InterViews

Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing

THIRD EDITION

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The **Third Edition** of Brinkmann and Kvale's **InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing**, offers readers comprehensive and practical insight into the many factors that contribute to successful interviews. The book invites readers on a journey through the landscape of interview research, providing the "hows" and "whys" of research interviewing, and outlines paths for students to follow on the way to research goals. Thoroughly updated to account for all recent developments in qualitative interviewing, the new edition expands its focus on the practical, epistemological, and ethical issues involved in interviewing, while maintaining the fluid and logical structure it has become known for.

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InterViews

Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing

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TWELVE

INTERVIEW ANALYSES FOCUSING ON MEANING

Analytic tools can make the interview analysis more accessible than it seems from the reply to the 1,000-page question. In this and the following two chapters, we give an overview of analytic tools and approaches for analyzing interview texts—with a key purpose of sensitizing interviewers when they are conducting and transcribing their interviews to the specific demands that different modes of analysis pose to interviews and transcriptions.

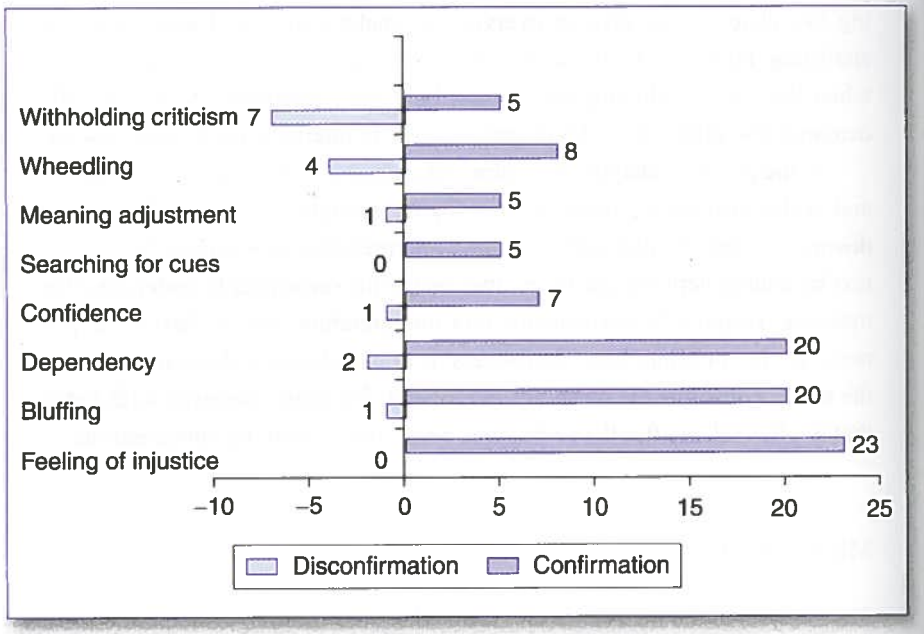
In the previous chapter, we addressed coding as a preparation for analysis, and in this chapter, we focus on meaning interpretation. While coding breaks down a text into smaller units, meaning interpretation may extend the original text by adding hermeneutic layers that enable the researcher to understand the meaning. Inspired by hermeneutic text interpretation, we emphasize the primacy of the question: how interpreters' presuppositions and questions put to the text coconstitute the meanings interpreted. We begin, however, with a step that is often taken after the coding has been done—meaning condensation.

MEANING CONDENSATION

The analysis of the interviews on grades illustrates meaning condensation as a form of categorization based on transcribed interviews. The 30 pupil interviews, transcribed into 762 pages, were categorized in order to test the hypothesis that using grades to measure learning affects learning and social relations in school. **Figure 12.1** depicts eight subcategories of one main dimension of a grade perspective—"Relationship with the teacher" (the other main dimensions are relation to fellow pupils, self-concept, relations to time, emotional relations,

learning motivation, and learning form). The categories were taken from educational literature and pilot interviews and were as such both theory driven and data driven. They were carefully defined in longer sentences; for example, "Bluffing—the pupil attempts to give the impression that he knows more than he knows, with the purpose of obtaining better grades," and "Wheedling—the pupil attempts to win the sympathy of the teacher with the purpose of obtaining better grades." Two coders independently categorized the 30 interviews, and their codings were combined. **Figure 12.1** depicts how many of the 30 pupils confirmed or disconfirmed the occurrence of each of the eight subcategories of the dimension "Relationship with the teacher," generally supporting the hypothesis that grades influence social relations in school (Kvale, 1980).

Figure 12.1 Categorization of Teacher–Pupil Relationship



The categorization of the meanings of the pupils' statements serves several purposes:

- The categorizations structured the extensive and complex interviews and when presented in a figure gave a simple overview of the occurrence of grading behaviors among the 30 pupils interviewed. Thus in the eight categories shown in **Figure 12.1**, the main results of 762 pages of interview transcription regarding the extent of grading attitudes and behaviors could be reported.
- The categorization made it possible to test the hypothesis that grades influence learning.
- The overviews of categorizations, such as those in **Figure 12.1**, give readers a background for judging how typical the quotes used in the accompanying qualitative analyses were for the interview material as a whole, and the categorizations may to a certain extent serve to counterbalance selective interpretations.
- The categorization made it possible to investigate differences in grading behaviors for different groups among the 30 pupils, such as boys versus girls and pupils with high versus low grades.
- Quantification also made comparisons to other investigations on the effects of grades possible.
- The categorization could itself be checked for coder reliability, which made some checks for interviewer reliability possible.

With categorization involving either/or decisions, it is preferable with precise preinterview definitions of the categories and careful probing during the interview to ascertain how the statements may be categorized. When the codes or categories are not to be developed until interviewing and analysis, it is important during the interviews to obtain rich descriptions of the specific phenomena to be coded or categorized.

Meaning condensation normally builds on coding and entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words. We here exemplify one form of meaning condensation developed by Giorgi (1975) on the basis of phenomenological philosophy. The thematic purpose of his study was to investigate what constitutes learning for ordinary people in their everyday activities. The methodological purpose was to demonstrate how one deals systematically with data that remain expressed in terms of ordinary language and how rigor and discipline can be applied in data analysis without necessarily transforming the data into quantitative expressions.

Table 12.1 demonstrates how the interview about learning presented in Chapter 2 was subjected to meaning condensation. The analysis of an interview involves five steps. First, the complete interview is read through to get a

Table 12.1 Meaning Condensation

Natural Unit	*Central Theme*
1. The first thing that comes to mind is what I learned about interior decorating from Myrtis. She was telling me about the way you see things. Her view of looking at different rooms has been altered. She told me that when you come into a room you don't usually notice how many vertical and horizontal lines there are; at least consciously, you don't notice. And yet, if you were to take someone who knows what's going on in the field of interior decoration, they would intuitively feel there was the right number of vertical and horizontal lines.	1. Role of vertical and horizontal lines in interior decorating
2. So, I went home, and I started looking at the lines in our living room, and I counted the number of horizontal and vertical lines, many of which I had never realized were lines before. A beam . . . I had never really thought of that as vertical before, just as a protrusion from the wall. (Laughs)	2. S (subject) looks for vertical and horizontal lines in her home
3. I found out what was wrong with our living room design: many, too many, horizontal lines and not enough vertical. So I started trying to move things around and change the way it looked. I did this by moving several pieces of furniture and taking out several knick-knacks, deemphasizing certain lines, and . . . it really looked differently to me.	3. S found too many horizontal lines in living room and succeeded in changing its appearance
4. It's interesting because my husband came home several hours later, and I said, "Look at the living room, it's all different." Not knowing this, that I had picked up, he didn't look at it in the same way I did. He saw things were moved, but he wasn't able to verbalize that there was a deemphasis on the horizontal lines and more of an emphasis on the vertical. So I felt I learned something.	4. Husband confirms difference, not knowing why

SOURCE: Giorgi, A. (1975). "An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology," in A. Giorgi, C. Fischer, & E. Murray (Eds.), *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 82–103), Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

sense of the whole. Second, the natural "meaning units" of the text, as they are expressed by the subjects, are determined by the researcher. Third, the theme that dominates a natural meaning unit is restated by the researcher as simply as possible, thematizing the statements from the subject's viewpoint as understood by the researcher. **Table 12.1** depicts this third step of analysis. The fourth step consists of interrogating the meaning units in terms of the specific purpose of the study. In the fifth step, the essential, nonredundant themes of the entire interview are tied together into a descriptive statement.

This form of meaning condensation can serve to analyze extensive and often complex interview texts by looking for natural meaning units and explicating their main themes. These themes may thereafter be subject to more extensive interpretations and theoretical analyses. Giorgi thus points out the importance of interpersonal relations in learning, which emerged in this study, a phenomenon that was rather neglected in the theories of learning at the time. It should also be noted that meaning condensation is not confined to a phenomenological approach and is also applied in other qualitative studies (Tesch, 1990).

For a phenomenologically based meaning condensation, it becomes paramount to obtain rich and nuanced descriptions of the phenomena investigated in subjects' everyday language. The interviewer's theories of the subject matter should be put into "brackets" during the interview, in line with a phenomenological approach outlined in Chapter 2.

MEANING INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of the meaning of interview texts goes beyond a structuring of the manifest meanings of what is said to deeper and more critical interpretations of the text. Meaning interpretation is prevalent in the humanities, such as in a critic's interpretations of a poem or a film, and in psychoanalytical interpretations of patients' dreams. The interpreter goes beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in a text. In contrast to the decontextualization of statements through categorization, interpretation recontextualizes the statements within broader frames of reference. As compared to the text reduction techniques of categorization and condensation, interpretations often lead to a text expansion, with the outcome formulated in far more words than the original

statements interpreted (e.g., in the interpretations of Hamlet's interview in Chapter 9 and the 1,000-page question in Chapter 11).

The interpretation of the meaning of texts encompasses a variety of approaches. Here we first exemplify multiple interpretations in a therapeutic example, then present a hermeneutic approach to the meaning of texts, and finally discuss meaning interpretation in relation to the questions a researcher poses to the interview texts.

THE ISSUE OF MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS

The evaluation of the quality of Hamlet's interview showed how different readings of an interview resulted in rather different interpretations, such as whether Hamlet's leading questions lead to unreliable or reliable knowledge and whether it is Polonius or Hamlet who is fooled in the interview. No systematic method of meaning interpretation was in play here. The interpretation of the 1,000-page question unfolded multiple potential meanings of the question, and here the methodical approach was spelled out. We now address the issue of multiple interpretations with an example from family therapy (Scheflen, 1978).

Box 12.1 Susan's Smile

The issue of multiple interpretations is brought out by a case story on family interaction in therapy. It is cast in a narrative form with a group of therapists watching and commenting on a videotaped therapy session. At one point the daughter, Susan, had smiled in an enigmatic way. The discussion among the observers about the meaning of this nonverbal statement, leading to six different interpretations, also highlights issues of interview interpretations.

One therapist suggested that the smile was sarcastic, thus invoking an expressional paradigm, where a person's actions are attributed to something within the person. Then a member of the group offered a second interpretation by pointing out that just before Susan had smiled her father had turned to her, held out his hands, and said, "I think Susan loves us. We certainly love her." The smile was then seen as a response to her father's statement. A further observation led to a third interpretation: After Susan had smiled, her mother turned to her and said, "You never appreciate what we try to do for you." The smile was then interpreted as a provocation, as a stimulus for the mother's reprimand. In these three explanations Susan's smile was interpreted as an expression, as a response, and as a stimulus, focusing respectively on Susan in isolation, the father-daughter relationship, and the mother-daughter relationship.

A fourth interpretation followed from a closer focus on the interpersonal interaction, noticing that the three members of the family often acted and reacted to each other by withdrawal: When Susan smiled, her father turned his face away and fell silent, and when the mother began her reprimand, Susan reacted in a similar way. A fifth interpretation followed when the tape was played back and the therapists looked for incidents similar to the sequence in which Susan smiled. There had been two previous exchanges where the father approached, Susan smiled, and the mother reprimanded. This indicated a programmed interaction in this family, the actors following an unwritten script and interacting according to a preexisting scenario. In this interpretation, moving from an individual-centered to a cultural interpretation, Susan smiled because this was the part she was expected to play in the family drama. A sixth interpretation argued that although Susan's smile was a response to her father's approach, it was not a response in kind. In Bateson's language, the smile was meta to the father's statement, her metacommunication derailed her father's offer of involvement.

When discussing the six therapists' interpretations of Susan's smile, Scheflen (1978, p. 59) does not side with any one interpretation: "These are usually presented as opposing truths in different doctrinal schools, but they are all valid from one point of view or another. And, accordingly, they are all tactically useful at some point or another." The various modes of explanation can be used deliberately as tactics throughout a therapy and can be tactically employed to alter habitual tendencies to deny, ignore, project, and blame: "In the course of family therapy our clients can learn multiple approaches from us and end up with a more flexible and comprehensive strategy for viewing and making sense of their experiences" (p. 68).

The case of Susan, who smiles enigmatically in the course of a therapy session, is outlined in **Box 12.1**. The therapy sequence testifies to the vague, uncertain, and precarious nature of meanings in interpersonal interactions, which may also pertain to the meanings produced in qualitative research interviews. The therapists discussing the meaning of Susan's smile offer continually

new interpretations as new contexts—from the therapy and from theory—are drawn in. The different interpretations do not necessarily contradict each other; they may be seen as enriching the meaning of a vague behavior. In the therapeutic session they may all be valid in one form or another, and they may be tactically useful to the therapeutic task of assisting the family in changing their habitual forms of interaction.

HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION OF MEANING

We now turn to the hermeneutical tradition in the humanities, which for centuries has sought to come to grips with the vicissitudes of the interpretations of texts, notably the Bible and also legal and literary texts. We begin by outlining some hermeneutic canons of interpretations.

Box 12.2 Hermeneutical Canons of Interpretation

The first canon involves the continuous back-and-forth process between parts and the whole, which follows from the hermeneutical circle. Starting with an often vague and intuitive understanding of the text as a whole, its different parts are interpreted, and out of these interpretations the parts are again related to the totality, and so on. In the hermeneutical tradition this circularity is not viewed as a "vicious circle" but rather as a "circulus fructuosis," or spiral, which implies a possibility of a continuously deepened understanding of meaning. The problem is not to get away from the circularity in the explication of meanings but to get into the circle in the right way.

A second canon is that an interpretation of meaning ends when one has reached a "good Gestalt," an inner unity of the text, which is free of logical contradictions.

A third canon is the testing of part interpretations against the global meaning of the text and possibly also against other texts by the same author.

A fourth canon is the autonomy of the text; the text should be understood on the basis of its own frame of reference by explicating what the text itself states about a theme.

A fifth canon of the hermeneutical explication of a text concerns knowledge about the theme of the text.

A sixth principle is that an interpretation of a text is not presuppositionless. The interpreter cannot "jump outside" the tradition of understanding he or she lives in. The interpreter of a text may, however, attempt to make his presuppositions explicit and attempt to become conscious of how certain formulations of a question to a text already determine which forms of answers are possible.

A seventh canon states that every interpretation involves innovation and creativity—"*Jedes Verstehen ist ein Besserverstehen*" (Every understanding is an understanding better). The interpretation goes beyond the immediately given and enriches the understanding by bringing forth new differentiations and interrelations in the text, extending its meaning.

SOURCE: Adapted and extended from *Contemporary Schools of Metascience* (p. 218), by G. Radnitzky, 1970, Gothenberg, Sweden: Akademiforlaget.

In **Box 12.2**, we have outlined some canons of interpretation developed within the hermeneutic tradition of text interpretation in the humanities that we touched on in Chapter 3, which we believe may serve to clarify the issues raised by multiple interpretations of interview texts. The hermeneutic principles have been sought for arriving at valid interpretations of religious, legal, and literary texts (see Palmer, 1969). It should be borne in mind that hermeneutics does not involve any step-by-step method but is an explication of general principles found useful in a long tradition of interpreting texts, such as the canons presented in **Box 12.2**. It is further an issue of debate whether hermeneutics should involve specific techniques for the interpretation of texts or whether hermeneutics is primarily a general questioning of the meaning of being. In the tradition of Gadamer (1975), it is thus explicitly rejected that hermeneutics is a method, and instead understanding is posited as the fundamental mode of being for humans. In the following sections we pursue the methodological implications of hermeneutics.

The Primacy of the Question in Interpretation

A common objection to interview analyses goes like this: "Different interpreters find different meanings in the same interview; the interview is thus not a scientific method." Dissimilar interpretations of the same interview passages do

occur, though probably less often than is commonly assumed. This objection involves a demand for objectivity in the sense that a statement has only one correct and objective meaning, and the task of an analysis is to find this one and only true meaning. Contrary to such a requirement of unequivocality, hermeneutical and postmodern thought allow for a legitimate plurality of interpretations.

There are multiple questions that can be posed to a text in an analysis, with different questions leading to different meanings. A researcher's presuppositions enter into the questions he or she poses to a text and thus codetermine the subsequent analysis. We saw earlier how the meaning of Susan's smile was interpreted differently with each new context, the selections of the relevant contexts rendered questions belonging to different theoretical perspectives. Some hermeneutic distinctions of types of questions to analyses of texts now follow. A first question concerns the relation of the author's and the reader's meanings. Is the purpose of a text interpretation to get at the author's intended meaning of the text—what Ibsen really meant to say with his play *Peer Gynt*—or does it aim to analyze the meaning the text has for us today? The interpretation of an interview involves a related distinction—is the purpose to analyze, for example, interviews about grades in order to arrive at the individual pupils' understanding of their grades? Or is the aim for the researcher to develop, through the pupils' descriptions, a broader interpretation of the meaning of grades in the educational system?

Another issue in interpretation concerns whether it is the letter of the text or its "spirit" that is to be interpreted in, for example, a legal text. Is what matters to get at the expressed meaning or at the intended meaning? In interview studies, this becomes a question of the level on which the interpretations should take place: Should the interviews be analyzed on a manifest level? Or is the purpose to get at latent meanings that are not explicitly conscious for the subject, as in the "depth hermeneutics" of psychoanalysis?

Interpretations of meaning are sometimes steeped in mistrust of what is said. Hamlet's interview was thus read as expressing a pervasive distrust of the words and acts of the other players, leading to a conversation of "per indirections find directions out." Within a "hermeneutics of suspicion," statements are critically interpreted as meaning something other than what is manifestly said, such as when a psychoanalytic interpreter looks for unconscious forces beneath what is said, or Marxist interpreters look for ideological class interests behind political statements.

A third issue implies the principal question of whether there exists one correct interpretation of a literary text or of a Bible story or whether there is a

legitimate plurality of interpretations. Can the Gospels of the New Testament thus be said to have one correct interpretation, or are they essentially ambiguous, open to different interpretations? If the principle of a legitimate plurality of interpretations through interview analyses is accepted, it becomes meaningless to impose strict requirements of interpreter consensus. What then matters is to formulate explicitly the evidence and arguments that enter into an interpretation, in order that other readers can test the interpretation.

In current interview research, the main problem is not a lack of variety of analyses and interpretations but rather the lack of explicit formulations of the research questions to a text. We may here distinguish between a biased and a perspectival subjectivity. A biased subjectivity simply means sloppy and unreliable work; researchers noticing only evidence that supports their own opinions, selectively interpreting and reporting statements justifying their own conclusions, and overlooking any counterevidence. A perspectival subjectivity appears when researchers who adopt different perspectives and pose different questions to the same text come up with different interpretations of the meaning. When readers' different perspectives on a text are made explicit, the different analyses should also become comprehensible. Subjectivity in this sense of multiple perspectival interpretations will then not be a weakness but testify to the fruitfulness and the vigor of interview research.

A fourth issue involves the question of what aspects of a theme should be analyzed and in which context. Hermeneutical text interpretations, psychoanalytical studies, and also psychological interview investigations have often involved an individualistic and idealistic focus on the intentions and experiences of individuals. There has been a neglect of the social and material context the persons live in; see Sartre's critique of the "psychoanalyzing" of Robespierre's reasons for his political behavior (**Box 13.3**). The interview method as such does not, however, need neglect the social and economic aspects of the human situation. It is mainly the contexts in which it has been used that have given the interview research this idealistic or individualistic slant.

Analytic Questions Posed to an Interview Text

The relationship between questions to, and answers from, a text in the process of analysis are illustrated with an interpretation of the following interview statement about grades.

> I know that somebody will say that it is wheedling ("apple polishing") if one seems to be more interested in a subject matter than is usual and says,

"This is really interesting," asks a lot of questions, wanting explanations. I don't think it is . . .

In religious instruction, where we get grades (from the teacher), but do not have an examination at the end of the school year, there is plenty of time to talk about anything else. Well, people do their homework during these lessons, and then we sometimes, perhaps two or three of us, discuss something interesting with the teacher. And then, afterwards, it sometimes happens that someone remarks, "Well, well, somebody seems to be wheedling."

(*Later on in the interview, about other pupils*) Sometimes we don't know whether they do it in order to wheedle or not, but at other times it seems very opportunistic. (*In a tense voice*) It's rather unpleasant. . . . It isn't easy to figure out whether people wheedle or whether they're just interested.

This high school girl's statement is rich in information about the influence of grading on the relationships between teachers and pupils. It is, however, not quite clear what her remarks mean. One line of inquiry addresses the meaning of the text in three different interpretational contexts: self-understanding, a critical commonsense understanding, and a theoretical understanding.

Contexts of interpretation are presented in the left-hand column in Table 12.2, and in the center and right-hand columns are the corresponding communities for and forms of validation, to which we return in Chapter 15.

Self-understanding. The interpreter here formulates in a condensed form what the subjects themselves understand to be the meanings of their statements. The interpretation is more or less confined to the subjects' self-understanding in the form of a rephrased condensation of the meaning of the interviewees' statement from their own viewpoints, such as these are understood by the

Table 12.2 Contexts of Interpretation and Communities of Validation

Context of Interpretation	*Community of Validation*	*Form of Validation*
Self-understanding	The interview	Member validation
Critical commonsense understanding	The general public	Audience validation
Theoretical understanding	The research community	Peer validation

researcher. The meaning condensation used by Giorgi, and also the categorization of the grade interviews, took place within the context of the subject's self-understanding.

The pupil in the statement earlier is interested in religion and enjoys discussing it with the teacher, but she has the impression that other pupils may regard this as wheedling. In other situations, she has difficulties determining whether the other pupils wheedle or whether they are actually interested in the subject matter. She experiences this ambiguity as rather unpleasant.

Critical commonsense understanding. The interpretation here goes beyond reformulating subjects' self-understanding—what they themselves experience and mean about a topic—while remaining within the context of a commonsense understanding. The analysis may thus include a wider frame of understanding than that of the subjects themselves, may be critical of what is said, and may focus on either the content of the statement or on the person making it. The interpretation of the statement with the denials of competition mentioned earlier (Chapter 10) thus went beyond the pupil's self-understanding to include a critical commonsense reading of the many denials as possibly indicating a confirmation.

By including general knowledge about the content of the statement it is possible to amplify and enrich the interpretation of a statement. For the question "What does the statement express about the phenomenon of wheedling?" the girl's statement may be interpreted as a manifestation of a basic ambiguity in the teacher-pupil relationship created by grading. Within a grade-dominant perspective, the subject matter and the human relationships in school are "instrumentalized": They become mere means toward the goal of the highest possible grade point average. In the classroom it may appear ambiguous whether a pupil's expressed interest in a topic is genuine or whether it is just a means to "twist" the teacher in the interest of improving grades.

The questions put to the text may also center on the person, asking what a statement expresses about the interviewed subject. In the statement earlier, the question "What does it express about the pupil's own relation to wheedling?" may lead to an interpretation that this girl employs double standards: The same activity of talking interestedly with the teacher is evaluated more positively when conducted by the girl herself than when carried out by others. The topic involves a conflict for her; her voice is tense, and a speculative interpretation might be that she belongs to that group of pupils whom the others accuse of wheedling.

Theoretical understanding. In a third context, a theoretical frame for interpreting the meaning of a statement is applied. The interpretations are then likely to go beyond the subject's self-understanding and also to exceed a commonsense understanding, such as when incorporating a psychoanalytic theory of the individual or a Marxist theory of society.

In a somewhat speculative interpretation, the psychoanalytical concept of "projection" may be used: At an unconscious level the pupil projects her own nonacceptable wheedling behavior onto other pupils, while denying it in herself. In a Marxist theory about the school system as socializing to wage labor, with grades as the currency of the school system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kvale, 1972), the statement about apple polishing may be interpreted as an expression of learning at school having a "commodity character." The pupils learn—through the grading of their learning—how to distinguish between the use value and the exchange value of their work. Their questions to the teacher may be led by a utility interest in obtaining a better understanding of the knowledge presented. The questions may also be part of an instrumental exchange relation; the knowledge about which they ask interested questions has no intrinsic use value for the pupils, and the questions only serve the purpose of making a positive impression on the teacher—an impression that can be exchanged for a higher grade. At school the pupils thus learn to subordinate the use value of their work to its exchange value.

Interrelatedness of interpretational contexts. The three interpretational contexts for analysis derive from different explications of the researcher's perspective and lead to different forms of analysis. The contexts may be further differentiated and may also merge into each other. The instrumental attitude toward learning—knowledge as a mere means to high grades—which was discussed earlier in a commonsense context, also follows from sociological and Marxist theories about education. For some of the Danish pupils in the study, such an instrumental means-ends thinking was an open part of their self-understanding: "My interests have taken me very far from that which takes place at high school. I go here with the explicit purpose of getting as good an examination as possible, with the least possible effort." The three contexts of interpretation suggested earlier serve to make explicit the analytic questions posed to a statement. One pupil's description of wheedling has given rise to a number of interpretations in our analysis. The various resulting interpretations are, according to the present perspective, not haphazard or subjective but follow as answers to different questions to the text.

Implications for interviewing and transcription: For extensive interpretations of meaning, rich and nuanced descriptions in the interviews are advantageous, as well as critical interpretative questions during the interview. For some types of interpretation, detailed verbatim descriptions may be necessary, such as when critically reading a pupil's many denials of competition in Chapter 10.

THE QUEST FOR THE "REAL MEANING"

When analyzing the meanings of an interview, a common question asked of interview researchers goes something like "How do you know you get to know what the person really means?" A tempting reply, "What do you really mean by 'really means'?" will probably not lead anywhere.

Guessing at the meaning of the "real meaning" question suggests a belief in the existence of some basic meaning nuggets stored somewhere, to be discovered and uncovered, uncontaminated, by the objective techniques of an interviewer understood as a miner digging up precious buried metals. The "real meaning" question is a leading question, in this case leading to endless pursuits of an undefined and fictitious entity. The quest for real, true meanings came to an end in philosophy some years ago. Interview researchers might still go on wild goose chases, hunting the real, authentic meanings of their subjects' experiences. Psychotherapists might still be digging for real meanings in the deep interior of their patients' unconscious psyches. Both therapist and patient then conceive of truth as something to be found or "mined" and not as something socially constructed with their subjects. The search for real-meaning nuggets may lead to reification of the subjective rather than to an unfolding and an enrichment of the subjective, which follows from an interrelational conception in which meanings are constructed and reconstructed through conversational interactions. A postmodern approach, laid out in Chapter 3, forgoes the search for true fixed meanings and emphasizes descriptive nuances, differences, and paradoxes. That different interpreters construct different meanings of an interview story is then not a problem but a fruitfulness and virtue of interview research.

With a transition from an individual storage conception of meaning to an interrelational constitution of meaning in the original interview conversation—and in the readers' conversations with the interview text—the power asymmetry

of the interview researcher and the subject become more obvious. Does the interviewer own the meanings constructed in and on an interview, interpreting it within his or her selected contexts? Or should the original "authors" of the interview statements have their say in the interpretation and communication of their stories? This is an issue not only of validity of interpretation but of ethics and power, of the right and the power to attribute meaning to the statements of others. Interview research involves the danger of an "expertification" of meanings where the interviewer as "the great interpreter" expropriates the meanings from the subjects' lived world and reifies them into his or her theoretical schemes as expressions of some more basic reality.

We end this chapter on meaning interpretation with **Box 12.3**, which addresses and questions the centrality of interpretation.

Box 12.3 Interpretation: For and Against

Meaning interpretation has been absolutely central in the qualitative corners of the human and social sciences for decades. Hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur has argued that a life "is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 28). It is the interpretation of meaning that elevates human life from a biological, animalistic state to something like a state of spirit and self-consciousness. Stripped of meaning and interpretation, a human life is pure biology. Ricoeur argued that the meanings of the actions that comprise a human life should be interpreted more or less in the same way as when we interpret a novel and consider how the text obtains meaning through contextual and intertextual relations. Concerning social life, Clifford Geertz's (1973) famous definition of culture—as an historically transmitted pattern of meanings—points in the same direction. Meanings (materialized in symbols, rituals, and works of art, for example) are at the core of human social life, and understanding a culture through interpreting its meanings is therefore a key social scientific method.

However, some human scientists are worried that people have focused too much on meaning. Famous feminist writer Susan Sontag raised concerns as early as 1964 in the essay "Against Interpretation" (Sontag, 1990). Although framed as a discussion of how to understand art, her arguments are also relevant in the context of qualitative research. By *interpretation* she means "a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' of interpretation" (p. 5). Interpretation, for Sontag, is thus an act of translation, showing the reader that some X (e.g., interview statements) "really means" Y (p. 5). This is very typical and also prevalent in this book: interpreting the meaning of something by using theoretical frameworks, for example, to go beyond the immediate. This, Sontag finds, threatens to betray the nature of art as it simply strikes us, and she quotes Oscar Wilde with approval: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (p. 3). She continues by stating that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'" (p. 7). As an alternative, she recommends paying more attention to *form* (in art, but it could also be in human expressions in general) and a more descriptive stance.

Literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has argued along similar lines, not least in his book *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004). Gumbrecht is not against meaning or interpretation but argues there is a layer in human relationships (and in our encounters with objects) that is deeper and more immediate than interpretation, which he calls presence. When the sound of a person's voice makes us shiver, or when we are moved by music, we experience this kind of presence as a noninterpretative relationship.

In agreement with Gumbrecht, we find that both interpretation of meaning *and* description of presence have their place in human (qualitative) science but that researchers could sometimes pay more attention to the layer of presence. This is easier said than done, but when Murakami describes his interview encounter with a victim of the Tokyo gas attack (see **Box 5.3**), we have a clear example of how it is possible to work with presence in interview research. We here find a lyrical approach to writing, which has its merits in some cases, as it does not seek to interpret by "going beyond" the visible and what is present to find the hidden meanings but instead brings forth and shows the situation as fully as possible (see Box 13.2 for an account of what we here refer to as a lyrical approach).