

Who Am I Interviewing? *Understanding the Fundamental Relation in Social Research*

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Abstract

The last twenty years have seen an increasing emphasis on the role of the subject both in sociological theory and in methodological guides on the unstructured qualitative research interview. I will argue that this emphasis on subjects is misplaced and cannot lead to a clear understanding of social relations or sociological interviewing. To make this argument I will look at what could be taken as the basic social relation in social research: the qualitative interview between sociologist and research participant. I will argue that major methodological problems arise when interviewees are addressed as identified subjects and when interviews are understood as exchanges between subjects. I will also argue that sociologists who presume subjectivity in this way are not clear about the methodology of interviews because they are not clear about the basic logic of social relation. As well as trying to clarify this logic, I will also try to draw out some of the practical implications of a genuinely social understanding of the interview.

Keywords: subjectivity, relational ontology, qualitative research, interviews, Martin Buber, ethics

1. Introduction

The last twenty years have seen an increasing theoretical emphasis on the role of the subject in sociology, a trend influenced by political debates about identity and by post-structuralist concerns with power, knowledge and the production of subjects. This trend has been matched and reinforced by changes in understandings of research methodology. In this period, defensive attitudes to the unstructured qualitative research interview (e.g. Kvale, 1994; Heyink and Tymstra, 1993) have given way to much more confident advocacy of its value (e.g. Hopf, 2004, Marvasti, 2004). While some of these advocates simply presumed that the qualitative research *reveals* subjective perspectives, which are said to be a necessary supplement to the objective perspectives of quantitative research, post-structuralism brought a more sophisticated concern with the way the research interview *constructed* the subjectivity of the interviewee and interviewer. Holstein and Gubrium were at the forefront of this trend, arguing that ‘Researchers are increasingly sensitive to the *subjects* who lurk behind the interview participants, and the varied roles they play in the production of knowledge. This, of course, prompts researchers to carefully theorise just who these subjects are, and how they affect the interview process’ (2003: 5; see also Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Järvinen, 2000). As a result of this concern, influential interview guidebooks urged researchers to become ‘more sensitive ... to “distinctive respondents”, such as the elderly, children, homosexuals, women and people of color’ (Marvasti, 2004: 25). To equalise the power dynamic in the interview, researchers were urged to reveal their own subject positions.

While I am indebted to this post-structuralist tradition, and accept the importance of its concerns, I will argue that this emphasis on subjects cannot itself lead to a clear understanding of social life. I will argue instead that social life relies on the possibility of a form of relational ontology which is more fundamental than the ontology of subjects and from which identifiable subjectivity emerges. Social analysis is not beginning at the right place unless it begins with an understanding of this ontological domain of unidentifiable relations. To make this general argument I will look at what could be taken as the fundamental social relation in social research: the qualitative interview between sociologist and research participant. I will argue that sociologists who understand the interview in terms of interacting subjectivities are not clear about the methodology of interviews because

they are not clear about the basic ontology of social relations. I will also try to draw out some of the practical implications of a genuinely relational understanding of the interview.

2. Identifying the Interviewee

I begin close to home. The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of New South Wales offers a template for Participant Information Statements (PISs), which begins with a paragraph on ‘participant selection and the purpose of study’:

You (*i.e. the research participant*) are invited to participate in a study of (*state what is being studied*). We (*i.e. the investigators*) hope to learn (*state what the study is designed to discover or establish*). You were selected as a possible participant in this study because (*state why the participant was selected*).

I have recently begun to wonder about the identification of the research participants in the template paragraph’s last sentence. I am not raising questions about sampling procedures, or about different ways of recruiting potential participants. I am talking of how this sentence *identifies* the person who is, let’s assume, to be interviewed, and I am thinking about the methodological difference between interviewing an identifiable subject and interviewing a whole person.

As its etymology suggests, an interview should be more than an exchange of views between two subject positions, whether we think of these subjects as pre-established or as being (re)constructed in the very exchange. Not an alternation of positions or monologues, an *inter*-view is a dialogue, a perspective from *between* positions, which is to say from no definable Euclidean location, from the midst and body of the relation itself. In Bohm’s phrase (1985: 179), it requires ‘a new kind of mind’ which lets go of subject positions. People do not press out words of a dialogue from an inner realm: they find themselves in *dia*-logue by letting the words pass *through* them, words that are at once new and familiar, at once inside and outside (see Metcalfe and Game, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1974: 19). Identification is problematic because it closes down this undefinable space of difference and relation, the space *in between* interviewer and interviewee, which should be the space of potential explored in any worthwhile interview.

The key sentences in most PISs derived from my HREC’s template begin with a ‘You’ and end with a definition built into an identity claim: because you a doctor, because you are a person of color, because you go to Bondi beach in the early morning. This identification has profound ethical, methodological, ontological and epistemological implications. It alters the approach of the interview, the questions interviewers ask, the way they ask them, the way interviewees respond and the way they are heard; more fundamentally it changes who interviewer and interviewee *are*, and thereby changes the logical justification of qualitative social research (see Järvinen, 2000). Is the research studying represented subjective identities or living people? Is it to learn of the other by collecting representative stories *about* a life or is it to learn by being, for the time of the interview, *part* of the other’s whole life? These are quite different logics. That is why this article is concerned with the question of whom it is you are listening to when you interview someone.

My contention is that you can learn of subjectivity while in an interview with a whole person, but that you cannot experience a whole person if you are a subject in an exchange. Perhaps the study of subjects is enough for certain narrow research purposes (see Silverman, 1998), but it is not the same as the respect for whole people and the understanding of social relations.

3. Who is ‘You’?

As an advertisement used for recruiting volunteers, the PIS is directly related to the World War I slogan ‘Your country needs YOU’, spoken by Lord Kitchener directly to the viewer, who has become a haplessly identified victim. In recognising themselves as the ‘you’ to whom the PIS is addressed, potential research participants are identifying with the objective descriptor that follows the word ‘because’. Yes, each reader is invited to concede, this research project is directed at me because that is who I am: I am the type of person they desire (the doctor, the person of color, the beach runner) (see Lacan, 1977: 1-7; Althusser, 1971: 118; Williamson, 1984: 50). As post-structuralism showed, this interpellation is not a neutral procedure, for there is selective misrecognition whenever a subject is formed through identification with a proffered objectification:

power ... categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects (Foucault, 1983:212).

Through subjectification, a person becomes an object to themselves; instead of accepting their undefinable potential, they identify with the object they desire to be. While identity promises power and self-certainty, it

produces this effect by splitting the whole person, repressing characteristics that do not match the objective definition. Every presentation of a self involves anxious repression of a shadow self, of the difference between what the subject shows to and hides from the world.

To better understand subjectification, I will call on the relational concepts of Martin Buber, whose book *I and Thou* (1958) shows another way in which 'I' can address 'you'. Buber would see the last sentence of the PIS paragraph as a fundamental ethical and ontological slippage, from the unmediated response of a direct relation into the alienated world where beings are treated as things or types. He calls the former the realm of the *I-Thou* (also translated as *I-You*), and the latter the realm of the *I-It*. The logic of former is based on dialogue and the infinitude or no-thing-ness of 'the between', the logic of the latter on the finitude of identification, subjects and objects:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something.... This and the like together establish the realm of *It*.

But the realm of the *Thou* has a different basis.

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object.... *Thou* has no bounds....

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*.... No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*.... (Buber, 1958: 4, 11)

In the realm of *I-It*, a subject in a world of objects, Buber can categorise a person biostatistically, or according to their socioeconomic status, or according to their skin colour, or their occupation, or their aesthetic attributes, or their history, or their psychological profile. This is the logic of the PIS's paragraph that defines the object that the researcher desires. In all these cases, Buber says, the other 'remains my object'.

But it isn't *always* like this: the *I-Thou* relation is different. Buber goes on. 'It can, however, also come about' that in considering the person I become bound up in relation with them. 'To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider [them]. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away ..., and no knowledge that I would have to forget' (1958: 7). Every partial objectively-true identification of the person is brought together in this relation with the other, but none are turned into definitions. The being is not an object but is simply, undefinably, immediately *present*: they are just as they *are*, whatever that is. They cannot be known abstractly, but only through the *here* and *now* of their presence. *I* can say to this being the word '*You*' because their you-ness is before me, but, unlike the PIS, I cannot define what that you-ness is.

If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things.

Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* or *She* ... able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities....

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words ... so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be *Thou*. (1958: 8-9)

Buber is describing a relation where the *Thou* is not objectified or identified or represented, but his implication is that the *I* must also be in a non-identified state, for there is no object of perception to turn the *I* into a subject. This point is crucial to our understanding of the interview process: *exchanges* happen between subjects and their objects in the realm of *I-It*, but *relations* do not involve subjects or objects, even if subjective/objective definitions (hair colour, occupation, other identifiers) are not denied. An interview between the subjects and objects of knowledge takes place in the *I-It*, but there is neither subjectivity nor objectivity in the *I-Thou* interview: there is just what *is*.

By distinguishing this ontological realm of relation, Buber highlights the issues at stake when the PIS turns 'you' into an objective definition and asks the research participant to identify with it. Participants are being asked to ignore their variousness and unbounded potential, and to speak *of* their lives, from outside them. The PIS invites people to adopt the alienated perspective of an identity, to self-consciously see themselves from the researcher's perspective, as this has been defined in the PIS. The basic logic is not changed, of course, if the PIS and interview offer in turn a number of subject positions to speak from (see Marvasti, 2004: 29; Hermanns, 2004: 210).

Now it is likely that the research participants often already see and live out their lives from this alienated perspective, for this is normality in the realm of *I-It*; it is indeed likely that the identity proffered in the PIS is one with which they are familiar and from which they derive pride. Nevertheless, if the interview is structured according to the *I-It* logic of the PIS, its presumption of subjecthood will put the wholeness of the immediate and undefinable 'you' beyond recognition.

4. The Interview of *I* and *It*

Any encounter has shifts of mood, from openness to anxiety or from defendedness to presence, and these shifts involve changes in the ontological and ethical condition of *I* and *You*. To characterise an interview as an experience of *I-It* state is therefore to construct an ideal type, by excluding moments of *I-Thou* relation. With this qualification in mind, I want to identify characteristics of interviews carried out in the identity logic that underpins the PIS.

Buber's *I-It* operates in accordance with Hegel's account of the logic of desire, subjectivity and the struggle of master and slave (1977), and Lacan's account of the logic of the mirror (1977). Formed through identification with objects of desire, the subject sees the world not as it is but as a mirror, a reflection of and on its self. Because otherness in the world is thereby made a threat that can undermine the return to self, the subject, desiring to have its identity confirmed, seeks to negate the undefinable difference of the other. This combination of violence toward and hidden dependence upon the other is the basis of the master/slave struggle. Recognition of its role in research underlies the acute political sensitivity of post-structuralist accounts of the unstructured interview (see Järvinen, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Marvasti, 2004).

Interviews might display this struggle for mastery when the interviewee is mortified by the implications of the researcher's questions, or challenges the interviewer's presumption, or refuses to engage with the questions. Mostly, though, everyday etiquette ensures that the struggle can go unacknowledged: words and gestures are chosen to allow both parties to feel that their subjectivity has been confirmed. The diplomatic achievement that lets people talk past each other is, however, an undermining of the research function of the interview. Rather than being open to the difference of reality, open to the difference made by this particular hour in their lives, the interview is reduced to confirmation of the interviewer's and interviewee's representations of the world.

Interviews contain countless deliberate and unconscious signs of how interviewers are presenting themselves and asking to be seen by the interviewee. (We are clearly in the terrain here of Goffman's analyses of the presentation of self (eg 1971). These signs will come in the researcher's self-introduction but will be carried through in the way they address the interviewee, in their dress and demeanour, in the way they phrase their questions, in the responsiveness and in the implicit tests of research relevance that guide their questions. At the same time and through the same signs, interviewers will be indicating how they see the interviewee: as, for example, a doctor or person of color or soft-sand runner. Through these interpellations, they indicate the sort of answers they want and those they would judge irrelevant.

Despite the diplomatic skills of interviewer and interviewee, the identity-based interview is necessarily marked by tension, self-consciousness and disrespect, because of its desirous logic. If the interviewee, for example, is seen as having knowledge that the interviewer wants, and if an interview is regarded as successful when it gives the interviewer what they want, the interviewee is an obstacle to be overcome (see Phillips, 1994). The interviewer desires to cover certain representative issues in the available time, and to do so they need to avoid irrelevance. Accordingly, they monitor and adjust the interview according to normative standards. Am I being friendly enough to get what I need? Have my prepared questions mapped out all the key issues associated with that identity? Is there enough time to get through all the questions? Is this answer going off on a tangent? What question should I ask next? Does that answer give me what I need? And all this internal chatter is going on while the interviewer is, ostensibly, listening to the person before them. The distracted and subtly disrespectful quality of the listening shows interviewees that it is their collection of representative stories and not their real living presence that matters to the interviewer.

As I have said, this process can be satisfactory, can even be exhilaratingly affirming, for both interviewer and interviewee. Moreover the data from such an interview can seem rich and informative, and may provide the researcher with persuasive evidence. I contend, nonetheless, that it will be alienated material, both biased and abstracted from reality.

The alienation arises from the continuous identifications that shepherd the interviewee through such an exchange. If asked to speak as a doctor or person of color or soft-sand runner, they are not being asked to talk *from* their whole life but *about* one compartment of their life, and this distance makes them self-conscious. Rather than directly responding to questions, they first test and judge them: What is that question getting at? What sort of

answer is the researcher looking for? What is relevant to this interview? How will I look if I say that? Consciously and unconsciously, they select stories and details to match what they think is expected of them as doctor or person of color. Both to protect themselves and to satisfy the desires of the interviewer, interviewees must guard against openness, because openness is not the expression of the subject under question.

When answers are *about* and not *of* the interviewee's life, the interviewee is reliant on voluntary memory, that is, on those memories accessible from the subject position to which their unique and incomparable being is at that moment reduced. Even if their answers are useful for certain purposes, there will be a certain lifelessness, abstraction and generalisation about them, because, rather than remembering moments in their lives, interviewees are being incited to recall *stories* about events. This representational distance means that the events being recalled are not being relived and reconsidered in the now of the interview.

In short, then, an interview derived from exchanges between would-be subjects is unable to access the truly relational realm of *I-Thou*, even though this is, for Buber, the fundamental reality that holds social life. In such an interview, the interviewee is being addressed as a subject and an object, the I of *I-It*, and not as a whole person, the I of *I-Thou*.

5. Three Examples

I will give three examples of the reduction that occurs when interviewees talk from a subject position, rather than as whole people.

My first example comes from a student in my methodology class, talking about her experience of interviewing a person who was a fellow student. Early in the interview, Jess asked her companion to describe a typical Monday. Only having read the interview many times did Jess realise the significance of the sidestep with which the interviewee responded: 'Oh, that's not a typical day, because I don't go to classes on Monday, so I'll tell you about my Tuesdays.' The interviewee was constructing a typical life that she thought would suit Jess, and to do so she was excising sections of her life as irrelevant. For the purposes of this interview, she was not a person: she was a student. But how could Jess at the end of the interview understand this woman's life, even her life 'at university', if she didn't know what was being repressed to bring about this clear subjective position?

My second example comes from a large study about community in an inner city suburb of Sydney. One interview was with a retired police sergeant, 'Stan', who was asked to tell us about his long career as a beat policeman. I began by asking Stan how he came to join the police, what attracted him to the job, when he got to the inner city suburb in question, and what it was then like in this suburb from a police perspective. His answer to the last question was 700 uninterrupted words of energetic, witty, well-wrought analysis of the socio-economic and historical underpinnings of crime in the suburb and of the challenges it posed to police. From there we went on to cover many other aspects of his career, and, apparently enjoying the experience as much as I was, Stan brushed aside the chance to finish the interview after an hour was up, even though, by this stage, we were both tiring. Finally, half an hour later, I asked him to tell me about what he did as a sergeant to introduce new police into the area. And out again came the witty well-wrought analysis of the socio-economic and historical underpinnings of crime in the suburb and of the challenges it posed to police. It was 550 words this time, but included, word for word, some of the same colourful phrases, such as the claim that 'all the young ladies normally wear stiletto shoes and they're coming home at all hours of the day and night, and it sounds like the Charge of the Light Brigade.'

My guess is that Stan drew upon his reserve of favourite stories because my interpellations encouraged him to see our talk as the induction of yet another novice into the police perspective on this suburb. It was a very interesting and helpful interview, but if tiredness had not allowed the Light Brigade to charge twice I might not have noticed that the literary polish on such stories was as much designed to conceal tensions in the police subject position as to reveal the whole complexity and confusion of police life on the beat. From such stories I was not likely to learn the lived experience of a beat policeman who, for example, at a certain hour, was required to enter a particular domestic dispute, not knowing the people in dispute, not sure of the facts, not having the appropriate legal remedies, unable to predict the future dangers, but knowing that these people would still be neighbours after he left. More to the point, if it was not already an anecdote, Stan himself would need to learn about the lived experience of a beat policeman by talking through such an encounter in the interview. The complexity and confusion of such lived experience is always lost in the biographical anecdotes we carry around with us, stories that package our lives and let us tell *about* them, from a safe distance, as if the occasion of telling was not itself part of that life (see Järvinen 2000). How interviewers understand the stories depends, though, on whether they recognise the logical difference between living testimony and a prepared representative story.

My third example comes from my experience with a student whose thesis I supervised. This case does not involve interviews, but I include it because it is unusually revealing about the life-story form common in subject-based interviews. I had taught Maddy as an undergraduate, but when she came to discuss supervision of her honours thesis, she had been away from university for a year, caring for her first child. I was surprised when she announced that she was going to study the effects in Africa of the marketing of Nestles' powdered baby-milk products, for this didn't match her previous interests, so I asked her to tell me more. As time passed and her thoughts unspooled and her defences dropped, it became clear to both of us that this topic had been chosen to satisfy her expectations of a proper thesis topic. What she was really interested in was the experience of breast-feeding, which she and others in her mothers' group had found a revelatory experience.

Once Maddy had decided on this topic, she chose a methodological approach described in Frigga Haug's book *Female Sexualisation* (1987). Haug's 'memory work' involved a group of people meeting at regular intervals, swapping life-stories written to common prompts, and then doing a collective analysis of the stories. This method seemed perfect for developing the interests of Maddy's mothers' group.

Maddy was surprised that *none* of the stories at the first group session were of the wonderful experiences about which the mothers often talked. Instead, they were stories of bitter complaint: of frustrating babies, of interfering mothers-in-law, of ineffectual partners, of impossible demands, of unreliable domestic equipment. Our surprise turned to confusion when the pattern was repeated at the second and third meetings.

At about this time, we came upon a radio interview with the novelist Tim Winton, who said, as a throwaway line, 'Well, of course, all stories are war stories'. Winton was highlighting the role of trouble in the story form: that the story begins at the beginning, which ends when trouble enters; that the body of the story is the attempt by the protagonist to overcome trouble; that the establishment of some new equilibrium serves as the conclusion. Winton was also drawing attention to the role of the story in the continuous reconstruction of subjects: how we produce ourselves as subjects by identifying with the heroes of our (auto)biographies. Furthermore, Winton seemed to imply, there are blind-spots generated by our identification with these life-stories: our lived life is not the same as the war-stories with which we identify. Beginnings, middles and ends are attributes of the life-story and not directly or necessarily of the life (see Berger, 1991: 21-23; Game and Metcalfe, 1996; Sacks, 1985; Järvinen, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998).

Wondering if the request that the mothers tell life-stories was shaping and restricting what they could say of breast-feeding, Maddy changed the instruction for the fourth group meeting. The mothers were asked to write poems about the breast-feeding experience, inspired by a particular prompt. Sure enough, the poems evoked a different experience. No more were there always protagonists operating in linear time, no more were there always opponents to overcome. These were poems about the experience of breast-feeding, but typically they suspended the self-certainty of separate entities, mother and baby. There could be held moments, when nothing happened, and nothing had to be achieved, when no moral judgment was required. In short, the poems were written from *I-Thou* experiences that were apparently inaccessible to the mothers when they describing the formation of identity. While not a Pollyanna-ish denial of the trouble of the stories, the poems implicitly re-evaluated the stories' judgmental self-certainty.

If Maddy hadn't heard the mothers outside the research setting, and if we hadn't heard Tim Winton's comment, we might only have had the stories of trouble through which the breast-feeding mothers produced themselves, oppositionally, in *I-It* mode. We might never have known of the *I-Thou* realm of experience about which there were no subject-based stories to tell. Because identities are an important part of their lives, these stories are always important, but to make them the centre of an understanding is to mistake the logic of an identity for the experience of a whole life.

6. The Interview of *I* and *Thou*

Before going on to draw out the practical implications of this argument, I need to take the abstract claim that the *I-Thou* includes the *I-It*, and show what it means in the interview situation.

As has been noted, the *I-Thou* is not an exclusion of the *I-It* and does not involve denial of objective and subjective knowledge. The point is that participants in the *I-Thou* suspend their *identification* with such representations: what would have been objects and subjects are present in the form of potential. To explain this, imagine an interview about the medical profession between a 'sociologist' and a 'doctor'. In an *I-It* mode, the sociologist who is not-doctor is seeking to acquire knowledge that the interviewee already possesses or that is called out in the negotiation between these two subjects. To remain in the doctor subject position, the interviewee will repress aspects of their lives that do not match their presentation of self. If the interview

develops in an *I-Thou* mode, however, the lived experience of ‘doctoring’ is present to both interviewer and interviewee, but is not located in either of them, because both of them are open to the potential of dialogue.

When an interview explores the implications of ‘doctoring’ in *I-Thou* mode, it becomes impossible to distinguish a question from an answer, because every answer gives rise to new questions and new answers. This is the ‘between’ of the *inter*-view and the ‘through’ of the *dia*-logue. The ‘interviewee’ finds their potential through the ‘interviewer’, and vice versa, and in both cases this acceptance of the other implies acceptance of those differences in their own lives that had to be repressed to maintain a subject position. The erstwhile doctor is therefore surprised to learn about their own life through the perfectly attuned questions of the erstwhile sociologist, who in turn learns from the ‘doctor’ how to ask appropriate ‘sociological’ questions. Through their comments and questions, both are simultaneously being sociologist and doctor, and yet neither *identifies* themselves in the role of the ‘doctor’ or the ‘sociologist’. Their previous subjective positions are potential ways of being but no longer definitions of who they are.

Because of the sense that doctoring is unfolding its implications in the here and now of the interview, doctoring is not just represented in the interview, not just talked *about*; it is open living experience. . Because it is witnessed, being *heard*, it can be felt and tested, and can testify, *directly*. Buber is getting at this point when he insists that awaited answers cannot be received. The answer comes

not from a distance but from the air round about me, noiselessly.... Really it did not come; it was there. It had been there – so I may explain it – even before my [question]: there it was, and now, when I laid myself open to it, it let itself be received by me.... If I were to report with what I heard it I should have to say ‘with every pore of my body.’ (2002: 3)

This quotation helps us appreciate that Buber does not suggest that a dialogic interview requires a very *active* interviewer who interposes their own thoughts and experiences and suggestions. Buber is instead insisting on a situation where it is not possible to distinguish active from passive (c.f. Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). ‘The *Thou* meets me’, he says. ‘But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one’ (1958: 11). The meeting happens in a *here* that is not definable location and a *now* that is not a definable point in chronology. Rather than a sense of *exchange*, of words moving from here to there in a temporal sequence, Buber is thinking of what T.S. Eliot calls a ‘stillness [that is] still moving’ (2000: 17). To listen and to speak in an *I-Thou* relation are both active aspects *and* both passive aspects, and neither has temporal priority. This form of listening allows speaking as much as this form of speaking allows listening; it is a listening that speaks and a speaking that listens (see Gordon, 2011; Metcalfe and Game, 2008).

In the *I-Thou*, then, the ‘sociologist’ and ‘doctor’ are located both inside and outside the two participants in dialogue. After the interview, in the desirousness of their normal lives, both interview participants will presumably reclaim their professional identifications, but it is likely that these will have changed in the interim, that they have re-learned the meaning of their identities through their intimate and undefended experience of the meaning of the other.

Once we understand these qualities of the *I-Thou*, we are able to understand how a sociologist can enter the interview self-consciously, with their qualifications, their store of sociological knowledge, their professional duty of care and their code of ethical conduct, with their research goals, their PISs and their lists of planned interview questions, and how they can find that these identifications have been suspended during the course of the interview and then later find that none of these responsibilities and resources were abandoned.

When the ‘sociologist’ is a whole person, and not a subject identified with a role, they have greater resources at their disposal, for they can accept what is different to them and allow their *relation* with the ‘interviewee’ to do the work of sociologising. I like to think of the PIS and the signed Consent Form marking the subject position ‘sociologist’ while the person who previously identified with this role gets on with the more important sociological work of actually *meeting* the other. This work will not go exactly as they had planned or wanted, but it will be all the more interesting, and all the more respectful and ethical, for the difference that the other has made.

Not only is there nothing in the *I-Thou* mode that precludes an exploration of the significance of identifications, it is *only* in this mode that identifications can be analysed: in the *I-It* mode the identificatory basis of subjectivity is taken for granted, so that people are not obliged to reveal how every identification is also a repression of being. But the *I-Thou* mode of interview does more than allow identification to be recognised for what it is. Because dialogue allows people to escape their defensive identifications, it allows them access to the differences that would normally be repressed in order to maintain the ideal of self-sameness. Most important, it alone allows

recognition of relational realms of life not even dreamt of in the philosophy of subjects and objects located in Euclidean space and linear time.

7. Practical Implications

Before I conclude this article, I will offer some thoughts on the practical implications of its argument. Because of its non-subjective and non-desirous logic, an interview of *I* and *Thou* cannot be brought about through acts of subjective will; such dialogues *happen*, but cannot be produced as the satisfaction of a desire for them. Nevertheless, there are practices that make interviewers more ready to accept such occurrences when they occur. These practices are ascetic, changing what we can know by changing who and how we are in the world.

Interviewers are advised not to ask their interviewee their research questions, but often this advice isn't taken deeply enough. While there are good reasons to identify potential interviewees by research category (doctor, person of color, soft-sand runner), interviewers should never address them through that category in the interview itself, unless they are willing to accept the misrecognitions that follow. Instead, they should face the interviewee as a person, as the 'you' with whom an 'I' is present; this will involve a respectful care not to presume that the interviewee's life is compartmentalised around subjectivities, much less the subjectivities that the researcher has identified through their recruitment categories.

My initial step in mentally preparing for interviews is to list all the questions I want to ask my interviewee, but the real preparation comes when I then have to imaginatively reconsider these questions so that they don't reflect the presumptions of the 'I' who *wants* something from this 'It'. I have to make the questions more naive, less leading, more likely to arise from my interviewee's own life. This requires considerable discipline and quiet attention. And then, in the interview itself, after formally setting out the research context in the manner of the PIS, I try, when possible, to set aside prepared questions and allow new ones to emerge directly from the call and response of the interview. Merleau-Ponty comments that the philosopher is 'a perpetual beginner' (1962: xv), and I take this to imply that sociologists must also have a discipline that requires them to relearn their way in each research encounter.

Putting aside my prepared questions does not guarantee that the interview becomes a meeting of *I* and *Thou*, but it does clear away some obstacles to the change. I am more likely to focus on the person before me instead of being distracted by what I want from them. I am less likely to defend myself against the unpredictability of the encounter behind the shield of my separate identity as 'sociologist'. This is the moment when research ethics extends beyond adherence to professional codes and becomes an issue of ontology, morality and epistemology: who I am shapes how respectfully I can be with the other and changes what I can learn.

Drawing on Simone Weil, Murdoch talks of this process through the concept of 'attention', and what she says of great art applies to the art of interviewing.

The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy, the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what there is outside one. Rilke said of Cezanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is.' This is not easy, and requires, in art or morals, a discipline.... We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. (Murdoch, pgs 57-8; c.f. Weil, 2002: 116ff; Rogers, 1980; Eliot, 1951: 24; Williams, 2005; Metcalfe and Game, 2010)

When Murdoch says that the artist 'ceases to be', she means that they cease to be a self, a subject. When she says that they attend to the existence of something else, she means that they accept difference, but this isn't an *external* difference: it is a difference that is at once inside and outside, for otherwise the artist couldn't, for example, paint that to which they attend.

Sometimes people presume that this attention must be intense, but, as Freud pointed out, deliberate effort leads to 'divided attention' (1953: 75-6). Freud instead recommended a lighter 'evenly suspended attention' which doesn't judge or interpret or identify with the speaker. 'It consists in not directing one's notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same "evenly suspended attention"... in the face of all that one hears' (2001: 111). This allows the interviewer to be affected by more than the words through which the interviewee presents or represents their experience: it allows the interviewer to receive too the interviewee's tone of voice, their gestures and bearing, their minor hesitations, the unconscious presentation of the whole person. This notice will not be a conscious interpretation of the interviewee, but a light feeling, coming from the relation, for the response for which the situation calls. The interviewer attends to the interviewee by staying aware of the flickering feelings passing

through their being, feelings which are both internal and external. In this way, they respond as a whole person to the whole person before them, avoiding the temptation of fixing only on the interviewee's words.

Two important consequences follow from this form of attention. The first concerns its equanimity. Interviewers often try to relax interviewees by greeting their answers with affirmations of personal support or agreement. Rather than producing a safe environment, however, such affirmations show interviewees that this is a judgmental setting, and that if they vary from the line of their answers, they may lose the interviewer's support. A more genuinely supportive environment relies on the equanimity and 'suspended' attention of the interviewer who ascetically withholds identifications.

The second point is that awareness and suspended attention give us a different way of considering how to respond to an interview that falls into irrelevancy. This is the fear that often convinces researchers of the need to maintain control over the encounter. My suggestion is that 'irrelevance' can be better understood as a shift from dialogue to monologue, from the inclusivity of relation to the exclusion of identity. It is as likely to arise when the interviewee is on as when they are off topic.

If my interviewee is being undefended, I cannot imagine how any comment can be irrelevant, as any part of their lives is of the whole, part of every other part. If, however, I become aware of being slightly bored as they speak, this tells me that the relation has lost its hold, perhaps because I sense that I am being talked *at*, that the interviewee has shifted ontological mode and is now giving me a defensive story. The psychoanalyst Winnicott advised that counsellors could work with anyone who didn't bore them, and by this he meant that you could only work with people when they provide the play you need for a relation with them (see Khan, 1989: 1).

When interviewers detect this hint of boredom, it is not time to drag the interviewee back on topic. What is required is a question that allows our relation with the interviewee to get real again. Usually, this will involve a question that opens up habitual self-consoling stories and allows the interview to regain a sense of the unexpected. I might ask the interviewee about a particular moment or detail in their story, putting a brake on the narrative rush from beginnings to ends. I might encourage them to pause on a word or metaphor they have used. Thinking of Hillman's archetypal psychology (see Hillman, 1977; Moore, 1992), I might ask about the counterfactual that is buried in every story: what would have happened if trouble had *not* been opposed, what was the acceptance that was unacceptable? These questions would be ways of responding with genuine interest to the stories that had previously been boring me: being aware of my own boredom would allow me to turn back to the interviewee with renewed interest. The alternative, to suddenly drag the discussion back to the prepared path, is not only disrespectful, it forces the interviewee back into the researcher's favoured subject position.

This issue of boredom highlights the need for interviewers not to judge what the interviewee is saying, according to what they want from him or her, but instead to be aware of their own tendencies, identifications and reactions. In this case the judgment that the interviewee is off-topic was replaced by my light awareness that I am feeling bored, a sign that calls on me to ask a question that will change the social dynamic and return the interest in the interview. The logic will be the same if the interviewer becomes aware of feeling offended or impatient or anxious or feels the need to reassert their sociological control of the interview. Awareness is the interviewing technique which lets interviewers turn back to the dialogic relation when the interview has lost its holding capacity. It allows the relation to resume the work of asking the relevant sociological questions.

Keats argued that creative genius comes from 'negative capability': 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (quoted in Hopkins, 1984: 85). This capability also lies at the heart of sociological interview technique. The interviewer needs to be able to stay in the openness of the interview relation without anxiously reaching for the fix of subjective identity and the illusion of control that it offers. This requires ethical respect for the infinite mystery of the whole person with whom you conduct the interview. The interviewer needs to know that their responsibility is not to extract information from a research subject, but to engage in dialogue with the person before them.

8. Conclusion

The provocation for writing this article was the question: if sociologists do not understand a sociological interview, what chance is there that they can understand other social situations? To put this even more simply: who is the sociologist interviewing?

In this article I have looked at assumptions about subjectivity that underlie recent trends in both sociological theory and methodology, hoping to make a contribution at both levels. Because of the influence of post-structuralism, subjectivity has come to be seen as a fundamental concern of social analysis, both the source and product of power, knowledge and objectification. In the same vein, the sociological interview has come to be

seen as a negotiation of subjectivity. I have argued, to the contrary, that the ontology of subjects is logically secondary to the ontology of relations. I have argued, as a consequence, that a good unstructured qualitative research interview is based on a relational ontology that allows for the possibility of, but is not fundamentally based on, subjects and objects.

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