1 Introduction

People continually reflect on themselves and their worlds, and they are continually called upon to give accounts of themselves. People have hopes, fears, reasons, intentions, and values, and they may experience times of satisfaction, confusion, and demoralization. The premise of this book is that researchers ought to and can study these matters. In this book, we give readers the conceptual framework and practical tools to do so.

We have written this book for students and researchers who are new to qualitative research. We have been doing qualitative research for more than two decades. Each of us has taught courses on qualitative research for many years and supervised such research in a variety of contexts. We have taught psychology students, medical students, students in interdisciplinary programs such as gender studies, and social science researchers new to this type of research. We have also jointly conducted seminars on research methods in several countries and for scholars from many backgrounds. And we have written about theories and practices of gender research (Magnusson and Marecek, 2012). This book draws on all of these experiences as teachers, supervisors, and researchers. Our hope is that readers of this book will become adept and judicious practitioners of the research methods that we present.

Introducing interpretative research

Before we proceed, we pause to introduce a key term. For the types of research methods you will learn here, the term qualitative research is the term most commonly used. However, we use the term *interpretative research.* We have chosen this term because it is both more precise and more descriptive. Interpretation is at the heart of the research methods we describe in this book. The goal of these methods is to understand – that is, to interpret – the meanings that people ascribe to events and actions, how they make these meanings their own, and how they negotiate these meanings in interactions with other people. The term interpretative research thus forthrightly proclaims the central purpose of the research as well as the central activity of the researcher.

Another reason why we use the term interpretative research is that it sidesteps the many misunderstandings that surround the term qualitative research. To take a prime misunderstanding, qualitative research and quantitative research are often set in opposition to each other. That opposition rests on the notion that the fundamental distinction

between qualitative and quantitative research is whether or not a research project uses numbers (i.e., quantities). It takes only a moment's reflection to demolish that notion. On the one hand, most research – whether qualitative or quantitative – aims at least partly at some kind of estimates of some kind of quantities. On the other hand, in any research project, whether qualitative or quantitative, the researcher must make numerous qualitative judgments in the course of the project.

The research methods that we present in this book are grounded in certain assumptions about people and about what researchers can learn about people. Qualitative researchers (or, as we will call them from now on, interpretative researchers) think of people as always located in social contexts and as continually engaged in making sense of their experiences. The expression "making sense" refers to how people imbue things and events with meaning and, by doing so, make them understandable. Interpretative researchers are interested in people's ways of making sense of their activities, experiences, and relationships and how they plan and act in accord with these ways of making sense. We return to the topic of meaning-making later in this chapter.

The interpretative research methods that we include in this book have another feature in common. They direct attention to how people are situated in social contexts of several kinds. People are positioned within societal hierarchies and structures, and they are part of organizations, institutions, and social groups. Social contexts such as these set the frames for personal meaning-making. Indeed, people form meanings and modify them in the course of interactions within these social settings. These social formations can be thought of as interpretive communities that share a culture, that is, a patterned set of ways of understanding the world. We take up the topic of context and culture later in this chapter.

Interpretative researchers hold that the best way to learn about people's meanings and meaning-making is to listen to people talk about their experiences in their own way and in their words. People's own words afford the best access a researcher can have to how they understand their experiences. As you might guess, interpretative researchers rarely administer questionnaires and scales to their research participants because these instruments compel participants to respond to a limited array of alternatives that have been set by the researcher. For interpretative research projects, loosely structured interviews that bring forward the participants' stories, memories, worldviews, and beliefs are far more useful. We devote a good portion of this book to helping you learn to do such interviews.

A good way to start to learn about interpretative research is to read about research projects. Therefore, we provide descriptions of several research projects throughout the book. We begin here with brief descriptions of five interpretative studies.

Living with agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is a psychiatric condition in which the sufferer experiences severe anxiety and even panic attacks and as a result is confined to home. Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs, two researchers in the USA, collected and analyzed an extensive set of interviews with a woman with long-standing agoraphobia so severe that it kept her housebound. In the interviews, the woman told many stories about her anxieties and her panic attacks. The researchers came to see that she used a consistent story organization as she told these stories. This story organization adhered closely to psychiatric theories that emphasized locations (e.g., heavy traffic and tight

spaces) as the triggers of panic attacks. This emphasis restricted the content of the stories to themes of helplessness and irrationality. By closely analyzing the stories, the researchers showed that there was another possible way of reading them. This reading featured the woman's difficulties in communicating with others, in particular her difficulty in asserting her needs and wishes to her husband (Capps & Ochs, 1995b).

Black racial identities. Andrea Dottolo and Abigail Stewart, two researchers in the USA, studied interviews with middle-aged Black people and White people who had grown up in a medium-sized city in a Midwestern state in the USA and had remained residents there. In the interviews, these individuals were asked to recollect experiences in which racial identity and race relations were salient. The analyses focused in detail on experiences of racial discrimination, which were described by many of the Black participants. For both Black men and Black women, such negative experiences often involved contact with the police. Thus, as the researchers noted, a common element of Black racial identity for these individuals was the expectation of racial discrimination (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008).

Stories of serial migration. Serial migration refers to a pattern in which parents migrate and their children follow several years later. Ann Phoenix, a researcher in England, interviewed adults who had experienced serial migration from the Caribbean to Great Britain when they were children. Phoenix found that the adult narrators told about their childhood experiences in ways that enabled them retrospectively to construct "adequate" childhoods in spite of having childhood experiences that were nonnormative according to Western ideals of family life and child development (Phoenix, 2008).

Negotiating about proper masculinity. Nigel Edley, a researcher in England, analyzed group interviews with young British men in their mid-teens. The interviews, which concerned a wide variety of everyday topics, brought up controversial matters such as sexual behavior and excessive drinking. Edley's analysis pinpointed how the young men placed themselves and one another in more or less "troubled" speaking positions during the course of the conversations. Such positions influenced participants' chances of being heard and taken seriously in the discussions (Edley, 2001).

Negotiating about proper femininity. Dawn Curry and her colleagues, a group of researchers in Canada, interviewed young teenage girls who participated in activities that were atypical for girls in their local context. These activities included studying science, skateboarding, and choosing to wear "uncool" clothes and hairstyles. Some of the girls explicitly presented themselves as being opposed to conventional "girlie"-ness. The researchers were interested in how this subset of girls talked about their opposition to "girlie"-ness. The researchers found that this subset of girls grounded their resistance to the rules of conventional femininity in a generalized discourse of rational individualism, not in feminism (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006).

These studies indicate the breadth of topics and issues that interpretative researchers study. The summaries also show some of the types of conclusions that interpretative researchers draw from their research, as well as the scientific contributions such research can make. Because of the specific interest in understanding people's meaning-making by studying their own words, interpretative research contributes some types of knowledge that researchers find difficult to acquire by other methods. For example, interpretative

research contributes useful knowledge about how people experience important events in their lives. See, for instance, the study of agoraphobia. Interpretative research also contributes useful knowledge about people's everyday practices, and how people make sense of those practices in the wider contexts of their lives. See, for instance, the study of girls who engaged in atypical leisure activities. And interpretative research contributes knowledge about how the societal and cultural context is implicated in and shapes people's ways of understanding themselves and others, thus making links between macro structures and micro processes. See, for instance, the study of African Americans' experiences of racial discrimination. Interpretative research can also contribute practical knowledge about what people's talk accomplishes in everyday interactions: how talk serves to place speakers and listeners in more or less comfortable positions in an interaction, as well as conveying content. See, for instance, the study of young men's group conversations.

Interpretative research methods have always had an important place in such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, education, and psychology. Like all scientific methods, interpretative methods are disciplined ways to obtain and organize knowledge. They are based on systematic observation. They are transparent: that is, researchers can clearly and precisely describe the procedures they used. This enables others to evaluate the soundness of the work or to repeat it. Like other forms of research, interpretative research generates knowledge that is provisional and subject to modification.

The theoretical framework for the book: some building blocks

The research approaches in this book all focus on people as they are situated in their sociocultural worlds and the ways that they make meaning of their lives. Here we describe some of the key concepts in those approaches.

Culture

We use the word culture to refer to the shared meanings, views of the world, moral visions, and practices that together make up a way of life for a social group. Elements of such shared meanings, views of the world, and practices often are so commonplace for members of a group that they are invisible *as meanings*, etc.; they are taken as "just the way things are." Culture is more than just the sum of the shared meanings, views of the world, and practices of a social group, however. At the same time, it is also the framework within which members of that group understand themselves and others (Bruner, 1986). This means that the cultural framework of a social group may limit the ways in which people are able to understand themselves and others (Shweder, 1991).

Two central components of culture are *worldview* and *ethos* (Geertz, 1973). A worldview is a model of how things are; this includes assumptions about people's resources, faculties, and capabilities. Ethos refers to moral, affective, and aesthetic aspects of life, including assumptions and values about what a person should be or become, and about what constitutes the good life.

The image of culture as a framework might be read to imply that culture is something that exists outside individuals. This would be a misrepresentation of a complex reality: On the one hand, it is people who create cultural frameworks, and therefore there could be no culture apart from the individual. On the other hand, there could be no individuals apart from culture. Culture is an integral part of each individual in a social group.

Meaning

We use the terms meaning and meaning-making when we write about how people understand themselves and the world around them. Let us consider the multiple senses in which people use the term meaning in everyday talk. Looking up "meaning" in a dictionary or thesaurus yields many different shades of meaning and scores of synonyms. Roughly speaking, there are four general senses of the word "meaning":

One sense is the message conveyed by a certain statement or the gist of an account. Some synonyms are substance, content, import, and point (as in "get to the point"). An example is "What is the meaning of that sentence?"

The second sense is the intention that is implied in a statement. Some synonyms are implication, spirit, sense, and tenor. An example is "I could get the meaning of his argument."

The third sense is the interpretation of an account. Some synonyms are explanation, analysis, and understanding. An example is "What could be the meaning of his dream?"

The fourth sense is the significance of what is said. Some synonyms are moral (as in "moral of the story") or lesson. An example is "The meaning of the parable is 'Love thy neighbor'."

All these senses of the term meaning come into play as we look closely at personal meaning and meaning-making in this book. Meaning is central to the book because meaning-making is a central human activity. In daily life, people continually impose personal meanings and order on the world. These meanings are connected to their sense of themselves, their previous experiences, and their expectations and plans. This is true moment to moment as well as on a larger timescale. People give meaning to their present activities and experiences and to their previous experiences on the basis of where they feel their life is going and where they want it to go. Therefore, meaning-making is connected to people's intentions. On the one hand, what people want to achieve in a particular situation to a large extent determines the sense that they make of that situation. On the other hand, the meanings of the world and of themselves that people bring to a situation serve as templates for action, which influence their plans, choices, and decisions in that situation (Bruner, 1990).

Personal meaning-making is not simply personal, however. As we noted in the section about culture, the resources for meaning-making are provided by culture. These resources both enable meaning-making and restrict the pool of available meanings. This means that the framework of culture simultaneously makes events knowable in some ways and not knowable in other ways. Moreover, personal meanings are always explicitly or implicitly negotiated with other people. It is such negotiations that determine which meanings will be dominant and which will be marginal in a particular

context. Such negotiations are often characterized by unequal power relations among those involved; the power to influence which meanings will be dominant is seldom distributed equally.

Talk and language

Most of what people do when they make meanings, negotiate about meanings, and use cultural resources in their meaning-making happens in language. People talk about what they have done and why; they discuss with others how a thing should be understood; they think about what things mean to them; and they often have cause to write down their arguments. And so on. Language is omnipresent in people's lives. But language is present in more than one way. On the one hand, people use language to express their personal ideas, wishes, or experiences. On the other hand, language to a great extent shapes how it is possible for people to express these ideas, wishes, or experiences.

It is not surprising that language should have this dual character, if you consider how children acquire language. When children are born, they enter a language environment that existed long before their birth. In this environment, they interact with people, they are spoken to, and they gradually learn to speak, all within the framework provided by the words and categories that these people use. People are in such language environments for their whole lives (Billig, 1996). Therefore, neither words nor their meanings can ever be purely "personal" or idiosyncratic. Speakers have to use already-existing words and expressions that they share with others in order to make themselves understood by these others. At the same time, word use certainly is often "personal," in the sense that a speaker creates a unique twist on shared words and meanings. Even the most idiosyncratic twists, however, need to be expressed in a language that can be understood by listeners (Kirschner & Martin, 2010).

Talk does more than express and shape personal experiences. Talk is also used to perform actions – to get things done (Edwards, 1997). For instance, in conversations with others, people do not use talk just to recount their experiences and opinions; they also use talk to do things like justify their actions or call others to account (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 2001). People can also use talk to bring across a communicated meaning *in a certain way* to a listener, to present themselves *in a particular light*, or to make a certain activity seem either worthwhile or pointless. This facet of talk is often referred to as "talk-as-action."

Interviews

Interviews – that is, face-to-face conversations structured by the researcher – provide an effective way to gather material that speaks to interpretative researchers' interests and goals. This is so because in a research interview, the interviewer asks the participant to explain herself and her world, and the participant has the task of telling the interviewer what she knows in a way that can be understood by an outsider. Interviewing is therefore a good way to locate clues to people's personal and cultural meanings that would be difficult to find in any other way (Quinn, 2005). Interviews can yield full and rich

accounts of how people see the world, what sense they make of it, and what concerns they bring to their lives. The talk that an interview conversation yields also is a window onto the linguistic and cultural resources that are available to the speaker, and that the speaker uses to make the world intelligible.

Our aims for the book: bringing practice and theory together

We have several aims for this book. Our first aim is that, after finishing the book, readers shall have gained competence in doing interpretative research. This includes how to develop research questions; decide about and contact participants; design interview guides and carry out interviews; select analytic procedures and carry out several kinds of analyses; and draw conclusions and write about projects. To fulfill this aim, we describe the concrete strategies and steps in each phase of a research project. In particular, we describe in close detail different ways of analyzing interview talk. This emphasis is deliberate; beginners usually find the analysis to be the most difficult part of an interpretative research project.

Our second aim is that readers shall acquire a working acquaintance with the distinctive goals of interpretative research. To accomplish this aim, we provide close-ups of the kinds of knowledge that different types of interpretative research yield; we combine these close-ups with detailed descriptions of specific projects.

Our third aim is that readers will develop an appreciation of the theoretical and epistemological commitments of interpretative researchers. Research methods are not "theory-neutral" tools but always part of larger theoretical frameworks. To fulfill this aim, we are careful to situate methods within their theoretical frameworks.

Our fourth aim is that readers will gain knowledge of how the theoretical frameworks inform the practical aspects of interpretative research. To fulfill this aim, we elaborate in detail the view of research participants as socially and culturally situated meaning-makers. We also describe in detail the view of interview talk as giving a unique set of clues about people's ways of understanding themselves and their worlds.

Many research approaches are compatible with the theoretical premises of interpretative research. Newcomers to interpretative research often find it difficult to know where to begin, because there are so many different methods on offer, such as narrative analysis, discourse analysis, phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, thematic analysis, and more. And, to make the beginning more difficult, researchers have developed several variants of all these approaches. This proliferation of methods and variations means that the methods are not so clearly delimited – or definable – as a learner might wish.

As teachers and supervisors of undergraduate and postgraduate students, we have repeatedly witnessed the confusion and uncertainty that the multitude of approaches creates. We have come to believe that beginners can best get a grip on research methods by becoming thoroughly familiar with some basic principles of interpretative research and how those principles guide practical choices about methods. This conviction has informed the way we wrote this book. We have distilled a number of premises and

assumptions that underlie the set of interpretative research approaches that we describe. We describe the central theoretical principles of each approach and present them in ways that we have found are accessible to beginners. And we present and work through the procedures of these approaches in detail.

The road map for the book

In this chapter, you have learned what we mean by "interpretative research" and you have read short descriptions of a few studies. We have briefly introduced the theoretical framework of the interpretative research approaches that the book presents. And you have seen what we aim to achieve with the book and our strategies for achieving these aims.

Chapter 2 offers an in-depth acquaintance with several projects that used interpretative methods and with some of the deliberations of the researchers as they worked on the projects. Material from some of these projects serves to illustrate analytical procedures in later chapters.

We then turn to the practical steps involved in preparing and planning studies and gathering interviews. Chapter 3 describes the first steps involved in planning an interpretative research project. It introduces the research journal as an essential tool for planning and keeping track of your work; it describes strategic ways to read the research literature and learn from other researchers; it considers how to assess the feasibility of a project; and it begins a discussion about how to develop and refine one's researchable questions. This discussion is continued in later chapters.

Chapter 4 takes up the many choices to be made about the participants in a project. It presents the principle of purposive selection of participants, including decisions about the number of participants. It also discusses how to contact and enlist potential participants and how to set up the interview situation. Finally, it reviews the ethical guidelines governing interview research.

Chapter 5 describes in detail how to construct an interview guide. It begins by introducing the format of the semi-structured interview. It describes the open-ended questions used in such interviews. In the chapter, we pay close attention to helping learners draw the crucial distinction between research questions, that is, the questions that guide the research project, and interview questions. The chapter gives advice about how to compose interview questions and follow-up questions for the different segments of an interview.

Chapter 6 presents the principles and practices for conducting interviews in an interpretative research project. It gives an overview of the phases of a semi-structured interview. It also presents practical interviewing techniques for typical interview situations, as well as a discussion of unusual and complicated situations. It discusses the relationship between the interviewer and the participant, as well as the specific demands on the interviewer in that relationship. Finally, the chapter describes how to pilot-test the interview guide.

Chapter 7 briefly sets the stage for the chapters to come, which detail several analytical procedures. It describes procedures necessary to produce high-quality and detailed transcripts of the interviews. It then turns to the topic of assessing the quality of interpretative research projects. It presents a set of criteria that are commonly used to judge such projects.

The next four chapters take up specific analytic procedures. Our aim has been to present each in sufficient detail and with sufficient clarity to enable readers to embark on their own analyses. The analytic procedures in these chapters are linked by a common framework, although they offer quite different ways of examining interview material.

Chapter 12 takes up the matter of preparing a written report of a research project. It discusses what ought to be included in such reports, as well as the accepted format for organizing the material. We then turn attention to how the material should be presented, taking up briefly such matters as writing style, the use of illustrative examples, and the ethical requirement to conceal participants' identities.

The book closes with a brief epilogue.

2   Some examples of interpretative research

One of the best ways to learn about interpretative research is to get acquainted with some actual projects. In this chapter, we describe five projects. Our intention is to show what the researchers were interested in, how they specified what they wanted to study in order to make it researchable, how they gathered their material, some examples of analyses, and some findings that the projects yielded. The projects we describe concern diverse topics, locales, and peoples: childrearing practices in the USA and Taiwan; repeated re-hospitalizations of people in the USA who had severe mental illnesses; how heterosexual couples in the Nordic countries make sense of gender-equal practices in daily life; Canadian women's accounts of their depressive experiences; and the spiral of suicide-like behavior among adolescent girls in Sri Lanka.

We have two reasons for presenting these projects. First, we want to give a sense of what interpretative research is like; for instance, how such projects might be structured and the kinds of questions that researchers can answer. Second, we use some of these projects as examples when we describe different ways of analyzing interviews. Before you read further, let us point out that these five studies do not cover all types of interpretative research. The selected studies illustrate some possibilities of such research, not all such possibilities.

As you will see, two of the project descriptions in this chapter stem from studies in which one of us was the researcher. We do not include these studies because they are necessarily the best examples of interpretative research, but rather because we have full knowledge of all the details, including details that normally are not described in research articles. (Quite a lot of what goes on in research is omitted in research publications.) Furthermore, we have extensive material from these studies, including, for example, interview transcripts, our research journals, and unpublished reports.

In the project descriptions, we discuss four key components:

1. **The researcher's knowledge interests.** The term *researcher's knowledge interests* refers to the overarching topic or issue that a researcher is interested in learning more about (such as "depression and gender" or "deliberate self-harm among adolescent girls"). Knowledge interests often arise from real life: from the researcher's everyday experiences, concerns, and commitments or from the experiences of a social group that the researcher has closely observed. A knowledge interest is sometimes motivated by social justice concerns. Typically, knowledge interests are formulated in rather general or abstract terms and therefore not directly researchable.