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CONFRONTING THE ETHICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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In this article we question the “ethicism” that often permeates the discourse on qualitative research, that is, the implicit idea that qualitative research is ethically good in itself, or at least ethically superior to the uncaring quantitative approaches. In order to throw light on the ethics of qualitative interviews in contemporary consumer society—what has also been called “the interview society”—we draw on microethics as well as macroethics, that is, on the relationships within the interview situation, as well as the relations to society and culture at large. We argue that prevailing forms of warm, empathic interviews are ethically questionable, and, as an antidote, we propose various forms of actively confronting interviews. We argue that ethics is a real and inescapable domain of the human world, and we propose that “The real has to be described, not constructed or formed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. xi). Therefore we relocate the focus away from the construction of our ethics, to the question of how the researcher should be enabled to skillfully confront ethical reality, particularly by mastering the art of “thick ethical description.”

The qualitative research interview probes human existence in detail. It gives access to subjective experiences and allows researchers to describe intimate aspects of people’s life worlds. The human interaction in qualitative inquiry affects interviewees and informants, and the knowledge produced through qualitative research affects our understanding of the human condition (Kvale, 1996). Consequently, qualitative research is saturated with moral and ethical issues.¹ Ethical problems in qualitative research particularly

1. In this article, we do not distinguish between “moral” and “ethical” or “morality” and “ethics” in any systematic way, but apply them as we do mainly for stylistic reasons.

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arise because of the complexities of “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Birch, Miller, Mauthner & Jessop, 2002, p. 1).

Following Michel Foucault, who once remarked that “the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger” (1984, p. 343), we shall argue that qualitative interviewing, which perhaps was once liberating, has become a main danger today, reflecting and reinforcing social forms of domination in Western consumer societies. We question the “ethicism” that often permeates the discourse on qualitative research, that is, the implicit idea that qualitative research is ethically good in itself, or at least ethically superior to the hard, “uncaring” quantitative approaches of questionnaires and behavioral experiments. We draw on microethics as well as macroethics, that is, the relationship within the interview situation as well as the relations to society and culture at large. As an antidote to the prevailing ideal of intimate and caring interviews, we propose various forms of actively confronting interviews with inspiration from Socratic dialectics as well as psychoanalytic interviews. We oppose the idea that ethics is something to be constructed and reconstructed at will, and approach it as a real and inescapable domain of the human world. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), we propose that “The real has to be described, not constructed or formed” (p. xi). Therefore we conclude by relocating the focus away from the construction—individual or social—of our ethics, to the question of how researchers should be educated and enabled to confront ethical reality skillfully.

Ethics and Science

Modernist philosophers and social scientists have been preoccupied with demarcating fact from value, description from prescription, science from ethics, aesthetics and politics. Ever since David Hume’s observation in the early eighteenth century, that one cannot logically infer evaluative judgments from descriptions, there has been a sharp separation of fact and value in Western thought. In a modern disenchanted world, there can seemingly be found only facts, and no substantive values. Rather than giving up the project of ethics in a disenchanted world, modern philosophers after Hume have turned their attention away from substantive moral goods

and towards those procedures that are supposed to generate moral rules and actions. The two chief approaches have been various forms of Kantian deontology and consequentialism (notably utilitarianism). Kantians (such as Habermas, Rawls, and Kohlberg) try to devise a universal procedure that will generate just moral rules and principles, binding to all rational creatures. Utilitarians argue that the relevant moral procedure is a kind of universal calculus with which to compute the greatest sum of happiness for all sentient creatures.

In recent years, however, a number of philosophers and social scientists have questioned these procedural approaches to ethics. The chief problem with these approaches, which are sometimes also called ethics of rules, is that no rule, principle or procedure can be self-interpreting (Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988, p. 8). Even if we succeed in formulating a general rule from our procedures that all can agree upon, we still need to know when and how to apply the rule. A classic example is found in Plato's *Republic*, where the rule under discussion is that one ought always to return borrowed items to the owner. Socrates questions the universality of this rule: "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" (Plato, 1987, p. 66). We cannot go on forever formulating rules for when and how to apply them, for at some point we have to act.

The dissatisfaction with the modernist procedural approaches to ethics has generated different responses. One response is found in social constructionism, where ethics is redescribed as "among the resources available for playing the games and participating in the dances of cultural life" (Gergen, 1992, p. 17). Ethics is nothing universal, but a constructed product of cultural discourse. Another response concentrates on the question of what counts as a competent moral reasoner. This is virtue ethics, first developed in great detail and subtlety by Aristotle (1976), but significantly revitalized in recent years. Contrary to the social constructionist tendency to aestheticize the ethical domain—constructionists see ethics as one of "the dances of cultural life" and urge us to become "*poetic* activists" (Gergen, 1999)—virtue ethicists engage in the phenomenological task of closely describing moral particulars: persons, actions, situations, practices, communities.

Ethics is thus understood as an inherent part of the human world (we return to the differences between constructionism and virtue ethics below).

Contrary to the procedural approaches, Aristotle's virtue ethics does not primarily aim to formulate a universal theory about morality, but rather has the practical aim of making us good persons. The modernist gap between fact and value would have been completely alien to Aristotle, who argued that a virtue (*arete* in Greek) is that which causes something, for example, a human being, to perform its function well, and thus enables it to achieve its *telos*. Consequently, values are part of the world, according to Aristotle, because when we describe what something essentially is we must include an account of what it ought to do when it functions well (Brinkmann, 2004). Fact and value are intertwined, and virtue ethicists therefore work with a substantive rather than a procedural approach to morality. They start from the premise that morality and values are already part of our world and can be described as such. With virtue ethics, one can deemphasize the craving for universal ethical procedures and look instead at concretely existing moral practices.

The most important Aristotelian virtue, which has been extensively discussed in contemporary philosophy, is *phronesis* or practical wisdom, and later in this article we argue that practical wisdom involves the skill of "thick ethical description," the ability to see events in their value-laden contexts, and judge accordingly. We believe that qualitative researchers should primarily cultivate their ability to perceive and judge "thickly" (that is, their practical wisdom) in order to be ethically proficient, rather than follow universal rules. They should engage in *contextualized methods of reasoning* (Birch et al., 2002, p. 3) rather than reasoning from abstract and universal principles. However, there is no need to completely abandon rules and principles, for moral rules are still useful as rules of thumb, as Martha Nussbaum, herself a neo-Aristotelian, says. Moral rules should not in themselves be seen as authoritative, but they are "descriptive summaries of good judgments [. . .] valid only insofar as they transmit in economical form the normative force of good concrete decisions of the wise person" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 299).

The modernist separation of fact from value has been questioned more generally in recent years, especially from the camp

of philosophical pragmatism, which also owes much to Aristotle's philosophy. Hilary Putnam has thus argued that "every fact is value loaded and every one of our values loads some fact" (Putnam, 1981, p. 201). Pragmatists argue that science should be judged according to what it does, or what it enables us to do. Therefore science is a moral activity, or, as John Dewey (1922) put it, all sciences from physics to history "are a part of disciplined moral knowledge so far as they enable us to understand the conditions and agencies through which man lives" (p. 296). Sciences are viewed as problem-solving activities embedded in cultural communities of knowledge. Objectivity, seen by many as the hallmark of science, must then be understood within such tradition-bound communities of knowledge and include a conception of ethics:

To be objective, then, is to understand oneself as part of a community and one's work as part of a project and part of a history. The authority of this history and this project derives from the goods internal to the practice. Objectivity is a moral concept before it is a methodological concept, and the activities of natural science turn out to be a species of moral activity. (MacIntyre, 1978, p. 37)

With this concept of objectivity, it becomes possible to talk about the objectivity of ethics in an everyday sense of the term. Being ethical means being open to other people, acting for the sake of their good, trying to see others as they are, rather than imposing one's own ideas and biases on them. This kind of objectivity involves an understanding of the social and historical context of one's viewpoint, for we always "see" something against a larger background of tradition, history and community. Accordingly, it can be argued that there is little, if any, difference between objectivity in science and objectivity in ethics. Ethical as well as scientific objectivity is about letting the objects object to what we do to them and say about them (concerning this conception of objectivity in science, see Latour, 2000).

Qualitative Ethicism

Today, it might be relevant to ask for the reasons why qualitative research interviewing has become so popular. Some of these reasons are no doubt internal to scientific practice. Thus an increasing

number of researchers have recognized that when the object is concrete human experience, then qualitative methods are the most adequate means of knowledge production. Following a well-known principle of inquiry, which dictates that researchers let the object of research determine the method, rather than the other way round, qualitative methods become an objective way of investigating a qualitative human world. Yet, there might as well be some reasons external to scientific practice that can explain the current boom in qualitative methods. In this article, we suggest that the cultural change from industrial society with harsh objectifying means of control and power, to consumer society and its softer seductive forms of power through dialogue, empathy, and intimacy, can help explain the current popularity of qualitative inquiry, particularly interviews. Being an ethically skilled qualitative researcher involves more than respecting the integrity of the research subjects. The ethical researcher also needs to take into account the cultural context of her research.

The qualitative boom has been accompanied by a tendency among qualitative researchers to portray qualitative inquiry as inherently ethical, or at least more ethical than quantitative research. This can be called the qualitative progressivity myth (Kvale, 2004) or a qualitative ethicism (baptized and criticized by Hammersley, 1999). It is the tendency to see research almost exclusively in ethical terms, as if the rationale of research was to achieve ethical goals and ideals with the further caveat that qualitative research uniquely embodies such ideals.

In their introduction to the authoritative *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin & Lincoln (2000) view qualitative research as “a form of radical democratic practice” that “can be used to help create and imagine a free democratic society” (p. x). They argue that feminist research in particular is about building trust and long-term research relationships, and “the research texts that are produced out of such material implicate the investigator in a feminist, caring, committed ethic with those who have been studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 39). Here, a more or less direct relation is asserted between a certain kind of qualitative research and “a caring, committed ethic.” Likewise, Hilary Rose has put forward a feminist epistemology that “thinks from caring” and advances a “caring rationality” (Rose, 1994, p. 33).

Also qualitative research inspired by social constructionism comes close to a kind of qualitative ethicism. Sheila McNamee, for example, has discussed the ethical implications of viewing research as “relationally situated activity.” This makes her question the distinction between research and therapy. She does not view “the research endeavor as differing substantially from a therapeutic interview” (McNamee, 1994, p. 70). According to this constructionist perspective, research should—just as therapy—help to construct new worlds through “poetic activism” (Gergen, 1999). A version of ethicism is thus expressed when development and change become the rationale of research, just as it is in therapy. However, there might be good ethical reasons to uphold a distinction between therapy and qualitative inquiry, which will be discussed below. Also, a qualitative ethicism can distract researchers’ attention away from the inevitable power plays inherent in the interview, and from the cultural context in which the research is carried out. Rather than thinking primarily in terms of intimacy, empathy and caring (e.g., crystallized in Rose, 1994); qualitative researchers also need to think from the power relations and cultural conditions in which they do research.

Quantitative research in psychology was historically connected to objectifying forms of power exertion. A key ethical question for qualitative researchers now is if qualitative research may constitute today’s “main danger” through its relations to newer, subjectifying forms of power that work by “governing the soul” (Rose, 1999). Have the hard, objectifying, but transparent, forms of power exertion in industrial society been replaced by soft, subjectifying and opaque forms of power in consumer society?

As regards the issue of whether qualitative research, due to its close personal interaction, is automatically ethically superior compared with quantitative research, it might be instructive to go back to the beginning of quantitative research in psychology. Wilhelm Wundt’s early experimental practice included “The questioning experiment” (“Das Ausfragexperiment,” see Danziger, 1990) where experimenter and experimental subject frequently changed places, something that is virtually nonexistent in current interviews where interviewees are rarely given the chance to ask questions. With Wundt, experimenter and subjects were engaged as collaborators in a common enterprise, and the power relations

in these early experiments were relatively transparent and proportioned in comparison with much of today's interview research. Wundt and his subjects/colleagues had a shared interest in obtaining knowledge; they had a common agenda known to all, which is also quite rare in current qualitative research, with action research as an exception.

Some often-neglected power characteristics of the interview situation are briefly outlined in what follows, to illustrate the shortcomings of an unreflective qualitative ethicism (Kvale, 2004).

The asymmetrical power relation of the interview. The interviewer has scientific competence and defines the interview situation. The interviewer initiates the interview, determines the interview topic, poses the questions and critically follows up on the answers, and also terminates the conversation. The research interview is not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners; the interviewer's research project and knowledge interest set the agenda and rule the conversation.

The interview is a one-way dialogue. An interview is a one-directional questioning. The role of the interviewer is to ask, and the role of the interviewee is to answer. It is considered bad taste if interview subjects break with the ascribed role and by themselves start to question the interviewer.

The interview is an instrumental dialogue. Unlike a good conversation, the research interview is no longer a goal in itself or a joint search for truth, but a means serving the researcher's ends. The interview is an instrument in providing the researcher with descriptions, narratives, texts, which the researcher then interprets and reports according to his or her research interests.

The interview may be a manipulative dialogue. A research interview often follows a more or less hidden agenda. The interviewer may want to obtain information without the interviewee knowing what the interviewer is after, attempting to—in Shakespeare's terms—"By indirections find directions out." Modern interviewers may use subtle therapeutic techniques to get beyond the subject's defenses.

The interviewer's monopoly of interpretation. In social science research, the interviewer generally upholds a monopoly of interpretation over the interviewee's statements. The research interviewer, as the "big interpreter," maintains an exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant.

Taking into account the interview subjects' options for countercontrol—such as evading or not answering the questions—and the different counter powers of children and expert interview subjects, it still appears warranted to characterize qualitative research as saturated with more concealed forms of power than quantitative and experimental research. Interviewing may involve what has been called commodification of the skills of "doing rapport," where the researcher even has to engage in the unethical affair of "faking friendship" in order to obtain knowledge (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). Duncombe and Jessop present instructions from qualitative method textbooks as evidence of the widespread, yet unethical, tendency of researchers to commodify their trust, empathy and feelings. Interviewers are thus encouraged to "*manage* their appearance, behaviour and self-presentation in such a way as to build rapport and trust with each individual respondent" (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994, pp. 122–123; our emphasis). And another example:

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, p. 79, p. 87)

Armed with good intentions and qualitative ethicism, qualitative researchers may nevertheless fail to be objective—ethically and scientifically—if they fail to situate their means of knowledge production in power relations and the wider cultural situation.

The Interview Culture of the Consumer Society

Interviewing is a distinctive and pervasive phenomenon in modern culture, but it is also a relatively new phenomenon. The first journalistic interview (with the Mormon leader Brigham Young) was published in 1859 in the New York Tribune (Silvester, 1993). Recently Atkinson & Silverman (1997) have referred to postmodern

society as *the interview society*, where the self is continually produced in confessional settings ranging from talk shows to research interviews. They find that “in promoting a particular view of narratives of personal experience, researchers too often recapitulate, in an uncritical fashion, features of the contemporary interview society” where “the interview becomes a personal confessional” (p. 305). Qualitative researchers often presuppose that an authentic self can be revealed through personal narratives in the warm and empathic context of the interview, but what is often overlooked is the possibility that interviewee subjectivity is not so much revealed as constructed during the interview (Alldred & Gillies, 2002), according to the logic of the consumerist interview society.

The focus of the economies of Western societies has shifted from efficient production of goods to customers’ consumption of the goods produced. What is important is no longer to make products as stable and unfailing as possible, but rather to make markets by influencing buyers through marketing. Henry Ford is supposed to have said that customers could get the Ford T in any color they wanted, as long as they preferred black, but in today’s post-Fordist economy, such standardization is clearly outdated. What is important today is not just the quality of the product, but especially its style, the story behind the experiences it generates, and what it reveals about the owner’s self—in short, its hermeneutic qualities. Products are sold with inbuilt planned obsolescence, and advertisements work to change customers and construct their desires continually, in order for new products to find new markets (Kvale, 2003a). Softer, more concealed, forms of power gradually replace the bureaucratic structures of industrial society with its visible hierarchies and governance through reward and punishment. A chief technique of governance today is management through subtle quasi-therapeutic techniques (Rose, 1999).

Analogously, in consumer society, soft qualitative research has been added to the repertoire of psychological methodology, often superseding the bureaucratic forms of data collection in standardized surveys and quantitative experiments. While a textbook on quantitative methodology may read like a manual for administrators and engineers, qualitative and constructionist guidebooks read more like manuals for personnel counselors and advertisers.

The qualitative interview is, in line with a qualitative ethicism, often pictured as a progressive, radical, democratic approach. We should not, however, overlook the immersion of the qualitative interviews in a consumer society, with their sensitivity towards experiences, images, feelings, and lifestyles of the consumers. The qualitative interview also provides important knowledge for manipulating consumers' desires and behavior through psychologically sophisticated advertising. One of the most significant methods of marketing in consumer society is, not surprisingly, qualitative market research. It accounts for \$2–\$3 billion world wide (Imms & Ereaut, 2002), and, according to one estimate, 5% of all British adults have taken part in market research focus groups. Although a major part of qualitative interviewing today takes place within market research, the extensive use of qualitative research interviews for consumer manipulation is hardly taken into account in the many discussions of qualitative research and its emancipatory nature.

Micro- and Macroethics in Qualitative Research

Modernist accounts of research ethics have tended to put emphasis on how to treat the research subjects. It is indeed important to obtain the subjects' consent to participate in the research, to secure their confidentiality, to inform them about the character of the research and of their right to withdraw at any time, to avoid harmful consequences for the subjects, and to consider the researcher's role. The relevant ethics here can be called the microethics of research. But it is also important to consider how the knowledge produced will circulate in the wider culture and affect humans and society. The ethics here is the macroethics of research. Following are some examples of ethical issues from a micro- and a macroperspective. When operating with the distinction between micro- and macroethics, it becomes obvious that there can be qualitative research which is ethically unproblematic on a micro level, that is, where participants are treated with respect and confidentiality, but which is nevertheless ethically problematic on a macro level. Again, consumer research can be cited here. Its goal is to manipulate buyers, making them want certain products, but such research can be carried out with complete respect of the concrete individuals participating in focus groups.

Another example which is ethically problematical at a macro as well as micro level is the extensive investigation carried out at the Hawthorne industrial plant, where interviews were conducted that suggested that management's display of human interest to the workers could be a key factor in increasing their morale and industrial output (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). More than 21,000 workers were interviewed, each for more than an hour and the interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The purpose of the study was to improve industrial supervision. In a sophisticated methodology chapter, interviewing is presented as a new mode of industrial research, inspired by clinical psychology and anthropology. In their indirect clinical interviews, the researchers did not limit themselves to the manifest content of the interview, and they listened not only to what the person wanted to say, but also to what he did not want to say.

There can also be research which is ethically justifiable on a macro level, that is, which serves worthwhile societal goals, but which is carried out in an ethically questionable manner on a micro level. The classical study of the authoritarian personality by the Adorno group can be mentioned here (Adorno et al., 1950). In their psychoanalytically inspired interviews, the freedom of expression offered to the interview person was seen as the best way to obtain an adequate view of the whole person, as it permitted inferences of the deeper layers of the subjects' personalities behind the antidemocratic ideology. The indirect interview technique, with a flexible interview schedule, consisted of "manifest questions," suggestions for the interviewer to pose in order to throw light on the "underlying questions," derived from the project's theoretical framework. These underlying questions had to be concealed from the subject, so that undue defenses would not be established through the subjects' recognition of the real focus of the interview, namely, to uncover the personally-rooted causes of anti-Semitism.

Using an expression from Fog (1994), the application of psychoanalytic knowledge of defense mechanisms in the study by the Adorno group served as a Trojan horse to get behind the defense walls of the anti-Semites. Concealed modes of questioning are ethically even more questionable in commercial interviews with opposing interests of the parties involved. The Hawthorne interviews served management interests in increasing the workers'

morale and productive output, and motivational market interviews serve to manipulate the behavior of consumers without their knowledge.

Ethics becomes as important as methodology when the question is production of objective knowledge by qualitative research (Kvale, 2003b). Interventions, which may be ethically desirable within a joint therapeutic venture of helping a person change, become unethical within larger social contexts with opposing interests. In therapy, the main goal is a change in the patient. In research, it is the advance of knowledge. In therapy it may be unethical if the therapeutic conversations do not lead to new insights or emotional changes. In research interviews, which the interviewees themselves have not asked for, it may be unethical to instigate new self-interpretations or emotional changes. A therapeutically ethical license with regards to academic ethical codes thus permits extreme situations of inquiry that are open for objectivity in the sense of allowing "the object to object," in word and in body. But objectivity in this sense of creating extreme situations, where the objects may be maximally provoked to object to the interviewer's interpretations, is ethically out of bounds for academic research interviews.

The ethical issues that arise in the close interaction of a qualitative interview, such as the dilemma between wanting as much knowledge as possible while at the same time respecting the integrity of the interviewee, cannot easily be solved, not even by following formal ethical principles. Jette Fog, who has worked both as researcher and therapist, has formulated the researcher's ethical dilemma as follows: the researcher wants the interview to be as deep and probing as possible, with the risk of trespassing the person, and on the other hand to be as respectful to the interview person as possible with the risk of getting empirical material that only scratches the surface (Fog, 1984, 1992). In a research project about living with cancer (Fog, 1994, pp. 201–202), a woman is interviewed and denies that she fears a return of the disease. She says that she is not afraid, and she appears happy and reasonable. However, as a skilled interviewer and therapist, the interviewer senses small signals to the contrary: The interviewee speaks very fast, her smile and the way she moves her hands are independent of her words. Her body is rigid, and she does not listen to her own words. If the interviewer decides to

respect the interviewee's words, and refrains from anything resembling therapeutic intervention, then the written interview will subsequently tell the story of a woman living peacefully with cancer. Valuable knowledge might be lost in this way, which could only have been obtained by trying to get behind the denial and defenses of the interviewee. If society has an interest in finding out what it means to live with a deadly disease, then the researcher should perhaps try to go behind the face value of the woman's words? But what is in the interest of the woman? Perhaps it is best for her not to have her defenses broken down, or maybe she will live a better life if she faces up to the reality of her disease?

While ethical principles about respect for the interview person are important, the researcher in this microethical situation also needs experience-based situational judgment, clear perception, and proper attention to the particularities of the situation and the woman's condition. A constructionist call for poetic activism seems misplaced here. Objective perception and experience-based judgment are also demanded in relation to macroethical issues. What will happen if I publicize this article? What happens when I, as a powerful researcher, speak on behalf of my interview subjects in the wider cultural situation? The experienced researcher who understands situational particularities is more likely than the novice, or the person blindly following guidelines and methods textbooks, to exercise capable ethical judgment in such cases.

Actively Confronting Interviews

Ethical as well as scientific objectivity is about letting the objects object to what we as researchers do to them and say about them (Latour, 2000). One fails to be objective and ethical in this sense if one does not allow one's objects—such as human beings—to frustrate one's investigations. If it can be agreed, or at least made plausible, that current warm, empathic, and caring interviews neglect real power relations, then what can be done to make the power relations more transparent and ethically accountable? What can be done to allow the objects to object? If the intimate interview, carried out in the context of a "faked friendship" (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002) or in a guise of therapy, represents a main danger today *pace* Foucault, we can either give up the unethical business

of interviewing entirely, and find other means of knowledge production, or else we must suggest alternative forms of interviews that make the power relations more transparent. In this section, we take the latter direction. We shall here briefly outline some forms of confronting interviews (Kvale, 2004) and describe in more detail what Bellah and colleagues have termed the active interview.

The psychoanalytic interview. In contrast to a harmonious understanding of an interview conversation between equal partners, the psychoanalytic interview involves an explicit power asymmetry between therapist and patient. The psychoanalytic situation is designed to create conflicts, to provoke maximum resistance from the patient towards the therapist's interventions. According to Freud, the psychoanalytic theory is built upon the resistance offered by the patient to the therapist's interpretations. Still, the analysis takes place in the patient's interest in being cured for her suffering, and has as a side effect produced significant psychological knowledge (Kvale, 2003b). It must be borne in mind that research and therapy are different practices, so we would not want to make qualitative researchers into psychotherapists. We would rather want therapists to publicize accounts of their experiences.

The Platonic dialogue. Another alternative to the warm and caring interview could be found in Plato's dialogues. This alternative emphasizes conflicts in interpretations, while approaching equality in the power distribution of the interview. It would entail a mutuality where both parts pose questions and give answers with a reciprocal critique of what the other says. Some forms of current elite interviews with experts, where the interviewer also confronts and contributes with his or her conceptions of the interview theme, approach such a dialogue. In a Platonic dialogue, the interview is "depsychologized" and is no longer understood as the *via regia* to the authentic inner self of the subject interviewed. Rather, the interview stimulates the interviewee and interviewer to formulate their ideas about the research theme, which may increase their understanding.

Agonistic interviews. By focusing on the conflict and power dimensions of the interview, the conversation becomes a kind of

battlefield (Aaronson, 1999). An agonistic understanding of the conversation lies behind Lyotard's discussion of knowledge in the postmodern society. Lyotard regards every statement as a move in a game: "to speak is to fight [. . .] speech acts go forth from a general agonistics" (1984, p. xx). Agonistic interviewing would apply confrontational modes, where the interviewer deliberately provokes conflicts and divergences of interests, as seen in some forms of journalistic interviews. In contrast to the consensus-directed ideal, which dominates current interview research, the interview would become a battle where the goal is to defeat the opponent, as found in the Sophists' rhetorical questioning, leading to new insights through dialectical development of opposites.

Dissensus research. A further contrast to the search for consensus through care and empathy would be to encourage, and to report, dissensus in interview research, following the motto of "*vive la différence*." The interview should then be reported in full with the arguments of the opposing sides. Hereby, the readers may follow the entire truth-seeking process, and themselves take a position on the arguments and counterarguments. Such an open book access to interviews could open for a manifold of alternative and conflicting interpretations of the same texts.

Advocacy research. Advocacy research would provide representatives from different positions and social groups—such as managers and workers, teachers and pupils—with access to the same interview texts. As lawyers in court, the representatives of the different positions could critically interpret the texts, and potentially, as in court, cross-examine the witnesses. The different parties involved may also have the option of engaging social scientists to address openly the research material from their interests. The outcome of such advocacy research need not be a harmonious consensus, but just a well-documented and well-argued dissensus.

The active interviews of Robert Bellah and coworkers (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Tipton, 1985) are one well worked-out alternative to the opaque, empathic interviews probing for private meanings. In the appendix to their study of North American values and character, *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah and coworkers (1985) spell out their view of social science and its methodology, summarized as "social science as public philosophy." The empirical

material for their book on individualism and commitment consisted of interviews with more than 200 participants, of which 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 what they call *active interviews*, which “create the possibility of *public* conversation and argument” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305; original emphasis). Active interviews do not necessarily aim for agreement between interviewer and interviewee, and there is no need to commercialize one’s feelings as researcher in order to obtain good rapport. The interviewer is allowed to question what the interviewee says, for example if she contradicts herself. They cite an example where the interviewer tries to discover at what point the subject 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: 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)

The question concerning responsibility for children challenges the respondent’s initial claim that she is only responsible for her own acts. The interviewer does not here display a Rogerian unconditional positive regard, or a warm accepting attitude, but rather resembles Socrates, who is also the explicit interview model for Bellah and colleagues. The Socratic attitude is explained as follows: “Though we did not seek to impose our ideas on those with whom we talked [. . .], we did attempt to uncover assumptions, to make explicit what the person we were talking to might have left implicit” (ibid., p. 304).

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* are sensitive not only to the microethics of the interview, but, also, and perhaps more so, to the macroethics of the knowledge produced. The very aim of

doing social science as public philosophy is to engage in debate with the public about the goals and values of society. This is made explicit and transparent by the authors: "When data from such [active] interviews are well presented, they stimulate the reader to enter the conversation, to argue with what is being said. Curiously, such interviews stimulate something that could be called public opinion, opinion tested in the arena of open discussion" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305).

Active interviews have a greater transparency of the power relations, and do not commodify or instrumentalize human feeling, friendship, and empathy. However, active interviews have their own ethical problems, which should be taken into consideration. For one thing, participants should know what they agree to. And furthermore, if Socrates is to serve as model for the interviewers, researchers should be aware of his cunning tactics in the dialogues, with his frequent use of flattery and leading questions. Still, we believe actively confronting interviews are a viable alternative in order to obtain ethically responsible knowledge in the current cultural situation. They could possibly serve to counter-reinforce soft forms of domination in today's consumerist interview societies.

Constructing or Describing Our Ethics?

The examples above of ethical issues in qualitative interviews point to the inadequacy of formal principles and guidelines alone as *the* way to ethically justifiable research. Such principles can, perhaps, tell us how to clarify, and to some extent, foresee ethical dilemmas, but they are in themselves unable to help us deal with those micro- and macroethical problems that inevitably arise when researching human lives and experiences (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Again, it should be stressed that there is no need to abandon ethical principles and rules, but we need to focus more on how to apply them in concrete situations, that is, we need to focus more on concrete ethical perception and judgment (*phronesis*).

If the modernist procedural approaches to ethics are inadequate in themselves, then a widespread response has been to turn to the social constructionist argument that morality is a social construction: There are no substantive moral truths (because there are no truths) and no universal moral procedures (because

nothing is universal). There are only cultural forms of story telling arising out of human relationship. In the constructionist view, as advocated by Kenneth Gergen, “moral language largely functions as a means of sustaining patterns of social interchange in danger of erosion” (Gergen, 1992, p. 19). Moral sentiments and deliberation should thus be “reconstituted as linguistic (poetic, rhetorical) forms of social practice” (p. 17).

Rather than supporting the constructionist claim that we need to construct or reconstitute our ethics in a world of relationality and contingency, we wish to end by pointing to the phenomenological project of truthfully describing the world as the most promising way to deal with ethical issues in qualitative research. Even in a constructed world, with its mistrust of universal theories, truths and certainties, there is still room for a moral reality. In Hannah Arendt’s words, “even if there is no truth, man can be truthful, and even if there is no reliable certainty, man can be reliable” (1958, p. 279). Our moral reality is a practical reality where truthfulness is more important than absolute truth, and where practical wisdom—the skill of clear perception and judgment—becomes more important than theoretical understanding and the ability to use abstract procedures. The lesson to learn from moral phenomenology is that by describing the world adequately, by getting close enough to phenomena, by being objective concerning particular situations, we will be lent a hand in knowing what to do that goes beyond ethical theories and abstract principles. To return to Merleau-Ponty (1945): “The real has to be described, not constructed or formed” (p. xi). The absence of theoretical criteria for determining moral action does not mean that we have no criteria at all. We do, and they are part of lived moral reality. Rather than demanding theoretical proof in the moral realm, we simply ought to act well (Levine, 1998, p. 230).

The standard reply to such a call for concrete description as the road to ethical action is that it is unethical not to have theoretical legitimization of one’s ethics. If there is no ethical theory to separate good from evil, then we fall into the morass of moral relativism where “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” to cite Richard Rorty’s constructionist credo (Rorty, 1989, p. 73). Such a response overlooks, however, that describing the real does not leave us with a value-neutral world

devoid of moral content and guidance. Rather, with the help of thick ethical description—using concepts that are at once descriptive and value-laden (e.g., “courageous,” “brutal,” “gentle”)—we can reenchant the world morally, and disclose the moral normativity that we inevitably have to deal with in our lives as humans and researchers. Stephen Toulmin, a philosopher who has also served on ethical commissions, has thus observed that commissioners can often reach consensus concerning particular cases, but not on the abstract theories and formal principles that might justify their concrete decisions (Toulmin, 1981). It does seem possible to engage in morally responsible action without the use of ethical theory.

Peter Levine has argued more radically that moral philosophy, in the sense of “*general normative principles or procedures that can be defended with arguments and then used to settle at least some concrete cases*” (Levine, 1998, p. 4; original emphases), does not help us settle moral conflicts or make morally responsible choices. In fact, he claims, we can much better settle moral dilemmas without the institution of “moral philosophy.” The alternative to moral theory is “more an art than a science, learned by experience rather than the apprehension of principles or techniques. It is—to be more specific—a matter of describing particulars in a judgmental way.” (Levine, 1998, p. 4). Skilled ethical reasoners do not follow moral rules or general principles, but they master, according to Levine, “the art of thick description” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

By going from thin descriptions, such as “he contracted his eyelids” to thicker descriptions, such as “he winked conspiratorially” (Ryle, 1971), we find ourselves increasingly committed to value judgments. Descriptive words can carry moral connotations. If we correctly identify an action as brutal or deceiving—and use what Bernard Williams (1985, p. 141) called “thick ethical concepts” (both descriptive and action-guiding)—then there is no need for formal decision procedures, for such thick descriptions “can make moral judgments all by themselves” (Levine, 1998, p. 21). We cannot decide whether some action violates a universal moral principle that prohibits harassment, for example, until the action is interpreted as harassment; “And once we have described it that way, then we can judge it without principles” (Levine, 1998, p. 50). The crucial feature of morality is in the moment of judgment. Consequently, what we need to learn is to describe

the world truthfully with thick ethical concepts, and thereby aspire to some kind of objectivity, as mentioned earlier. The focus on thick ethical description goes back to Aristotle's virtue ethic, where facts and values are equal aspects of the world, so describing the world is already to include its moral features. We propose that the ethically competent qualitative researcher master the art of thick description.

Educating Qualitative Researchers Ethically

Becoming an ethically capable qualitative researcher involves cultivating one's *phronetic* skills, e.g., learning to recognize which rules (if any) to apply in a given situation, which is ultimately based on experience (see also Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1990; Løvlie, 1993). There are different ways of learning to thicken events to help us act morally:

Contextualize. We thicken events by describing them in their context. In a court of law, for example, the question whether somebody did something intentionally is decided, not by citing theories or general rules, but by describing the context of the act (Levine, 1998). Thick description situates an event in a context, and the experienced reasoner knows which features of a context are relevant in order to judge adequately. The skilled qualitative researcher understands the peculiar features of the interview context, and how this context generates specific ethical issues to be addressed.

Narrativize. Those thick descriptions that incorporate a temporal dimension are called *narratives*, and "narratives can carry moral meaning without relying upon general principles" (Levine, 1998, p. 5). If we manage to pull together a convincing narrative that situates an event temporally, then we rarely need to engage in further moral deliberation about what to do. Looking at a situation in a snapshot, outside its temporal and narrative context, will on the other hand make it hard to judge and act morally. If one is not provided with the kind of information necessary to narrativize—e.g., if the interviewer has never met the interviewee before and does not know her larger life story—then it is ethically wise to be lenient about ethical interpretations and refrain from anything resembling therapeutic intervention.

Focus on the particular example. Great literary works often portray the particular case in such fine detail that the philosophical discussion of cultural relativism appears redundant. As Levine (1998) points out, Vladimir Nabokov's portrait of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* "shows us something that philosophy could never definitively tell us, namely, that Humbert is an evil man, and that his excuses about the contingency or relativity of moral values are irrelevant" (p. 132). Likewise, the qualitative researcher should know about exemplars of ethically justifiable, and also ethically questionable research, in order to evaluate her own practice and learn to recognize ethical issues. Generalizations, as found in formal ethical guidelines, should not blind us to the crucial particularities encountered in the research situation. As qualitative researchers are involved in concrete issues with particular people at particular places and times, they need to master an understanding of these concrete particulars in order to be morally proficient.

Conclusion: The Ethical Researcher

According to Aristotle (1976), the task of ethics is not to provide an abstract theory of the good, but rather to make us good. We have argued above that learning ethical principles is not sufficient to become an ethically responsible researcher. We have pointed to thick ethical description as an approach to learning ethical behavior in qualitative research. Learning to describe particulars thickly does not primarily involve learning rules, but learning from cases, and by observing those who are more experienced. It is about learning to see and judge rather than learning to universalize or calculate. Interestingly, the art of thick ethical description is similar to what the good (in a nonmoral sense) qualitative researcher should master in order to produce new, insightful knowledge about the human condition.

Finally, we would like to invite reflection on the question whether Aristotle could be right that only the good person can know the truth concerning ethics, interpersonal relations, human action and experience, that is, the things investigated by qualitative research? Does the good qualitative researcher have to be a morally good human being? This seems to follow from the general argument of this article that there is little, if any,

difference between ethical and scientific objectivity. The rationale of research is to lend a voice to that which is other than oneself—to let the object object—and this is also the core of ethics. If true, it means that education of researchers ought to involve moral education.

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