

Gender Differences as Relational Processes: Reflecting Reality Constructions in Interviews

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The 11th Interview: I arrived in time at Company X to have an interview with Ms. Meier. This would be the last in a row of 11 interviews with equality professionals in Switzerland. This one was somehow special because when I initially called the company to talk to the official equality representative I had been told that they did not have an official equality representative, but that I should definitely talk to Ms. Meier as she is somehow the informal one and involved in a lot of change efforts towards more gender equality in the company. After the first telephone contact my impression of Ms. Meier was of "a complaining victim." I remember her saying that a lot of change would be necessary in this company but that this would never happen and that improvements are very slow and came just in little steps. Women still have to fight a lot she said. All this goes through my head while I am waiting for her at the reception area for some minutes. Finally Ms. Meier arrives and guides me to a meeting room where we can talk undisturbed. On the way she asks me a lot of questions about my job and what I am doing. I feel a little bit interrogated and wonder why she is that curious about the university institute.

To begin the interview I ask her for her opinion about why her name was on the receptionist's mind when I asked to talk to the gender equality representative. The answer is easy: she has no idea and no clue and does not even want to think about it. Wow! I am talking to somebody and the start of the interview (to which she had agreed with great interest) somehow is at the same time the end – she does not know why I should talk to her. I try to go on with my interview guide, but without great success. Either she refuses to answer my questions because they are too general and reality is not that easy in her eyes or my questions are too concrete and she does not want to talk about the intimate details of the company. Hmm. I am puzzled. The frustration I sensed in the telephone call is gone. The company now is great in terms of gender equality – compared to other companies. One always has to see it in the societal context, she tells me. As if I would not know... but we are in an interview and my aim is not to show how much I know but to get her talking. But how do you get someone to talk if the someone does not want

to? I decide to dump the interview and to stick to one last objective: getting out of here without losing face. My questions are polarizing and the way I am asking them will not provide good data for my dissertation, she tells me. Aha. By "polarizing" she means that I am talking about women and men and differences or similarities. But I did not talk about my attitudes – I asked if this is relevant to her. It is not. That is more than obvious. But neither can she answer the question of what is important to her. I feel helpless and it is even getting worse, the interaction starts to feel more and more aggressive. Now she is accusing me of being stuck in a "seventies feminist discourse." This is too much, too much for a constructionist feminist of the third generation. I am finally punching back, leaving the "normal path" of the interview. At this point I start to see the situation as a game. If she wants a contest about who has the better way of thinking, ok, she will get one. I ask her what she means by "seventies feminist discourse." And finally I am getting an answer: looking for differences and constructing women as the victims, men as the bad guys. This is definitely not her way of doing things and - giving me good advice – I should not do this either. Am I doing this? I did not realize it, but, well.. maybe my questions could be understood in this way..... Finally, after 45 minutes I make my way out of the room. Puzzled and frustrated and angry. What went wrong? What did I do that she reacted to me in that aggressive way? This interview felt like a disaster.

Gender differences as relational processes – reflecting reality constructions in interviews

The situation described in the "11th Interview" made me think about what had happened and "what went wrong" in the course of the interview. But it also made me wonder what had happened in the other ten interviews where I did not have this feeling that everything went wrong. How was it that in all the other interviews we seemed to understand each other and did not have to fight about what the topic was? Following Järvinen (2000, p. 371) who says that "our unsuccessful interviews can teach us something about our successful interviews" I will try in this paper to find some answers to these questions, looking more closely at the construction process that takes place in the interview situation. If it is possible to construct different

understandings of what the interview is all about and what the reality of every question is, how is reality mutually constructed in the interview situation in the first place? How is understanding or misunderstanding constructed in an interview? Analyzing this construction process I will focus on the notion of relating (Hosking, 1999; Hosking & Ramsey, 2000; Dachler & Hosking, 1995).¹

Developing the concept of a "process of relating," I will come back to the construction process in my research study of different understandings of gender equality in Switzerland², and will try to

¹ So far little has been written about the aspect of reality construction and relating in an interview context from a social constructionist perspective. But a few papers are of interest for the point I want to make here. Focusing on the issue of relating in qualitative research designs in the sense of relationships, Bourdeau (2000) explores the similarities and differences between an interview situation and a therapeutic setting; Ceglowski (2000) reflects on her relationships to the research partners in her study as well as to her mentors and tackles the issue of objectivity and subjectivity in qualitative research comparable to the discussion about "going native." Järvinen (2000) reflects on the construction of meaning in life story research and how so-called "successful narratives" in the eyes of the researchers are constructed. More in line with the notion of relating as reality construction investigated in this paper, Howarth (2002) focuses on the construction of identities in the research situation from a social representation perspective. She concludes, as I do, that it is important to reflect the relationship between researcher and researched, not because it is a methodological problem in the sense of producing artifacts or biasing the results. According to her, "This is not simply a methodological problem. Difference is the fabric of day-to-day life in today's hybrid societies. The misunderstanding, the anger, the pain, and the guilt that one's positioning brings forth are the substance of contemporary self-other relationships" (p. 30).

² The goal of the study was to explore the question of how gender equality is constructed in the German-speaking region of Switzerland. I conducted a total of 11 problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) between July 2001 and February 2002. The interview partners were all female: three equality representatives in state bureaus, one president of a women's organization, four equality professionals in charge of the equality policy in different companies, two representatives of a public organization and one female CEO of a small company. My analysis focused on the topics and accounts they used in

give some answers to the question of "what happened in Interview 11?"

Constructing reality in relationships: the role of the researcher in constructionist research

...the researcher's position is something like Escher painting a picture of himself painting: a view that stresses research as like all other relational processes and the researcher as like all other participants – part of the construction process. (Hosking, 1999, p.126)

In the constructionist view, the interview is a situation where reality is constructed in a meaning-making process and through the relationship between interviewer and interviewed, jointly explicating accounts and drawing on discourses to (re)construct their reality or view on gender equality (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Interviews are not "pipelines for transmitting knowledge" (Järvinen, 2000, p. 371) but a situation where both partners are negotiating about a certain construction of reality. This does not mean that they have to agree about every issue raised in the interview; it does mean that they have to agree about the applicability of the discourses and accounts used to make a certain issue arguable in the first place.

Therefore it is the topics, accounts and discourses provided in the communication process in the interview which are of interest in the analysis and lead to a better understanding of the processes of constructing gender in general. But it is not only the content providing information about what gender is but also how the researcher and the interview partner relate to each other: the relationship³.

describing the daily work with the equality policies and arguing for certain aspects of change (see Nentwich 2002 for the interpretations of the study).

³ Differentiating the forms of relationships in an interview situation, one could talk about the relationship between the researchers on a research team and the impact of those relationships on the interpretation of the data as Broussine and Fox (2002) describe it in their analysis. One could also focus on the relationship between the researcher and the

Hosking (2000) calls this understanding of knowledge and science "multilogical," in contrast with the traditional understanding of "monological." She sees the consequences of this different understanding especially in the role of the researcher. In the traditional monologic understanding of science, she says, "the researcher writes the script, directs the process, and decides where to present the show. She does so by constructing, e.g., research aims, what counts as knowledge, how the process will go on, and where the results are reported –all in relation to the local cultural 'game rules' of science" (p. 2). In the multilogical (constructionist) understanding of science and knowledge "the researcher's standpoint or logos (reason, argument, discourse) becomes viewed as one of many possible standpoints" (p. 10).

This means that the researcher and the interview partner are equal partners in the situation – both of them having the power to define what counts as right or wrong but negotiating what counts as reality in the situation. Conducting multilogical research means taking seriously the act of constructing in the interview situation and not expecting to find new aspects of an objective reality.

Being equal partners in the "co-creation of knowing" (Broussine & Fox, 2002, p. 10) does not mean that the interview partners are equal partners in the sense that they become "co-researchers" as implicated in participative or collaborative forms of inquiry (Olesen, 1998, p. 317-318; Broussine & Fox 2002, p.10). Such an understanding would ignore the different standpoints of the researcher and the interview partner – the researcher with all the theoretical knowledge and the interview partner with the "hands-on practice." Because both the researcher and the researched do have different standpoints, it is important to take these differences into account in order to reflect the power relationship, "the researcher's potential for exploiting and otherizing the research participants" (cf. Howarth, 2002). Taking both interpretations seriously in the process of developing one version of reality does not mean that one is denying the different standpoints and their consequences. Co-

reader or the public. This aspect becomes important when dealing with the topic of publication and the "third-order construction": what takes place when we write up the results and present them to the public. Here I want to focus primarily on the "second-order construction": the researcher's reflection on the relationship between interviewer and interview partner in the interview situation.

constructing knowledge or reality in a constructionist sense would mean appreciating all possible definitions and versions of the situation without privileging any one. Co-construction takes place where we focus on it or not. The important issue about power is here to consider the interview as a co-construction: the partners do not take power relations for granted or what is said as factual. Instead, the researcher analyses the processes of constructing of what is constituted as "real and good" in the course of the interview.

Therefore, being multilogical means being aware of multiple possible versions of the situation and analyzing what happened in the process of privileging one definition in the specific situation as "reality." This means challenging the underlying assumptions made in the interview by one or both of the partners in order to generate understanding. Understanding in this sense means agreeing on the context of interpretation, or as Wittgenstein (1997) put it, exploring the joint "form of life" of both the researcher and the interview partner, and not agreeing on specific issues. Only if the researcher and the interviewed can agree on a context where the utterances make sense can meaning be constructed. For example my interview partner in the 11th interview framed my questions as "seventies feminist discourse," which implies that women are the victims and men are the ones to blame. If this was not the context I thought of when I asked a question, we will not agree about the meaning of the dialogue and it will be important to negotiate the context in the interview situation, or to challenge the perspective of the researcher in the analysis.

Exploring the perspective of the researcher also means tackling the theoretical background of the study and asking questions about how, for example the research question in itself co-constructs the interpretation. In the context of research about gender this would mean being reflexive about the notion of gender in general (cf. Hagemann-White, 1993). Brossine & Fox (2002, p. 4) give a good example of how the research question reifies what originally was the research subject: women. One of their interview partners "argued that she did not want to be seen as a 'woman chief executive' but rather as a chief executive who happened to be a woman." This example shows that one possible construction— in this case the existence and relevance of the category "woman chief executive" - is set as given and not to be questioned when doing research about women chief executives. All reality constructions that deny this

construction and deal with something else are excluded and the research becomes less valid as a result of privileging the interviewer's perspective. In doing research about either women or men we risk defining a category before we ask questions about it (Hirschauer, 1995, pp. 69-70). We take the two sexes as a given category and start to look for differences instead of similarities or instead of questioning the category in the first place. Hence, research about gender holds at least two risks (cf. Broussine & Fox, 2002, p. 4): first, the danger of presenting women's experiences as if they were uniform and therefore essentialising women and denying differences and second, the contention that the focus on women in organizations problematises women (for a general discussion see Olesen, 2000; Behnke & Meuser, 1999; Hagemann-White, 1993)

The process of "relating"

We view relating as an ongoing process of construction carried out on the basis of language. By "language" we mean to refer to the realm of action and of social processes – language is social rather than private ... – a social communicative process that people 'do' together." (Hosking, 2000, p. 6)

An interview is a situation where one person, usually the researcher, is asking questions and another person, the interview partner, is answering them. But the game played here is not only question and answer; it is simultaneously a negotiation about what is real, good, important or not applicable. This agreement on something called reality and what reality is about can be described as the product of co-ordinated, reflexive processes of action, communication and language – or relating. If the researcher asks a question in an interview, the interview partner has to understand the question and give an answer. Giving an answer means at the same time "yes, I understood what you have been asking" and "yes, I agree, in my reality this is also a relevant question." The importance of this agreement becomes obvious in situations where the questions (or the answers) do not make sense to one or the other, or both. In this

sense relating means co-ordinating with someone else, agreeing on a context for a text or a supplement for an act.⁴

Hosking (1999, p. 121) gives the following example: "suppose I enter the office of someone with whom I have arranged a research interview (act). Possible supplements include: 'other' screams for the police; continues with what she was doing as though I had not arrived; or insists on doing some ritual cleansing before joining me in my journey into the unknown; each supplement give a different meaning to the act and invites the process to continue in a different way."

Relating therefore describes three aspects of the process of reality construction (cf. Hosking, 2000, p. 9-10 and 1999, p. 124):

- First, it stands for a co-ordination between act and supplement, text and context, one person and the other.
- Second, these co-ordinations are constantly reproduced in a reflexive process. One knows what one has to expect when going to a research interview – and it is not somebody screaming for the police. This repeated use of co-ordinations or expectations of a certain situation are achievements which produce the impression of being natural, unquestionable or taken for granted. But they are not: co-ordinations are historically and socially located, and they depend on reference to different possible contexts or on how someone relates to them.
- Third, relational processes are not new but build on what is already available. For example one's knowledge, expectations or even fantasies about how a research interview proceed make them reflexive in the sense that they reproduce ways of co-ordinating and at the same time produce and confirm them.

Relating therefore is a process based on language to coordinate acts and texts; its products are taken for granted in the process of understanding. Understanding in this sense means agreeing on

⁴ Hosking (1999, p. 120) uses another example to illustrate the importance of "the other" for construction of reality: "The Zen narrative of, 'the sound of one hand clapping' could be a useful reminder that to make something is a co-construction involving many co-ordinations. Co-ordinations might be achieved in two hands clapping, shaking in formal greeting, or playing a piano."

certain natural, taken-for-granted facts one need no longer negotiate (e.g. gender). Or, as Wittgenstein (1997) would put it, the meaning of an utterance and therefore understanding depends on the form of life one is acting out (cf. Nentwich, 2001). This implies that a reality construction always draws upon discourses already available and at the same time (re)constructed directly in the interaction. This means that on the one hand understanding can be reproducible: if the way of relating always refers to what is commonly available in that context, then it should be possible to analyze different possibilities of relating in one form of life or at one time in a specific context. On the other hand, understanding is local and historically grown and therefore depends on the specific context, it is a "doing" (cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987) in a specific context. This means two things. First, "it recognizes that both researcher and participant are positioned and are being positioned by virtue of history and context" (Olesen, 2000, p. 226); it also means that both the researcher and the interviewed person are not passively positioned, but position themselves actively in a certain context by offering some discourses and not others to the relationship. And, reflexively, they mutually construct their position at the same time.

Analyzing the "process of relating"

Broussine and Fox (2002, p. 8) see two basic consequences of a constructionist understanding of relating: "to be *reflective*, for example about what was coming out of the data, but also to be *reflexive* – to be aware of ourselves individually and in relation to each other in the process of researching." To reflect on the context of interpretation and to be reflexive about the role of the researcher in the process of interpretation, the researcher must question the underlying assumptions on at least four different levels:

1. the theoretical background of the study (research question, basic concepts),
2. the researcher's own background in the form of subject positions (cf. Edley, 2001) and possible discourses offered (e.g. gender) for co-ordinating (research process, topics, interactions);

3. the background of the interview partner and possible expectations and assumptions offered in the process from the first contact until the interview finally takes place; and
4. the process of understanding in the interview situation itself.

The four levels together form the process of relating; each level provides a context for the interpretation of what is said in the interview situation itself and the interpretation. Hence, it is important to take notes about this process and possible interpretations in order to facilitate different perspectives and ways of understanding in the analysis⁵.

The following questions will provide some guidelines: What aspects of the process of relating could be important to take notes about? What should we question, and what should we take into account in the course of analysis?

Different levels of analyzing the process of relating

Questioning the *theoretical framework* and research question:

- What are the basic unchallenged concepts in the research questions and what role do they play in the interview situation?

Questioning the *subject positions*:

- Subject Positions of the interviewer and interview-partner: Which discourses are offered and which are offered but are unnoticed and/or set aside? (e.g. gender)
- Where is power linked to a subject position?

Questioning the *process of understanding* in the interview:

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This applies to what Witzel (2000) calls a "postskriptum" or postscript, a file where the researcher takes notes about the interview just after it. I believe we should extend this note taking to the whole research process – from the first contact with the interview partner until we write the report – and to use a framework like the one I present in this paper in order to coordinate our potential questions with the process of relating.

- Where did we understand each other? Which shared understandings did we agree on and why?
- Where did we misunderstand each other? Which different understandings did we use here and why?

I will now develop the concept of relating a bit further and use it as a basis to analyze the process of the "gender equality project," returning to the question of the 11th interview.

Questioning the theoretical framework

As it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide the entire theoretical background of my larger study, I will deal very briefly with this aspect of the process of relating. I based my theoretical framework on a constructionist notion of gender in the sense of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1991). Questioning theoretical framework requires to me to allow many perspectives, and not privilege one of my own understandings of gender and gender differences. Thus it was important to design the interview in a way that did not reify common assumptions about gender differences. I tried to do this by not privileging one definition of gender – by always asking for the opposite definition. But I think this was exactly what my 11th interviewee "misunderstood;" in any case I did not succeed with these aims in that interview. Ms. Meier accused me of constructing differences when I asked about the relevance of gender and gender equality. And she was right: talking about gender equality implicitly means talking about women and men and how they are different. This is a topic all the other interview partners agreed on in the interview, leaving it unchallenged.

Questioning subject positions

Depending on the possible subject positions held by the two interview partners, the researcher offers various aspects to connect to in the course of an interview. This means that the researcher plays an important role in determining not only the subjectivity but also how the process of relating will take place. With the notion of subject position I refer to aspects of social identity the researcher "brings" with him/her to the interview as possible contexts the interview partner may relate to (cf. Edley, 2001). For example, being

a female researcher conducting interviews with women about the subject of gender equality did imply in most of my interviews, that I was a feminist with an emancipatory interest. Ms. Meier related to this assumption by placing me in the context of the 70's discourse, a position she was opposing in the interview. Imagine a man conducting the same study – would this research focus not imply a scientific interest instead of a political one? But the issue here is not only the fact that I belong to a certain social identity category like "male" or "female." The notion of the subject position also implies that the relevance of being placed in a certain category is part of the reality constructing process in the interview situation and therefore again reflexive. The researcher and the interviewed person must agree that the discourses building on the subject positions are applicable and make sense to both. In this sense, relating means relating to a subject position and agreeing on this relating. To be provocative during an interview, one could challenge this act of relating and its implications. In this sense the two parties' agreement that the discourses refer to a certain subject position is the basic element of the interview relationship; depending on the discourse one relates to, one will find a different set of contexts for a specific text and therefore a different meaning of what the interview was about.

My interview partners and I related to several other aspects of the subject positions: being young, at University of St. Gallen, a foreigner, a psychologist, etc. Being from the *university* made it easier to make contact, especially with companies. The university context allowed a serious interest in the questions which would justify the time spent in an interview. Being a *foreigner* made it easier to ask "stupid" questions about everyday life in Switzerland. As I am German I cannot know all of the details about Switzerland, so it was easier for me to challenge the assumptions made in the interview. On the other hand the German interview-partners – also foreigners in Switzerland – tried to connect with this aspect: as we are both German we both know what is special and unique about Swiss society compared to Germany. Being *young* (under 30) became important in two different constellations: I was in the age of a possible daughter when the interview partner was 50 or older, or a possible sister of a partner about my age. As some of the partners were *psychologists* this subject position took on some importance: being the same age and with a comparable university degree one

knows the meaning of terms like postmodernism or mainstream. "Being the daughter" became obvious when the issue in the interview was the generational conflict in feminism and which side I belonged to. In the interviews where I belonged to the "right side" I was treated like the good daughter doing important research and asking relevant questions. In the 11th interview I was lectured about basic facts which I should have obviously known but did not from the perspective of Ms. Meier.

Questioning the process of understanding in the interview situation

These aspects of the theoretical background and the subject position have emerged from my analysis of the different interview situations and the process of understanding in each situation. Reading through the interviews focusing on the aspect of relating I first asked the following questions:

- Where did we misunderstand each other and why?
- Where did we understand each other without questioning and why?

If the process of understanding was undisturbed throughout the interview, it was harder to answer these questions as the forms of life one shares and the discourses one draws upon are taken for granted and thus not obvious. Therefore, the 11th interview was an opportunity to look for the major misunderstandings, the differences in the understandings and how they could happen in order to learn about how we achieve understanding in the first place. Misunderstandings can be connected to an emotional impact on the researcher. Looking for "emotional situations" or situations where the researcher "did not feel too good" might therefore be a hint for discovering misunderstandings, or conversely for discovering agreements on a certain understanding, e.g. when both parties start to laugh (cf. Broussine & Fox, 2002, p. 8).

Another perspective was to look for questions which were not asked because of a certain understanding or even a taboo in a

specific situation⁶. The interview situation has to be analyzed according to two basic questions: What has been said? And what has not been said? And a second round of analysis is needed to reveal the underlying assumptions about understandings in the interview situation as well as the processes of privileging and muting.

The more I analyzed the possible underlying assumptions, the more I saw situations where the understanding was not questioned. And with every situation I saw more clearly the underlying assumptions and the specific context in which the two of us agreed or disagreed on a certain aspect.

Implications

Reflecting on the process of relating shows how some versions of reality become more important in an interview than others, as some discourses became the center of argumentation and others were silently set aside. This does not mean that the findings of an interview might be biased in the sense that they do not reflect what the interview partner said or what could be the "true interpretation." My reflection shows that reality construction in an interview is always an interactive construction between the researcher and the interview partner; it depends not only on bare "facts" like position, age, gender but also on the interpretation of these facts and their consequences in relation to each other. Therefore it is not only interaction but an reflexive process. In itself, being a woman does not have consequences for the research situation or the findings of a study. But interpretations about being a woman and the interview partner relating to certain aspects of it and not to others makes it an important difference. Ms. Meier did relate to the aspect of being a woman doing research about gender equality with one possible interpretation: being a "70's feminist." This may be one of many possible explanations of why she refused to accept most of my questions (acts) while denying the existence of an answer

⁶ After conducting each interview I took notes in the *Postskriptum* (Witzel, 2000) about what I had not asked and what additional questions I would like to ask now that the interview was over, and some possible explanations for the taboo. I also wrote down my first impression of the "main topic" of the interview in order to have an idea what the underlying assumption could have been.

(supplement). In refusing to agree on the context which she felt I suggested, she also refused my reality construction and it turned out to be impossible to construct a reality we both agreed on. The only way out of this dilemma was to talk about that phenomenon, to ask her why she rejected the context of my questions. Asking her about her understanding of the 70's discourse therefore enabled her to construct a reality sequence which was different from the earlier ones because I now accepted her definition of the situation. If I had done this earlier the interview might have been less frustrating. On the other hand all the other interviews might have been more controversial if I had insisted on differences in understanding instead of agreeing on basic assumptions. Relating therefore seems to be a narrow path between confrontation and agreeing on a specific reality construction, always balancing both in order to continue the relationship.

My analysis shows that the answers not given in an interview just as much as the answers given, provide new insights about the reality being constructed. Thus constructionist researchers need to reflect on these aspects of how a certain version of reality is mutually constructed in the interview. This reflection should be documented systematically so the researcher can account for certain interpretations. It is not a question of finding the one true interpretation in an interview sequence but rather being aware of all possible interpretations in this specific context and understanding how a certain reality is constructed by the interviewer and the interview partner.

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