

INTERLUDE II

Controversies in Interview Research

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Interviews are a “method” of data collection or generation that is today widely used in research on international organizations (IOs). What interviews are; the way to handle the interviewing process; how best to analyze, evaluate, or interpret the interview “text”; and how to apprehend power relations during the interviewing process have been widely debated among scholars using interviews. Clearly, doing “interviews” in itself does not say much concerning a project’s research design, unless the questions above are also addressed. Yet existing insights in the literature too often solely concentrate on the *practicalities* of research drawing on interviews, focusing on how to choose whom to interview, how to gain access, and how to establish a good “rapport” with the interviewee. While relevant, such questions are often addressed without prior consideration of the *epistemological status of the knowledge created through interviewing techniques*, thus creating some confusion in methodological discussions. Diverging conceptions on the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer have fed a number of controversies concerning interviews and their interpretation. First, such conceptions have informed competing conceptions of “validity” in relation to interview knowledge. Second, they have also resulted in debates over the kind of power dynamics that might be at play during interviews, and in the process of interpreting them.

Debates on Validity

Until the 1980s, most of the literature on interviews engaged with “how” to ask interview questions, how to avoid bias both during the interview as

well as during the process of analysis of the interview “data,” and how best to ensure that research projects—based on interviews as the main method of data collection—were overall considered scientific. While not unproblematic, such insights have legitimized the use of interviews in social sciences.

Informed by a “positivist” approach, such insights see interviews as informative. Scholars, conceived as “minors” who unearth knowledge already there (Kavele and Brinkmann 2009), conduct interviews in order to discover new factual data. Knowledge is conceived as given, and the role of the scholar consists in collecting objective evidence on social reality. Albaret and Deas tell us that “semi-structured interviews are often the only viable conduit to discovering factual data, accessing certain types of information, and reconstructing a course of events or decision-making processes” (see chapter 5—*Semistructured Interviews*). Such assumptions have informed projects aimed at process-tracing events, processes, or “reveal” the points of views of certain groups of actors. When this is the case, scholars aim to access such views “as they are,” assuming that the discourses of those interviewed can be accessed in an objective way.

As an effect of such assumptions, books on methods informed by this perspective have focused on the “interviewer’s effect” (Hyman 1954) as well as the “reliability of the interviewee” and how best to control for these. “Validity,” from this perspective, is about asking the right questions, in the right way, and whether the interviewee offers truthful answers.

In order to address the first concern (the “interviewer’s effect”), existing advice has focused on research design. The suggested recipe consists in focusing on the “scientificity” of the research methodology, which translates into the formulation of “unbiased” interview questions. Students have been advised to formulate “nonleading” questions that will not distort the interviewee’s responses (McCracken 1988). Questions should restrain, the word goes, from “putting words in the mouth” of interviewees. The emphasis has also been put on making interviewees feel at ease, in the hope that this would provide for a more honest conversation and thus access to “true” knowledge. While positivist approaches acknowledge that scholars who do interviews may not be “neutral” or objective, such bias is seen, however, as entirely quantifiable and controllable (Mosley 2013).

In order to address the second concern (the “reliability of the interviewee”), existing insights point to the lack of neutrality of interview data, focusing on ways to “control” for this (for instance, Rathbun 2008). From this perspective the partiality of interviews is a problem. Insights have focused on memory failures, arguing for instance that “the older the witness, and the further from events they are, the less reliable the information” (Rich-

ards 1996: 200) or on interviewees' deceptive strategies, when someone strategically misremembers their accounts (Mosley 2013). In the context of IO research, this may occur when highly ranked bureaucrats for instance stick to an "official" discourse and do not reveal the politics behind the agendas of their organizations. Positivist scholarship on interviews here proposes triangulation as the golden solution, that is, cross-referencing across interviews conducted with different actors *and* between interviews and other forms of data. Davies for instance tells us that "the optimum solution appears to be a triangulation triad of primary sources (interviews, published first-hand accounts; and documentary sources (published or archival)), with published secondary-source information available" (Davies 2001: 78). Such combination, the argument goes, makes for a powerful and rigorous research design (Richards 1996).

Such questions, however, are relevant only when interviews are conceived as *informative*. When the value of interviews is seen as a manifestation of the interviewee's views of social reality, the "lack of validity" of the interviewee account is no longer seen as a challenge to be overcome. Instead researchers can ask themselves new questions: how are such understandings produced, or what are the effects of such understandings? Rather than being concerned with a possible "misrepresentation" of reality by interviewees, their stories are seen as an exercise of sensemaking in a specific sociohistorical context, that is valuable as such. In IO research, the study of representations has informed new agendas on the way IO bureaucrats look at specific governance problems or how such conceptions vary across IOs (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Fresia 2009; Pouliot 2016; Beerli 2018). From this perspective, "bias" does not need to be excluded and the interview text does not need to be "controlled" against other types of evidence. Triangulation becomes redundant.

In the same way, interpretivists acknowledge that researchers *need to make sense of* their interview material. Interviews do not "speak for themselves" and need to be interpreted. This is unavoidable to the act of writing. Interviews are, as put by Beerli in her discussion of biographical interviews in this volume (see chapter 6—*Biographic Interviews*), "dialogical," "interactionist," and "intrusive." For interpretivists, the positionality of the researcher (what positivists call, in their own terminology, the "interviewer's effect") affects the production of interview knowledge, as well as its interpretation. But of course the question then goes, how can we tell a good from a less convincing interpretation of an interview, if interview stories (and social reality more generally) can only be apprehended from the perspective of the researcher?

One avenue consists in making the positionality of the researcher, as

well as the decisions made by the researcher during the research process itself, explicit. Leander for instance argues that “strong objectivity” consists in being reflexive about the researcher’s “presence in framing research” as well as the research process itself (Leander 2016). This implies discussing how our identity, stance, or emotions may affect our relationship to our research object as well as our research endeavor. A feminist researcher who examines IOs’ institutional cultures will ask certain questions but also see certain asymmetries in gender relations that another researcher might miss. Not only the questions to the interviewees but also the questions to the *interview text* are affected by the positionality of the researcher.

By the same token, researchers who are interpreting the interview text in light of a specific *theory* should discuss how their theoretical standpoint may illuminate their object but also close alternative interpretations (Kvale 1996). A marxist interpretation of international bureaucrats’ mindset will pay more attention to their economic vision of individuals and shared assumptions about the global economy more generally. This “lens” is not problematic as such, as it makes it possible for researchers to see things that might not be visible to others. It should, however, be made explicit. The first advice, thus, consists in making the researcher’s epistemological, theoretical, political, or emotional stance transparent.

The second avenue consists in interpreting the interview text in light of the political, social, and historical context in which the text is produced. Paying attention to “context” may point for instance to the structural conditions that may constrain the interviewees when they speak. This mode of interpretation acknowledges that reality exists “beyond words” and recognizes the effects exerted by objective structures. Bourdieu, when discussing the interpretation of interview text, alerted us to the need “to understand the conditions of existence of which they (the interviewees and their words) are the product of” as well as the “the social effects which the relations of the fieldwork (. . .) can themselves exert” (1996: 30). In what he called a “realist construction” of interview text, “conversational analysis reads each discourse not solely in terms of its specific structure of interaction as a transaction, but also in terms of the invisible structures that organize it” (Bourdieu 1996: 27). Prior knowledge of these objective structures is, thus, a condition for the interpretation of the interview text.

These different contexts of interpretation, as described above, serve to make explicit the questions posed to the text. But this does not suffice. The interpretation of a text also includes requirements of credibility. Precise observations and logical argumentation are also necessary, even when interviews and the scholarly work that interprets them are conceived as cocreated

knowledge. Several interpretations of interviews are possible but not *any* interpretation.

Debates on Power Asymmetries

Paying attention to the interview process and the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee therein calls for a reflection on power relations, which are central in this relationship. A second controversy emerges when one considers this relationship from the perspective of power asymmetries. Most insights tell us that in the context of “elite interviews,” the power asymmetry plays in favor of the interviewee. Richards for instance tells us that “by the very nature of elite interviews, it is the interviewee who has the power” (Richards 1996: 201). Highly ranked officials can be difficult interlocutors who skillfully convey an official discourse and control both the format and the direction of the interview, as underlined by Dairon in this volume (see box j—*Asymmetrical Interviews*). The identity of the interviewer may also exacerbate this asymmetry: researchers who are young, female, or coming from an underprivileged social background can find themselves in a dominated position more frequently (Alles et al. 2016).

But IO interviews can also be with nonelite officials, like local staff or beneficiaries. And mainly I would argue that the question of power, *even in elite interviews*, is not straightforward. When one places the interview relationship within its scholarly context, it becomes clear that the interview takes place *for the purpose of the interviewer*. As put by Kvale, the idea of an interview dialogue “gives an illusion of mutual interests in a conversation, which in actuality takes place for the purpose of just the one part—the interviewer” (Kvale 2006: 483). Given this, the idea of a genuine and even emancipatory interview dialogue is illusory. During the interview, the interviewer, who asks questions, sets the agenda. In light of this interaction, advice given to researchers on “how to gain trust” during interviews must be critically examined. We hear for instance that “the first question, crucial in initiating the exchange by gaining the respondent’s trust, must not be too delicate or naïve” (Alles et al. 2016: 118). But creating trust during the interview also serves the researcher’s purpose to “obtain a disclosure of the interview subjects’ world” (Kvale 2006: 482). Whether this is legitimate or manipulative is debatable. One may argue that elites, given their dominant social position or the—sometimes—contestable nature of their agendas or behavior, may well be the object of social scientific critique, and that such critique can be formulated only once elite discourses and practices are researched. But even

elites may be harmed—personally or in their career—by an interpretation of their thoughts or doings they fundamentally disagree with (Dauvin and Siméant 2001). This power asymmetry appears clearly when one considers what happens “after” the interview. The researcher indeed controls the interpretation of the interview text. Even when researchers adhere to an ideal of mutuality and coauthorship, the researcher organizes the process of knowledge cocreation. There is an ambiguity in the interview relationship that has both personal and instrumental elements.

This brief discussion aims to encourage researchers to deeply reflect on the relationship between themselves, as researchers, and their interviewees. This relationship is, first, at the core of epistemological discussions on interview knowledge and its “validity.” Second, it is also at the core of a more ethical reflection on power asymmetries during the interview itself, as well as in the process of interpretation of interview text.

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