

## The Problem-Centered Interview

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**Abstract:** The problem-centered interview (PZI) is a theory-generating method that tries to neutralize the alleged contradiction between being directed by theory or being open-minded so that the interplay of inductive and deductive thinking contributes to increasing the user's knowledge. The appropriate communication strategies aim firstly at the representation of the subjective approach to the problem, secondly the stimulated narratives are enriched by dialogues employing imaginative and semi-structured prompts. Theoretical knowledge develops by using elastic concepts that are further developed during the analysis by employing empirical analysis and which will be refined by "testing" empirically grounded "hypotheses" with the data.

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## 1. Introduction

The principles guiding a problem-centered interview (PCI) (WITZEL 1982, 1985)<sup>1</sup> aim to gather objective evidence on human behavior as well as on subjective perceptions and ways of processing social reality. [1]

Empirical studies from the actor's perspective and therefore qualitative interviews, have been given new importance by propositions put forth by individualization theory (among others, BECK 1986). According to this theory, individuals have shed former binding relationships (social rank, social class, etc.) and have to adjust to new institutional dependencies, such as those of the labor market, of an occupation or educational system. The plausibility of inferring human actions from a societal framework, societal mechanisms of selection or the socially unequal distribution of resources is diminishing. Actors must now much rather take responsibility for their own actions. Once such a view is assumed and they increasingly consider themselves as the agent planning their own life course, then a certain amount of self-reflection will necessarily follow. Newer concepts of

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1 Recommended summaries: MEY (1999, pp.142-150); LAMNEK (1989, pp.74-78). For more information on how the collection and evaluation of the data were carried out, see SCHMIDT-GRUNERT (1999).

socialization research (HEINZ & WITZEL 1995) point to individual accomplishment instead of the use of social normative thinking in dealing with living conditions and societal experiences. This relates to the development of aspirations and expectations concerning one's occupation, partnership and family, as well as to the ways of coping with biographical experiences and to the ways of utilizing resources and opportunities in relation to the planning of private and occupational life. [2]

## 2. The Basic Ideas of Problem-Centered Interviews

Methodologically, the concept of a PCI borrows largely from the theory-generating procedure of grounded theory (GLASER & STRAUSS 1998), which on the one hand addresses the critique of a hypothetically deductive procedure in which data can only be collected and verified through steps determined ex-ante in the operationalization. But, on the other hand, this approach leans toward the naive inductive position of "sociological naturalism" (e.g. HOFFMANN-RIEM 1980) which is characterized by the interviewer's or scientist's position of general openness in relation to the empirical observation. Apart from the previous theoretical knowledge, such a position can be conceptualized as "tabula rasa" (cf. KELLE 1996). In relation to a PCI, the insight gained through data collection and evaluation must much rather be organized as an inductive-deductive mutual relationship. The inevitable previous knowledge which must thus be disclosed serves in the data collection phase as a heuristic-analytical framework for ideas for questions during the dialogue between the interviewer and respondent. At the same time, this principle of disclosure is manifest in that through narration what the observed subjects determine to be relevant is stimulated. Theoretical knowledge is generated in the evaluation phase through the application of "sensitizing concepts" (BLUMER 1954, p.7) which are further developed in the continued analysis and reinforced with empirically grounded hypotheses from the data material. This flexible procedure should insure that the interviewer's/scientist's view of the problems being addressed does not simply overlap the respondent's and that the theory is not simply superimposed upon the collected data. [3]

Against this background three basic principles of PCI can be roughly outlined:

- It is distinguished by a *problem-centered orientation* towards socially relevant problems which also characterizes the organization of processes of cognition and learning (preceding interpretation). The interviewer makes use of the formerly noted objective conditions of the observed orientations and actions in order to understand the interviewees' explanations and continue the problem-centered questioning and re-questioning. Action-related contexts of education, occupational and labor-market organization, gender, class or regional specifics are objective to the extent that individual action is a precondition and that they can not be altered by individual actors. Parallel to the production of broad and differentiated data material, the interviewer is already working on understanding the subjective view of the respondent while

gradually making communication more precisely address the research problem.

- The *object-orientation* emphasizes methodical flexibility in face of the different necessities of the objects being observed. For this reason, the PCI was developed as a combination of methods among which the interview is the most important instrument. It might therefore for instance make sense to prepare for interviews regarding a new research topic by holding a group discussion (focus group) in order to obtain a preliminary overview of the range of opinions among the sample to be studied. The biographical method points for instance to developing patterns of meanings in the process of an individual's confrontation with social reality. Finally, the PCI can also be combined with standardized questionnaires in order to solve the problems arising in connection with samples (e.g. MÖNNICH & WITZEL 1994) and to relate the various results generated by the different procedures (e.g. ERZBERGER 1998, pp.153ff). Also, conversation techniques are applied flexibly: according to the requirements of developing a communication situation focused on the individual respondent, the interviewer can more frequently use, depending on the varying degree of the respondent's reflection and eloquence, narration or recurrent questioning in dialogue procedure.
- *Process orientation* is maintained throughout the course of research and in particular for what I have called "pre-interpretation". If the communication process is focused reasonably and acceptably on the reconstruction of orientations and actions, the interviewees respond with trust and thus open up; they feel that they are being taken seriously. This trust relationship promotes the respondent's capability to remember and motivates self-reflection. As the respondent unfolds his or her view of a problem, so to speak unprotected, in cooperation with the interviewer, in the course of the conversation new results are produced again and again by means of the cooperation between the interviewer and interviewee. For example, this may lead to alternative aspects on the same topic but from a different perspective, corrections of earlier statements as well as redundancies and contradictions. Redundancies are welcomed to the extent that they often contain new formulations which facilitate interpretation. Contradictions express individual ambivalences and indecision which should be addressed. These might be the result of misunderstandings on the part of the interviewer or an interviewee's error or lack of memory which can be clarified through repeated questioning. However they may also be a reflection of problems in orientation, contradicting interests, decision making dilemmas in the face of contradicting demands of action. The promotion of a conversational flow through the application of a PCI as a biographical interview becomes clear when life-history accounts are stimulated. Story-telling as an original form of reflection works to break down the artificialness of a research situation so that respondents do not feel forced to give "isolated answers to isolated questions" (BAHRDT 1975, p.13; see also BERGER 1974). This form of inquiry of question-and-answer typical of opinion surveys institutionalizes

precisely the obstruction of a systematic development of the respondent's perspective of the problem (CICOUREL 1974, p.97). [4]

### 3. PCI Instruments

Four instruments allow for and support the carrying out of a PCI: a *short questionnaire*, *interviewing guidelines*, *tape recordings* of the discussion and a *postscript*. [5]

For one, the *short questionnaire* serves to collect data on social characteristics (age, parents' occupation, education etc.). The interview which follows aims to negotiate a subjective view and is thus not obstructed by questions structured by a question-answer scheme. Furthermore, the information gathered thereby and especially in combination with open-ended questions can facilitate starting a conversation. For instance, information on occupational preferences can be used to formulate a question to start the investigation of the transition of youth from secondary schooling into upper secondary education or vocational training (both aspects are elaborated below in Section 4). [6]

*Guidelines* are the crucial part of the PCI, together with conversation strategies. *Guidelines* are a supportive device to reinforce the interviewer's memory on the topics of research and provide a framework of orientation to ensure comparability of interviews. In addition, some ideas for lead questions into individual topics and preformulated questions to start the discussion are included. Ideally, they accompany the communication process as a sort of transparency of the background, serving to supervise how individual elements in the course of the discussion are worked through. [7]

Compared to a protocol, the generally accepted *tape recording* of an interview allows for an authentic and precise record of the communication process, which should be immediately fully transcribed. The interviewer is thus able to concentrate completely on the discussion and on observing situation-related conditions and nonverbal expressions. [8]

*Postscripts* are written directly after the interview to complement the tape recording (see also CICOUREL 1974). They entail an outline of the topics discussed, comments on the aforementioned situative and nonverbal aspects as well as on the interviewee's own foci. Beyond this, spontaneous noteworthy remarks on the topic and ideas for the interpretation can be noted which might offer suggestions for the data interpretation. Following the procedure of the "theoretical sample" (GLASER & STRAUSS 1998), postscripts are also used to create content-related criteria for the selection of additional cases. Contrasting cases can thus be constructed, while similar and contrasting evidence are being sought. [9]

## 4. Structuring of PCIs

At first, directly establishing contacts is part of the interview process. The further structuring of the discussion proceeds, on the one hand, with communication strategies which generate story-telling: entering into a conversation, general explorations and ad-hoc questions; on the other hand, there are strategies which generate understanding: specific explorations with elements of references to previous answers, questions directed toward understanding and confrontation. [10]

While establishing contact, besides ensuring anonymity of the interview's transcript and explaining the desired form of conversation, the study's main question is elaborated. The interviewer attempts thus to transcend the hypothetical rules concerning the purpose of the investigation (cf. BERGER 1974) by disclosing research interests and making clear that it is not just a matter of observing a performance but rather that the thoughts and opinions of the interviewees are central to the discussion. [11]

The PCI is a "discursive dialogue procedure" (MEY 1999, p.145) in which respondents are considered experts of their orientations and actions—which has already been made clear at the time of establishing contact. They should become more confident in the course of the conversation to take at all times the liberty to correct their own statements or those of their interviewers. In order to optimize progress in gaining insight, the interviewer combines listening and repeated questioning. This entails the following conversation techniques which can be applied flexibly by the interviewer. [12]

### 4.1 Communication strategies which generate story-telling

A *preformulated introductory question* is a means to focus the discussion on the problem under study. At the same time, the question is so broadly formulated that it functions like an empty page which is filled out by the interviewee in his or her own words, structured in his or her own way. Such a question could—with respect to the aforementioned research question—be worded as follows: "You would like to become a hairdresser. What lead you to this (or: how did this come about)? Tell me how it all happened!" The last statement explicitly invites the interviewee to turn away from the generally expected traditional style of interview of a question-and-answer game. [13]

In the continued progress of communication, *general exploration* serves to successively disclose the subject's view of the problem (principle of openness or induction). The interviewer employs thematic aspects in the order in which they are told in response to the introductory question. This way the interviewer can ask questions which allow the thread of the story to be further spun and detailed in the sequence offered by the respondent. At the same time the repeated questioning documents the desired detail on the topic. A sort of "luring out" of concrete examples of experiences or biographical episodes stimulates the respondent's memory, clarifies abstractions, lacking or unclear terms and produces concrete connections to the contexts of past action. [14]

*Ad-hoc questions* are necessary if certain topics are left out by the interviewees but are needed to secure comparability of the interviews. These are activated by key words in the guide or can also consist of single standardized questions and be asked at the end of the interview to avoid a question-and-answer game in the main part of the interview: for example, "What would you like to have achieved by the time you are 30 years old?" [15]

#### **4.2 Strategies aimed at generating comprehension**

With *specific explorations* the aspect of deduction comes into play. The interviewer uses the previously, or in the interview itself, acquired knowledge to develop questions. As in non-directive conversation-psychotherapy, elaborating on statements made by the respondent furthers his/her self-reflection. Furthermore it creates opportunities for them to assert their own views and to correct any insinuations made by the interviewer ("discursive validation"). Clarifying *questions for understanding* are utilized in case of evasive or contradictory responses and disrupt that which is self-evident in daily life. [16]

*Confrontations* can promote further detailing of the respondents' views. However a trust relationship must have been well established in order not to provoke any ad-hoc justifications. [17]

The question as to when it makes sense to change from using questions which generate story-telling over to questions which generate understanding can in principle be shown by the "documentary method of interpretation" originating from ethnomethodology (GARFINKEL 1962). The method characterizes a hermeneutic process which constitutes an individual's conceptualization of reality in everyday life and allows for common practices. It has been applied to the social scientific investigation of structures of meaning. The assigning of single aspects of the stories to previous patterns of interpretation of meaning which the interviewer brought into the discussion (deduction) is supplemented by the search for new patterns of interpretation for which the preceding patterns do not offer an explanation of single phenomena expounded upon by the interviewee (induction). Concretely, the interviewer promotes narration through queries which generate story-telling and waits until individual statements fit into a pattern. Inversely, new patterns of understanding can develop with the different questioning techniques for generating understanding or former patterns can be corrected through later details or controlling by the interviewee. This complex conversation strategy (the usage of previous knowledge to develop questions, without obscuring the original view of the respondent) is a highly demanding task of the interviewer. The researcher would therefore do best to conduct the interviews him- or herself and not to hand over the task to an assistant or survey institute. This is in principle possible because theoretical sampling does not deal with large numbers of respondents. [18]

## 5. Analyzing PCIs

Given the principle of object orientation, there are various methods of analysis depending on the research interests and topics of reference. The following suggestion—which attempts to combine a thorough case-study analysis with the construction of a typology based on a relatively large number of cases—is based on many years of experience in research projects pursuing questions in the fields of socialization and life-course theory (e.g. HEINZ et al. 1987; KÜHN & WITZEL 1999). [19]

The basis of analyzing procedures (WITZEL 1996) are cases, i.e. complete transcriptions of the interviews. The first step refers consistently to pre-interpretations initiated in the interview which the investigator interprets sentence by sentence. This analytic step results in the marking of the text with key words derived from the interview guidelines and concepts which are suited to the thematic aspects in the interview partner's account. [20]

These markings can also serve as a basis for the development of a coding grid to build a concept-driven data bank for the documentation. This data bank can be used as an electronic register to facilitate access for complex searches. With the help of "retrievals", i.e. of a data-bank system of links based on key words ("codes") or variables (such as sex or occupation) with passages from the text (see PREIN 1996), places in the original text under various aspects can be found or cross-links between different places in the text and individual cases can be created (KÜHN & WITZEL 1999). [21]

Furthermore, noteworthy thematic observations are assigned to an analytical grid of "in-vivo-codes" (i.e. everyday colloquialisms). Such ideas for analysis can be put into notes or sketched in what GLASER and STRAUSS (1998) call "memos". [22]

The next step in the case study consists of the completion of the *case description* or *biographical chronology* which is to permit the interpreters to become familiar with the case. In the course of the analysis this allows one to bring individual statements or sequences of text into a general context, e.g. of a biographical process. This total picture also facilitates initiating the constantly necessary re-analysis. [23]

The *dossier* contains a comment by the researcher on the composition of the available interview materials, special features of the case, interpretive uncertainties, unusual events and methodical errors. [24]

The development of *case-specific main topics* is a first step of theory development with thematically or biographically oriented ideas for interpretation. They are integrated into concise statements and linked to places in the original text, paraphrases and analytical statements ("open-ended coding", STRAUSS & CORBIN 1990). At the same time, heuristics, as for example an action theory model, can be useful for understanding specific topics of a case's subjective logic ("axial coding", *ibid*). This shows once more how an open-ended and theory-

guided procedure is interlaced. This level of defining theoretical terms is finally *discursively validated* individually in relation to the text and then by an evaluation team. [25]

*Systematic contrasting through case comparisons* aims chiefly at working through main topics in common among cases. Individual cases are compared to one another with respect to their substantive characteristics and features, such as sex, region and occupation, according to the principle of "maximum and minimum contrast" (GERHARDT 1986, p.69); and similarities and differences are sought. Interesting problem areas, links, etc., are ascertained and documented in memos. The aim here is to develop "*core categories*" (STRAUSS & CORBIN 1990), for example conceived of as a typology, which are then used in the next level of evaluation of "selective codification" as the basis for formulating a hypothesis for interpretation, which by this time, theoretically-guided or deductive, is supplemented with additional empirical material. [26]

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