The Individually Focused Interview: Methodological Quality Without Transcription of Audio Recordings

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In this paper, I argue—with an example—that under certain conditions replacement of audio transcriptions with a combination of simultaneously taken and jointly produced notes can be done without affecting reliability, validity, and transparency. These conditions are: (1) professional or otherwise relatively "strong" interviewees (interview persons: IPs) with diverse backgrounds; (2) thorough planning of the interview with well-focused themes; and (3) a thorough and repeated introduction to the interview. The omission of audio transcriptions is an obvious solution to the researcher who wants a breadth of range of statements stemming from the use of many more interviewees than is often possible. The Individually Focused Interview (TIFI) also provides more time for involvement in the field and further analysis. Key Words: Qualitative Research Interview, Transcriptions, Reliability, Validity, Transparency, Breadth of Range, The Individually Focused Interview.

In using the qualitative research interview, there is a well-known risk that the researcher or student will "suffer the data death" because he or she will end up with too many pages and find it difficult to gather up the raw data. Kvale calls this "the 1,000-page question" (Kvale, 1997, p. 176), while others simply warn researchers not to "drown in the data" (Silverman, 2005, p. 349). The 1,000-page question and the risk of drowning in data come from the wish to interview more people than possible in the research process.

In this paper, I argue that under certain conditions audio transcriptions of qualitative research interviews can be replaced by taking notes, with no harm done to reliability, validity, and transparency. These conditions relate to the group under study, how well the interview has been planned, focused themes, and how thorough the introduction to the interview has been. The paper introduces the Individually Focused Interview as an alternative way to find the immediate discourses that are attached to the main issue. It seeks to predict trends and explain the social dynamics, and is a way to ensure breadth of range of statements. Furthermore, the paper argues theoretically—from the standpoint of modern hermeneutics—that audio transcriptions are not necessarily needed to comply with scientific standards.

Since the 1940s, the qualitative research interview has evolved from the "focused interview" of Robert K. Merton to presenting a range of qualitative interviews. Today, Merton gets the credit for the development of the focus group interview (Pedersen, 2003), although Merton's original ideas in the "The Focussed Interview" did not include today's many uses of focus group interviews (Merton 1965; Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990). Merton was not only the literary midwife of the focus group interview: he also represented an important change to the mentality of the research interview.

Merton (1946) argued that instead of using more mechanical, quantitative measurements to understand people's statements about dissatisfaction, satisfaction, comfort, or discomfort, a fundamental shift to a qualitative interview style would bring more depth of understanding. Shortly afterwards the possibility of making recordings began to appeal to researchers. It was thus possible to transcribe interviews in the manner we know today.

The qualitative research interview has reached high ground on a worldwide basis, not just at universities but also at other teaching levels and in change-oriented processes in organizations guided by consultants. Starting mainly in the 1990s, a number of researchers argued for the use of qualitative methods to complement quantitative methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 1994).

The father of modern hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, argued that in interpretation of statements in dialogue, they should be understood from the individual's own situation and range of understanding. Moreover, we must understand that objectivity in the usual scientific sense is not possible in interpretation of statements; thus, the definitive interpreter is also part of the interpreted (Gadamer, 1960). Historically, the presentations of qualitative methods and their differences from quantitative methods have been part of a fierce debate about what is scientific and what is not (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The ability of qualitative methods to satisfy requirements of validity has been under fire from advocates of quantitative methods, while qualitative researchers argue the contrary—that natural science-based validity requirements cannot be used with qualitative methods. The development of the qualitative research interview thus occurred concurrently with a defence of both its necessity and its scientific status. In this context, the development of the qualitative interview may have occurred at a time of controversy when its proponents may have been too willing to overlook its possible weaknesses.

There are, however, widespread practical problems for researchers when describing the method used to perform the qualitative research interview in a transparent manner. Not least, there are problems of explaining reliability and validity; it is often not possible to look over the researcher's shoulder.

The Individually Focused Interview (TIFI)

In what follows, I will endeavor to present an example of how, under certain conditions, the qualitative research interview can be conducted in a manner that makes it possible to improve reliability, validity, and transparency. The background to this lies in hermeneutics. Firstly, I will present the context ("the case") in which the interview method was used. Secondly, I will describe in detail the stages of the interview to which I attach crucial importance.

The Individually Focused Interview will be described under the following six headings, representing different stages:

1. Thematization, design, and planning
2. Thorough introduction to the interview method
3. The interview, and writing of notes on statements together with the participant
4. Writing of the draft and further joint production

5. Analysis
6. Results

This may be compared to Kvale's seven methodological stages, which can be seen as the gold standard in qualitative research interviews: (a) Thematization; (b) Design; (c) Interview; (d) Transcription; (e) Analysis; (f) Verification; and (g) Reporting (Kvale, 1997, p. 95). The two main differences to Kvale's seven stages are (a) the involvement of the interview person (IP) in the interview (the thorough and repeated introduction to the interview and the contribution from the IP in the production of notes); and (b) the omission of transcription of recordings.

I call the method "The Individually Focused Interview" (TIFI), after Merton's focused interviews. I use the word *focus* to show that the temporal weighting in the interview process is on the key issues of the study.

The Case

My task in the "Work Retention Project" in 2007 was to collect data to answer questions about possible differences in municipal proceedings sickness cases (after an intervention, or not). The project was a controlled non-randomized study with an epidemiological design. The quantitative data revealed how many people were on long-term sickness leave, the types of illness involved, and the immediate relationship between the type of cause of illness and the length of sick leave. The data also revealed a difference between the participating municipalities in the project. The figures showed that there was a link between the municipality citizens who had been treated and the subsequent labour market status of these citizens. Also, the length of sick leave varied according to the municipality the citizen lived in.

A Note on Municipal Proceedings Sickness Cases in Denmark

In Denmark, whenever a citizen who is potentially suitable for the labour market–(i.e., virtually all individuals between the ages of 18 and 62)–is on long-term sick leave, the municipality is responsible both for paying sickness benefit and for follow-up of the individual in question. In contrast to most other countries, there is a comprehensive follow-up of the status of the citizen regarding both his/her sick status and the possibility of returning to work.

1. Thematization, design, and planning. From the quantitative data, we had a series of *why* and *how* questions that seemed to be best answered using qualitative methods because between municipalities, and even within the same municipality, there appeared to be significant differences in the proceedings with exactly the same types of sickness leave cases. An example was one citizen who was refused certain privileges according to Danish social legislation. He then moved to another municipality, and immediately afterwards he had exactly the same priveliges given to him–under the same laws. Thus, we had the feeling that the differences identified were not necessarily only differences between municipalities, but also differences reflecting the behavior of social workers within the same municipality. There was thus a need for data collection that

could not only explain differences in behavior at the municipal level, but also behavioral differences in individual cases. To do this, we had to involve both the social workers and the citizens who were on long-term sick leave. The question then was how many citizens and how many social workers would have to be interviewed to obtain a knowledge base that was sufficient to allow us to gain insight into the concrete problems and why the differences occurred.

To ensure an adequate breadth of range of statements in the data collection, it was necessary to reach significantly more than 5-10 participants in the interview. The study included interviews with 20 people reported to be ill and 22 municipal social workers handling municipal proceedings sickness cases. The social workers came from two municipalities. The interviews were individual. Focus group interview could have been chosen, but would not have guaranteed a wide enough range of statements about problems; in focus group interviews, there is a risk of asymmetrical power relations between participants. I have no references on this point of asymmetrical power relations, only my experience from participation in focus group interviews and in organizational groupings that can be compared to focus groups.

Asymmetrical power relations may not be a problem if the aim is to test and develop attitudes in a group. When the purpose is to uncover the breadth of range of statements, there would be an advantage in having equal time with each interview person. Choice of focus group interviews could also lead to distortion of the material because it can be difficult to bring together people with different working hours and different positions on the labor market at the same time.

2. Thorough introduction to the interview method. In a written invitation to participate in the interview, there was a layman's description of the purpose of the interviews and of the study, and references to where the participants could learn more (a website, a phone number, and an e-mail address).

During the telephone confirmation of participation/agreement for interview time and place (which were decided by the IP), the following information was given and repeated: (a) the purpose of the interview (including the research project as such); (b) that the interview would not be recorded, but instead written down in condensed form; (c) that during the interview there would be agreement with the IP on what statements should be written down; and (d) that shortly after the interview, the IP was expected to accept or correct the draft version of the condensed interview. At the end of the telephone conversation confirming the participation, it was agreed with the submission of an interview guide with questions and themes.

3. The interview, and writing of notes on statements together with the participant. All interviews began with a refresher of the purpose of the study. The interviews were semi-structured and organized with nine sub-themes and 2–4 specific questions for each sub-theme. The questions were followed by detailed, open questions. For example: "What do you mean by that?", "Can you elaborate on that?", or "Can you give some examples?" The specific questions were indicative, i.e., not all questions were asked if the question was covered by the answer to another question. If the interviewer had any doubt about the meaning of a statement, the IP was asked the same thing to

obtain a deeper meaning of the statement. Besides asking questions, the role of the interviewer was mainly to take notes.

The intention was to complete the interview in about 45 minutes, based on the assumption that when people were well-prepared and had looked at the guide to the questions, then the vast majority of IPs would be able to answer a question-theme in 5 minutes.

During the interview, a consensus would be reached with the IP concerning which of his/her statements should be written down.

The IP's statements were written down in keyword format, preferably using the expressions, words, and phrases from the IP. In some cases, entire quotes were written down if there was agreement that the phrase was accurate and apt for the theme in question. Statements that were judged by the interviewer to be entirely outside the theme were not written down (e.g., a reference to the weather that day). However, the interviewer was careful not to exclude non-theme statements that could be referring to the theme (e.g., using an analogy).

4. Writing of the draft and further joint production. Immediately after the interview, a draft of the notes (usually 3–6 pages) was written using a PC. The notes, which now took the form of meaningful, condensed statements, usually covered two A4 pages. All the IPs received their draft no later than two days after the interview, and then had a two-week period to comment on the statements. They were again told about the importance of corrections if the written statement was false, was unclear, or needed to be explained more deeply. There were some comments and minor corrections from about half of those interviewed. All IPs but two reported back and approved the statements. The majority reported back after a few days. Two IPs (one citizen and one social worker) did not report back and were told by the interviewer that their statements would be considered accepted if they were not returned as soon as possible. It was noted at the start of these two written reports that they had been passively approved in this way.

5. Analysis. The raw material amounted to 90 pages of meaningful, condensed statements. What was left was a pure text analysis. The analysis broadly followed the data analysis in grounded theory (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The detailed analysis is described in Clausen, Stoltenberg, and Skov (2008).

6. Results. The results from the study are published elsewhere (Clausen et al., 2008). Here, I will emphasize two main results that would not have been possible to gather if recordings had had to be transcribed.

The first main result was that among the social workers, we discovered a widespread arbitrary interpretation of key legislation. This had major consequences for a small number of citizens in the study. The second main result was that, practically speaking, work on the proceedings on cases with sick leave was organized independently and without any systematic form of knowledge sharing. Furthermore, one problem was that the proceedings were halted in the social worker's absence for any reason (due to holidays, meetings, sick leave, maternity leave, courses, etc.).

Common to the two main results was the discovery of a generally arbitrary file-processing system that provided the citizen with an arbitrary result. This would not have

been possible to discover using only a few interviews, because data that might have indicated something like this would have been considered a potential measurement error or a result of chance. Because transcription of audio recordings would have limited the number of IPs to perhaps ten in all—covering three subgroups: citizens and officials from the two municipalities. With a total of 42 interviews, however, it was possible to know more about the distribution of certain issues. Furthermore, the study benefited from the many IPs regarding the total range of statements.

Objections to the Individually Focused Interview

I presented the first use of qualitative interviews without transcription of recordings in a working paper submitted to a conference in Aalborg, Denmark, in the autumn of 2005. At that time, I built my example of how I, in 2000, had interviewed a total of 37 IPs over two months within a project aiming to reveal the base of certain organizational changes with many professionals in a hospital. Since the presentation of the working paper, I have had some comments and criticism, on which I will now elaborate.

What about Reliability, Validity, and Transparency?

In my study, about 90 pages of approved statements in condensed form made up the raw material of the study. The IPs were thoroughly briefed on their right--and duty– to correct the wordings of the statements from the interview. This was done verbally both before and during the interviews, and in writing immediately afterwards. This ensured a high degree of reliability–particularly in comparison with the standard procedures that take place when transcribing recordings, where IPs are often not given the opportunity to correct either the statements or the first interpretations of them. If they are, it is important to remember that the IPs will be less reluctant to check and correct their statements if the statements take up only 2 pages (as TIFI) rather than 25 (as a standard transcription). The time factor is also significant, as an IP will be less inclined to correct a text prepared from an interview that was held a month ago than a text that has been prepared from an interview held a few days earlier.

Validity is ensured, not least, by the breadth of data collected, which allows a multi-faceted description of problems in sickness cases. Transparency improves conditions for the researcher, with fewer pages of raw material. It is much easier to come further in the steps of the analysis (categorizations and interpretations) and finally disseminate the different parts if there are only 90 pages of text. This is theoretically only a question of time. However, in my experience, the time factor is crucial when it comes to the possibility of transcribing, analyzing, disseminating, and publicizing qualitative data. I made a test of this by holding the very same interview using both TIFI and recording and transcriptions. The first written version of the interview using TIFI resulted in two pages of condensed interview material. The second version from transcription of audio recordings resulted in 25 pages—after 2 days of hard work doing transcriptions. In this way, it was possible to see whether an analysis of the fully transcribed text would give rise to interpretations other than those in the shorter version of TIFI. The short answer to this question is no. The difference was that compared to the 25 pages, the two

pages of TIFI made it much easier to handle the text and to reach the point of disseminating it, and in doing so it was easier to ensure that there was more transparency.

Is TIFI Not Just a Journalistic Approach?

TIFI might look like a journalistic approach regarding the taking of notes (although most journalists today use audio recording). But otherwise there is a substantial difference between working with the scientific problem and hypotheses and working with journalistic angles where only those statements that fit with a pre-selected idea or conclusion can be used. The Individually Focused Interview also differs from the journalistic method by placing particular emphasis on the IP's involvement in and approval of the raw material, unlike some forms of journalism where quotations can be used or left out to suit the argument and not properly explained in context. My view of the differences between science and journalism is consistent with that of Silverman (2005, pp. 349-350).

"You Will Not Gain Deep Insight in Only 45 Minutes!"

It is a common assumption among researchers that the more time an interview takes, the greater the insight the interviewer can achieve. Also, it is believed that an interview lasting only 45 minutes will only scratch the surface, and not identify real problems. This view rests on the premise that the longer an interview takes, the more honest, open, and fulfilling the answers of the IPs will be. This might be true in some cases where IPs struggle to express themselves or are deeply skeptical about the interview situation; then, it would take some time for the IP to thaw. But in most cases where people are interviewed—especially if professionals are being interviewed about their work and if the interviewer maintains focus on key issues with relevant open questions—it is difficult to see why the IP should not be able to express his or her main statements on a sub-theme in less than five minutes. It is clear that the longer the time one spends on a sub-theme, the more the IP will say, and in principle there will be more information given over. But the question is clearly whether such detailed knowledge is always relevant to the research in question. I would argue that there is not necessarily more depth in a dialogue because it is long. Indeed, the dialogue can become less focused relative to the problems. This can be illustrated as seen in Figure 1.

The figure is merely to illustrate my point, as there are no empirical measurements behind it. The reason that there are two lines showing the quantity of relevant data over time is that I assume that both the interviewer and the IP, to some extent, adapt their statements and the dialogue to the announced time frame. Conversely, it is my assumption that the amount of irrelevant statements rises independently of the form of interview as fatigue and lack of concentration arise—on both sides! This is probably applicable to any interview. However, in my experience the assumption illustrated above applies (a) when professionals or other relatively strong IPs are interviewed; (b) if there is a well-planned interview with focused themes; and (c) if there is a thorough and repeated introduction to the interview.

Figure 1. Relevance of Data in the Individually Focused Interview and the Typical Research Interview as a Function of Time

Quantity of   Quantity of

relevant data   irrelevant data

Time

	TIFI	Typical research interview
	STOP	STOP
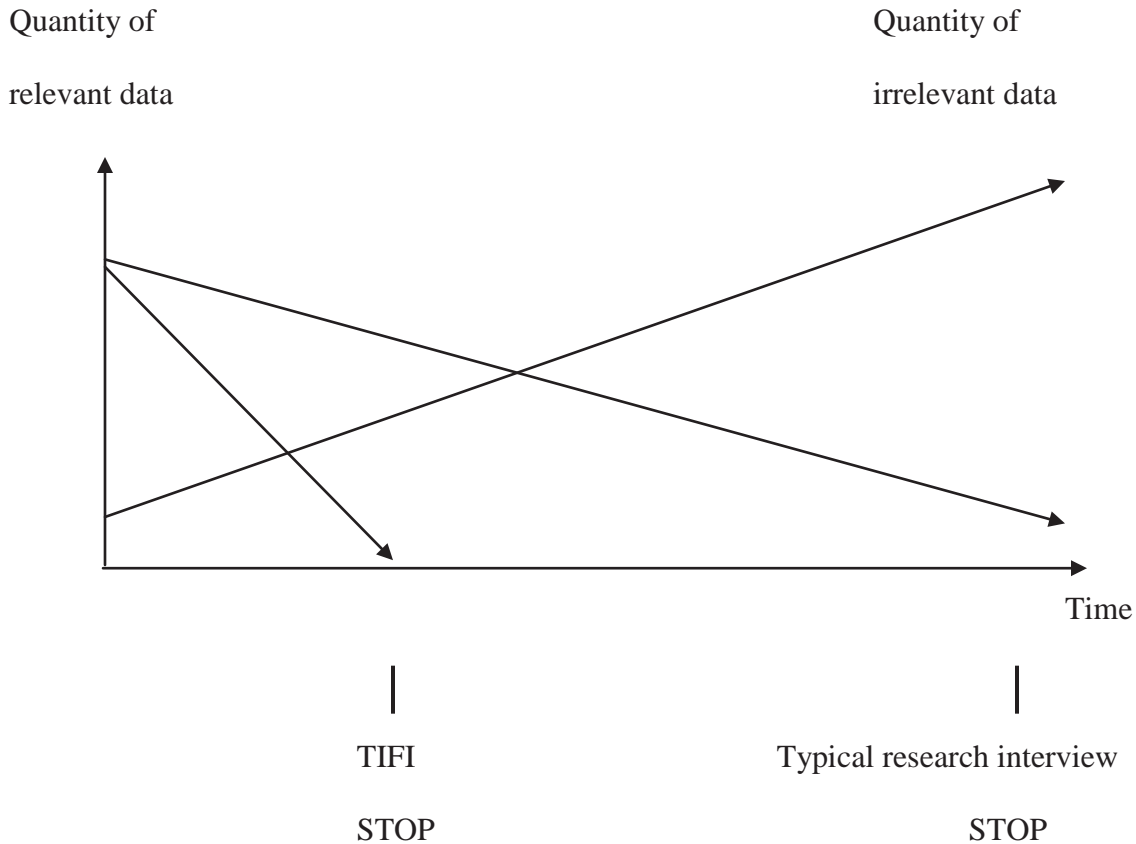
        Another aspect of depth versus breadth is the often implicit assumption that the "in-depth interview" is superior to more quantitative approaches because it is more "progressive". This idea ("the qualitative progressivity myth") is convincingly uncovered by Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Kvale, 2004). Overall, probably only approaches that cover enough of both breadth and depth have the potential to achieve overall understandings. Otherwise, the choice of approach should be based on the research questions, in particular concerning what needs to be answered and whether the method can be communicated transparently. The value of new insights could prove to be very limited if the researcher is not able to describe how the allegedly exciting results have emerged.

"You Will Not be Able to do In-Depth Analysis"

        If I have—as a starting point for analysis—90 pages of approved statements in condensed form, representing the raw material of the study, I only have material to make a plain text analysis. Any description of gestures, pauses, situation-impressions and the

like has been peeled away. How can I be sure of getting the socially recognizable understandings and viewpoints of the IP? How can I be able to understand if the IP has another understanding of a particular word than the one I have? My answer is that TIFI does not neglect the importance of situations—the context, prejudices, or power. The talented interviewer must embed his or her impressions of the situation, context, and power relations as part of the craftsmanship of the interview. The task is to contextualize and personalize the handling of the interview rather than to do the same in the analysis. The task is not made easier by trying to take account of the same things throughout extensive written material, whether it involves hundreds of pages of raw material or special notes. For example, an observer notes how the IP apparently feels in the situation, etc. If the interviewer and interpreter (usually the same person) is able to take good account of the IP's mood, gestures, perceived comfort or discomfort, etc. during the interview, then it cannot be undone afterwards.

Reliability, validity, and transparency with or without audio transcriptions

In the above, using a practical example I have argued how TIFI may be a good way to perform the qualitative research interview without any need for audio transcriptions. This is not common practice. On the contrary, in my experience audio transcriptions are often seen as a gold standard that will always improve the interview—and subsequently, the quality of the analysis. However, taking methodological considerations into account and from the perspective of hermeneutics, it is not at all clear that audio transcriptions will always ensure the best quality of research.

In any science, reliability, validity, and transparency are key words—or even measurements—of the methodological quality. Taking these three key words in what follows I argue that the typical research interview with audio transcription is not any better than without it. Hence, the question I seek answers to, partly from method literature and partly from the philosophy of hermeneutics, is whether the transcription of audio recordings is necessary to achieve the best possible reliability, validity, and transparency.

Methodological problems in qualitative research

In the international literature on qualitative research methods, the most comprehensive and thorough quality criteria are transparent and motivated methodological procedures. Irrespective of the approach, it is recommended that key methodological choices should be made explicit. Although the different approaches vary in how well methodological dispositions can be clarified (it might be difficult with a narrative approach), the researcher should at least try to justify his/her choices of method to the reader (Olsen, 2002).

In a study of the quality of Danish qualitative interview studies, Henning Olsen concludes:

Many studies seem more based on common sense rather than transparent methodology-logical reflections and decisions based on the recommendations in qualitative methodology literature about qualitative

research processes and ensuring of analytical quality. The consequence is that researchers and other users of qualitative analysis are assigned limited (and sometimes almost no) opportunities to "look over the researcher's shoulder" from the initial subject during the development of data to the final analysis. Among the most prominent problems is the absence of strategic analysis and transparency of criteria for the control or "validation" of analysis of the results. (Olsen, 2002, p. 85 [my translation])

Olsen concluded that the Danish qualitative interview studies investigated had an overall lack of transparency and there was a lack of opportunity to validate the studies. The question then is whether the studies that Olsen reviewed are representative of Danish qualitative studies? In his investigation, Olsen carefully explained the selection criteria of the studies included in his review, and there was apparently nothing to support the notion that the studies selected represented an especially skewed group of non-transparent qualitative interview studies.

Peter Dahler-Larsen sees it as a possible intrinsic problem in qualitative studies that many methodology books have a purely normative approach, which in many studies leads to simple reproduction of the description of methods without them being thoroughly investigated, including the considerations and problems associated with them. Dahler-Larsen believes that a stronger focus on methodological rules for the production of data will significantly improve many qualitative studies in their entirety (Dahler-Larsen, 2003, pp. 19-22).

The question, then, is why there is such a widespread problem of lack of transparency. Is it just a matter of researchers not being better at using the methodological rules, or is there also another major reason for it being difficult to convey methodical transparency? In the following, I look at the significance of transcriptions for validity and the ability to convey a transparent investigation. I question whether transcriptions are needed to meet normal scientific standards.

What are Reliability, Validity, and Transparency?

Reliability is about whether the data are due to measurement error, and whether repeated measurements under the same circumstances would give the same results.

Validity is about the overall quality or credibility of the study in relation to drawing firm conclusions on the study issue. Validity can be defined in many ways, such as immediate validity (face validity), content validity, and criterion validity. Another way of considering validity is to break it down into conceptual validity, conclusion validity, internal validity, and external validity. Sometimes the concepts of validity and reliability are used almost interchangeably. It is difficult to make a simple summary of the concept of validity.

Transparency is about researchers' design of the study, their description of the implementation of the method, and their analysis—in such a way that it is possible to look over their shoulder. Reliability, validity, and transparency are inextricably linked. Only if an investigation is transparently designed, implemented, and analyzed is it possible to tell about the study's reliability and validity.

Transcription Criteria

Qualitative methodology literature shows a range of transcription criteria and various methods of weighting of the importance of transcriptions. Differences are seen in the various transcription conventions— i.e., the rules about how the sound recordings are reproduced in written form; for example, how and to what extent sound like "em", pauses, etc. are printed. In Silverman (2004), there is a set of transcription conventions with a reference to conversation analysis. Psathas (1995) gives a set of "transcription symbols" (p. 70) that is significantly different from Silverman's conventions. Silverman (2005, pp.166-167) shows a somewhat different convention than that published in 2004, with emphasis on reproducing accurately described breaks measured in tenths of seconds.

In Danish qualitative research practice, there is no certainty about the criteria that should be used. From the aforementioned survey by Olsen:

> Only one researcher reflects on the loss of meaning stemming from the recording of the live voice on paper... More importantly, none of the researchers set fairly good transcription criteria. Noncommittal terms such as "literal print-out", "print-out of the full text" etc. are used... or the issue is by-passed without any mention. (Olsen, 2002, p. 81, [my translation])

So there are a variety of ways to transcribe, from laissez-faire practices of self-invented rules and logic with the associated rule of writing down words literally, to advanced conversational analytical rules where all the sounds and pauses are written in the form of letters, special characters, and symbols.

Is There a Hermeneutic Reason for Transcription of Audio Recordings?

All forms of conversation analysis have their theoretical basis in philosophical hermeneutics. From the founder of modern hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, we know at least two mandatory requirements or tasks for researchers who want to understand and interpret dialectical statements: (a) to explain the situation or context when statements are being interpreted; and (b) to explain one's own prejudices (Gadamer, 1960; Henriksen, 2003). Furthermore, an extra mandatory requirement or task for researchers has been added by Jürgen Habermas who, in his hermeneutic sociological approach, argues that researchers should also include political and economic power (Henriksen, 2003, pp. 54-55).

Each one of these tasks is difficult and complicated to meet in practice, perhaps because they are unlimited and diffuse. Above all, philosophical hermeneutics does not deal with methodology issues of social science. Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote in his principal work *Truth and Method* that the hermeneutical mission "... is not to develop a method of understanding, but rather to clarify the conditions under which understanding takes place" (Gadamer, 1960, p. 281 [my translation]). Thus, Gadamer does not argue for the use of certain techniques, but rather that the researcher's understanding, interpretation, and application of the statements must be based on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is thus comprehensive and philosophical, and is not specific regarding how and if transcription of audio recordings is required.

Does Methodology Literature Have a Reason for Transcription of Audio Recordings?

In literature on methods, there are few lines of argument as to why it is necessary to transcribe recordings. It is taken for granted that it is reasonable. This is seen, for example, in several chapters by different authors in Denzin and Lincoln's *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Thus, transcription of audio recordings in the qualitative research interview can be called a methodological paradigm (according to Kuhn, 1970).

The argumentation for transcription of recordings that is actually found in methodology literature is that the transcription is raw material that is important for reliability and thus, indirectly, also for validity and transparency: "In conversation analytic research, recordings and transcriptions are the 'raw material' comparable to ethnographers' field notes. Accordingly, the quality of recordings and transcriptions has important implications for the reliability of conversation analytic research" (Peräkylä, 2004, p. 285). But the question is rather: Is it not good documentation and internal analytical context as such that have implications for reliability and validity, and not the choice of recording and transcriptions *per se*? And why does Peräkylä readily accept that ethnographic field notes are good evidence while the social researcher should use audio recordings and transcriptions? One answer may be that the ethnographic understanding is that the researcher and the people involved in an ethnographic study are in a living dialogue in cultural encounters, where the researcher himself is a joint producer of data. This is unlike social science research interviews, where the researcher is more or less trying to compensate for contextual meanings, prejudices, etc. Thus, implicitly, the social researcher has a starting point as the exogenous researcher who tries to gather data in a manner that has no mutual impact. Overall, in the methodology literature, it is difficult to see a convincing argument for why sound recording and transcription are necessary.

Disadvantages of the Transcription of Audio Recordings

An immediate disadvantage of transcribing recordings is the excessive use of time. Following the recommendations of the methodological literature (e.g., Psathas, 1995; Silverman, 2005), transcription is not just a simple writing down of the spoken word. One should follow certain conventions, with more or less sophisticated use of symbols and signs for any sound or break. This may also be supplemented by the interviewer's (or an observer's) notes on the interview situation.

A one-hour interview typically covers 20–30 printed pages. Thus, for an unskilled secretary just one interview can take several days to transcribe. Even if a trained secretary is able to do it faster, time will be spent validating the transcript through repeated listening of the recording. The total time used has at least the following five consequences:

1. The number of IPs in qualitative research interviews is often restricted to 5–10 people—not only due to the time used to transcribe, but also due to the time taken to handle so many pages.

2. There is a risk that the researcher will "suffer the data death" because he or she ends up with (too) many pages and finds it difficult to summarize the raw data.

3. There is a relatively long time from completion of the interview to when the analysis is complete. No matter how well the transcription is done, and no matter whether it is supplemented with progress reports and observations of the interview situation etc., people tend to forget more and more over time. It tends to become purely text analysis. For a number of years, there have been computer applications supporting editing, categorization, and other advanced forms of text analysis. At the same time, applications that perform speech recognition are on the way. In principle, the latter might make the transcription process redundant. Whether (overall) there will be fewer hours handling the many pages involved is, however, an open question because the fundamental problems that were previously associated with the transcription may well prove to shift over to the work of technical management and editing of many pages. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, pp. 54-55) mention a variety of critical objections to the use of computer applications.

4. The time used reduces transparency. The interview in itself constitutes a dialogue-based learning process for the researcher who, while it is underway, will correct the methodology and questions. Thus, transparency implies answering the question "What did I do?" and not just answer a previous "What will I do?" As transcription of audio recordings (even of just 5–10 interviews) takes quite a long time, and as essential parts of the passing on of the methods will always be the end of the research process, the essential parts of this will always be in danger of ending up beyond the deadline.

5. The IP is often unable to correct his/her statements or weigh his/her words differently. Although the IP gets a transcription on paper, the paper is not usually handed over on the day after the interview, but after several weeks have passed. The time since the interview has in itself implications for possible changes. Firstly, the IP remembers less after some weeks and will therefore tend to correct less, or to correct wrongly. Secondly, if changes or corrections are suggested by the IP—after even more additional respond time—it can be annoying for the researcher, who has, of course, in the meantime tried to live up to a gold standard by starting the analysis (pinpointing the interim conclusions) before the transcription process is over. Thus, the actual possibility of changes and corrections is low. In fact, in the standard research process using transcriptions, it would be very annoying and delaying for the whole process if many changes and corrections were to be suggested by all the IPs. Thus, in the standard interview process with transcriptions, it may be necessary not to give priority to the IP's corrections and suggestions for changes. In this way, it affects both reliability and validity when most of the IPs are not involved in the understanding and approval of the words that have been transcribed.

Steinar Kvale (1997) does not see a low number of IPs as being a problem. He asks: "How many interviewees do I need?" and he answers very simply: "Interview as many people as necessary to find out what you need to know" (pp. 108-109). Subsequently, Kvale argues that a small number of IPs (in some cases only one person) can constitute a good source of significant knowledge (Kvale, 1997 [my translation]). Significant knowledge and representativeness is in itself fine, but it is not the only rationale for deciding the number of IPs. The number should be strongly linked to the need for breadth of range of statements, and to whether interpretations are at a social or psychological level (which in principle could apply to any person brought into a similar

situation) or whether the researcher wishes to predict trends and explain social dynamics/phenomena or behavior (perhaps group behavior in certain situations). In other words, it will depend on whether the results are to be analyzed from a psychological/social-psychological point of view or from a sociological point of view. For the first point, few IPs will be needed in most cases, but for the second more IPs will be needed in most cases.

Another reason why few IPs may be critical is the greater risk of interpretation error stemming from measurement error. Apart from directly lying in his/her responses, the respondent may have forgotten or misunderstood important details about the issue in question. Furthermore, there might be more influence from prestige-bias, e.g., the IP might respond in a socially desirable way rather than being fully honest (Kruse, 1996). A larger number of IPs will not in itself be an insurance against measurement errors, but the effect of such errors will be limited unless the same error is systematic.

Can Transcription of Audio Recordings Be Omitted?

The whole process of transcription takes a great deal of time, time that could be used in other parts of the interview stage of the study, and which may cause the investigation to lack both transparency and breadth. In addition, there may be problems with validity and reliability, in the form of a lack of involvement of IPs validating the statements. This point is strongly supported by Eikeland (2006), who argues that validity is also a question of dialogue and of getting into the field.

When there are so many not only practical but also methodological problems associated with the transcription process, can we drop this completely in the qualitative research interview? Going back to philosophical hermeneutics, transcription of audio recordings is not a direct requirement. Lars Bo Henriksen summarizes and remarks on the overall approach the researcher should have when using philosophical hermeneutics:

> You must abandon the idea of studying people as objects, and instead recognize them as fellows who can teach you something and who themselves can learn from the research process. As an effect of this, the people who engage in the social contexts the study is about must be involved. Through dialogue with these actors, it is possible to correct the data, highlight viewpoints etc., which would not otherwise be available. By engaging in dialogue with the actors rather than loosely interviewing them, it is also possible to ensure their acceptance of different points of view. (Henriksen, 2003, p. 64 [my translation])

One consequence of Henriksen's point of view is that the researcher should emphasize the involvement of the IPs in validation of their own views. This can be done during the interview and then by showing the IP an audio transcript. However, the question is then the degree to which an IP would be able to amend or correct a tape transcript. Kvale mentions an example in which he presented a transcript to an IP, who was allowed to correct the quotations. Kvale writes:

> I was at that time not very aware of the different rules that apply to speech and written language, and thought that a verbatim transcript of the interviews was the most fair and objective transcription. But I respected his request, and changed his statements to the correct written form, which also made them easier to read. (Kvale, 1997, p. 167 [my translation])

Kvale writes that when his IP had the opportunity to amend his own statements, the text became easier to read. This speaks for the involvement of the IP in an additional validation of the transcript. But whether and to what extent this should be done will depend on the type of transcription needed. Kvale calls for researchers to ask themselves the question "What transcription is suitable for my research purposes?" And Kvale answers:

> Verbatim descriptions are necessary in the context of linguistic analysis. The inclusion of pauses, repetition, and tone is relevant to psychological interpretations of, for example, the level of anxiety or the significance of denial. When you convert the conversation to literary style, it becomes easier to pass on the meaning of the interviewee's stories to the readers. (Kvale, 1997, p. 166, [my translation])

According to Kvale, language researchers and psychologists are the most frequent users of audio recording transcriptions. Researchers with a more sociological viewpoint are not mentioned. Kvale thus sees it as an advantage for the readers' understanding if the conversation is transformed into a "literary style", (Kvale, 1997, p. 166) which would be different from a usual transcript. Kvale could be interpreted as an argument for first making full transcriptions and then reformulation of all transcriptions into "literary style". But then the question is: would it not, for more sociologically-oriented researchers, be more adequate to refrain from transcription of audio recordings and go directly to the "literary style"?

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to present the Individually Focused Interview as an alternative to the widely used qualitative research interview, where the transcription of audio recordings is practically the gold standard. The Individually Focused Interview uses joint production of notes rather than transcription of audio recordings. Under certain conditions, this may enhance the reliability, validity, and transparency. The most important of these conditions relate to (a) the group under study—when the group being investigated is heterogeneous and must have sufficient breadth of range of statements in the data collection; (b) introduction of the method to the interviewees—a thorough introduction concerning IPs and their roles, especially the joint production and approval of their statements that form the basis of subsequent analysis; (c) the purpose of the study—when the tendency of certain issues to occur is important, and when one needs to collect statements on the same issue from several groups in order to describe a range of nuances associated with the main problem; and (d) the methodological aspects of the study—when the investigation has a sociological outlook, the understanding being that

the researcher wants to find the immediate discourses that are attached to the main issue, and tries to predict trends and explain the social dynamics.

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In memoriam my academic advisor and professor at Roskilde University Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, ┼ April 2012.

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