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Kvale, S. (2007) 'Epistemological issues of interviewing'. (Ed.), Doing Interviews. London, England: SAGE Publications. pp. 11-23.

THREE

EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES OF INTERVIEWING

Qualitative research can give us compelling descriptions of the qualitative human world, and qualitative interviewing can provide us with well-founded knowledge about our conversational reality. Research interviewing is thus a knowledge-producing activity, but the question is how to characterize the form of knowledge that qualitative research interviewing can give us. In this chapter we address epistemological issues of research interviewing. *Epistemology* is the philosophy of knowledge and involves long-standing debates about what knowledge is and how it is obtained. Throughout this book we show how epistemological presumptions of qualitative interview knowledge concretely bear upon conceiving and practicing research interviewing. This concerns, for example, issues such as whether an interview subject's spontaneous narratives are to be regarded as digressions from the scientific task of finding facts and whether narratives are essential aspects of human knowledge.

We first propose two metaphors, the interviewer as a miner and the interviewer as a traveler, and go on to discuss the knowledge produced in interviews in relation to conceptions of knowledge in a postmodern age, drawing upon postmodern thought as well as hermeneutic and pragmatic conceptions of knowledge. Inspired by these epistemological positions, we depict seven key features of interview knowledge as produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic. We end the chapter by outlining

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positivist philosophy, which portrays research as rule governed and scientific knowledge as quantitative and has served to rule out qualitative interviewing as a legitimate research method.

THE INTERVIEWER AS A MINER OR AS A TRAVELER

These two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer—as a miner or as a traveler—illustrate the different epistemological conceptions of interviewing as a process of *knowledge collection* or as a process of *knowledge construction,* respectively. By *metaphor,* we refer to understanding one kind of thing by means of another, thereby highlighting possible new aspects of a kind. The two metaphors for interviewing, although not logically distinct categories, may inspire the researcher to reflect upon what conceptions of knowledge he or she brings to an interview inquiry.

In a *miner metaphor,* knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. The knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions. The nuggets may be understood as objective real data or as subjective authentic meanings. A research interviewer strips the surface of conscious experience, whereas a therapeutic interviewer mines the deeper unconscious layers. The knowledge nuggets remain constant through transcription from an oral conversation to a written transcript. By means of a variety of data-mining procedures, the researcher extracts the objective facts or the essential meanings, today preferably by computer programs.

As an alternative, in the *traveler metaphor* the interviewer is a traveler on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer-traveler wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people he or she encounters. The traveler explores the many domains of the country, as unknown terrain or with maps, roaming freely around the territory. The interviewer-traveler, in line with the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as "wandering together with," walks along with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world; some, such as the anthropologists, living for a longer time with their conversation partners. The potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through the traveler's interpretations

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of the narratives he or she brings back to home audiences. The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as well. The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the traveler to new ways of self-understanding, as well as uncovering previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveler's home country.

These two metaphors for the interviewer—as a miner and as a traveler—represent contrasting ideal types of interview knowledge as respectively given or constructed. The two metaphors stand for alternative genres and have different rules of the game. A miner approach will tend to regard interviews as a site of data collection separated from the later data analysis. A traveler conception leads to interviewing and analysis as intertwined phases of knowledge construction, with an emphasis on the narrative to be told to an audience. The data-mining conception of interviewing is close to the mainstream conception of modern social sciences where knowledge is already there, waiting to be found, whereas the traveler conception is nearer to anthropology and a postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research.

We should note that the miner metaphor pertains not only to positivist and empiricist data collection, but also to a certain extent to Socrates' pursuit for preexisting truths, to Husserl's search for phenomenological essences, and to Freud's quest for hidden meanings buried in the unconscious (see his archaeology metaphor for the psychoanalytic excavations of the unconscious). Some traditions may imply both metaphors, such as psychoanalysis, where the narrative constructions of case histories come closer to a traveler conception of knowledge. We may further, inspired by Bauman (1996), discern two types of travelers: the pilgrim on a long search for truth and the tourist shopping for experiences. The pilgrim's goal is set according to shared external standards (e.g., concerning how to live an ethical life based on God's command), whereas the tourist invents his or her own goals according to aesthetic criteria based on taste and lifestyle. In a postmodern consumer society, aesthetic criteria concerning beauty, ethical criteria concerning goodness, and political criteria concerning justice all compete with epistemic criteria concerning truth. In sum, the miner and the traveler metaphors may, in a simple dichotomized form, illustrate the complex and contested conceptions of interview knowledge. Below, we turn to more sophisticated epistemological conceptions of knowledge as they pertain to research interviews.

When discussing the epistemology of interviewing, it should be kept in mind that the interview is a special form of conversational practice, which was

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developed in everyday life over centuries in relative independence from epistemological discussions. In the last few centuries, interviews have become institutionalized as various forms of professional interviews. Although the varying forms of interviews have not been developed from any specific theory or epistemological paradigm, we may, however, post hoc, invoke different epistemological positions to conceptualize the knowledge that is produced in interviews. A clarification of such positions may serve to shed light on different understandings and practices of research interviewing.

INTERVIEWS IN A POSTMODERN AGE

Different philosophies highlight different aspects of knowledge relevant to the qualitative interview. In this chapter the emphasis is on knowledge and interviews in a postmodern age, with a focus on hermeneutics, pragmatism, and, in particular, postmodern thought. While some of their epistemological assumptions of knowledge differ, as do their geographical birthplaces (postmodernism is associated with French thinkers, pragmatism with Americans, and hermeneutics with German philosophers), they may here serve as contexts for reflection on the multiple aspects of producing knowledge through interviews. Qualitative research interviewing has existed in the social sciences for nearly a century, but it did not become a general issue for methodological discussions until the last few decades. This may in part be due to social scientists not having had access to philosophies relevant to conceptualize the kind of knowledge produced by research interviewing. In the following section we argue that the philosophical positions mentioned above may provide conceptual frames of reference, which may clarify the nature and the problems, the strengths and the weaknesses, of knowledge produced by qualitative research interviews.

Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of texts. From a hermeneutical viewpoint, the interpretation of meaning is the central theme, with a specification of the kinds of meanings sought and attention to the questions posed to a text. The concepts of conversation and of text are pivotal in the hermeneutical tradition in the last centuries of the humanities, and there is an emphasis on the interpreter's foreknowledge of a text's subject matter. The purpose of hermeneutical interpretation is to obtain a valid and common understanding of the meaning of a text. Although the subject matter of classical hermeneutics was the texts of religion, law, and literature, there has been an extension of the concept of "text" to

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include discourse and even action. Thus, in *Truth and Method,* Gadamer (1975) begins with Plato's dialogues and regards both the conversation and the oral tradition as presuppositions for understanding the written texts, which historically are secondary phenomena. According to Gadamer, we are conversational beings for whom language is a reality (see Bernstein, 1983). In his article "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," Ricoeur (1971) extends the hermeneutic principles of interpretations of the texts of the humanities to the interpretation of the object of the social sciences—meaningful action. Human beings are self-interpreting, historical creatures, whose means of understanding are provided by tradition and historical life. Understanding depends on certain *pre-judices,* as Gadamer famously argued. And every text derives its meaning from a con-text. Knowledge of what others are doing and saying, of what their actions and utterances mean, always depends "upon some background or context of other meanings, beliefs, values, practices, and so forth." (Schwandt, 2000, p. 201). From hermeneutics, qualitative researchers can learn to analyze their interviews as texts and look beyond the here and now in the interview situation, for example, and pay attention to the contextual interpretive horizon provided by history and tradition (see Palmer, 1969).

Pragmatism as a philosophical position, with its central view that language and knowledge do not copy reality but are means of coping with a changing world, has come to the fore in a postmodern age. Pragmatism emphasizes the primacy of practice and the use-value of the ideas and theories produced by researchers. Pragmatism was originally developed by American philosophers such as Peirce, James, and Dewey in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, and is today represented by Rorty and Putnam, among many others. In Rorty's neopragmatic philosophy, conversation is a basic mode of knowing: "We see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature" (Rorty, 1979, p. 171). From pragmatism, interview researchers can learn to focus on the practical aspects of what they are doing, on the craftsmanship of their activities, and on the issues of values and ethics raised by the use-value of their research results.

In the pragmatic approach of the present book, the emphasis is less on paradigmatic legitimation of interview research than on the practical implications of the different epistemological positions for the craft of research interviewing. In later chapters, we give examples of how different epistemological positions lead to different conceptions of interview research, and also to different forms of practice, not least concerning the many decisions about how to do it

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that are made throughout an interview investigation. This concerns issues such as the use of leading questions, the nature of transcriptions, forms of interview analysis, and also the understanding of objectivity and validity of interview knowledge.

In addition to hermeneutics and pragmatism, a *phenomenological* perspective and a *dialectical* approach are important philosophical positions in relation to qualitative interviewing. *Phenomenology* was treated in the previous chapter on interview conversations and includes a focus on consciousness and the life world, an openness to the experiences of the subjects, a primacy of precise descriptions, attempts to bracket foreknowledge, and a search for invariant essential meanings in the descriptions. A *dialectical* standpoint focuses on the contradictions of a statement and their relations to the contradictions of the social and material world. There is an emphasis on the new, rather than on the status quo, and on the intrinsic relation of knowledge and action. A dialectical position will be brought up in relation to discursive analyses of interviews in Chapter 13.

In *postmodern thought,* there is a disbelief in universal systems of thought (Lyotard, 1984). There is a lack of credibility of meta-narratives of legitimation—such as the Enlightenment belief in progress through knowledge and science. The modern conception of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by a conception of the social construction of reality, where the focus is on the interpretation and negotiation of the meanings of the social world. With the breakdown of the universal meta-narratives of legitimation, there is an emphasis on the local contexts, on the social and linguistic construction of a social reality where knowledge is validated through practice. There is openness to qualitative diversity, to the multiplicity of local meanings; knowledge is perspectival, dependent on the viewpoint and values of the investigator. With a decline of modern universal systems of knowledge, the narratives of local, manifold, and changing language contexts come into prominence. The linguistic turn in philosophy has been radicalized in postmodern philosophy: In some versions of postmodernism, language constitutes reality, each language constructing reality in its own way. The focus on language shifts attention away from the notion of an objective reality, and also away from the individual subject. There is no longer a unique and sovereign self who uses language to describe an objective world or to express itself; it is the structures of language that speak through the person. In *The Postmodern Condition,* Lyotard (1984) also depicted economic performativity, striving for

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the most efficient input-output ratio, as crucial for knowledge in a postmodern age. Knowledge is increasingly understood as a commodity, a tendency Lyotard calls the mercantilization of knowledge.

In a postmodern epistemology, the certainty of our knowledge is less a matter of interaction with a nonhuman reality than a matter of conversation between persons. Knowing subjects are conceived not as isolated islands but as existing in "a fabric of relations" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 15). Knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between persons and world. Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenological psychologist and philosopher whose work has also been regarded as a precursor to postmodern thought, concludes his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) with a quote from Saint Exupery: "Man is but a network of relations." In postmodern epistemology, there is a shift from the individual mind to relations between persons: "Constructionism replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge" (Gergen, 1994, p. x).

Leading postmodern theorists in the second half of the 20th century were French philosophers such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault, although not all of these identify themselves explicitly with postmodernism. A postmodern approach to interviewing focuses on the interview as a production site of knowledge, on its linguistic and interactional aspects, including the differences between oral discourse and written text, and emphasizes the narratives constructed in the interview. See Rosenau (1992) and Scheurich (1997) for broader discussions of postmodern approaches to the social sciences, and, for a pertinent overview of philosophical positions and issues relevant to qualitative research, see Schwandt (2001).

SEVEN FEATURES OF INTERVIEW KNOWLEDGE

With inspiration from the philosophical conceptions depicted above, we shall now describe interview knowledge with respect to seven key features. Interview knowledge is produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic. These intertwined features are taken as a starting point for clarifying the nature of the knowledge yielded by the research interview and for developing its knowledge potential. These features are characteristic not only of interview knowledge, but also of the objects that interviews are able to give us knowledge about. That is, the lived social and

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historical world of human interaction is itself something constantly produced by humans; it is also relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic or action oriented. Throughout the discussions of the seven practical stages of an interview project in Part II of this book, we draw in the aspects of knowledge outlined below.

Knowledge as Produced. The research interview is a production site of knowledge. Interview knowledge is socially constructed in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee. The knowledge is not merely found, mined, or given, but is actively created through questions and answers, and the product is co-authored by interviewer and interviewee. The production process continues through the transcription, analysis, and reporting of the original interviews, with the reported knowledge tinged by the procedures and techniques applied on the way.

Knowledge as Relational. The knowledge created by the inter-view is interrelational and inter-subjective. As illustrated by the ambiguous vase/faces in Figure 1.1, the researcher can focus on the knowledge produced inter the views of the interviewer and interviewee or concentrate on the interaction between the two participants. Therapists have been attentive to the interpersonal relationships in their interviews. A therapeutic interview is thus an inter-personal situation where the data produced are neither objective nor subjective, but intersubjective (Sullivan, 1954). The research interview establishes new relations in the human webs of interlocution, with the goal of producing knowledge about the human situation.

Knowledge as Conversational. With the loss of faith in an objective reality that can be mirrored and mapped in scientific models, attention must be paid to discourse and negotiation about the meaning of the lived world. Philosophical discourse and research interviews rely on conversations giving access to knowledge. Also, in the classical philosophical position of Socrates, conversations are a primary way of producing knowledge about the true, the good, and the beautiful. If we follow Socrates, we understand qualitative interviews as having the potential of producing descriptions and narratives of everyday experiences as well as the epistemic knowledge justified discursively in a conversation.

Knowledge as Contextual. Hermeneutic philosophy has emphasized the fact that human life and understanding is contextual, both in the here and now and in a temporal dimension. Knowledge obtained within one situation is not

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automatically transferable to, nor commensurable with, knowledge within other situations. The interview takes place in an interpersonal context, and the meanings of interview statements relate to their context. Interviews are sensitive to the qualitative differences and nuances of meaning, which may not be quantifiable and commensurable across contexts and modalities. When it comes to ethical judgments of an interview procedure, and qualitative analytical generalizations of the knowledge produced, thick contextual descriptions of the settings are required. With the heterogeneity of contexts, the issue of translation between contexts comes into the foreground, for example from the interviewers' conversations with their subjects to their conversations with other researchers about the validity of the interview knowledge produced, and also when the results of the conversations enter into a public conversation about the knowledge produced.

Knowledge as Linguistic. Language is the medium of interview research; language is the tool of the interview process, and the resulting interview product is linguistic in the form of oral statements and transcribed texts to be analyzed. The transition from one linguistic modality to another, such as from oral to written language, is not merely a technical question of transcription, but raises issues concerning the different natures of oral and written language. Knowledge is constituted through linguistic interaction, and the participants' discourses and their effects are of interest in their own right. A variety of approaches exist for analyses of interviews that are based on language, such as linguistic, conversational, narrative, discursive, and deconstructive analyses.

Knowledge as Narrative. Stories are a powerful means of making sense of our social reality and our own lives. The interview is a key site for eliciting narratives that inform us of the human world of meanings. In open interviews, people tell stories about their lives; see, for example, the phenomenological interview in Chapter 2, where the respondent spontaneously produced a narrative on her learning of interior design. Research interviews give access to the manifold local narratives embodied in storytelling and they may themselves be reported in a narrative form.

Knowledge as Pragmatic. When human reality is understood as conversation and action, knowledge becomes the ability to perform effective actions. Today, the legitimacy question of whether a study is scientific, or whether it leads to true knowledge, tends to be replaced by the pragmatic question of whether it

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provides useful knowledge. Good research is research that works. The issue concerning what should count as "useful" is laden with value and ethical questions, to which we turn in the following chapter on ethics. There is an insistence in pragmatism that ideas and meanings derive their legitimacy from enabling us to cope with the world in which we find ourselves.

KNOWLEDGE AND INTERVIEWS IN A POSITIVIST CONCEPTION

We conclude this chapter with an outline of a philosophical tradition, which has been influential in the social sciences, and which has contributed to outlawing or marginalizing qualitative research as a legitimate scientific approach. A positivist philosophy has often been implied by researchers who are skeptical toward qualitative research interviewing, since positivism emphasizes the point that data should be quantitative. Scientific methods should further be neutral with regard to the subjectivity, interests, and values of the researcher. Because of the importance of positivism as an often-invoked antithesis to qualitative research, we briefly discuss it here by distinguishing between the classical positivism of Auguste Comte, which does not contradict the practice of qualitative interviewing, and the later restrictive methodological positivism of the social sciences.

A Rehabilitation of Classical Positivism?

Positivist philosophy undoubtedly made a historical contribution to the social sciences and also to the arts: Auguste Comte (1798–1857) founded both positivist philosophy and the science of sociology. The positivist philosophy reacted against religious dogma and metaphysical speculation and advocated a return to observable data. Positivist science was to provide determinate laws of society with the possibility of socially engineering society.

The influence of positivist sociology can be seen in the work of Émile Durkheim, an early sociologist who gave penetrating qualitative analyses of social phenomena. Positivism also had an extended influence on the arts of the 19th century, inspiring a move from mythological and aristocratic themes to a new realism, depicting in detail the lives of workers and the bourgeoisie (for some of this history, particularly in the British context, see Dale, 1989).

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In histories of music, Bizet's opera *Carmen,* featuring the lives of cigarette smugglers and toreadors, is depicted as inspired by positivism, and Flaubert's realistic descriptions of the life of his heroine in *Madame Bovary* enable it to be considered a positivist novel. Impressionist paintings, sticking to the immediate sense impressions, in particular the sense data of pointillism, also drew inspiration from positivism. Michel Houllebecq is a contemporary French author who explicitly acknowledges his inspiration from Comte's positivism, and Houellebecq has written the preface for a recent volume on Comte today (Bourdeau, Braunstein, & Petit, 2003).

The early positivism was also a political inspiration for feminism, and it was the feminist Harriet Martineau who translated Comte's *Positive Philosophy* into English. In philosophy, the founder of phenomenological philosophy, Husserl, stated that if positivism means being faithful to the phenomena, then we, the phenomenologists, are the true positivists. It can even be argued that the insistence in Comte's positivism to stay close to observed phenomena rather than engaging in metaphysical speculation about theoretical entities comes close to a postmodern emphasis on the importance of staying close to observable surface phenomena rather than postulated deep structures—here the surface has become the essence.

Methodological Positivism

The open approach of classical positivism was lost in the methodological positivism of the Vienna circle in the 1920s, whose members included the philosophers Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath (see Radnitzky, 1970; Schwandt, 2001). Its strict focus on the logic and validity of scientific statements contributed to a methodological bureaucracy of social science research, particularly in the mid-century United States. Bureaucracy is characterized by standardized procedures and methods, regularity, formal rules of decision and impersonal impartiality, written communication, and quantification.

A rigorous positivist epistemology came to dominate social science textbooks on methodology from the middle of the 20th century. A "unity of science" was advocated, where scientific research was based on a common method, independent of the subject matter investigated. In methodological positivism, scientific knowledge was to be found by following general methodological rules that were largely independent of the content and context of the investigation. The nature of scientific methods was to be found

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in the advanced natural sciences. Thus scientific statements should be based upon observable data; the observation of the data and the interpretation of their meanings were to be strictly separated. Scientific facts were to be unambiguous, intra-subjectively and inter-subjectively reproducible, objective, and quantifiable. Scientific statements ought to be value neutral, facts were to be distinguished from values, and science from ethics and politics. Any influence of the subjectivity of the researcher should be eliminated or minimized.

According to an epistemology that takes as its starting point the elimination of human subjectivity in research, the qualitative interview based on interpersonal interaction is unscientific. Interview data consist of meaningful statements, themselves based on interpretations; the data and their interpretations are thus not strictly separated. Quantified knowledge is not the goal of interview research; interview findings are commonly expressed in language, frequently in everyday language. Interview statements can be ambiguous and contradictory and the findings may not be intersubjectively reproducible, for example, because of the interviewers' varying knowledge of and sensitivity to the interview topic. In conclusion, major features of the mode of understanding in the qualitative interview appear, from a methodological positivist perspective, as sources of error, and the interview, following a positivist perspective, therefore cannot be a scientific method.

Although social scientists have often labeled positivist research as uncritical, since it regards critiques of the historical and social functions of social research as outside the scientific domain, it should be kept in mind that the positivists in fact contributed to moving social research beyond myth and common sense. Their emphasis on using and reporting transparent methods for arriving at scientific data opens the possibility of intersubjective control and critiques of research findings, counteracting subjective and ideological bias in research.

Critiques of positivism in social science are today often dismissed as attacking a man of straw. A strict methodological positivist epistemology is rarely if ever advocated by philosophers of science today. Within the social sciences, however, the formal methodological rules of positivist science still prevail in certain places—in newer neopositivist positions, in many mainstream methodology textbooks, and particularly in the new discourse on evidence-based practice, where evidence is frequently understood as based on formalized quantitative research.

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BOX 3.1 Evidence-Based Practice

The approach of evidence-based practice was developed by the British epidemiologist Cochrane in the 1970s. Faced with the wealth of new biomedical research and contradictions in this research, Cochrane sought to work out a model to evaluate rigor in medical research, which could support advice to practioners about which drugs and medical interventions had well-documented effectiveness. This endeavor led to an evidence hierarchy that placed randomized controlled experiments as "the gold standard," and expert opinion, as well as qualitative research, at the bottom level of evidence.

Such strict criteria of evidence are perhaps adequate for the biomedical research they were developed for. However, when they are extrapolated to other forms of research, they may result in a "politics of evidence" (Morse, 2006), where qualitative research in general becomes marginalized. The explorative, interactive, and case-based approach of many qualitative studies does not fit the logic of strictly controlled experimentation. In some areas, there have been attempts to broaden the original rigorous criteria—for example, evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP), which aims for "the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences" (see the Report of the Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, Levant, 2005). And while there are attempts to develop evidence criteria for qualitative research, the effect of the evidence-based practice movement on qualitative research has largely been to discredit qualitative research, hampering the acceptance of research proposals and the funding of qualitative research, and to support a methodological and political conservatism (Denzin & Giardina, 2006).

Box 3.1 depicts the role of the evidence-based practice movement in medical research and its relation to the legitimacy of qualitative research. We see here a parallel to methodological positivism, where generalized criteria developed for one area of scientific research—experimentation in physics—were extended to research in general, thereby outlawing qualitative social research. Today, a corresponding methodological imperialism takes place, where methodical criteria developed for evidence in biomedical research are generalized to the social sciences, again relegating qualitative research to an inferior position.

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This chapter has treated the epistemology of qualitative interview research, primarily with reference to postmodern, pragmatist, and hermeneutic philosophies. We have argued that these philosophical positions can help us understand the nature of the knowledge produced by qualitative interviews, constituted through language, narrative, human relations, and contexts. We have also presented a positivist philosophy, which emphasizes research as rule governed and scientific knowledge as quantitative, that has served to rule out qualitative interviewing as a legitimate research method. We have emphasized that in contrast to methodological positivism, knowledge is not obtained in qualitative research by following value- and interest-free methods, for the subjectivities of human beings play an irreducible role in qualitative knowledge production. Rather than excellence in research being conceptualized in terms of the methods used, we will advocate in Chapter 5 that excellent qualitative research is marked by good craftsmanship. This theme is also pursued in the next chapter, on ethics, where we address some of the ethical uncertainties of interviewing as a social practice. A central point will be that practicing ethically capable research cannot be reduced to following ethical principles and guidelines but must include elements of situated human judgment.