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The unequal power relation in the final interpretation

Pernille Almlund

Abstract. This article addresses the power relation in qualitative research and especially the importance of taking into consideration the problematic aspects of the power relation when executing the final interpretation of qualitative research. The methodology literature examines the unequal power relation in qualitative research by focusing on how society has become an interview society and on the lack of equality in interviews. Although the literature recommends being aware of asymmetry between research participants, it fails to look at how to address the final interpretation of qualitative research if the interpretation also takes the unequal power relation into account. Consequently, interpreting the researched in a respectful manner is difficult. This article demonstrates the necessity of increasing awareness of the unequal power relation by posing, discussing and, to some extent answering, three methodological questions inspired by meta-theory that are significant for qualitative research and qualitative researchers to reflect on. This article concludes that respectful interpretation and consciously paying attention to the unequal power relation in the final interpretation require decentring the subject, dissociating from the ideal of intersubjectivity, being descriptive instead of normative, accepting the unconquerable distance between the researcher and the researched and looking at the entire research process and analyses as an undeniable coproduction and interpretation.

Keywords: qualitative research, power, power relation, final interpretation, decentred subject

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Introduction

The unequal power relation in the final interpretation in qualitative research is an aspect that must be taken into consideration when you carry out qualitative research. The purpose of this article is thus to define and explain why the unequal power relation is an important factor as well as how to address it in research.

Most qualitative researchers prepare e.g. interviews and observations expecting to understand the subject or the phenomenon in question, and normally they do not deliberately dominate the researched. Qualitative researchers express gratitude toward those who take the time to provide information and enter into dialogues. However, in spite of all this they must bear in mind the presence of power, especially in the final interpretation, in qualitative research. The point here is that if we are not aware of the presence of power as a condition and despite our efforts to equalize researcher and researched and interpret in a respectful manner, we will not be fully responsible for the unequal power relation and eventually make and publish offensive and problematic interpretations. The final interpretation should here be understood exactly as the published interpretation and not as the ending or finalizing story about the researched.

Many methodological researchers focus on the 'interview society' and describe how interviews have come to play a dominant role in late-capitalist society (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Denzin, 2003; Briggs, 2003). The interview society is seen as the result of the central role different types of media play in daily life. Increasingly, the media, market researchers and social scientists

produce their information using interviews. Denzin (2003) explains that, 'The interview society has turned the confessional mode of discourse into a public form of entertainment' (Denzin, 2003, p. 144). Focusing on the interview society means taking into consideration both how society is influenced by interviews and how interviews are influenced by society. Having reflected deeply on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, Briggs (2003) has come to the conclusion, 'that it is the circulation of discourse among a range of institutional contexts that imbues interviews with the power to shape contemporary life' (2003, p. 246). Further stressing how this gives researchers a powerful position as they gain control over the recontextualization of interviews, Briggs states,

The power of researchers thus lies not only in their control over what takes place in the interview itself but particularly in their ability to use that setting as a site that is geared toward creating a broad field for the circulation of discourse (2003, p. 248).

His assessment of the interview society demonstrates how the dominant discourse or importance of interviews is both discursively formed and forming. This implies two different aspects of the power relation, namely: 1) the powerful influence of discourse on a particular interview; and 2) the researchers' power to create a field for circulating discourse when they form and distribute the final interpretation of the interview in publication and lectures.

These statements are compelling reasons for taking the presence of power in qualitative research into account. Particularly important is it to reflect upon the power relation in the final interpretation as this field is defectively described and analysed in the literature. The point from Briggs and further elaborated in this article is that we need to observe the relation of power between researcher and the researched as a matter of specific interaction and not as a relation of power between two particular subjects. In that sense it is not a question of whether the researcher or the researched possesses the most power as it is not a given who the most powerful or the most strategic person is in the actual relational interaction. I will leave this question open for future research as few examples exist in the literature on how to handle powerful interview respondents (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Rice, 2010; Stephens, 2007).

The main assumption in the article is thus to see the power relation in qualitative research as a specific kind of interaction between the researcher and the researched and to see how this kind of interaction influences the final interpretation. Even though the relation between a researcher and a researched is dynamic, influenced by the specific context and should be seen as a coproduction of researcher and researched (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003), the power relation in qualitative research is a situation in which the researcher always sets the agenda and makes the final interpretation. This relation displays permanence: The relation or interaction usually involves a researcher who initiates the research, decides the main topic and sets the overall agenda. In addition, the researcher carries out the final interpretation and conclusion and publishes the final report or article. All of these steps represent some of the specific elements that are important to accomplish qualitative research in general. These elements especially raise the question of responsibility in the final interpretation because most people can handle a bad experience during an interview or when they meet a less than stellar qualitative researcher, but they would most likely respond with dissatisfaction if they appear in a published interpretation of poor quality.

Taking these elements into account corresponds to creating greater general awareness of the power relation, which in turn must be enhanced by examining how the specific position of the researcher makes the specific interaction in qualitative research an *unequal¹ power relation*. To be aware of this unequal power relation especially regarding the final interpretation is to be aware of our methods and reflections of interpretation. Often we assume that empathy, open-mindedness, a respectful focus at the subject etc. help us to analyse and interpret in a respectful manner. In the next section we will see how this is no guarantee. This article will then suggest further reflections in a meta-theoretical perspective in order to go beyond such operative methodological reflections potentially capable of producing more respectful interpretations of qualitative research. The article poses and handles three methodological questions inspired by meta-theory regarding the meaning of interpretation, regarding interpretation without disrespect and regarding the meaning of subject.

With these objectives in mind and an awareness of the unequal power relation, and especially the unequal power relation in the final interpretation, this article begins by showing how power relations in qualitative research are described and used in the literature. After this short state of the art, the article will present the empirical case from which the concrete examples will be drawn. Next, this article discusses and to some extent answers the three meta-theoretical questions. Last, the article makes some concluding remarks about respectful interpretations.

The power relation in the literature

The literature on the power relation in qualitative research looks at how to pose questions and meet the researched as well as the specific context and the discourse of society and only few mention the power relation in the final interpretation. As shown above it is mentioned directly by Briggs (2003) and more indirectly by Denzin (2003) and below a few more will be presented. Even though it is a theme in the literature, the literature is weak in providing insight into how to handle the power relation in the final interpretation of the data produced. This section presents these statements in literature about power relations in the final interpretation, and, in addition to that, issues related to the discussion of power in qualitative research. The unequal power relation in the final interpretation should not and cannot be regarded in isolation from other important issues of power relations in qualitative research because the final interpretation is influenced by the whole research process.

To start with reflection about the interaction between researcher and researched in qualitative research, Kvale (2002) and Brinkmann & Kvale (2005) bring up reflection upon the asymmetrical power relation in qualitative interviews and label such dialogues as oppressive. They focus on how dialogue has become idealized and how it represents the need for a relation between parties such as employers and employees and counsellors and clients to solve conflicts or equally share knowledge and experiences with one another. Dialogue in this context may create an impression of equality in the types of relations where the asymmetry of power is obvious. Consequently they talk about dialogue as a power instrument defined by soft power exertion and power concealment (Kvale, 2002; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Regarding the final interpretation Kvale (2002) and Kvale & Brinkmann (2005) point out the researcher's monopoly of the interpretation.

¹ I use the term 'unequal' instead of 'inequal' because unequal means not equal in an inherently permanent way, while inequal means not equal due to impermanent social differentiation, e.g. varying levels of income or education, factors we in principle have the opportunity to alter.

Other researchers bring up issues that are important and challenging for the power relation of the specific relation and interaction of researcher and researched. One of them is Finlay (2002), who explains how 'negotiating the swamp', a metaphor for interviews, is a challenge reflexivity poses in qualitative research practice. She illustrates how handling deconstructions, self-analysis, and self-disclosure in qualitative research is not a given, nor is evaluating the ways in which intersubjective elements transform research. Qualitative researchers are unsure about the necessity and extent to which they succumb to what Pierre Bourdieu negatively calls 'the diary disease' (2000).² Finlay offers five maps of reflexivity for navigating the swamp, namely: '(i) introspection; (ii) intersubjective reflections; (iii) mutual collaboration; (iv) social critique; and (v) discursive deconstruction' (p. 209).

Opposite to Finlay, Abell et al. (2006) show how self-disclosure in interviews for the sake of similarity often produces difference instead. They show how self-disclosure designed to promote dialogue risks emphasizing the difference between the interviewer and the interviewee in terms of e.g. age differences and the negotiation of category entitlement within interview interactions. With this in mind, it is important to be aware of the risk of 'diary disease'.

Another important issue in literature regarding the power relation is that Watson (2009) maintains that, 'much qualitative research is predicated on the ideal of the elimination of the difference between self and other' (p. 108) and pinpoints that this derives from a concern with the power differential between the researcher and the researched. The search for the elimination of the difference is built upon the assumption that power is in the hands of the researcher and should be applied with tools such as empathy when conducting interviews. Watson questions this use of empathy as a tool of qualitative research, stating, 'the assumption of empathy of the possibility of entering into another's situation can give rise to complacency in research terms' (p.114). According to Watson the ideal and use of empathy build on the assumption of a 'univocal and monological interpretation of the meaning underlying social interactions' (p. 106). She states this as a paradoxical situation in today's postmodern milieu. Further elaborating on the use of empathy as one of the aims of qualitative research, Watson highlights how the search for commonalities and identification is especially in danger of doing the opposite of what is intended, namely hiding the actual differences and reproducing structures of oppression.

As it is shown, researchers examine a variety of aspects in their analysis of qualitative research. As demonstrated the methodological researchers bring up aspects such as asymmetry, intersubjectivity, empathy, self-disclosure, interpretation – univocal or not– respectful or not as important issues for the debate of unequal power relation in the final interpretation. Moreover, researchers also consider the researcher's privileged role as monopolizing interpretation. Despite the focus on all these influencing aspects, the existing literature tends to not cover how to handle this privileged role in the final analysis and interpretation. Further the examples show how reflections upon the power relation in qualitative research often disclose the problems of the initiative taken precisely to go beyond the problems of the power relation.

If a more coherent interpretation of qualitative analysis on the power relation is desired, we can take our departure in issues such as asymmetry, intersubjectivity, self-disclosure etc. mentioned

² 'Diary disease' refers to descriptions of the lived experience of the researcher that are rife with narcissism and explicitness and that fail to include the reflexive layer that Bourdieu recommends every analysis contain. Bourdieu calls the reflexive layer 'participant objectivation', which is a systematic and profound reflexive analysis of e.g. the role, status and position of the researcher carried out by the researcher (Bourdieu, 2000).

above and frame operative methodological questions with inspiration from meta-theory. In that respect I frame the following three methodological questions in the article: What exactly do we mean by 'interpretation' in qualitative research? How can we approach the phenomenon or person who is the focus of the interpretation without showing disrespect? How do we understand the term 'subject' in qualitative research?

With input from Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu and Hans-Georg Gadamer³ it is beneficial to discuss these methodological questions and in connection to them focus on the mentioned issues and rethink how to handle the unequal power relation in qualitative research. The discussions of these issues are based on questions of interpretation, of approaching the phenomenon in focus and of 'the subject' at an operational level where the three theories all present a non-univocal and respectful approach to interpreting and are working with a decentred subject.

Even though these theorists express quite different theoretical traditions, they all draw on the phenomenological tradition of Martin Heidegger (Clam, 2002; Callewaert, 1997; Gulddal & Møller, 1999). This common source of inspiration eases the opportunity to let the theories supplement each other on these specific issues and is founded on similarities at the level of meta-theory and the theorists' reflections of society, constructivism, structuralism, ontology, epistemology, etc.

Before going into the discussions of these methodological questions inspired by meta-theory and concrete examples illustrating the importance of these discussions, the next section presents the empirical study on the foundation of which these thoughts were elaborated and from where the concrete examples are drawn.

Presentation of an empirical study

The empirical study was primarily based on a meticulous case study (Flyvbjerg 2004; 1999; Thomas 2011) of a large enterprise, Ecosoap,⁴ which provides useful illustrations of the importance of such meta-theoretical reflections. Ecosoap, one of the world's leading providers of cleaning, food safety and health protection products as well as services for the foodservice, healthcare and industrial markets, works with both the production of chemicals and the development of cleaning solutions. My goal was to study environmental communication in environmentally front-running enterprises, of which Ecosoap was an excellent example, in order to establish an approach to do that, and to define the understanding of environmental communication.

The first person I had contact with in the company was the environmental manager in Denmark. Ecosoap is an American-owned company, but the role of the environmental manager was solely a European undertaking and the position was with the Danish enterprise. In his attempts to garner concern for the environment in the whole company, the environmental manager was trying to find out why the sales consultants did not pay much attention to environmental issues, the company's environmentally friendly products or the company's ISO

³ The theorists mentioned are an important source of inspiration for this article and my previous work. Nevertheless, the methodological suggestions and meta-theoretical discussions in this article are of general importance in all methodological considerations and are possible to consider with inspiration from other theories and theorists.

⁴ A pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

14001 certification in their daily collaboration with costumers. He wanted to know how these areas could be given higher priority. As a result, I initially asked: *How can the environmental manager encourage the sales consultants to work more purposefully with environmental issues in their selling practices?*

After three informant interviews (Kvale, 1997) with the environmental manager this research question turned out to be narrow and focused too specifically at the sales consultants. Already from the beginning has the research question identified the sales consultants as the problem. The question did not explore what the problem was or how different employees contribute to the problem. As a result, I discarded the question and raised another: *How are the environment and environmental issues understood in the company's organizational practice?* This question is open-ended and does not place responsibility for the problem on any specific group but rather opens the path for further exploration in the enterprise as a whole. Then this new research question became the foundation for further exploration.

The study was concentrated on one section of the enterprise to ensure the depth of the study and to involve employees within different positions involved in the environmental work. In addition to the interviews with the sales manager I conducted three focus group interviews (Halkier, 2008) with sales consultants and four individual interviews with different managers at different levels. Moreover I conducted a small survey (Fink 2003; Hansen & Andersen 2000; Olsen 1998; 1998a) with all the sales consultants and carried out participant observation (Bourdieu 2000; 1994; Kristiansen & Krogstrup, 1999) by participating in sales meetings and in six different sales consultants' daily routes of selling and consulting. All these interviews, surveys and observations make up the empirical data of the study and should ensure an open path for exploration.

As we will see in the following three sections addressing the three weighty questions posed earlier, the final interpretation must be grounded on the entire research process and on meta-theoretical reflections about the entire process to handle the unequal power relation. Without such reflections we can unintentionally deepen the unequal power relation in the final interpretation. The following sections will then reflect upon interpretation, respectfulness and 'the subject' and let the case study illustrate the importance of such reflections.

What exactly do we mean by 'interpretation' in qualitative research?

The final interpretation of qualitative research will always remain the researcher's interpretation – the people who are the objects of the research in question will leave the interview or the observed setup with their own interpretation of what occurred, but their version will most likely remain unpublished. This is the primary reason why researchers have a serious responsibility to be respectful in the final interpretation.

In his philosophical hermeneutic Hans-Georg Gadamer underlined the importance of being aware of one's own prejudices and using them in a productive and conscious way in interpretation. Gadamer's observations urge us to observe how our own interpretation is influenced by our own experiences and our own expectations, which in turn should be allowed to be an obvious part of our interpretation. Thus, to understand a person is to understand the subject matter. It means understanding what the subject is saying and not reliving this person's experience (Binding & Tapp, 2008). Even if never being able to grasp the true meaning, experience or understanding of another person or a phenomenon is a permanent condition, awareness of prejudices will help us to understand how we reach a specific interpretation.

Without this awareness, we risk confirming our own prejudices in the interpretation (Gadamer, 1999; Gulddal & Møller, 1999).

The awareness of prejudices and of the conditional understanding as influential to interpretation helps us to undertake a respectful interpretation in qualitative research. In that sense, we cannot be content to make a final analysis and interpretation at the end of a research project. Instead, the final interpretation must be grounded on the entire process of the research project.

By focusing on the process, prejudices and Gadamer's idea of understanding, we can accept the restricted access to the true meanings or thoughts of other people and 'what the interviewee really meant' with respect to the concern about the interviewer's monopoly of interpretation, as Kvale (2002) and Brinkmann & Kvale (2005) put it. Accepting restricted access underpins why this manner of interpretation is respectful to the people or phenomenon in focus and also takes into consideration the power relation. Kvale and Brinkmann moreover launch the idea that 'the interview is often an indirect conversation' and this underlines the importance of focusing on the process and accepting that access to what the interviewee really means is restricted. Kvale and Brinkmann accentuate how the research interview often pursues a more or less hidden agenda, stating that, "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'" (Kvale, 2002, p. 4).

This can of course be the strategic approach, but even with the ambition to clarify the intentions, we notice with Gadamer's concept of prejudices and understanding in mind that the case might be that what the interviewer is searching for is not fully known to the interviewer him- or herself. People always carry with them a certain pre-understanding and set of prejudices that they are not necessarily aware of. In that sense it might not be completely obvious to the interviewer what he or she is looking for. This is why Gadamer recommends being aware of our own prejudices and using them in a productive way in interpretation. He argues that we will subsequently come closer to an understanding of why we interpret the way we do (Gadamer, 1999). With this in mind, indirect conversations are indirect in more ways than one when the researcher sets the agenda. Indirect conversation can be both a conscious and unconscious agenda of the researcher.

An interview conducted, as part of the presented case study provides a useful illustration of how easy it is to overlook the indirect conversation and not be aware of own prejudices (Almlund, 2007). This was the case for the interview with the chemicals manager. During his interview the manager was congenial as we jointly worked to alter employee attitudes towards the environment and the work of the sales consultants. This perception of a common goal apparently made him feel free to make brief, patronising remarks about the sales consultants. He told me that he thought they were slow in adapting new sales procedures. He also explained that the sales consultants had come up with the central environmental criteria themselves at a meeting. In a surprised tone, he explained that

they formulated these criteria themselves so they are able to express what to do in words

and

We continuously set new goals about the environment. It is self-evident. I think it is interesting that they could independently select the criteria.

The chemicals manager was not aware of the changed research question and still focused on my initial question involving the sales consultants, obviously believing that the purpose was to affect the sales consultants and convince them to take environmental issues into account in their daily sales procedures. If he had been aware of the change and if he had known I was trying to gain a more general understanding of environmental issues, he would probably not have talked about the sales people in such a patronising way. In that sense I was not aware of the importance of explicitly explaining that the focus of my work had changed, from which followed that I asked indirectly but received direct answers. In addition the example with this indirect agenda shows how I worked more jointly with the sales consultants than I did with this particular manager without consciously intending to use it in the interview. I was not aware of my own prejudices.

This specific interview emphasizes how the power relation is an important issue in general as we often expect a manager to be more powerful or even manipulative during an interview. We expect him to be aware of the role as an interviewee (Fivelsdal, 1990).

Communicating the change unambiguously could easily have meant that the manager would have dissociated himself and dropped his congenial attitude. His response could then have been different. If the power relation had been more visible to both parties, then the outcome of the interview might have been fairer to the manager. Both the response I got and the response I could have received had I been more overt about my altered focus were and would surely have been what the manager meant although neither of the responses would have been truer or closer to what he really meant – just different!

This is one reason why it is important to keep in mind that the final conclusion or interpretation should be no more final than always being part of a continuous process (Frank 2005). This particular manager should also have had the chance to shape what took place and not be finalized as a highly patronizing person. Furthermore this example shows how important it is to be aware of the power relation in the full research process as the final interpretation would have been different and somehow more respectful, had I presented my altered research question.

How can we approach the phenomenon which is the focus of the interpretation without showing disrespect to the research participants?

With respect to this interpretative condition and acceptance of a distance to 'a true meaning' as stated by Gadamer, we may ask ourselves how to approach a phenomenon when we work qualitatively without showing the research participants disrespect. Being aware of our own prejudices is an important step to take, but according to Bourdieu and Luhmann we can do even more. Their ideas supplement each other when the purpose is to be respectful in the research process and the final interpretation. Bourdieu's work contains solid theoretical arguments about how the acceptance of restricted access to the true meaning of what other people think is a more respectful research approach. According to Luhmann, on the other hand, this acceptance of restrictedness is concrete because we only have the option of analysing and interpreting communication.

According to Bourdieu, we have to distinguish theoretical praxis from practical praxis as theoretical praxis is research praxis and practical praxis comprises all of the practices we have the ability to study. In making this distinction, Bourdieu shows how researchers are condemned

to distance from the researched – we only have the possibility to approach and not to capture the practitioner's praxis (Bourdieu, 1997). He also points out how maintaining distance respects the dignity of other people (Bourdieu & Krais, 1994). Taking this condition, which is similar to the philosophical hermeneutics' proposals for interpretation, into account, we realise that the praxis theory of Bourdieu has more recommendations.

Bourdieu's praxis theory emphasizes that not even the person or practitioner entirely understands his or her own praxis. If you ask people why they do what they do, they will often answer the question in *meconnaissance*, or with a misunderstanding of their own motives (Bourdieu, 1977). That is why it is better to ask people about *how* they did what they did instead of asking them *why* they did what they did. They will be able to describe themselves to some extent, but usually they will be unable to give a useable answer as to why they did what they did. Thus neither researchers nor practitioners are able to provide a definitive explanation, but we do have the ability to approach an authoritative answer.

The type of question asked in an interview is one way to emphasize the importance of process and of being descriptive instead of normative. Asking *why* questions focuses on the solution and takes 'common sense understanding' for granted, whereas *how* questions focus on the process up until the 'common sense understanding' is a reality. *Why* questions are normative, which is in contrast to the descriptive nature of *how* questions. Emphasizing *how* questions are necessary when doing interviews, but this is also true when posing research and analytical questions. Emphasizing *how* questions does not mean that *why* questions should be neglected as they show the interviewee's own version of their reasons. However, emphasizing *how* questions weight the process higher than the final solution and work as a framework for the research.

Luhmann's theoretical work puts an even more distinct focus on being descriptive rather than normative. Drawing on his theoretical focus and concepts, we are only given access to observe communication and not the reason for actions nor thoughts or feelings of subjects when we search for insight into society broadly understood. This kind of restrictive access forces us to concentrate on the phenomenon in focus of our investigations and not be disturbed of subjects' individuality. Then to be non-normative and focus strictly on the phenomenon through observations of communication must be a tight description of the communicated phenomenon and the full description will show the general understanding and aspects of the phenomenon instead of individual understandings and aspects. In this manner Luhmann suggests to be descriptive as this according to him is a way to be non-normative and give a more precise description of the investigated phenomenon.

Combining the suggestions from Bourdieu and Luhmann respectively show us the importance of being descriptive by posing descriptive how-questions more than normative why-questions and to observe only what is distinctively observable, namely communication.

As mentioned earlier one of the research questions in my PhD dissertation was: *How are the environment and environmental issues understood in the company's organizational praxis?* This question is open-ended and asks for a variety of descriptions and explanations. As a result, it questions the common sense. I could also have posed the question as: *Why do they understand the environment and environmental issues as they do in the company's organizational praxis?* This question is difficult to answer if we want the real explanation of why. Asking people in the enterprise what the answer is will at best give us some guesses or common sense answers usable for further interpretation. At worst it can lead to taking common sense answers as real

explanations, consequently elevating the common sense understanding to the level of a real explanation. Instead of gaining insight into why environmental issues have low priority in the enterprise in general, I would have ended up with the impression that the enterprise was exceptionally environmentally friendly.

To pose the research-question as a how-question established a descriptive approach which then permeates the whole research process and then the entire interviews carried out. The interview questions were then focused on all aspects of the phenomenon, namely the understanding of environment and the environmental work in the enterprise. In that respect the questions were questions such as: *How do you experience environmental work in the daily work of Ecosoap? How do you understand the environment in Ecosoap? What kind of consideration is the environmental consideration in Ecosoap?* This type of interview questions favoured the descriptive answer and invited the interviewee to describe and reflect upon the mentioned aspects of the phenomenon. The point was not to collect a series of individuals' specific opinions, but to coproduce the general and common understanding of environment and environmental work in the enterprise.

Regarding the analytical questions posed in the phase of interpreting the produced data, they were equally focused on the process and the descriptions by being primarily *how* questions. The analytical questions were questions such as: *How do they articulate environment? Which kind of understandings of environment do we find in this articulation? How do they categorize environment? How do they shape environment in their daily work?* These analytical questions made it possible to stay focused on the descriptions and as a result also on the common understanding of environment.

The interview questions and answers made up the larger part of the observable communication for this search of a definition to understand and an approach to investigate environmental communication. To gain a broad and general insight into the understanding of environment it was necessary to observe and then coproduce communication about the phenomenon broadly in the enterprise. This was the reason to carry out so many interviews and observation on different levels in Ecosoap. Only communication was observed, whether it was communication in the interviews, at the sales meetings or in the work days of sales consultants I followed. Through such observations of communication one gains the wanted insight into the generally, common and common sensual understanding of environment in the specific division of Ecosoap.

If we are descriptive and primarily pose *how* questions and focus on what is actually being communicated, we will see how the phenomenon or theme in focus is recognized and used by the researched. In addition we will establish a broad and open but still sharp image in opposition to a closed and finalizing image of the understanding of environment in the enterprise. This is a way to be more respectful in the final interpretation and to take the relation of power seriously as we only have access to this level of understanding and not to *the* true story. We can and should, however, be approaching the understanding of the interviewee.

How do we understand the term subject in qualitative research?

A precondition for a respectful interpretation is moreover to understand the subject as decentralized and to dissociate from the ideal of intersubjectivity. We will never be able to fully understand the researched person and their thoughts; hence we should not try to pretend it is possible. The interview, the observation or the transcription enables the researcher, and if

published, the environment, to observe the communicative *mise-en-scene*, but not the consciousness nor the thoughts of the interviewee or observed.

Gadamer focuses on the subject's limited ability to fully understand 'the other' and how this understanding will always be an interpretation depending on conscious and unconscious experiences, one's history and language. According to him we are as human beings thrown into a world where history, experiences and language are existing facts to be built upon (Heidegger, 1994; 1999; Gørtz, 2003; Gadamer, 1999). Bourdieu's work also examines the distance that hinders complete understanding, in addition to focusing on the process involved in desiring the production of new knowledge. He also focuses on relations and dependency on history and experiences in his concepts of field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; 1985; 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996). Focusing on the subject in particular was never covered in his extensive analyses of different aspects and parts of society. Luhmann's work focuses on being descriptive using his concepts of observation and of communication and there is also dissociation from intersubjectivity in the notion of observing communication as the only possibility for describing society (Luhmann, 1997; 2000; Kneer & Nassehi, 1997; Åkerstrøm Andersen, 1999). Luhmann's concept of communication is then a non-individual concept of communication that dissociates itself from the idea of intersubjectivity. At the same time the concept of communication and the concept of observation jointly propose a way to handle this. As stated above, communication is what we have the ability to observe if we want to know something about society. This would, according to Luhmann, also be the case in qualitative research. We cannot get any further than observing communication as we have no access to the thoughts of other people. This is the reason why Luhmann recommends being descriptive and abandoning the idea of intersubjectivity. This underlines that we are observers more than participants in other people's lives. This observer role we have to accept in respect for the interviewee and then make the dilemma of the interviewer as being between a participant role and an observer role, mentioned by Brinkmann & Kvale (2005), easier to handle. This should be accepted as a condition for qualitative research.

The acceptance of distance from the researched and then of the dissociation from the idea of intersubjectivity open up the possibility of a respectful interpretation without an ambition to reach a univocal and monological interpretation of the meaning underlying social interactions. The acceptance of distance in the observations and interpretations further underline how a focus at subjects is limiting instead of clarifying and discloses how important it is to closely describe the phenomenon in focus of the investigation.

When I discarded my first research question, *How can the environmental manager encourage the sales consultants to work more purposefully with environmental issues in their selling practices?* and replaced it with, *How are the environment and environmental issues understood in the company's organizational practice?*, I posed an open-ended question and asked for different descriptions and explanations, hence questioning the common sense. At the same time, I substituted the environmental manager and the sales consultant's responsibility with a more organizational responsibility, subsequently focusing on a specific issue, topic or phenomenon instead of specific subjects. I worked intentionally with a decentred subject to investigate '*what is going on*' instead of '*who is going on*'.

The many interviews and observations at different levels in the division of Ecosoap were then important for more than the possibility of being descriptive. The many interviews and observations were also necessary to secure the mentioned focus on the organizational

responsibility not to be narrow-mindedly focused at the responsibility of the sales consultants. In that way this more broad focus decentred the individual responsibility and was one of the aspects making it possible to work with a decentred subject in practice.

Additional aspects influencing this possibility are: the descriptive approach, the observation of communication about environment and the accept of distance from the researched, all of which were conditions for keeping focus on environment and the common organizational responsibility and not at specific subjects' responsibility, thoughts, actions etc.

My interview questions were posed with the intention to let the interviewee describe how they prioritized and worked with environmental issues in their daily work in the enterprise. I asked them to describe actions, responsibility, use and understandings of environment and environmental approaches, but solely in relation to the enterprise and the common level and not on an individual level. In that way the final interpretation solely presented the common understandings and actions in the division and separated understandings and actions in different groups such as sales consultants and managers. When I asked them *How do you experience environmental work in the daily work of Ecosoap* I got a lot of different answers from the sales-consultants such as

Our company takes no initiatives to reward sale of environmental products. There are methods to control that stuff, so that if you do a lot to sell environmental products, you will get bonus. In that way, we are not pressured by the company to go out and do it.

They should focus more on it. It is also true, what XX says, when we launched these swan-marked⁵ products, they focused on it in one or two meetings, and then it died. Nobody stands up and says – 'it is not good enough. We need to speed up'.

You run the risk of driving around a whole day where nobody mentions environment, but that is also instructive, since afterwards you can say 'why the hell don't they talk about it?'

We raise or profile a lot on environment. We are regarded as very environmentally friendly in the market. We have environmental products all over the line.

It is on the agenda. No doubt, that when new products are developed, environment is an important element. I don't remember any new product during the last 1 or 2 years, where environment is not an important element, if not the most decisive.

When we have had a sales meeting, they have had one hour's discussion on environment. Every time we have a new product, environment is included... So, for that reason alone, there is a now sort of brush up, every time a new product comes up. Then we are told what the environmental dimension of the product is. It has been one or two hours – not more.

⁵ The Swan-mark is a Nordic label for environmentally friendly products.

The ambition with the question was exactly to focus on the common organizational level and not on individual motives for working with environment as they do and the important conclusion from these answers and statements was not to understand each person's intention with the answer but exactly to combine the answers and conclude how they in common understand the environmental work in Ecosoap. From the three first answers, and many more alike, it became obvious how the environmental work was not highly prioritized in their daily work and this priority was not solely defined by the sales consultants. From the two last answers, and many more alike, it was underlined how environment was categorised as environmentally friendly products as the common understanding of environment.

The focus on understandings of environment and environmental issues in both interview questions and in the final interpretation is furthermore an important descriptive trait and approach, which emphasizes the work with a decentred subject. With a focus on understandings of environment it became more obviously clear on which part of the environmental issues they based their work as a common condition either in the whole division or group wise. Understandings are in that regard seen as opposite to individual opinions, which could not give us this insight into the basement of their work and priorities because it is difficult to ask individuals about the common organizational understanding.

With this kind of stringency we are able to investigate the phenomenon in focus and keep our attention on that and dissociate from the intention to interpret the individuals. This is a precondition to handle the unequal power relation in a responsible way because this is an acceptance of distance between researcher's results and the researched's integrity. With this stringency it is furthermore unnecessary to take the methodological steps towards empathy, disclosure, intersubjectivity etc. as Finlay (2002) presents them. Especially because these steps never save us from the unequal relation. As shown by Watson (2009) and Abell et al. (2006) these methodological considerations even disguise the unequal relation and in that way enhance it.

Understanding the subject as decentred is a precondition for focusing on the interpretation as Gadamer defines it, by being descriptive as well as by working to approach and see the power relation as a particular interaction and not as a relation of power between two specific subjects. Decentring the subject in the final interpretation requires our attention to this understanding through the whole study or research process. Simultaneously it underlines the fact that accessing other people's thoughts is impossible, and even more importantly, that the thoughts of other people are not the way to understand society or different phenomena worth studying.⁶

Concluding remarks

What kind of insight can researchers produce by using qualitative methods if we take these three discussions and suggestions into consideration? I am not sure that the production of data only will be influenced if we have an awareness of these methodological and meta-theoretical discussions. I see the impossibility of intersubjectivity, the continuous interpretation and the

⁶Doing the opposite, namely focusing on or 'centring' the subject and searching for other people's thoughts is a search for a truer story about people. Emphasizing the interpretation as a condition and being constructivistic in the understanding of data production will therefore never match an understanding of a centred subject and the effort to achieve intersubjectivity.

researchers approach to the practitioner's praxis as conditions we can never leave behind. Opposite, being aware of these factors emphasizes the importance of humility, executing the final interpretation more respectfully and may even make approaching the topic more successful.

Keeping this in mind, the answer to the question posed above is: We can gain insight into what is happening by being descriptive and by focusing on the processes. We can gain an impression of relations instead of insight into the thoughts of the researched, their mind and consciousness. We can observe how the topic in focus is described. We can concentrate on a specific issue, problem or topic instead of what we *think* other people think or feel. This kind of insight gives us a unique opportunity to critically question the common sense of the issue, problem or topic. The analysis of the interviews and observations of managers and employees at Ecosoap, for example, made asking them if their actual work with environmental initiatives and steps match their understanding of being a frontrunner in the field of environmental responsibility an obvious question. This kind of critique is not to be confounded with critical normativity, but provides the opportunity to heighten the level of reflexivity and underline how the research project should not finalize a continuing process.

In conclusion, respectful interpretation and conscious attention to the unequal power relation in the final interpretation of research results requires decentring the subject and dissociating from the ideal of intersubjectivity as well as being descriptive instead of normative and accepting the unconquerable infinite distance between the researcher and the researched as a condition. Finally, the whole research process and analysis must be looked at as a coproduction and interpretation that cannot be left behind.

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