

## THE UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW AND INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH

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### *Abstract*

*Tulisan ini mendiskusikan salah satu teknik pengumpulan data dalam penelitian, yaitu interview tidak berstruktur (unstructured interview), berdasarkan sudut pandang pendekatan interpretatif. Dalam diskusi dijelaskan bahwa penggunaan interview tidak berstruktur dalam kerangka interpretatif secara ideal memungkinkan peneliti memperoleh data yang kaya tentang subjek penelitian, yaitu data yang sesuai dengan pandangan dan pengertian subjek tentang realita kehidupannya. Akan tetapi ada dilema yang dialami peneliti terutama dalam hal tuntutan untuk menjaga keadilan atau kewajaran subjek penelitian dan bias-bias yang mungkin terjadi, antara lain karena pengaruh subjektivitas peneliti, pola hubungan yang berkembang antara peneliti dan yang diteliti maupun pengaruh bahasa yang digunakan. Dua hasil penelitian dibahas dalam tulisan ini untuk melihat bagaimana cara atau kiat peneliti menghadapi dilema ini.*

### **Introduction**

The interview is the most popular data collecting technique in sociology. Benny and Hughes (1977:233) even state that sociology has become 'the science of the interview'. In essence, the interview is a face to face verbal interchange in which the interviewer attempts to get information or expressions of opinions or beliefs from the interviewee (Maccoby, in Denzin, 1989:103). The interview process therefore, not only involves intensive communication, but also other forms of social interaction such as status and gender relations.

The obvious importance of the interview in sociological research, makes it necessary to understand not only its benefits but also its biases and assumptions in order to use it effectively. I am specifically interested in the unstructured interview which, when used in the framework of interpretative sociology, provide the opportunity to understand the richness of people's realities. This essay, then, will focus on the unstructured interview and the implications of using it from the interpretative perspective.

It is evident that using the unstructured interview within an interpretative research framework means incorporating a particular epistemological view, politics of research and critique of representation. These will be discussed at the first section of the essay. Following this discussion two studies which adopted this research technique will be examined to have an understanding of how the researchers deal with these issues (in particular the politics of research and critique of representation).

### **The Unstructured Interview**

There is a long tradition in social science in which the interview has been perceived as a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984:102), a conversation between researcher and respondent. The specific feature of the unstructured interview has been it has no prespecified set or order of questions. This enables the interviewer to explore various aspects relevant to the research while at the same time

it provides considerable latitude for the interviewee to give a wide range of information during the interview process. This also means that the relationship between the researcher and those who are being researched is crucial. Consequently, it is argued that interviewers will need to make the interview appealing to respondents so that the respondent will feel the process is "an agreeable form of social intercourse" (Webb and Webb, 1932:139), and therefore more likely to lead to the development of trust and confidence in those being interviewed and provide the information that is being sought. Since the interviewer-interviewee relationship is important for the interview process, it needs to be acknowledged that this process is not neutral because each party, interviewer as well as interviewee, bring their own values and beliefs which influence the nature of interview process and in turn the validity of the response.

To establish this relationship, it is necessary from the very beginning of the process, that the interviewer needs to be able to create a comfortable atmosphere. Burgess (1984) for example, argues that the interviewer should be accepted as a friend and a confidant who has an interest, understanding and sympathy with the subject's life. Therefore, it would be useful if the interviewer started the research process with finding out some detailed knowledge of some of the general and specific characteristics of the respondent which could influence the interview process (Schutzman and Strauss, 1973:19; Burgess, 1984:103).

On the other hand, the ethical and political aspects of the research are needed to be considered in the research process. One of these aspects is related to the recognition of the respondent's rights. These rights have become crucial to the research process wherein the interviewee will provide detailed information about the reality of their life, a process which demands not only their time but also their willingness to open their own life to the interviewer. Researchers have different approaches to acknowledging these rights. Denzin (1989:109) for example, states that the interview is a kind of gift from respondent to interviewer and advocates giving the respondent a greater opportunity to determine, for example, the time and the place of the interview. Burgess (1984:107) on the other hand, informs the respondents of the research aims and methods of interview at the beginning of each interview process and provides them with the opportunity to be free to seek any clarification that they needed.

In establishing the method of the study, it is important to understand the epistemological assumptions which underlie a particular method. This is because the epistemology of the method provides a general framework for the research process. The unstructured interview as a method of study is epistemologically based on the assumption that human beings are not 'organisms responding' to some external stimulus, nor merely driven by internal needs and instincts, but they are individuals who 'construct the meaning and significance of their realities' (Jones, 1985:46). This kind of approach is known as the interpretative approach, and is based on the

assumption that in order to understand people's actions, a researcher needs to understand their constructions of reality. One way of achieving this is to conduct intensive interviews so that the interviewees can explain the substance of the meaning in their terms (Jones, 1985:46). Specifically Denzin (1989a:10) asserts that interpretative research should focus on 'the life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons given to themselves and their experiences'.

Various names have been applied to the interpretative approach, including interpretive sociology/anthropology, hermeneutics, naturalism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and the case study method. Even though each of these have specific differences, they have a common epistemology which based on a challenge to the long tradition of positivism which regarded social realities as something that are 'out there', independent of the subjective experience of human beings. In the research process, therefore, the positivist is ultimately concerned with facts about the external world. These facts, that are obtained through investigation, place a great emphasis on the issue of objectivity, control and protocol (Silverman, 1989:161; Roman and Apple, 1990:38). In doing research the positivist is an 'outsider' who stands above the social realities to see what they 'really are'. From this perspective qualified researchers are able to put themselves as distant as possible from the object of their studies. Interviewing for the positivist is therefore concerned with gaining facts that are comparable, and they seek to establish causal relationships determined by the

variables used in the research (Silverman, 1989:158). The interaction between interviewer and interviewee is strictly defined by the research protocol. Consequently this relation only becomes important in terms of the extent to which the interviewer has departed from this research protocol (Silverman, 1989:161).

Postmodernism has brought a new perspective to the social sciences. In which it add to the criticism which exist against the positivist tradition. In this respect, the interpretative approach has been strengthened by postmodernism and has justified itself against the positivist approach in research methods. The meaning and the way people construct their reality becomes crucial in interpretative social research. Therefore, subjectivity and objectivity in the research process are seen in a new light. According to the interpretative approach, subjectivity is not to be purged from the research process, but rather it needs to be 'acknowledged, understood and learned from in the process of constructing the relations and representations of cultural selves and others' (Roman and Apple, 1990:38-39). Within the interpretative approach 'human consciousness is recognised as being asymmetric, often reflecting multiple power relations and conflicting interests of class, age, gender, race, and sexual relations. These social factors are acknowledged as influencing human behaviour and people's subjective understanding of the world. Maintaining the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is not simple; therefore the rigid binary opposition between this dualism which is presented in positivist research, is critically

reexamined when undertaking research using the interpretative approach.

Nevertheless, in empiricist research it seems unavoidable that the data will have to be objectified at some stage if researchers are to make truth, validity, or generalizability claims about their research. But the idea that objectivity can be fully attained, an argument defended by Little (1993:363-369), seems only utopian, because social realities, as the objective of social research, find their entities in relation to the subjects, namely the people. Some researchers such as Acker et al (1983:425), who have taken a particular interest in this dichotomy, have tried to overcome the problem by postponing objectifying the interviewee's experience until data analysis. However, this is not the end of the dilemma because they come to another stage of objectification in that they are required to define other people's realities when writing up the research and the interviewees accounts (1983:429).

To overcome such dilemmas, it is important to consider the need for reflexivity in conducting the research. It highlights that the researchers 'create worlds' through both the questions that are asked and the answers that are regarded as reasonable. To be more specific, in understanding other people's world through the research process, researchers need to engage in a self-reflexive process. In this process, the researchers need to try to understand people's realities through these people's own perspectives (Steier, 1991:1-2). This implies that where there are similarities between the respondents' realities and the researchers' realities it will be easier for researchers to have a

greater insight into those realities. In contrast, a great distance between the researchers' social background and that of the respondents' may bring the researchers into difficulty with comprehending the respondents' constructions of their life. The experience of a British anthropologist in failing to comprehend the meaning of 'soul' ('jiwa') in a certain tribe in Bali provides an example of this difficulty. In this tribe, 'soul' is believed not only to belong to human beings, but also to particular animals and trees. The difficulty that this anthropologist had in understanding such a concept is because he did not engage in reflexive process, but applied his understanding of 'soul' from his own British cultural perspective. In this respect, the researcher's awareness of the usefulness of reflexivity in understanding other people's lives needs to be developed (Steier, 1991:3), at least in order to recognize the difference between the people's own construction and that of the researcher's construction of the people's realities (Steier, 1991:4-5).

Another issue which has arisen and has also become a dilemma in the research process, is that concerning the relationship between the researcher and the respondent. As the person who conducts the research and who determines the things in the research process such as the questions that are to be addressed and the method for conducting the interview, the researcher automatically stands in a powerful position compared to the respondent (Acker et al, 1983:42 ; Stacey, 1988:22). This power relation could bring disadvantages to the research process, in term of it could provide a greater bias in



the interview process, for example the interviewee could provide information that he or she thinks will satisfy the interviewer. On the other hand, a decrease in power relation between the researcher and the respondent could create another problem. Based on her experience conducting an ethnographic research, Stacey (1988:23-24) realizes that although she had developed very good relationships with her research participants, this could in fact be counter-productive in that it could exposing the subjects to greater danger of exploitation and manipulation by researchers.

Another stage of the research process which also has been challenged by the interpretative approach and other postmodern views is the data analysis process. Unlike the standardized interview technique which provides a particular method to analyse the data, it seems that there is no general procedure that has been followed by researchers in analysing data gathered from the unstructured interview. Two of the procedures for data analysis will be examined, namely the cognitive mapping technique which is advocated by Jones (1985a) and the standard coding technique, advocated by Wiseman (1974). Even though Jones and Wiseman use the same process in data gathering they have applied a different technique for data analysis in order to construct the meaning from the data.

In 'mapping' process Jones develops cognitive maps of each interview, which contain two main elements; respondents' concepts and description of realities, and the beliefs or theories about the relationships between them. These relationships are

indicated by arrows, lines, dotted lines or positive (+) and negative (-) signs (Jones, 1985a:60). The researcher also writes comments or justifications about the data and notes any contradictions, significant constructs and non-verbal information on the maps (1985a:61-62). At the following step Jones compares all of the cognitive maps for each interview and integrates them into conceptual categorisations, and then the data is recategorized to produce a summary diagram. To reduce the influence of the interviewer's subjectivity, Jones shows the interviewees the research report and the maps, and requests their feedback. Unlike Jones, who prefers the cognitive mapping technique, Wiseman (1974) prefers to use standard coding methods for data analysis. She develops categories from the data and theory as a continuous process during the analysis. Then she cuts up the copy of the data transcript and puts them together into similar categories (Wiseman, 1974:322-323).

In analysing the data the researchers make interpretations which involve their own beliefs and opinions as well as including the concepts from the theories. Coding and categorization such as applied by Jones and Wiseman is used to reduce the data, but it means losing some of the richness and context of the interview. Throughout this process, it is recognized that the existence of the researcher's power in the research process will influence the research outcome. Therefore, research processes cannot be objective and value free such as believed by positivist researchers.

Postmodernism not only problematizes the research process such has been previously discussed, but it also questions the research product, that is the way that research is written. Since the meaning which is given by the subjects to their life is very important, the totality of the research product should be a central focus in the writing. However, it is argued that writing is not an innocent process, which merely records the fieldwork situation, but it is a form of interpretation because it involves language as rhetorical means (Nencel and Pels, 1991:13). In this sense, the research product is in a new form, which has been influenced by the author's interests. This is the way that knowledge has been constructed, while at the same time having its own power to influence the readers. Said's criticism (1978:20) about the process of how the Orient has been presented in the text by western anthropologists is one of these examples. He argued that western anthropologists have built a kind of image about the Orient, the image that was translated into their own term and that has been referred by other audiences and institutions.

Besides containing the author's interest and interpretation of the research, the text becomes more powerful because of the arguments, suggestions and emphases that are put by the author in the text in order to attract and convince the audiences that his or her findings are important to be considered (Wolcott, 1990:10; DeVault, 1990). Once again, the author has constructed powerful knowledge about specific reality through the discourse in the text. Actually, this kind of writing, which involves the arguments and suggestions has been a long

tradition in social sciences, especially in sociology (DeVault, 1990:107). Some authors and researchers such as Krieger (1983) have provided an unconventional style, in which she encourages the readers to participate in constructing the meaning instead of presenting her own voice. Unfortunately, Krieger's attempt is less popular and her book is less known and widely circulated (DeVault, 1990:101).

### **The Two Studies**

This section will examine two studies which primarily use the unstructured interview technique in data gathering. One of the studies is Denzin's research (1987) about the self of alcoholics who seek therapy from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), in order to stop drinking. The other study is about the lives of women who participate in a lesbian community which was conducted by Krieger (1983).

In his research Denzin attempted to explore the inner side of alcoholism, as seen from the point of view of the alcoholics themselves. He interviewed 330 alcoholics, their families and relatives, medical practitioners, counsellors and therapists. He conducted this research for 5 years and analysed the data by combining grounded data with the theoretical overview and the Alcoholics Anonymous theory. The AA theory was the theory which became the basic assumption of the AA agents in helping the alcoholics. The product of this research are six theses about the self of the alcoholic which includes emotionality, bad faith, self control, relationships with others, the need to surrender, and the temporality of their own self.

Similar to Denzin's objective, Krieger also attempt to understand the subjects' lives from their own perspective. Specifically, the study is concerned with the relationships between individuals' identity and their local lesbian community. Intensive interviews were conducted with 78 women who were either members of the community or importantly associated with it. The result of the study is the description and explanation of the community's dilemmas, precisely such have been presented by the community members.

These two studies are interesting to compare because they present different research outcomes even though they were based on the same data gathering procedures. The main difference between the two research projects arise from the ways in which issues surrounding the politics of research were approached. Both Denzin and Krieger consider the reflexive process, but each of them puts emphasis on different aspects. Denzin, on one hand, acknowledges this process by drawing a line between the other's view about the alcoholic's self (Which is presented through the overview of the theory), the alcoholics' voices, and his own interpretation. His own interpretation derives from the combination of the theories and the alcoholic's voices/experiences. In his conclusion Denzin clearly and honestly acknowledges that his involvement as a researcher who constructs others' meanings through interpretation, is not exactly the same as the subject's own construction of their lived reality.

On the other hand, Krieger puts great consideration into the self-reflexive process. In doing this, she allows, as far as possible, the subject's voices to exist while minimizing her own voice by avoiding to make a personal interpretation of the data. Instead she relies on the interpretation of the research product by the audience. As a consequence, compared to Denzin's research, it seems that Krieger's report is less powerful in convincing the readers about the importance of her study.

Actually Krieger's work is methodologically interesting, especially in relation to presenting an experimental method of data analysis and writing up the qualitative research. Through the use of a more creative and innovative approach to reproducing the research result, Krieger has attempted to minimize researcher's subjectivity in order to find the 'truth' and more valid realities. Denzin, on the other hand, has acknowledged and used his subjective view consciously in order to present a new perspective about the research subjects, while maintaining a more traditional research framework for presenting the results of his research.

### **Conclusion**

The interpretative perspective has been adapted by postmodernism and places great emphasis on the meaning and the way people construct their realities. It is generally against the orthodox positivist point of view. This essay has explored the unstructured interview, which is one of the data gathering techniques used in social research, from within the framework

of this interpretative perspective. From the discussion it is obvious that the application of the unstructured interview within the interpretative approach enables the researcher to gather rich detailed data about people's lives from their point of view. This is the main advantage of this method. Nevertheless, besides its usefulness, there are also some dilemmas in its application. The dilemmas mainly come from the epistemological assumption of this approach which emphasises the need to maintain the realities as presented by the people being researched, both in the research process and the research product. To deal with these dilemmas, the researcher needs to develop an awareness about his or her role in the research process by acknowledging or differentiating between people's own view of their realities and the researcher's view of those realities. In examining the research project of Denzin and Krieger it was possible to see how they dealt with the dilemmas in creative ways.

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