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”

If this line of thinking is valid, we can be said to know something only if our knowledge can be placed and justified in a normative space of reasons, which is our practical reality. I will leave this complex epistemological issue here, but I merely add that I believe that there are good reasons to think like Wittgenstein and the ethnomethodologists that the human “mind” itself is a generic term for our various abilities to give normative accounts of our conduct, that is, by placing our actions in the space of reasons (Brinkmann, 2006; Coulter, 1979). As Judith Butler (2005) has recently emphasized in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, we come into being as reflexive human participants when we are prompted by others to give accounts, accounts that are
given meaning by reference to a social dimension of normativity (p. 23). It is thus out of morality and normativity that a knowing subject emerges because these supply “a set of norms that produce a subject in his or her intelligibility” (p. 10).

That knowledge is a normative concept that involves reference to a shared “space of reasons” is old news in philosophy (but “new news,” perhaps, to current inhabitants of the Western culture of subjectivism). Plato’s dialogues were precisely designed as ways of testing whether the conversation partners have knowledge, that is, whether they are capable of adequately justifying their beliefs, and, if they cannot (which is normally the case), if their beliefs are unwarranted, the dialogues unfold as dialectical processes of refining their beliefs—their doxa—in light of good reasons, to approach episteme. In Plato’s dialogues, knowledge is discursively produced as the conversation partners test each other’s beliefs. I am aware that the Platonic notion of the realm of eternal ideas is unsupportable in today’s postmetaphysical philosophy, and I have no intention of rehabilitating it. I believe, however, that the discursive practice of producing knowledge through conversations, represented in the Platonic dialogues, can fruitfully serve as inspiration for doing research interviews today, also without the heavy metaphysics developed in Plato’s writings. (And it is indeed an open question to what extent Socrates would endorse Plato’s philosophical machinery. After all, we should bear in mind that Socrates was a philosopher who did not write but engaged in “performative philosophy” through the spoken word in the present, whereas Plato possibly wanted to “freeze” knowledge for all eternity because of his ideational conception of knowledge.)

**Epistemic Interviews**

To more concretely illustrate what I mean by “epistemic interviews,” I give just a simple and very short example from Plato. This is one of my favorite examples because it very elegantly demonstrates that no moral rules are self-applying and self-interpreting but must always be understood contextually. Socrates is in a conversation with Cephalus, who believes that justice (dikaiosune)—here “doing right”—can be stated in universal rules, such as “tell the truth” and “return borrowed items”:

“That’s fair enough, Cephalus,” I [Socrates] said. “But are we really to say that doing right consists simply and solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed? Are those not actions that can be
sometimes right and sometimes wrong? For instance, if one borrowed a
weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then
asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not
to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, not to consent to tell
the strict truth to a madman?”
“That is true,” he replied.
“Well then,” I [Socrates] said, “telling the truth and returning what we
have borrowed is not the definition of doing right.” (Plato, 1987, pp. 65-66)

At this point, the conversation is interrupted by Polemarchus, who disagrees
with Socrates’s preliminary conclusion, and Cephalus quickly leaves to go
to a sacrifice. Then, Polemarchus takes Cephalus’s position as Socrates’s
discussion partner, and the conversation continues as if no substitution had
happened.

Initially, we may notice that Socrates violates almost every standard
principle of qualitative research interviewing. First, we can see that he talks
much more than his respondent. There is some variety across the dialogues
concerning how much Socrates talks in comparison with the other participants,
but the example given here from The Republic, where Socrates dialectically
and at length develops an absurd conclusion from the belief stated by
Cephalus, is not unusual, although the balance is much more equal in other
places. Second, Socrates has not asked Cephalus to “describe a situation in
which he has experienced justice” or “tell a story about doing right from
his own experience” or a similar concretely descriptive question, probing
for “lived experience.” Instead, they are talking about the definition of an
important general concept. Third, Socrates contradicts and challenges his
respondent’s view. He is not a warm and caring conversationalist, working
with “a methodology of friendship.” Fourth, there is no debriefing or attempt
to make sure that the interaction was a “pleasant experience” for Cephalus.
Fifth, the interview is conducted in public rather than private, and the topic
is not private experiences or biographical details but justice, a theme of
common human interest, at least of interest to all citizens of Athens.

Sixth, and finally, the interview here is radically antipsychologistic.
Interestingly, it does not make much of a difference whether the conversation
partner is Cephalus or Polemarchus—and the discussion goes on in exactly
the same way after Cephalus has left. The crux of the discussion is whether
the participants are able to give good reasons for their belief in a public
discussion, not whether they have this or that biographical background or
defense mechanism, for example. The focus is on what they say—and whether
it can be normatively justified—not on dubious psychological interpretations.
concerning why they say it, neither during the conversation nor in some process of analysis after the conversation. In the words of Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957), the “researcher” (Socrates) is a participant, who takes seriously what his fellow citizen says (“What does he say?”)—seriously enough to disagree with it in fact—he is not a spectator who objectifies the conversation partner and his arguments by ignoring the normative claims of the statements or looking at them in terms of the causes (psychological or sociological) that may have brought the person to entertain such beliefs (“Why does he say that?”). To use Sellars’ (1956/1997) concepts discussed above, the conversation is conducted with reference to the normative space of reasons rather than the space of causation.

It is a common human experience that we can relate to other people both as participants (thus taking seriously their knowledge claims) and as spectators (thus objectifying their behaviors by seeking causes), and Skjervheim’s (1957) argument emphasizes the fact that the former attitude necessarily enjoys primacy in human interaction. P. F. Strawson (1974) similarly described two fundamental sets of attitudes in human life, “the reactive attitude” (roughly corresponding to the participant mode) and “the objective attitude” (corresponding to the spectator mode). Like Skjervheim, Strawson pointed out that the reactive attitude is our prima facie attitude, for we need reasons to distrust other people, to stop seeing them as responsible agents that are accountable and able to justify their beliefs, whereas the immediate trust in other people and other “reactive attitudes” need no reasons (cf. Løgstrup, 1956/1997). We need reasons to suspend our interaction with other people in the space of reasons. In psychotherapy (at least in most traditions), it is part of the implicit agreement between client and therapist that the therapist can (should?) objectify the client’s life to throw light on debilitating causes and conditions, but in normal human conversations, we often find it a derogatory experience if someone takes the role of objective spectator of our lives, disregarding our capacities as accountable subjects and placing our behaviors in the space of causation.

**Principles of Socratic Interviewing**

Christine Sorrell Dinkins (2005) has recently outlined the general principles of Socratic interviewing, which she refers to as “Socratic-hermeneutic interpre-viewing.” Dinkins is dissatisfied with “phenomenological interviewing,” which “calls forth long narratives from the respondent, with few interruptions or prompts from the interviewer, in order to allow the respondents’
stories to unfold naturally” (p. 112). Although not couched in exactly these terms, I believe that Dinkins here has in mind what I call doxastic interviewing, and the Socratic alternative to be presented corresponds to my epistemic version of interviewing. Socrates’s “method” is not a method in the conventional sense, as Dinkins makes clear, but an _elenchus_, a Greek term that means examining a person and normatively considering his or her statements. The Socratic conversation is a mode of understanding rather than a method in any mechanical sense (cf. Gadamer, 1960). In Dinkins’s rendition, the _elenchus_ proceeds as follows (and we can bear in mind the small excerpt from _The Republic_ discussed earlier):

1. Socrates encounters someone who takes an action or makes a statement into which Socrates wishes to inquire.
2. Socrates asks the person for a definition of the relevant central concept, which is then offered.
3. Together, Socrates and the respondent (or “co-inquirer” to use Dinkins’ term) deduce some consequences of the definition.
4. Socrates points out a possible conflict between the deduced consequences and another belief held by the respondent. The respondent is then given the choice of rejecting the belief or the definition.
5. Usually, the respondent rejects the definition because the belief is too central—epistemically or existentially—to be given up.
6. A new definition is offered, and the steps are repeated (adapted from Dinkins, 2005, p. 124).

Sometimes, the conversation partners in the Platonic dialogues settle on a definition, but more often the dialogue ends without any final, unarguable definition of the central concept (e.g., justice, virtue, love). This lack of resolution—_aporia_ in Greek—can be interpreted as illustrating the open-ended character of human social and historical life, including the open-ended character of the discursively produced knowledge of human social and historical life generated by (what we today call) the social sciences. To use the popular terms of social constructionist metatheory, the goal is not to end the conversation in a settled and frozen account but to “continue the conversation.” If, as Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) has argued, “conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general” (p. 211), human life itself is an ongoing conversation, and the goal of social science should therefore not be to arrive at “fixed knowledge” once and for all but to help human beings improve the quality of their conversational reality, to help them know their own society and debate the goals and values that are important in their lives. Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) has characterized this kind of social
science—which asks value-rational questions such as “Where are we going?” “Is this desirable?” “What is to be done?”—as phronetic social science, whose purpose it is to help people act wisely in concrete situations. This is social science practiced as public philosophy (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). The epistemic interview could be an important social science tool in the toolbox of the phronetic social scientist.

Michel Foucault (2001) also discussed Socrates’s conversational practices in some of his last writings, and the quotation below nicely brings out the normative and epistemic dimensions of Socratic interviewing (also see the analysis in Butler, 2005). When Socrates asks people to give accounts, “what is involved is not a confessional autobiography,” Foucault makes clear:

In Plato’s or Xenophon’s portrayals of him, we never see Socrates requiring an examination of conscience or a confession of sins. Here, giving an account of your life, your bios, is also not to give a narrative of the historical events that have taken place in your life, but rather to demonstrate whether you are able to show that there is a relation between the rational discourse, the logos, you are able to use, and the way that you live. Socrates is inquiring into the way that logos gives form to a person’s style of life. (p. 97)

Socrates was engaged in conversational practices in which people, in giving accounts of themselves, exhibited the logos by which they lived (Butler, 2005, p. 126). The conversation partners were thus positioned as responsible citizens, accountable to each other with reference to the normative order in which they lived, and the topic would therefore not be the narrative of the individual’s life or his or her experiences but rather people’s epistemic practices of justification.

**Examples of Recent Epistemic Interviews**

What Bellah and coworkers (1985) refer to as “active interviews” correspond, I believe, quite well to what I address here as epistemic interviews, and they represent one well-worked-out alternative to the standard doxastic interviews that probe for private meanings and opinions. In the appendix to their classic study of North American values and character, Habits of the Heart, Bellah and coworkers spell out their view of social science and its methodology, summarized as “social science as public philosophy.” The empirical material for their book consisted of interviews with more than 200 participants, of whom some were interviewed more than once. In contrast
to the interviewer as a friend or therapist, probing deep in the private psyche of the interviewee, Bellah and coworkers practiced active interviews that were intended to generate public conversation about societal values and goals. Such active interviews do not necessarily aim for agreement between interviewer and interviewee, and there is consequently no danger of instrumentalization of the researcher’s feelings to obtain good rapport. The interviewer is allowed to question and challenge what the interviewee says. In one of the examples cited, the interviewer, Ann Swidler, is trying to get the respondent to clarify the basis of his moral judgments crystallized in his statement that “lying is one of the things I want to regulate”—and Swidler asks him why:

A: Well, it’s a kind of thing that is a habit you get into. Kind of self-perpetuating. It’s like digging a hole. You just keep digging and digging.
Q: So why is it wrong?
A: Why is integrity important and lying bad? I don’t know. It just is. It’s just so basic. I don’t want to be bothered with challenging that. It’s part of me. I don’t know where it came from, but it’s very important.
Q: When you think about what’s right and what’s wrong, are things bad because they are bad for people, or are they right and wrong in themselves, and if so how do you know?
A: Well some things are bad because . . . I guess I feel like everybody on this planet is entitled to have a little bit of space, and things that detract from other people’s space are kind of bad. (Bellah et al., 1985, pp. 304-305)

Swidler challenges the respondent to examine why lying is wrong, which is quite a hard philosophical question, and the final question cited—concerning why wrong things are wrong—seems very complex, and, in standard textbooks on interviewing, the question could appear as an example of how not to pose an interview question. The question is (extremely) abstract and invites highly conceptual reflection rather than concrete description. It very much resembles Socrates’s questions in the dialogues. In the next example, the interviewer, Steven Tipton, tries to discover at what point the respondent would take responsibility for another human being:

Q: So what are you responsible for?
A: I’m responsible for my acts and for what I do.
Q: Does that mean you’re responsible for others, too?
A: No.
Q: Are you your sister’s keeper?
A: No.
Q: Your brother’s keeper?
A: No.  
Q: Are you responsible for your husband?  
A: I’m not. He makes his own decisions. He is his own person. He acts his own acts. I can agree with them or I can disagree with them. If I ever find them nauseous enough, I have a responsibility to leave and not deal with it any more.  
Q: What about children?  
A: I . . . I would say I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their own acts. (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 304)

Here, Tipton repeatedly challenges the respondent’s claim of not being responsible for other human beings. With the Socratic principles outlined by Dinkins in mind, we can see the interviewer pressing for a contradiction between the respondent’s definition of responsibility, involving the idea that she is responsible only for herself, and her likely feeling of at least some (legal) responsibility for her children. The individualist notion of responsibility is almost driven ad absurdum, but the definition apparently plays such a central role in the person’s life that she is unwilling to give it up. I would argue that this way of interviewing, although not asking for concrete descriptions or narratives, gives us important knowledge primarily about the doxastic individualist beliefs of Americans in the mid-80s but also secondarily about the idea of responsibility in a normative–epistemic sense. For most readers would appreciate the above sequence as an argument that the respondent is wrong—she is responsible for other people, most clearly her children. At the very least, the reader is invited into an epistemic discussion not just about beliefs but also about citizenship, virtue, responsibility, and ethics. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* conclude that unlike “poll data” generated by fixed questions that “sum up the private opinions,” active (epistemic) interviews “create the possibility of public conversation and argument” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305). The view that interviews should stimulate public argument is quite different from the traditional doxastic view of social science interviews, portraying these as ways of understanding what people privately think, feel, and want.

Qualitative research in social science serves—and should serve—many different purposes. One legitimate purpose is to throw light on people’s private experiences and opinions. It is difficult to learn about lived experience in prisons, schools, and factories, for example, without the use of experience-focused interviewing. But according to an older view of social science that goes back to Plato and notably Aristotle (1976), the social sciences are practical sciences that should ideally enable the creation of a knowledgeable
citizenry capable of discussing matters of communal value. Social science should serve the political community in the sense of engaging this community in conversations about ethical, political, and other normative issues. Qualitative social science, according to this view, should not just serve to bring forth autoethnographic narratives or other intimate aspects of people’s lives. It should also serve the *res publica*, that is, the ethical and political relations among human beings that are not constituted by intimacy (Sennett, 1977/2003).

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett (1977/2003, p. 4) warned against seeing society as a grand, psychological system where the question “Who am I?” is constantly pursued and where psychological categories invade and destroy public life, making us forget that political questions cannot be dealt with alone through trust, empathy, warmth, and a disclosure of private opinions (p. xvii). Under the conditions Sennett describes as “the tyranny of intimacy,” public, social, civic, and political phenomena are transformed into questions of personality, biography, and individual narratives (p. 219). As an antidote, Sennett calls for more “impersonal” forms of action in public arenas (p. 340).

My worry is that some of the social science interviews, which I have referred to as doxastic, can be said to uncritically reproduce and reinforce the view of social life as reducible to “psychology” in the form of people’s experiences and opinions. What Sennett (1977/2003) said of contemporary life in general also applies to much interview research: “Each person’s self has become his principle burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world” (p. 4). Current doxastic interviews are often about getting to know people’s selves, which is often portrayed as an end in itself in the contemporary “interview society” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), and I would echo Sennett’s claim that we need a forum “in which it becomes meaningful to join with other persons without the compulsion to know them as persons” (p. 340)—also in the contexts of qualitative interview research. No doubt, we also often need to know others “as persons,” and here doxastic interviews have proved to be very efficient, but if we genuinely want to examine ethical and political issues for the sake of the public good, one way could be to add epistemic interviews to the repertoire of qualitative inquiry to a larger extent.

**Final Questions About Epistemic Interviews**

Before summing up and concluding, I would like to discuss two legitimate critical questions concerning the practice of epistemic interviews.
Question 1: Should Not the Practice of Epistemic Interviews Be Limited to Elite Interviews?

Epistemic interviews that seek to develop knowledge in the sense of *episteme* are certainly not suitable for any and every research purpose, and there are no doubt groups of people with whom this interview form is out of the question. Because this form of knowledge production requires significant discursive skills—it requires the formation of accountable human agents or *citizens*—it cannot always be practiced in interviews with small children, for example (although Piaget’s interviews with children concerning their conceptions of the physical and moral aspects of the world approached an epistemic form because Piaget focused on the reasons given by the children for their [often wrong] answers; see the discussion in Kvale, 2003, p. 280). I would oppose the objection that epistemic interviews should be limited to “elite interviews” (e.g., interviews with specialists or leaders within some area). We can see in the interview excerpt below, which is from the grand interview study reported in *The Weight of the World*, led by Pierre Bourdieu (1999), that an interviewer, in this case Bourdieu, can challenge his respondents’ claims and beliefs to investigate whether they can be justified with reference to good reasons, also in a research context where the respondents are marginalized young men (François and Ali) from the poor suburbs of Paris. Recognizing respondents as responsible, accountable agents is quite possibly a precondition of them being able to act as such, whereas a totalizing caring, therapeutic attitude of unconditional, positive regard can cultivate vulnerable selves that are unable to take action as accountable citizens. This, at least, is the conclusion of Frank Furedi’s (2004) thought-provoking *Therapy Culture*. Here follows the sequence from *The Weight of the World*:

You were telling me that it wasn’t much fun around here, why? What is it, your job, your leisure time?
François: Yeah, both work and leisure. Even in this neighbourhood there is nothing much.
Ali: There’s no leisure activities.
François: We have this leisure center but the neighbors complain.
Ali: They’re not very nice, that’s true.
Why do they complain, because they. . .
François: Because we hang around the public garden, and in the evening here is nothing in our project, we have to go in the hallways when it’s too cold outside. And when there’s too much noise and stuff, they call the cops. . . .
You are not telling me the whole story. . . .
Ali: We are always getting assaulted in our project; just yesterday we got some tear gas thrown at us, really, by a guy in an apartment. A bodybuilder. A pumper.

Why, what were you doing, bugging him?

Francois: No, when we are in the entryway he lives just above, when we are in the hall we talk, sometimes we shout.

But that took place during the daytime, at night?

Francois: No, just in the evening.

Late?

Francois: Late, around 10, 11 o’clock. Well you know, he’s got the right to snooze. The tear gas is a bit much but if you got on his nerves all night, you can see where he’s coming from, right?

Ali: Yeah, but he could just come down and say . . .

Yes, sure, he could come down and merely say “go somewhere else.” . . .

Ali: Instead of tear gas. (Bourdieu et al., 1999, pp. 64-65)

Although the theme under discussion here is not a universal philosophical issue such as justice or virtue, we clearly see that Bourdieu as the questioner critically challenges the young men’s account. As in some of the excerpts discussed above, this conversation approaches the form of a legal interrogation (“You are not telling me the whole story . . .”; “But that took place during the daytime, at night?”), where the question of the epistemic quality of witnesses’ beliefs can be a matter of life and death. The central issue in a court of law is not just what people believe, their opinions, but whether there is substantial normative evidence to back their claims, whether they are warranted. The professional practice of qualitative research interviewing is no doubt very different from the professional conversations in courts, but I still believe that researchers can and should gain inspiration from many conversational practices besides the therapeutic conversation, here included the legal interrogation and the examination that are explicitly normative (because it is the justifiability that is central in these cases and not simply beliefs and opinions).

I take the study reported in The Weight of the World as an indication that epistemic interviews need not be limited to “elite interviews,” for “nonelites” are very often capable of justifying their opinions and beliefs if challenged, and important knowledge often develops from challenging respondents to give good reasons. In other cases, it is the qualitative research interviewer that is challenged by “nonelites,” as described in Tanggaard’s (2007b) study of apprenticeship learning, in which her theoretical conception of learning is antagonistically negated by some of the apprentices interviewed. Here, it is the researcher who is challenged to provide good epistemic reasons for her theoretical beliefs that seem unrecognizable to the respondents.
Question 2: Is the Use of Confronting Questions in Epistemic Interviews Not Unethical?

I have presented the epistemic interview as an alternative to conventional, often psychologized, interviews. But is it not particularly suspect from an ethical perspective to challenge respondents, to confront them with the task of giving reasons and normative accounts? I would counter this objection by arguing that epistemic interviews have the potential for at least as great a transparency of its power relations as doxastic interviews and do not commodify or instrumentalize human feeling, friendship, and empathy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). However, epistemic interviews are not without ethical problems, which should be taken into consideration. For one thing, participants should know what they agree to. And there are perhaps ethical and not just epistemic reasons why actively confronting interviews should be conducted with particular care vis-à-vis children.

Nevertheless, I believe that the active and confronting style in epistemic interviews in many ways enable researchers to proceed ethically in qualitative knowledge production. As testified in some of the epistemic interviews discussed above, the interviewers do not try to suck as much private information out of the respondents as possible, without themselves engaging in the conversation with all the risks that are involved in this. The ethical ideal in active interviews is not Rogers and his client-centered therapy, but Socrates. Rogers’s humanistic interviews can be said to reflect the contemporary consumer society where the client is always right, and the interviewer acts as a mirror of the respondent’s feelings and beliefs. In epistemic interviews, the client is not necessarily right (nor wrong, for that matter), for opinions and beliefs are debated, tried, tested, and challenged in an open conversation, where the validity of the respondent’s statements does not depend on how he or she “really feels” but rather on public and intersubjective criteria—perhaps even ethical ones.

We should not overlook the immersion of qualitative interviews in a consumer society, with its sensitivity toward experiences, images, feelings, and lifestyles of the consumers (Kvale, 2006). Quantitative research was historically connected to objectifying forms of power exertion. A key ethical question for qualitative researchers now is if qualitative research may constitute an ethical danger today through its uncritical relations to newer, subjectifying forms of power that work by “governing the soul” (Rose, 1999). If the hard, objectifying, but transparent forms of power exertion in industrial society have been replaced by soft, subjectifying, and opaque forms of power in consumer society, there are perhaps not just good epistemic reasons, but also
ethical ones, to add what I have called epistemic interviews to the tool box of qualitative inquiry because epistemic interviews counter the psychologizing tendencies of some doxastic interviews.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to make clear that the distinction outlined in this article between doxastic and epistemic interviews is intended as analytical and as a matter of degree. I have not intended to provide “diagnostic criteria” for interviews to count as either epistemic or doxastic. Furthermore, the purpose of this article has definitely not been to invalidate the use of phenomenological, descriptive, lifeworld interviews that focus on experiences and opinions—the *doxa*. Rather, my aim has been to argue that other kinds of human conversations can also be practiced with the goal of reaching knowledge, as classically illustrated by Socrates in the role of epistemic interviewer. Socrates is never content to hear what people believe or how they experience the world. He is always interested in examining whether people’s beliefs and experiences can be justified, and his dialectical “method” (his *elenchus*) was developed to bring human beings from a state of being opinionated to a state of knowing.

I have argued that knowledge is a normative concept and that the basic interpersonal attitude in human encounters is the participant mode, or the reactive attitude in Strawson’s words, where we meet people as accountable agents who can give reasons for their actions, feelings, and beliefs. Not that people can always do so, of course (often we have trouble coming up with reasons for our beliefs), but most people have at least the important ethical and political potential to engage in such conversations. Human participants are born in relations of accountability (Butler, 2005). In what I have called epistemic interviews, the analysis is in principle carried out *in* the conversation, with the accountable respondents involved, because the analysis mainly consists of testing, questioning, and justifying what people say. In Plato’s dialogues, we do not hear about Socrates continuing his analyses in solitude after the public meetings. In conventional research interviews, on the other hand, the analysis is typically carried out after the interview has taken place, often informed by the researcher’s theoretical beliefs. I do not think that one of these methods is automatically better, but I do think that researchers could experiment more with testing their own and their respondents’ statements in public discussion in the course of the interview rather than just seeing this as something to be carried out behind closed
doors. I believe that this could sometimes improve the validity of the analyses, and it could perhaps also create more interesting interviews. Often, the use of challenging and confronting questions in epistemic interviews generates more readable interview reports compared to the long monologues that sometimes result from phenomenological and narrative approaches.

In short, the epistemic interview is based on an epistemology, the idea that knowing something involves reference to a normative “space of reasons,” but also on an approach to interview style, which recommends a more widespread use of active and confronting questions that challenge respondents to give reasons for what they say. The epistemic interviewer’s “intrusion” into the conversation is not thought of as a source of error, or as something unnatural. On the contrary, if knowledge and subjectivity are discursively produced, it is an epistemic virtue to become visible as a questioner in the interview, and I believe that (without wanting to get entangled in the impossible debate concerning the naturalness of different conversational styles) it is at least as natural for an interviewer to become involved in the conversation as a participant as it is to act as a passive mirror (pace Rogers) or a therapeutic analyst (pace Freud), where the respondent is left to guess what use the researcher will make of his or her lengthy descriptions and narratives after the interview has taken place.

Note

1. I should make clear that Kvale’s later writings on interviews have sought to supplement the “standard” phenomenological interview with many other kinds of interview forms (see Kvale, 2006).

References


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