

Toward Understanding in Postmodern Interview Analysis: Interpreting the Contradictory Remarks of a Research Participant

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How is the qualitative research analyst to understand apparently contradictory remarks made by a research participant? Although social scientists in the positivist tradition rely on methods such as triangulation to find "truth," interpretive social scientists listen beyond, between, and underneath participants' words to understand the social conditions that produce apparent contradictions in their accounts. In this article, the author presents a case study of making sense of a research participant's contradictory comments, using a theoretical framework to understand the participant's "logic of practice." Through interpretive listening and reflexivity during the data analysis, she came to understand the participant's contradictory remarks in a way that illuminated the contradictions, as well as a significant process in the participant's life at the time: the transformation from carefree daughter to responsible mother. Such an interpretive analysis does not produce "truth" as positivist social scientists require but offers instead the satisfaction of understanding.

Keywords: *interviewing; Bourdieu; reflexivity; logic of practice; interpretive analysis*

As West (1990) has observed, "People, it seems, are eminently capable of talking about an issue in different and apparently contradictory ways" (p. 1229). This poses a problem for qualitative researchers seeking insight and understanding into participants' lives and the research question at hand. When a research participant makes apparently contradictory remarks during an interview, how can the qualitative researcher interpret or make sense of them? Where is "the truth" in such accounts?

The answer depends in part on the qualitative researcher's epistemological stance. From a positivist or postpositivist position, in which one is concerned with

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This research was part of the author's doctoral dissertation, undertaken while a student in the Social Science and Health Program in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Toronto. The research was funded by the Bertha Rosenstadt Foundation, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, and the Centre for Research in Women's Health. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and helpful comments.

QUALITATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH, Vol. 14 No. 6, July 2004 858-865

DOI: 10.1177/1049732304265935

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finding an objective truth, the problem for the social scientist is to evaluate “both the status and validity of [research participants’] versions of reality” (West, 1990, p. 1229). One commonly used strategy is triangulation, by which the researcher corroborates or complements the research participant’s statements using other perspectives or data collection methods (such as observation) to arrive at factual truth.

From a postmodern epistemological perspective, the pursuit of “the truth” has been replaced by the search to understand multiple, localized, contextual truths. “Facts” are viewed not as a simple mirror of reality “out there” but as empirically based constructions that are always socially mediated and interpreted. For the qualitative researcher, this requires reflexive awareness of, and accounting for, the constructed nature of the research relationship—a relationship of two people situated in their own, often quite different, positions in social space (Bourdieu, 1996; Kvale, 1996).

In this article, I argue that the positivist or postpositivist epistemological stance, and its associated methodological strategy of triangulation, is inadequate for understanding the richness and complexities of interview data—and people’s everyday lives. Using a case study, I show how a Bourdieusian interpretive analysis offers much more. By “listening” to the interview transcript, and thus understanding the research participant’s “logic of practice”, the qualitative researcher can provide a deeper understanding of the research participant, and of the implications of contradictory remarks for interpreting the rest of the interview. Such an interpretive analysis offers qualitative researchers a satisfying, if never certain or unambiguous, way of understanding apparently contradictory remarks.

METHOD

The research method is described more fully elsewhere (Power, 2002). In brief, I recruited 15 single women for a study of how single mothers feed their families on social assistance. The women lived in a town of approximately 7,000 people in an economically marginalized region of Nova Scotia, on the Atlantic coast of Canada. Recruitment methods included word-of-mouth, one of the few viable ways of recruiting research participants in this population (Standing, 1998), and face-to-face contact at the local food bank. Participants were purposively sampled for the age of children, type of living arrangements (i.e., market rent, subsidized housing, or living with parents), and marital status (i.e., never married or cohabitated vs. divorced or separated). The women ranged in age from late teens to early 40s and had primary responsibility for one to three children, all under the age of 13.

Each participant gave signed, informed consent, and was interviewed from one to four times. I interviewed 12 of the 15 participants two or three times; 1 four times; and 2 only once because second interviews could not be arranged, for a total of 37 interviews. The interviews averaged approximately 90 minutes, ranging from 60 minutes to 3 hours. The theoretical framework (see below) necessitated the use of open-ended interviews, though I included a series of questions about “feeding the family” (DeVault, 1991) in each set of interviews. I encouraged participants to “tell their stories,” and most seemed appreciative of an attentive, nonjudgmental listener. Participants were paid \$15 per interview, which I handed to them in an envelope at the beginning of each interview. Interviews took place at the participants’

homes, at times convenient for them, and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I carried out data analysis using a Bourdieusian theoretical frame, described below. The project received approval from the University of Toronto Ethics Review Committee.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Following Bourdieu (1980/1990, 1996), I was especially concerned to understand “the logic of practice” of each of the research participants. Bourdieu has contended that an individual’s practices always have an underlying logic, even if they do not obey the principles of “rational” logic, and that this logic is always practical, oriented toward the situations encountered in daily life. Quoting Bourdieu, Wacquant (1992) explained, “The logic of practice is logical up to the point where to be logical would cease being practical” (pp. 22-23). The researcher can understand the logic of some of a research participant’s practices by apprehending the underlying social conditions that have shaped the general category of person to which the participant belongs, such as his or her social class, gender, and culture.¹ However, understanding the logic of other practices requires a grasp of the individual’s particular social and psychological conditions, including his or her social trajectory (upward, downward, or lack of movement over time through social hierarchies), and the types and amounts of capital² he or she possesses. Methodologically, this requires attending to the details of the research participant’s individual circumstances and background.

As Bourdieu (1996) explained, for researchers to understand the logic of practice of a research participant, they must be able to situate themselves mentally “in the place the interviewee occupies in the social space in order to understand them as *necessarily what they are*” (p. 22, emphasis in original), in their “distinctive necessity” (p. 24), such that each participant’s “world-vision becomes self-evident, necessary, *taken for granted*” (p. 33, emphasis in original). According to Bourdieu, if the social science researcher is able to do this, then she understands “that if she were in her [the participant’s] shoes she would doubtless be and think just like her” (p. 34).

Being able to put oneself in the place of the participant (although reflexively aware of, and accounting for, the social distance between the researcher and the participant) requires a great effort to listen during the interview, creating a welcoming space in which the research participant can explain him- or herself, and constantly monitoring the interview process to overcome the various types of distortions inherent in the interview relationship (Bourdieu, 1996). It also means gathering enough data about the participant’s situation and background to enable the researcher to put him- or herself in the place of the participant. Although Bourdieu emphasized aspects of listening essential during the interview itself, I would argue, along with other researchers in the interpretive tradition (e.g., Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; DeVault, 1990; Poland & Pederson, 1998), that listening to understand moves beyond the interview situation, continuing throughout the analytical process. Listening to understand a participant’s logic of practice leads the analyst to look beyond, between, and underneath the participant’s words, to understand the social space in which the participant is located and in which the interview took place.

In this article, I present two contradictory statements made by a research participant during the only interview I was able to conduct with her. I use an interpretative approach, informed by Bourdieu, to understand the logic of these contradictory remarks and, thus, to shed light on the participant's account of herself and her current situation.

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA USING THE LOGIC OF PRACTICE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A CASE STUDY

At the time of the interview, Darlene (a pseudonym) was in her early 20s and a fourth-year university student on leave from her studies because of the recent birth of her son. Almost 3 months prior to the interview, she began receiving social assistance and had moved from her parents' home to a nearby ground-floor apartment in an older house. She was living with her infant and paying rent at market rates. Darlene was the 4th participant in my research project, and my interview with her was the 7th I had conducted.

Near the beginning of the interview, I asked her,

Interviewer: So, how did you find this apartment? Was it hard to find it?

Darlene: No, actually I only looked at two. But this one, it was relatively cheap, and *my main concern was that heat and lights were included*. So I wouldn't have to bother with those bills and I always knew that I'd always have heat and lights, like once you pay your rent you always have that. Some people sacrifice one bill if they need the money. Like maybe "Oh I won't pay my power bill" or "I'll only pay half of it" and you just can't do that 'cause you always need power and you always need heat. (lines 226-236, emphasis added)

I thought this was a commendable approach to finding an apartment. I had already interviewed 2 women who thought they could save money by paying their heat and lights separate from the rent but instead had run up large electricity bills³ they could not pay. Darlene's decision to prioritize having her heat and lights included in her monthly rent seemed very sensible, because such an arrangement would enable her to budget her limited social assistance check more effectively. Soon afterward in the interview, I was shocked when Darlene told me that the arrangement of having the landlord include the cost of heat and lights in the rent was new.

Interviewer: Tell me what happens to your [social assistance] check now that you've got it.

Darlene: When check day arrives, we make a budget of what we need for that month.⁴ . . . So I'll cash my check tomorrow . . . and then go grocery shopping on Friday, probably. And then pay all the rest of the bills.

Interviewer: So the rent and . . .

Darlene: Rent and, I'll go down and complain about things that he [the landlord] hasn't done [chuckles] and stuff like that, and the power and . . . Well, ah, I, I paid power this month because only—we only made the agreement this month to ah, for heat and lights to be included. Because this was a house, and now it's two apartments. So the woman upstairs, she moved in and said that, well her last apartment was heat and

lights included and she'd really like it so, he'd have to offer it to me too so, that's how that worked. (lines 416-442)

Although I was surprised, I did not question Darlene at the time about her contradictory remarks. Throughout the interview, I was struck by her tone, which was matter-of-fact, nonchalant. Though she had recently lived through what I considered some fairly significant life changes, she gave little explicit expression of this. I felt puzzled by the interview and some of the things she had told me, though I could not put my finger on why. However, I felt a similar sense of puzzlement after the first interviews with 2 of the other women, so I anticipated that my puzzlement would clear after the second interview, as it had with the earlier respondents. We scheduled a second interview for 6 days later.

When I returned to her apartment for the second interview, there was no response to my knocks on the door. I peered through the curtainless window beside the door to see that the living room, full of furniture only 6 days earlier, was empty. Darlene had moved. I was shocked and puzzled. She had given no indication in the first interview that she was dissatisfied with her housing or that she had any plans to move. For the next 6 weeks, I tried to contact her by phone (her phone number had not changed) and left three messages on her answering machine. She did not return my calls. The person who gave me her name commented that it was not unlike Darlene to get an idea in her head and to act on it quickly, but she had not had recent contact with her and so could provide no further information.

Near the end of the research project, I decided to try to contact her once more. This time, she answered the telephone. She apologized profusely for not contacting me earlier, and we carried on a short, pleasant conversation about her university studies, which she had resumed. We set up an appointment for 5 days later, in the week before I was scheduled to leave the research site. However, when I arrived at her new apartment, there was no response to my knocks and no sign that anyone was at home. Alternating between feeling annoyed, angry, and perplexed, I wondered why she could not have just told me she did not want to do another interview or at least phoned to cancel our scheduled appointment.

A few months after the interview was conducted, I settled down to review Darlene's transcript and listen to the tape of our interview. I was immediately filled with the same feelings of annoyance and anger. When I came across the first of the pair of contradictory remarks, my first thought was "liar, liar." I did not believe much of what she said in the interview, partly because of the contradictions I have already discussed and partly because she used expressions such as "it's okay," "I'm so fortunate," "it's pretty good" so often that she was not convincing. It was as if she was trying to convince herself, as well as me, that she was perfectly content. I wrote in my notes to myself, "Much of what she says throughout the interview sounds like something said by someone else, that she is repeating." I started to puzzle over why she would contradict herself about something that seemed like a straightforward, "factual," nonsensitive issue: the criteria for choosing an apartment to rent. I was not concerned about the "truth" of the criteria she had actually used, but I could not understand why she had told me what she had and what the implications of this blatant contradiction were for my interpretation of the rest of her account.

I continued to read and to puzzle. In speaking about why she had moved from her parents' home, Darlene said,

They [Darlene's parents] need time for themselves. And they couldn't live with a little baby again. As much as they'd love to, it would be just too hard for them, so that's why I pretty much left. And privacy. And living on my own *I have a bit of freedom*; I'm a Mom now so, *I need to take some responsibility*, I suppose. The big harsh reality of life, I guess. (lines 591-596, emphasis added)

This counterpoint of freedom and responsibility caught my attention. Suddenly, throughout the transcript, I began to see repeating themes of the responsibility and sacrifice involved in caring for her son, and the adjustment from the relatively care-free existence of living with her parents to maintaining her own household, contrasted with the freedom to make her own decisions but with the constraints imposed by motherhood and restriction of the limited funds provided by social assistance. I realized that I had interviewed her in a transition time, as she was making the shift from being a carefree daughter to a responsible mother facing "the big harsh reality of life," as she put it, and that this transition was something that she was actively working on and struggling with.

I came to understand that she probably told me, in some instances at least, what she thought a responsible mother should be saying rather than what she had done. I began to suspect that she had been repeating to me what others, likely her parents, had told her that she should be doing. I had a sense that her account was a mix of what she aspired to and what she actually did. As I began to gain insight into this person who had irritated, angered, and puzzled me, and as I began to understand the logic of her account, my attitude softened, and I suddenly felt empathy for her. The logic of representing herself in the best possible light ("impression management," in Goffman's [1959] terms), acting as a responsible mother "should," made sense in light of comments that indicated her deep sense of shame about being on social assistance. Other parts of the interview seemed intended to impress me (a doctoral student studying at a large Canadian university) with her "worthiness": for example, her comparisons of herself to a friend, also a single mother on social assistance, who, she thought, acted irresponsibly; accounts of her many accomplishments, travels, and contributions to a youth service organization; and her repeated assurance that being on social assistance was a temporary state until she finished her university studies. I wondered if the work of consistently constructing herself as she thought she should be was too difficult to sustain through another interview, and that was why she evaded a second one.

DISCUSSION

There is no way of knowing for certain if I am interpreting correctly Darlene's contradictory remarks about when heat and lights were included in her rent. However, my interpretation of her remarks provides insight into this contradiction and the rest of her account. Had I adopted a positivist or postpositivist epistemological stance and decided to triangulate Darlene's account, I might have contacted her landlord to ask for his version of the story, which, presumably, would have given me an objective "truth" of when heat and lights were included in the rent. However, this small fact would not have given me any satisfaction concerning the interpretation of the interview. It would have left open the question of why Darlene contradicted herself. I might also have confronted Darlene about her contradiction during

the interview; however, because the research design involved more than one interview with each participant, it seemed more important to build trust and rapport in the research relationship during the first interview, as Backett (1990) has suggested. Indeed, puzzling aspects of first interviews I had conducted with other participants had been resolved in subsequent interviews, so I anticipated that either the contradiction would be resolved or I could ask her about it in a subsequent interview. However, even if I had asked Darlene to explain herself to me in the first interview, and she consented to do so, she might not have been able to put her logic of practice into words.

Instead, I undertook a dialogue with the transcript, listening to it and asking questions of it (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), while reflexively attending to my own emotional responses to the text and my interpretation of it. Following social scientists in the interpretive tradition, I looked to the respondent's position in social space and her trajectory there, as well as her social position in relation to my social position, to understand the logic of her account of herself in a research interview. Such an interpretive listening process leads to a truth of understanding, which is truth of a different nature than the truth of the one valid, objective account. A truth of understanding is a contextualized truth, with no claim to certainty, that, nevertheless, holds the potential to illuminate both the logic of the interview process and the rich, complex social logic of human life. In the end, I have some confidence in my interpretation, because of the power of my new understanding to explain Darlene's account, to shift my sentiments regarding her actions and empathize with her, and to connect her account to the larger social relations of her situation. Such criteria might be useful to qualitative health researchers who are interested in understanding the logic of their research participants' practices and the truths of their accounts.

NOTES

1. In Bourdieu's terms, these social conditions are reflected in the individual's habitus, which shapes how the individual perceives the world and acts in it.

2. Bourdieu has specified four main forms of capital: economic capital; cultural capital (dispositions of the mind and body, cultural goods and educational qualifications); social capital (networks of relationships); and symbolic capital (the form that other types of capital assume when the arbitrariness of their nature is not recognized). For more detailed elaborations of Bourdieu's notions of different forms of capital, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Power (1999), or Swartz (1997).

3. This was usually because their poorly built and maintained apartments were heated electrically, a relatively common but expensive form of home heating, especially in the region's long, damp, cold winters.

4. Social assistance checks are mailed to recipients monthly, near the end of each month. Because all social assistance checks arrive in recipients' mailboxes on the same day, it is colloquially known as "check day."

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