

SEVEN

Critical and compassionate interviewing: Asking until it makes sense

Susanne Ekman

Introduction

The current chapter will place the art of interviewing inside the complex world of organizations and hierarchical interactions and explore some of the challenges which this setting creates for the researcher. Furthermore, it will propose an approach to interviewing which sympathizes with critical management studies (CMS) agendas, yet on important points also recognizes potential blind spots in critical research. Consequently, the aim is to develop and describe in practical detail a form of critically inspired interviewing which is at the same time committed to remedying what it considers to be recurring tendencies in CMS: moral condescension, polarized opposition to mainstream research, and predefined subject positions for many of the key research subjects (for more on this debate, see: Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009; Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Reedy, 2008; Wray-Bliss, 2003). I will return to these tendencies later.

Notably, the kind of interviewing proposed here wishes to retain some of the strengths of CMS, namely the sense of solidarity with those on the receiving end of suffering, marginalization or exploitation. In other words, the agenda is to establish a form of engagement with the field which avoids the tendency towards not only prescriptive instrumentalism in mainstream research (Adler et al., 2007; Fournier and Grey, 2000), but also suspicion and moral superiority in CMS. The best way to transcend these two approaches, I suggest, is by means of compassion. In order to succeed with this, it is necessary to ask for and endure a high degree of ambiguity.

This represents a challenging demand for the interviewer who will be required to pursue issues and conflicts more in the mindset of a scrupulous arbitrator than that of a judgmental partisan.

Below, I will start by delineating some of the key aspects of qualitative interviews, including the differences in epistemological approaches. Then I move on to discuss critical interviewing, and more specifically the elements in critical analyses which I believe could benefit from revision. This leads me to my key concept of 'compassion' which I present as the possible source of inspiration for such revision. Through a reading of various classical texts on compassion, I argue that compassion allows us to make sense of every agent in the field while at the same time retaining the ability to point out injustice and suffering. I move on to define a number of concrete interview techniques which allow the researcher to carry out this intention in practice. I conclude the chapter by describing situations of frustration and confusion which interviewing in general and compassionate interviewing specifically may entail.

Qualitative in-depth interviews

Interviewing is probably one of the most thoroughly described, discussed and debated qualitative research methods throughout the social sciences. The subject has been treated in depth by distinguished scholars such as James Spradley (1979), Steinar Kvale (2006), Denzin and Lincoln (2007) and Gubrium and Holstein (1997), just to mention some of the giants in the field. Although there are many different approaches to qualitative interviews, there are a number of characteristics which are generally agreed upon. Most researchers argue that one of the great strengths of qualitative interviews is their ability to generate nuance and detail. Contrary to quantitative approaches, qualitative interviews show the fine-grained qualities of social life in a manner that potentially tolerates a high degree of complexity. Furthermore, interviews are well suited to the study of subjectivity and the minutiae of everyday life (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

That said, there are also important variations in the approach to interviews, not least relating to epistemology. In the empiricist or naturalist approach, interviews are seen as a source of 'data' about the world 'as it is', independent of context. Here, the ideal is to capture the rich details of social realities without distorting them through interference or bias. This leads to interviewing techniques concerned with getting behind the façade and reaching the 'true stories' (Alvesson, 2003). Consequently, the naturalist researcher typically generates large quantities of detailed material about the informants' world, making an effort not to taint them with her own presuppositions. This material is then analyzed according to rigorous and systematic guidelines (Alvesson, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

The emotionalist approach to interviewing (somewhat condescendingly called 'romanticist' by Alvesson, 2003) does not attempt to make the researcher as invisible

as possible in the process. Rather, it regards the researcher's empathetic and mirroring abilities as an essential tool to generate truthful and authentic accounts from research subjects. Here, the focus is on the intimate and trust-based exchange between two parties in a way that opens up the richness of inner lived experience. Consequently, the interviewer must be 'creative' and move beyond traditionalist techniques. This could involve the willingness to engage in self-disclosure and the extensive effort to form an authentic relation with the interview subject. Furthermore, it might even presuppose a thorough familiarity with one's own psychological patterns, so that unresolved emotional baggage does not obstruct trust and empathy in the interview (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Another, increasingly influential approach is the contingency perspective, or what Alvesson (2003) calls 'localism'. In this approach, the notion of a natural world 'out there' has been left behind. Instead, the focus is on how social worlds are constructed in different contexts and by various linguistic or social practices. This means that the interviewer is no longer seen as a discrete outsider, but rather as a co-constructing participant. Consequently, the interview situation itself is a relevant object of study, rather than simply a vehicle for the generation of data or knowledge. The contingency perspective has been accompanied by a so-called 'crisis of representation' in which social researchers strongly denounced traditional, naturalistic approaches for veiling power asymmetries between observers and observed, and for disregarding the reflexivity which poststructural researchers consider vital (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In the wake of this crisis, a variety of experimental representations were developed to ensure 'multiple voices' and critical reflections on the proposed 'truth claims' from researchers. Interviews conducted within this framework embrace an active or possibly even consciously interfering interviewer, as opposed to the unobtrusive or empathetic interviewer in naturalism and emotionalism, respectively (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004).

Critical interviewing

One cannot position CMS squarely within one of the three approaches above. Generally, it is recognized that CMS is a highly diverse movement, both epistemologically and theoretically. It ranges from Marxist, critical realist, and poststructuralist to pragmatist perspectives (Adler et al., 2007). Yet it is surprising how much CMS empirical work tends to accord only minimal attention to research methods (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008). To the extent that it does reflect on methods, it often reproduces surprisingly conventional approaches (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Wray-Bliss, 2002). Generally, the critical agenda tends to enter at the phase of analysis, rather than in the design of empirical study (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009). The neglect of methodological considerations may risk contributing to a number of the common risks in critical research. CMS researchers themselves have acknowledged these risks

in various contexts. They include the reliance on ‘usual suspects’ such as ‘capitalism’, ‘managers’, and ‘bureaucracy’ (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009: 67), the reproduction of preconceived and inflexible subject positions for informants, for example those designated as ‘dominated’ and ‘dominating’ (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009: 70; Wray-Bliss, 2003: 310), the representation of managers as ‘culpable dupes’ and employees as ‘cultural dupes’ (Legge, 2001: 21; Reedy, 2008: 68), or the tendency to use empirical data from local realities as a mere ‘illustration’ of ready-made universal, critical plots (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009: 74). What all these risks have in common is the temptation to ‘brandish a critical “hammer”’, as Alvesson and Ashcraft put it, without showing any due appreciation of situational complexities (2009: 74).

In recent years, however, an increasing methodological reflexivity in CMS is beginning to surface (see Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Kärremann, 2007; Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009; Wray-Bliss, 2003). In these texts, the authors attempt to face the above-mentioned risks head-on while contemplating the recurring tensions and dilemmas involved in empirical research based on a critical framework. Rather than offering easy solutions, they urge CMS researchers to display an increased degree of reflexivity about these tensions when conducting their studies. In this chapter, I will focus on some of these dilemmas, as I describe the compassionately critical interview. First, there is the tension between being understanding and being critical. Second, there is the tension between a focus on ‘lived experience’ and on more structural aspects such as political frameworks, discourses, and steering mechanisms. Third, there is the tension between various epistemologies and their respective criteria of quality. In their definition of ‘critical listening’ Alvesson and Ashcraft attempt to address these tensions. They suggest that critical listening involves the ability to hear not only the social realities of participants, but also the dominant discourses and formations of power embedded in them. Furthermore, they propose an exploration of multiple or even competing voices combined with the application of ‘alternative and nuanced’ theories (2009: 68). I would like to subscribe to these suggestions and develop them further through the notion of compassion. My argument is that compassion indicates a mode of involvement with the field which assists us in navigating the tensions above. Below, I will make a brief presentation of various texts on compassion and then move on to show how this principle can be translated into concrete interview techniques.

From unreflexive instrumentalism or suspicion to compassion

Taking a closer look at the tensions described above, one can see that they have something in common. This something concerns a precarious negotiation of distance and proximity. Should we be close to and intimate with the research subject, or should we apply a structural view from above? Should we engage to the point of defining what The Good Life is, or should we make more modest interventions by

pointing out patterns of pain and suffering? These tensions risk generating polarized practices unless we find a way to integrate them. In order for such an integration to succeed, we need to expand our tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. This involves leaving some of the neat dualisms behind and instead entering a territory of contradictions and gray zones. It is precisely the commitment to ambiguity and gray zones, as opposed to polarized dualisms, that characterizes the notion of compassion throughout the very varied texts on the theme. Exploring these texts can help us define an approach to interviewing which steers clear of 'black and white' research practices, whether they be the tendency to non-reflexive instrumentalism in mainstream studies or the tendency to moral condescension in critical studies.

Compassion is a profoundly ethical concept. It has been treated by thinkers from fields as diverse as medicine, psychology, Buddhism, existentialism, and Christianity (Aring, 1958; Dalai Lama and Cutler, 1998; Hendrix et al., 2005; Lévinas, 1991; Løgstrup, 1956; Ricoeur, 1992). Despite their considerable differences, all these texts attempt to formulate an ethical stance from which one can relate to a significant Other without either over-engaging with her or disregarding her suffering. Put differently, the notion of compassion seeks to strike a middle way which allows fundamental separateness to become the prerequisite for and facilitation of fundamental commitment. It thus promises to dissolve the antagonism between distance and intimacy by suggesting that the former actually serves to enhance the latter. This allows us to formulate a critical commitment which is not moralizing, but still engages strongly in the attempt to relieve suffering.

In the existential ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas this is expressed as a distinction between 'totality' and 'infinity'. He argues that when we claim to know the Other in her totality it equals a form of violence. We commit this kind of violence when we see the Other as the 'same as' me. Instead, we must be able to allow the Other her radical alterity, which Lévinas equates with infinity. Infinity entails 'a relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality' (Lévinas, 1991: 22). Consequently, the opposite of violence, namely peace or compassion, is a relationship 'where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism' (Lévinas, 1991: 306). Put more mundanely, the act of peace or compassion means a form of commitment to the Other which intensifies precisely by respecting the radical separateness or alterity, and by practicing compassion without an ego driven desire to steer the Other in a certain direction.

Similarly, Buddhism points out the difference between feeling with somebody and being attached to somebody, arguing that compassion helps us establish the former approach (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 1998). Compassion, in Buddhism, is a deep commitment to the reduction of suffering, yet without desiring or clinging to a specific notion about how the Other should be or not be in this process. In other words, this notion of compassion also emphasizes how engagement is intensified precisely through the preservation of distance and the ability to let go. The point is that when we become attached to a certain notion of how the Other should be 'saved', 'enlightened' or 'emancipated', we are driven by ego concerns and the will to succeed, rather than by an open-minded, moment by moment compassion.

Finally, in the field of medical ethics, Charles D. Aring argues for the distinction between sympathy and empathy. While sympathy involves a fusion with the feelings of the suffering patient, empathy involves the ability to identify while at the same time preserving a clear notion of the Other's alterity. Aring calls this 'one of the most difficult tasks put upon mankind' (Aring, 1958: 448).

Returning to the question of interviews, the points about compassion above help us strike a third way between the potential unreflexive instrumentalism of mainstream approaches and the potential suspicion and moralizing of critical approaches. It does so by insisting on sustained engagement and the attempt to relieve suffering, yet at the same time constantly trying to minimize attachment to specific notions about emancipation and, more importantly, attachment to one's own position as emancipator. The attempt to relieve suffering is always a simultaneous act of letting go, however paradoxical this may sound. In practice, this means that we must let go of our attachment to certain plots about exploitation and liberation, just as we must let go of our attachment to specific subject positions like exploiter and exploited. Notably, this does not mean that we let go of our ability to point out exploitation! But we never assume that the term 'exploiter' can tell the whole truth about a person. Based on the principle of compassion, we must always approach the Other with the assumption that we do not know her in her totality. Our interview, whether conducted with shareholders, managers or employees, is thus an exercise in making sense of an unknown Other, irrespective of her position. Letting go of attachment is the same as increasing tolerance for ambiguity. Thus, the measure of a good, compassionate interview is the degree to which it yields complex, multifaceted results. While it may capture elements of exploitation from, say, a manager, it should preferably capture elements of suffering, vulnerability or dependence too. Similarly, the interview with employees may capture elements of being exploited, but hopefully it would also capture contradictory aspects such as opportunism, immoderate expectations or the like. The analytical plot ensuing from such interview material can point out patterns of suffering without making an overly neat distribution of qualities between the various groups and subject positions involved. And most importantly, it can portray *all* the participants compassionately!

In order for this to succeed, the interview process must be prepared and conducted in a manner that facilitates the researcher's ability to make sense of every interviewee while still staying alert to the structural patterns of suffering and injustice. Below, I will describe in closer detail how this can be done. For illustrations, I draw on my own research experiences as an interviewer.

Principles and techniques of compassionate interviewing

As mentioned earlier, there are three central sets of tensions which pose a challenge to the critical interviewer: the tension between understanding and critiquing;

the tension between a focus on micro-level experience and macro-level structures; and finally, the tension between various epistemological ideals such as naturalism, emotionalism and localism. Compassionate interviewing attempts to handle these tensions through integration rather than polarization. Basically, this is done through various techniques to maximize the tolerance for ambiguity. When ambiguity is permitted, dualistic elements become mutually constitutive, rather than mutually exclusive, as we saw in the section on distance and intimacy. Tolerance for ambiguity is heightened when we systematically pursue multiple perspectives. The principle to be followed is similar to that of a conflict broker: the researcher needs to know and understand the stakes, stories, and experiences of all the primary positions within the social phenomenon being studied, before the analytical plot can be developed. Knowing and understanding means asking *until it makes sense*. If a certain position, say that of a manager, has only yielded unambiguously negative data, it means that the interview technique was not sufficiently tolerant of ambiguity. Below, I will describe how the tolerance of ambiguity can be maximized in various phases of the interview study: formulating the research problem, selecting participants, phrasing interview questions, finding a mode of listening, and developing an analytical plot.

When formulating a research problem the main challenge is to capture an issue where cultural, social and material patterns seem to generate powerful norms, rigidities or sufferings, but at the same time phrasing the question in a manner which allows for actual empirical *exploration*. By exploration is meant that the plot, the structures and the subject positions of the problem field are not known in advance. We generally have to make certain initial assumptions on which our research problem rests; however, we can still attempt to maximize room for surprise and contradiction. If we look at some of the classic empirical studies in CMS, they have a tendency to import the familiar subject positions and dualisms of the critical plot already in the research problem. Just to name one example, James Barker's famous study of teamwork in the company known as 'ISE' was driven by the question of whether this new form of work actually transcended traditional bureaucratic control (Barker, 1993). This research problem has a high risk of reproducing classical CMS plots about (nasty) bureaucratic control versus (nice) autonomy. It also risks important preconceived subject positions involving exploitative managers exercising ever more insidious and subtle forms of control vis-à-vis employees who are cultural dupes. As cultural dupes, employees either helplessly enact the cultural schemes through which managers control them, or they 'resist' from a position of fundamental moral innocence. None of these subject positions are associated with the kind of ambiguity that compassionate critical interviewing aims for. In compassionate approaches, each subject position must 'make sense' to the interviewer and seem like a probable and understandable position, given the stakes. This does not mean that the researcher is uncritical of the actions and consequences ensuing from such a subject position. However, the critique is made on the basis of extensive attempts at understanding rather than condemning.

This leads us on to the question of which participants to recruit for the study. Here, the key principle is *multiple perspectives*. The aim is to look at the research theme through a prism of as many different positions as possible. One way to do this is to recruit based on ‘snowballing’ rather than a representative sample. Snowballing means that you let one participant lead you to the next. In my study of hierarchical interactions in creative knowledge work, I followed the principle of ‘intensity’. For example, several of my participants seemed intensely preoccupied with the feeling that they did not get enough recognition for their work. I would then inquire into whom they wanted this recognition from, which situations they wanted it in, which concrete experiences they could use as an example, and so on. From their answers, I could then gauge who the important ‘primary Others’ were on this issue. Perhaps it was a certain middle manager, project leader, or colleague – or all of those. Based on this, I then went on to recruit those ‘primary Others’ in order to hear their perspective on the issue. My focus on intensity ensured that I pursued problems that were significant, and my focus on snowballing ensured that I elicited multiple perspectives on the matter. This form of recruitment is more in line with the so-called multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995), than with traditional notions of attempting to map units. The multi-sited approach operates in chains of significance rather than in discrete settings. John Law has illustrated the difference as one between a map of traffic and a map of nations: the former concerns networks and connections, the latter concerns bounded fields (Law [personal communication] in Jensen, 2005: 196).

When preparing the interview questions, the ideal about ambiguity, complexity, and multiple perspectives also applies. If we return to the sets of tensions facing the critical researcher, namely understanding versus critique, subjective experience versus structural patterns, and various epistemological ideals, the aim of a compassionate interview is to cover the spectrum, rather than choose between poles. Therefore, the interviewer consciously approaches the same theme from different angles. In my study of creative knowledge workers, I always combined emotional and subjective questions with questions of a more general and normative flavor. For example, when trying to understand the ideals and practices of hierarchical interactions, I would ask employees about managers in two different ways. Early in the interview, I would ask questions such as:

Please name the five most important characteristics of a good manager.

This question mostly elicited normative and general answers which adhered relatively closely to the dominant discourses. The majority of my interviewees mentioned characteristics such as ‘giving recognition and feedback’, ‘being present and empathetic’, and ‘allowing me autonomy and influence’. These characteristics fit well into the dominant discourse about self-realization and self-management. However, later in the interview I posed the same question from a personal angle:

Could you please tell me about the last time you went home from work feeling really pleased with your manager?

or

Could you give me an example of an episode with your manager which was really positive?

Interestingly, the two kinds of questions often elicited quite different responses. In the personal and emotional framework, interviewees were less steered by the normative ideals of discourses. Hence, they would mention episodes of satisfaction which did not necessarily fit with the discourse which they preferred to understand themselves through. Several interviewees told me that they had been really pleased with episodes where the manager put them straight or acted authoritatively. Similarly, they told me that they were often frustrated if managers did not give them very clear instructions and direct them towards unambiguous goals. These bureaucratic values were normally sifted out of the more normative answers. In other words, by combining different types of questions, it was possible to capture the ambiguities of norms and practices in hierarchical interactions. Similarly, it was possible to see the dominant discursive trends while also having an eye on the many variations in individual practices.

Combining different kinds of questions also means that the interview approach cannot be neatly categorized into one of the three epistemological frameworks mentioned above. On the contrary, the compassionate interview actively combines types of questions associated with naturalism, emotionalism and localism, respectively. While purists may find this eclectic, the rationale behind such a combination is that it forces the researcher out of preconceived assumptions and epistemological comfort zones. While an emotionalist approach may yield a certain kind of response, the naturalist focus on categorizing and listing may yield another. The way in which these responses differ may actually represent valuable input for the researcher.

During the interview, the compassionate interviewer has an ideal about a certain kind of listening and engaging with the participant. It is through this form of listening that the integration between understanding and critique can come about. For this purpose, the interviewer can draw on techniques developed in marriage counseling which aim to engage the spouses with each other in a manner that defuses their habitual communicative patterns and prejudices (Hendrix et al., 2005). In other words, these techniques, called 'imago dialogue', serve to maximize the understanding of the counterpart's motives and stakes, yet without necessarily aiming for consensus or agreement in the end. In practice, this process of understanding is carried out by paying heed to three different elements in the communication: mirroring, validating and extending empathy. In the mirroring phase, the interlocutor attempts to repeat the message from the counterpart as loyally as possible, thus illustrating that it was perceived in the intended way, and if not, allowing for corrections. In order to move from a purely cognitive to a more compassionate mode, the exchange also needs to involve validation. According to Harville Hendrix (1996: 17), 'validation requires one to look through the eyes of the other, to see the world as it appears to him or her, and to understand the logic of the other's point of view'. However, and

quite importantly, validation is not synonymous with agreeing! Validation simply means that one has 'asked for more' until the other person's perspective makes sense. It means 'Seeing the world through your eyes, I understand how you must experience it like that'. The final element in imago dialogues is to extend active empathy by offering comments such as 'I can imagine how sad you must have felt'. This element can be turned up or down in intensity when conducting a research interview, depending on the kind of rapport one aims at establishing with the interviewee. The point of paying heed to the three imago elements is to ensure that one captures ambiguities and complexities, rather than reproducing familiar subject positions. However, the compassionate interview is not exhausted by these techniques, which would make it more or less identical with the emotionalist approach. Rather, they are integrated with techniques from the two other perspectives. For example, from the naturalist approach one can employ the focus on extensive details about the 'natural world' of the interviewee. And from the localist approach one can use the sensitivity towards how discourses and structures are speaking through the subject. Altogether, these integrated forms of asking and listening allow us build criticism on the basis of understanding.

Let me give an example from my study of creative knowledge workers. The publishing house Booker (pseudonym), which was one of my cases, was undergoing a process of extensive restructuring and merger activity. This meant that new hierarchical constellations were established and the assignments of many employees were changing. During this time, I interviewed one of the experienced editors, Karen, for whom a new junior manager had just been appointed, and who had lost some of her old colleagues and gained some new ones. She told me that she was very frustrated with the process so far. In particular, she was displeased with the fact that a set of assignments seemed to have just 'landed on her desk' without any formal notification from her boss. She felt that this omission was a sign of disrespect and a breach of the rules about how to engage with each other hierarchically. Consequently, Karen more or less ignored the assignments, simply telling her boss that she was waiting for a proper introduction to them. I spent a considerable amount of effort trying to understand Karen's point of view in this conflict, including her norms about work, authority, distribution of tasks and so on. Then I followed my snowballing principle of recruitment and went on to interview the manager in question. Without making any explicit prompts about Karen, I ensured that the interview was directed towards the question about subordinates and possible conflicts. The manager soon brought up the relevant conflict and started giving her perspective on the issue. According to her, Karen was an example of a 'modern kind of employee' who lacks an autonomous sense of responsibility. Instead, she needs to be instructed in every little detail before she sets about her work.

As a critical researcher, it is tempting to analyze this situation as an example of exploitation: the manager gets away with pushing a boundaryless work model onto her subordinate, who in turn offers resistance by refusing to work unless she receives instructions. However, such an analytical plot does not live up to the ideals

about multiple perspectives and ambiguity driving the compassionate approach. As I delved into the stories, frustrations and legitimations of these two people in conflict with one another, I reached a point where both versions made sense. It seemed to me that Karen interpreted the situation by drawing on bureaucratic norms about formality, clear task descriptions, and asymmetrical hierarchical relations. In this perspective, her manager did not live up to the requirements about explicit distribution of tasks and a quid pro quo renegotiation of Karen's work situation, now that she had received additional assignments. The manager, however, interpreted the situation by drawing on norms about self-management, autonomy and commitment. In this perspective, Karen did not live up to the requirements about showing initiative, ownership and independence. Interestingly, both Karen and the manager seemed to alternate between these two frameworks throughout the interview, depending on the situation they were describing. Apparently, both of them were trying to maximize the advantages of the frameworks while evading the costs. Strategic shifts of framework made such opportunistic maneuvering possible.

In this reading, both Karen and the manager are coping with the daily cross pressures and tensions of their working life by developing hybrid or opportunistic approaches to hierarchical interactions. Considering their situation, such strategies make sense. In turn, both parties feel recurring frustration, helplessness and disbelief as their counterpart acts inconsistently or unreliably. This kind of pattern seemed to repeat itself all the way up through the hierarchical ladder in both my case companies.

Having thus made sense of the individual actors, the next step is to take a critical look at the cultural trends and social structures which generate such patterns. This could be the combination of the current capitalistic focus on short-term growth and shareholder value combined with late modern narratives about individualism, self-realization and freedom through work. Together, they generate patterns of flexibility and optimization strategies which put pressure on moderation, prioritization, and consistency. However, the focus on ambiguity in compassionate analysis means that every subject position is seen as contributing to this pattern in some way or other. While there may be gross inequalities and injustices, there is often some kind of unholy alliance between the parties. In this case, many employees are fierce supporters of the late modern discourse about self-realization and flexibility, because it offers an enticing narrative about freedom without the need to prioritize. Also worth noting is that many managers feel instrumentalized by these demands from employees, because it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss work as a matter of assignments rather than personal development. In other words, the pattern cannot be explicated through neat subject positions of exploiting managers and exploited employees. However, exploitation does take place! Certain kinds of employees and certain kinds of managers become highly vulnerable in this system while others become skillful opportunists and networkers. But skillful opportunists and networkers experience other kinds of vulnerabilities, which the compassionate researcher should preferably capture and make sense of too.

Frustrations and challenges in the compassionate approach

Each methodological approach has its own set of potential pitfalls and challenges. This is also the case with compassionate interviewing. There are three such challenges which I would like to mention and exemplify: the failed alliance with an interviewee, the generation of material which is too sensitive to publish, and the inability to develop analytical narratives due to over-tolerance of ambiguity.

During fieldwork in a hi-tech corporation, I was exploring a drama in the management group caused by a highly unorthodox project manager. This project manager was a star employee in the company, generating both high sales and invaluable new concepts. However, he was an unpredictable player in the internal power game, establishing alliances and challenging the existing power structures to promote himself. In particular, he had attempted to take over responsibility for the overall strategy process, which had hitherto been run by the presales manager. During my exploration of the tense situation, I used the snowballing method of recruitment and talked to all the primary people affected by the maverick employee, not least the presales manager. From all of them, I elicited long, detailed stories. However, as the time came for an interview with the CEO, my interview techniques failed me. The CEO was extremely curt, speaking only in short primary clauses. All my prompts for more detailed stories failed. He would only offer brief, factual information and painted a picture of the management group as a well-functioning unit. My attempts to mirror and validate his perspective did not loosen up the conversation. As I grew increasingly frustrated, I grasped for every straw in the interview which might lead me towards the desired theme. When the CEO mentioned the strategy process and how the maverick employee was gaining more influence in this area, I asked: 'Is it correctly understood that the presales manager was responsible for the strategy process before?' The CEO affirmed this. 'And he is now perfectly happy with the new constellation?', I prompted, to which the CEO responded: 'I assume that he is, but it sounds from your question as if he is not?!' This obviously led to instant backpedalling from the interviewer. The rest of the exchange unfolded more like the CEO's cunning and systematic attempt to gauge what I as an interviewer had heard through the grapevine. Rather than successfully establishing a validating atmosphere which facilitated detailed accounts of personal perspectives, I was reduced to a defensive position in order to reveal as little as possible about my volatile insider information. In other words, this was an example of how the compassionate approach of trying to elicit multiple perspectives on the same precarious issue not only failed, but risked causing ethical problems.

Another example of challenges in the compassionate approach concerns data material which is too explosive to publish. During my fieldwork in a large media company, I soon discovered that there had been an intense conflict between a certain middle manager and a group developing science programs. Following my

snowballing principle, I interviewed all the primary parties, and they needed little prompting before the detailed accounts started flowing. During these interviews, both parties made such harrowing remarks about each other and gave such an embittered version of the process that any future cooperation between them would be impossible, if this was published. As a researcher I was left with probably some of the best interview data in my entire career, showing the minute details of an intense psychological drama within the frameworks of self-management and creative knowledge work. However, it was ethically inconceivable that I could ever use it. I made several attempts at veiling and anonymizing the quotes, but either the participants were still recognizable, or the story lost its point and became superficial. The only feasible approach was to use the data as mere background material for my general analytical plot. In other words, when pursuing the intimate accounts of intense and precarious issues from all the key actors, one may end up intractably bogged down in ethical dilemmas. In these cases, I have always chosen to prioritize anonymity above research quality.

The final challenge which I would like to point out concerns the risk of ‘losing the plot’, so to speak, as a result of one’s desire to acknowledge multiple perspectives. Generally speaking, one can say that a research process involves transforming information into knowledge through a systematic and theoretically informed reduction of complexity. The compassionate approach has a distinct inductive flavor, especially due to the focus on multiple perspectives, and it thus tends to generate detailed empirical material. The ensuing analytical process easily risks losing its momentum once all the perspectives have been recounted. Consequently, the result is more like a descriptive mosaic than an actual analytical plot. This is where the researcher must remind herself that distance is as essential as intimacy in the compassionate perspective. We are not taking over the perspectives of the research subjects, but using our respectful understanding of them as a platform for analytical distance and reduction of complexity.

Altogether, the analytical plot based on compassionate interviewing becomes a great deal messier and more confusing than naïve stories about win–win capitalism and moralizing stories about perpetrators and victims. However, if scrutinized with care, patience, and a high tolerance for ambiguity, data from compassionate interviews may provide the opportunity to construct analyses where each research subject makes sense and where the joys, sufferings and inequalities of the larger patterns become apparent.

The willingness to endure ambiguous data and plots requires of the interviewer that she does not feel attached to a certain identity as ‘emancipator’ or ‘spokesperson of the weak’. Instead, she commits to an empirical world of gray zones where there are no neat moral subject positions for either researcher or research subjects. This requires a permanent attention to research reflexivity as the interviewer scrutinizes her own agenda and identity project in relation to the empirical study she undertakes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an account of so-called compassionate interviewing. This form of interviewing is intended as a revised version of critical interviewing: it retains the ambition to point out suffering, yet it insists on the extensive attempt to make sense of every research subject in the process. This focus on multiple perspectives and tolerance of ambiguity is meant as a remedy to the risk in CMS of operating with preconceived subject positions and critical plots and of brandishing a default moralizing hammer. I name three key tensions which often face empirical researchers of a critical creed: the tension between respectful understanding and critique, between personal accounts and structural patterns, and between various epistemological frameworks. My claim is that the notion of compassion can help us maneuver in these tensions due to its high tolerance for ambiguity. Through a brief reading on key texts about compassion, I argue that the term offers integration of aspects which critical research often treats dualistically. This ambition about integration is then transferred into the key elements in the interview process in order to illustrate how it can be carried out in practice. The insistence on ambiguity and multiple perspectives involves a specific set of techniques throughout the interview process, including the definition of a research problem, the selection of participants, the phrasing of interview questions, the mode of listening, and the development of analytical plot. In each of these research phases, I try to show how the three sets of tensions named above can be integrated fruitfully rather than being polarized. My claim is that the analyses based on compassionate interviewing can yield critical plots which at the same time manage to make sense of every subject position and illustrate their ambiguities.

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