Power, ethics and the production of subjectivity in the group interview

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss how Michel Foucault's concept of power can contribute to the discussion of research ethics in qualitative interviewing within the field of social psychology. Minimizing power is a common aim in the ethical principles of psychology and in research interviewing. Using examples from my own research, I show that the traditional concept of power seems insufficient to capture what is at stake in group interview situations. The group interview adds a group dynamic, making it significantly more complicated than the individual interview. To account for this complexity, the paper suggests elaborating the discussion of ethics in the research interview through Foucault's concept of power as a productive force.

Key-words:

Michel Foucault, qualitative interview, subjectification, research ethics, group relations.

As human beings, we long to live meaningful lives that seek the good. As friends, we long to have trusting relationships that care for others. As researchers, we long to do ethical research that makes a difference. To come close to these goals, we constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling. (Ellis 2007: 26)

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss how an expanded view on the concept of power can contribute to the research ethics of interviewing. Relations of power in the qualitative interview have been the concern of, among others, feminist researchers (e.g., Reinhartz 1992; Nielsen (edt.) 1990; Ellis 2007; Corbin & Morse 2003). Marcia Westcott, for example, discusses the asymmetry of men and women as a problem of domination that calls for a feminist (non-dominant) approach. The feminist approach must be working towards freedom from domination and towards '[…] a dialectical approach of self and other, person and society, consciousness and activity, past and future, knowledge and practice […]'(Westcott 1990: 65).

Carolyn Ellis, in turn, focuses on the power of the researcher when becoming – or being – intimate with participants (Ellis 2007). What stories is the researcher allowed to share – and to construct? And what does the researcher do when the participants recognize themselves and other people they know in the research? Corbin & Morse examine the challenge of interviewing on sensitive topics (Corbin & Morse 2003) but conclude, however,

that the potential harm inflicted by the researcher does not differ significantly from what might occur in an everyday dialogue (ibid.).

The research mentioned above conceptualizes power in a traditional (Marxist) manner: as something possessed by someone and exercised over others. This can easily lead to power being considered an evil force, equal to domination and suppression. This conceptualization of power may evidently lead to the interviewer having to *limit* her power over the interviewee.

However, I intend to argue in this paper that this concept of power is quite insufficient to capture all the processes of power at stake in a qualitative interview. In an interview, as in everyday life, power seems to be much more 'fluent' and difficult to locate than the traditional (Marxist) concept of power presupposes. Power exists and is being exercised even when no one seems to be dominating or dominated (Foucault 1994a). Thus, the traditional concept of power is only capable of grasping some of the processes of power in an interview. Even if the interviewer does not violate any of the research ethical demands, an interview situation is still loaded with power but in a form unequal to domination. This is quite obvious when more than two persons are involved in the interview, i.e., in a group interview.

In order to capture these different processes and relations of power, I turn to the power concept of Michel Foucault: Power as a productive force, which exists only when exercised. Whereas the traditional (Marxist) power is rather explicit, Foucault points at all the subtle mechanisms of influence that operates in our linguistic, behavioral and institutional practice (Foucault 1994a; Foucault 1995; Foucault 1998).

The paper takes its point of departure in the ethical principles of the research interview, which are highly inspired by the ethical principles of psychology. I then introduce the research project that opened my eyes to the shortcomings of the traditional/Marxist power

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concept as the foundation of the research ethics of interviewing. I thus introduce the power concept of Foucault and discuss its potential in relation to research ethics.

Ethics and Temptations in the Research Interview

Although the research interview is a widely used method for collecting data in the humanities and social sciences, the actual research ethics of interviewing is strongly inspired by the practice of psychology. Psychology has a long and well-established tradition for interviewing dating back to Freud, who used interviews as a method of gaining access to the patient's mind. Although much has happened since Freud's time, interviewing is still one of the most commonly used methods within psychology. It is used not just to approach the patient's mind or allow the patient to develop an enhanced understanding of her own mind, but also as a way to gain insight into how individuals conceptualize and make sense of their everyday life.

The practice of interviewing – in the clinical setting as well as in research – can be considered as a meeting between two (or more) persons. This meeting shares similarities with a dialogue, but despite the similarities, the research interview must not be confused with an everyday dialogue. The late Danish psychologist Steinar Kvale points to several important differences: Unlike an everyday dialogue, the interview has a structure and a purpose that go beyond the spontaneous exchange of points of view. It is a method for careful questioning and listening with the purpose of providing thoroughly verified knowledge. The researcher defines and controls the situation, he introduces the topic of the interview, and he carefully chases the interviewee's answers to the questions (Kvale 1997: 19).

All human relationships invoke an ethical stance, but the research interview demands a certain ethical awareness, first of all, because the object of the research is a human being, and, second, because the research interview may look like a symmetrical dialogue,

which it is not. The core challenge seems to be that the asymmetry embedded in the qualitative research interview is often hidden in the similarity between the interview situation and the equal (symmetric) dialogue. The dialogue demonstrates interest not only in the topic of the conversation but also in the other as a person.

In this way the situation will not only demand but also lead to intimacy and confidence (Kvale 2005: 5; Ellis 2007; Corbin & Morse 2003). While intimacy and confidence must be equally distributed between the participants in a dialogue, the aim of the research interview is for the researcher to gain insight into the interviewee's thinking and comprehension without being intimate himself (Kvale 2005). The Danish psychologist Jette Fog further accentuates the dilemma that the openness and confidence of the qualitative research interview are exactly the qualities, which inhibit *both* its potential *and* its seductiveness (Fog 1992; see also Corbin & Morse 2003: 338). According to Fog, this is what makes the interview 'sensitive to moral temptation' (Fog 1992: 218).

The endeavor to avoid the researcher from being intimate herself can be considered as an effect of the (positivistic) claim that science must be 'objective', i.e. exempted from the researcher's subjectivity (Westcott 1990: 61). From this point of view, the intimacy of the researcher is often considered counterproductive to the validity of the research. However, as explained in the following, this view can be questioned when it comes to the validity and ethics of qualitative interview research.

Relational Ethics

The asymmetry of the research interview commits 'the one who knows '(the researcher) to take particular care of 'the one who does not know' (the interviewee). This responsibility shares similarities with the moral obligation of a competent (stronger, older, etc.) person towards a lesser skilled (weaker, younger, etc.) person. According to Carolyn Ellis, this is not

done solely by following rules or an ethical codex in the research process. Rather, she advocates for *relational ethics,* a form of ethics closely related to the ethics of care: 'Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations.' (Ellis 2007: 4).

Relational ethics, as defined by Ellis, bears a certain resemblance to the proximity ethics of Martin Buber. For Buber, ethics is not a question of following certain rules; the ethical concern develops through the interaction between two individuals: an *I* and a *Thou*. According to Buber, human beings can conceptualize and conduct themselves in two radically different ways: as an individual who recognizes the world in the shape of objects, i.e., 'things', which are remote and distant; or as a person, an *I,* who relates to another person, a *Thou*. Only in the encounter with the other as a *Thou* does the person get to understand himself as *I.* 'Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I'* (Buber 2004: 28).

Thus, both the scope and research ethics must be reflected differently when the research subject is not an object (i.e., a 'thing'), which can be objectified and manipulated but another human being. A human being demands to be considered as an agent, whose subjectivity and agency must be respected. According to Ellis, this can be achieved if the researcher changes her approach from doing research *on* the participants to doing research *with* the participants. This requires that the researcher interact with the participants in an egalitarian participatory relationship (Ellis 2007: 13). Although this is not always possible, the egalitarian goal seems fruitful as an overall aim for good research practice.

Informed Consent, Confidence and Consequences

The ethics of research practice can be traced back to philosophical considerations that have been going on since Ancient times. In this respect, ethics is defined as universals, i.e., demands of human conduct that are not supposed to alter according to context or historicity

(McIntyre 1985). In its most basic sense, this can be boiled down to *the care and respect for the other person as a human being*.

Although the principles of ethics are not supposed to alter, history shows that they have not always been properly taken into account in research. Since violation can lead to an enhanced insight into the topic of the research, any research practice may contain temptations to violate the demands. Despite insight and knowledge constituting the primary goals of research, the ethical obligation of the researcher must outweigh the scientific search for 'the truth'.

Although Ellis emphasizes the importance of *relational* and *situational* ethics to the research practice, she does not underestimate the value of procedural ethics (Ellis 2007). Procedural ethics are the rules on which relational and situational ethics are based. In order to secure and maintain the ethical obligations of the research practice, procedural ethics are required. Kvale outlines the three most important ethical demands that are universal for any research practice involving human beings: *informed consent*, *confidence* and *consequences* (Kvale 1997: 118-).

In the research practice of interviewing, *informed consent* means that the researcher must ensure that all interviewees are kept well informed about the purpose of the research. In some research projects, full openness can be considered a problem, however, because it may affect the results of the research. In such cases, informed consent can be minimized to limited information and a *debriefing* of the interviewee after the interview. The demand for *informed consent* not only demands that the participants informed about the research project, but also that the participants are aware of their option to leave the interview and research project any time they want. This can only be achieved if the participants are constantly kept informed about the results of the research or, as Ellis suggests, are involved as co-researchers (Ellis 2007). Involvement at this level can be difficult, however, as it

presupposes the researcher's ongoing analysis of the interviews. It is obvious that this is rarely possible.

The second demand, the demand for *confidence,* refers to the participants being secured anonymity. The aim is to protect the interviewees' private sphere and integrity. The implications of this demand are that the raw materials (tapes and videos) are available only to the researcher and the person responsible for the transcription. Thus, the identity of the participants is known to the researcher but must not appear in the research report. This means that the names of the interviewees must be changed, and that all information linked to specific persons must be deleted in the transcriptions. Despite all these measures, it can be quite difficult to mask the identity of the participants. In a small community, for example, people are identifiable according to their profession, family and relationships (ibid: 11). Finally, this demand means that none of the information given in the interview is passed on without the consent of the interviewee. Typically, researchers handle this demand by letting the interviewee read and confirm the transcript of the interview.

The third demand, the demand for *consequences,* means that the researcher must be constantly aware of the personal, social and societal consequences of the entire research project as well as the singular interview. The overall purpose of a research project must be the search for knowledge that can provide better conditions for the participants and, ultimately, all human beings. This must be done in a way that does not harm the participants and is in line with the scientific demands. This demand also accentuates the request to keep the practice of therapy and research apart. As Kvale puts it, it is considered unethical to induce new self-interpretations or emotional changes in an interviewee who has not himself sought this kind of personal development (Kvale 2003: 283). A research project should not involve any promise of personal growth for the interviewee.

Although the research ethics of interviewing seems quite elaborate, its principles are based on a traditional (Marxist) concept of power as possessed, observable and (potentially) abusive.

An Interruption: a Group Interview

The insufficiency of this power concept became obvious to me when I conducted a series of qualitative interviews. The empirical examples provided in this paper were all drawn from a research project concerning university students working in project groups (Christensen 2013) [i]. For one semester, I studied students' project groups at two Danish universities. I observed the work process of two groups in the second year of their bachelor's program, I attended the plenary sessions, and I conducted qualitative interviews with the two groups and with other groups as well as with individual students and teachers in the two programs.

Collected data	
Observations	More than 30 hours in two groups
Qualitative questionnaire	62 answers (answer percentage above 70)
Group interviews	7 student group interview
Individual interviews	6 student interviews, 4 teacher interviews
Texts	Evaluation and research reports and texts from the two programs (homepage, presentations, etc.)

Fig. 1.

The methodology was qualitative and the strategy for analyses was inspired by post structuralism and social constructionism (i.e., Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Bronwyn

Davies, Kenneth Gergen, Dorte Marie Søndergaard). This led to detailed textual analyses and a particular awareness of how language is used in the complicated processes of inclusion and exclusion that ultimately establish certain subject positions, i.e., processes of subjectification.

As the above schematic overview shows, some of the interviews were individual interviews while others were group interviews, i.e., interviews with the project group as a unit. The analysis made me realize how much the two forms of qualitative interviews differ in aspects that may cause both methodological and ethical concern. The research ethics of interviewing focuses mainly on the individual interview, i.e., a relation between two persons. The group interview involves more participants who interact in different and not always foreseeable ways.

At first glance, the group interview seems more relaxed than the individual interview; the interviewer does not have to interact as much as she does in the individual interview. The participants interview each other, so to speak, in what may look like an everyday chat. But when you examine the interactions a bit closer, you see that the group interview is much more demanding and complex, and that much more is at stake. The group interview is not only a question of the relation between the interviewer and the interviewee, but also of the forces of group dynamics.

This complexity accentuated the insufficiency of the power concept implied in the ethics of interviewing. The quotation below is from an interview with a group of three students (two female and one male) (Christensen 2013). Originally, the group consisted of five members, but two of the members were expelled from the group because, according to the remaining members, they did not perform satisfactorily. One of the questions in my interview guide focused on the theme of 'group roles':

Interviewer: Is there such a thing as roles in a group?

Arne (male student): Yes, I think so…in many groups you find … I mean in my former group, we had…we had the problem that no one took the initiative to work on the project… everyone had more or less the same role…it was like…laidback… (laughter) But, ehh…in this group…we have some role differentiation.

Marie (female student): What? What do you mean? What kind of roles are you referring to? Right now I am taking over the interview…ha, ha…

Arne: Oh yes…you are a little more…it is you who is the driving force … the originator of the project…I don't know, the leader, or what you may call it…You go through with the plans and says: 'Come on, we have to move on'…I couldn't do that…

Marie: Well, I can have different roles, but…it is not unthinkable for me to take such a role, if no one else does, because I, I want the work to be structured, I like to have things done, so they don't build up, I like to move on, so we can finish our work.

Interviewer: Yes…?

Marie: And I think that I take on this role, if no one else does, because I was not the one in the former group, because there was another person who did it and I was actually enjoying it, because it left me to work just as I wanted, because there was another person who took care of planning the project work, plus … she got punished. So…that wasn't me…and that is what I can easily become in this group, because the one who is doing the job makes the errors…

Interviewer: Yes…?

Marie: So, you see…one can easily be the one who is punished…

Interviewer: Hmmm… have you experienced having this role in the present group?

Marie: You mean in the current group?

Interviewer: Hmmm…

Marie: Not like that…not especially. Well, I realize that I might be the one to…but not that much, it could be much worse, I think… I look at us as being close to equal…or close to…

Arne: (interrupting Student 2) …No I didn't mean it that harshly, you know…

Marie: No, no…

Arne: I didn't mean that you are one of those persons who…I find that role a little ambivalent…

Marie: Yes…

Arne: It is of course a question of how you put it… this is not to be rude…

Marie: I didn't mean it that harshly either…

(Student interview; own translation)

Ethical approval had been obtained before the interviews were conducted, and in accordance with the procedural ethics presented above, the interviewer did not violate the ethical demands: I respected the demands for *informed consent*, *confidence* and *consequences*. I did not disregard the interviewee's right to autonomy, privacy, self-determination and confidence, nor did I force or use power in order to make the interviewees answer the questions. The interviewees were properly briefed about the research project and how the interviews would be used. Although I know the identity of the interviewees, I have tried to ensure their anonymity by using pseudonyms and removing confidential and personal details in their narratives. In spite of these measures, they may still be recognizable to some.

Although I carefully observed the research ethics demands, I had a nagging feeling that some kind of abuse was occurring during the interview. As the direct quote indicates, both students try to salvage the situation. The atmosphere was strained, which prompted Marie to take charge of the interview. While I analyzed the interview, I had to question my own role in creating this atmosphere. Was it my question about roles that changed the atmosphere? And was the discussion between the two group members likely to influence their future work process?

To be honest, my question about group roles and group leadership was not entirely innocent. I knew from former interviews that it is a vulnerable topic, but I had no idea that it could trigger a conflict within the group. I did not feel that I had misused my authority as an interviewer, at least not according to the traditional/Marxist conceptualization of power. Perhaps I needed an expanded concept of power, and this is what made me turn to Foucault.

A Different Concept of Power: Turning to Foucault
The French philosopher Michel Foucault is well known for his analyses of the humanities and his genealogies of sexuality, punishment and mental illness (Foucault 1995; Foucault 1998; Foucault 2002; Foucault 2009). He developed a concept of power that differs from the traditional/Marxist. Unlike the Marxists, Foucault did not primarily consider power as acts of domination but rather as a force continuously at stake any time, in any society and in every relationship; in short: in discourse. In this concept, power does not merely refer to subordination. Power is considered as a productive force always connected with knowledge.

In this respect, power and knowledge are considered as different domains that interact in a coherent complex, *the power/knowledge complex* (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1994a). According to Foucault, it makes no sense to try to keep the two domains separate, as is

usually done (also by the Marxists). *Power/knowledge* is a generative force, which defines what can be said and what cannot be said at a particular place at a particular time. Hence, it defines what is included in and what will be excluded, silenced or displaced from the discourse. The emphasis on power as a generative force turned Foucault's concern for power away from power in itself to the *effects* of power: the individuals and the way they are constituted; in other words, the processes of subjectification:

> Power must be analysed as something, which calculates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation [...]. The individual, that is, is not the *vis-a-vis* of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. (Foucault 1980: 98)

In Foucault's definition, the human individual is not considered as a subject in the classical humanistic interpretation, i.e. a rational agent who is transparent to himself and in possession of a free will; nor is the individual in possession of an identity that is always identical to itself (Butler 2005). From the outset, the human individual is considered an empty shell: 'It is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself' (Foucault 1994a: 290). Thus, Foucault points to the double meaning of the word 'subject': on the one hand, subject to someone else by control and dependence, and, on the other hand, tied to his own identity by conscience and self-knowledge. 'Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault 1994a: 331).

The process of subjectification can, in other words, be considered as two-sided: as a process that originates outside the individual and is determined by forces external to the

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individual, and as the person's inner work. Both are processes that tie the individual to his self-knowledge, i.e., subjectification as a certain person with a specific 'personality', 'desires', 'hopes', 'will' etc.

Inspired by Foucault, Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré conceptualize this double process of subjectification in their concept of positioning as a discursive process whereby selves are located in everyday practice. Davies & Harré distinguish between *interactive* positioning, in which what one says positions another, and *reflexive* positioning, in which the person positions herself. This process is not necessarily intentional (Davies 2000: 91). Although subjectification cannot be considered a product of a conscious individual, the processes of subjectification are not arbitrary. The power/knowledge complex of the discourse constitutes a certain diversity of possibilities for subjectification. These are called 'subject positions' (ibid.).

Although power is not considered as an individual possession, some of the subject positions will inevitably be more powerful than others. Entering a powerless subject position is thus not a question of personal skills or abilities but a complexity of interactions between the individual, her surroundings and the norms of the context. The norms tell us the difference between legitimate and illegitimate, good and evil, correct and incorrect (Foucault 1994a). The norms also define what can be said and what cannot be said, and in the end, who is to speak and who must keep silent. As Judith Butler explains it: 'Moreover he [Foucault, GC] insists that the relation to the self is a social and public relation, one that is inevitably sustained in the context of norms that regulate reflective relations: How might and must one appear? And what relation to oneself ought one manifest?' (Butler 2005: 114).

From the outset, neither the limitations nor the possibilities are tied to any particular person but to specific ways of acting and interacting in a specific context. In spite of the impersonal outset, the consequences are personal: someone gets the right to speak while

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others are never heard; and someone is positioned as legitimate while others are marginalized.

A Different Perspective on Ethics

In Foucault's perspective, ethics becomes a question of being aware of the processes of subjectification made possible in an ongoing practice. This involves improving practice in ways that minimize dominance as much as possible:

> I do not think that a society can exist without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others. The problem, then, is not to try to dissolve them in the utopia of completely transparent communication but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ethos*, the practice of the self that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible.
>
> (Foucault 1994b: 298)

From this point of view, ethics are not defined as rules and demands of conduct but through regulation of what one must *avoid* doing. And because ethics as *ethos* implies certain kinds of practice as *a practice of the self*, ethics are contextualized and behavior oriented; the ethical individual is the individual who behaves ethically. In Foucault's perspective, the individual becomes an ethical individual through practice.

The Ancient Greek principle of *ethos* has inspired this concept of ethics. For Foucault, *ethos* is a certain way of behaving, living and being in the world that does not conflict with freedom: 'Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (ibid: 284). For

Foucault, ethics as *ethos* is a question of self-construction. Thus, the ethics becomes an aesthetic project, a project through which the individual constructs himself as an ethical agent through *the care for the self* as an ethical practice (ibid: 293).

According to Foucault, the ethical construction of the self implies not only care for one self but also care and respect for the other person as a human being. Thus, the care for the self is a condition for the care for others: 'The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this ethos of freedom is always a way of caring for others' (ibid: 287). As an ethical practice, the care for the self must not conflict with or eliminate the self-practice of others. This is closely related to Ellis' concept of *relational ethics* (Ellis 2007), but as I will argue, the ethics of Foucault adds one more layer to the discussion of ethics.

Revisiting the Group Interview

With Foucault's considerations of productive power as important to ethics in mind, the quotation from the group interview can be examined in more detail. From this perspective, the research ethics must also include considerations for which possibilities for subjectification the interviewer offers, and which subject positions the interview situation entails. These considerations include the question of which subject positions the interview makes possible, and which are made impossible for the participants. In other words, the researcher has to take into consideration the interaction in the group during the interview. This implies reflections on which subject positions the interview produces as attractive and which it produces as unattractive.

From a traditional conceptualization of power, the interviewer obtains the powerful position in the interview session: she decides on the topic of the interview, plans the interview guide and poses the questions. However, according to Foucault's conceptualization

of power, power must be considered as a distributed and productive force that produces subjects, and therefore as a constitutive of all individuals in the context.

This perspective recognizes the power of the interviewer as a representative of the scientific power/knowledge complex. More importantly, Foucault's concept of power points to what is going on in the space *in between* the participants in the interview, and how this is interpreted within the norms of the discourse. First, the discourse obviously contains the power/knowledge complex of social psychology. According to this discourse, 'group roles' exist as a phenomenon of relevance to groups. Thus, when asking about 'roles in the group', the interviewer is drawing on this power/knowledge complex. This makes it difficult for the students to avoid answering the question. The students could avoid answering by returning the question and asking the interviewer, 'What do you mean by group roles?' But that would make them appear ignorant, and they probably do not want to appear ignorant to a researcher. Avoidance is thus out of the question. The discourse is closely linked to the context and the relation in between the participants of the interview.

Second, the discourse contains certain possibilities for subjectification, which are attached to gender. Traditionally, men are considered as the standard, while females are gendered (Nielsen (edt.) 1990; Reinhartz 1992). From this perspective, Arne would have a privileged position in the group and in the interview. On the other hand, he does not seem privileged. This may be because he, as the single male, is a minority in the group. It is Marie who 'takes over the interview' and thus takes charge of the situation. Apparently, she feels threatened by Arne's positioning of her as 'the leader' of the group.

The discussion about leadership must be considered as more than merely a consequence of my interview question, however. The question seems to trigger something that has been lying dormant for a while, perhaps something the group members have been

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aware of for some time: the (unequal) distribution of responsibility, workload and duty within the group.

Regardless of the reason for the reaction, the question seems to lead to the students' positioning of each other in a way that I as the interviewer did not intend to trigger nor could have foreseen. Through the interactive positioning, Marie is positioned as 'the leader', while Arne is positioned as 'laidback', i.e., a synonym for 'lazy'. The two positions contradicts each other, and their relative value can only be understood in the light of the history of this specific group and the norms of the context where the group is situated. This particular university is known in Denmark for its (Marxist) tradition and focus on equality (Christensen 2013). In the quotation, the students' relative positioning highlights an ambivalence experienced by the person labeled as 'leader': Marie seems flattered to be positioned as 'leader' although she accepts the position rather reluctantly.

The ambivalence experienced by the appointed 'group leader' makes more sense when one considers that it is in fact a relatively powerful position: the group leader is likely the most capable of the students, and the one who gets the highest marks. This, on the one hand, makes the position as group leader attractive, but, on the other hand, being elevated to 'group leader' status is equivalent to illuminating individual difference in between the students, which is considered inappropriate in this particular university context. The illegitimacy of the position as group leader is confirmed by the fact that group leadership was denied by the students in all the group interviews I conducted. The leader is also in charge of making difficult decisions about the group's work process. In the case in question, two members have been expelled from the group. This is an illegitimate act in itself.

The ethics of Foucault emphasizes the positioning created in the interview: did I, unintentionally, illuminate differences among the students in the group? Can I, despite not intending to, be accused of being the (co-) creator of a group conflict? And to which extent

can this discussion and the students' relative positioning in the interview be considered to have a, perhaps lasting, effect on the group work and the students' individual subjectification? Did I act unethically despite all my ethical concerns?

The Mirror: an Individual Interview

The literature on the method of group interviewing seems to concentrate on what is called 'focus groups', i.e., groups consisting of members who have not met prior to the interview (Bloor et al. 2001). The quoted interview differs from focus groups in one important aspect: the members of the group know each other and have to work together on a project for a whole semester after the interview. They are thus more dependent of each other than participants in a focus group. The students' awareness that a discussion of group leadership may lead to conflict is a testament to the vulnerability of this particular topic.

To illuminate the question of positioning in a group interview and the hereby following possibilities of conflict, the dialogue above may be read in the light of a quotation from another interview: an individual interview with a male student. The student, Christopher, was interviewed on his own, but he did in fact belong to a group consisting of 5 members. As was the case with the previous interview, ethical approval had been obtained, and the student was briefed about the purpose of my research project and guaranteed anonymity. Thus, the ethical demands for *informed consent*, *confidence* and *consequences* were all taken into account.

Before the recorded interview, the student told me that he was quite critical of the group project studies, and that he wanted to be interviewed because it would give him a chance to share his reservations. In the first part of the interview, he mainly told me about the division of tasks in his present group and about his role in the current and former groups. As

in the previous interview, I was interested in knowing how the student perceived 'group roles':

> **Interviewer:** You were telling me that you often take a leading role in the groups. Is there a division of roles in the groups?
>
> **Christopher:** I think that some might say that there is no division of roles in the project groups, but I do think there is an obvious division of roles. You find fighting […] for sure you find battles. But I don't fight to be the dominant one. I look at it differently: focus on the interests of the group. But I think people are fundamentally selfish. I like to be successful, but being successful means that the group is successful. And that is why somebody takes the leading role and says: let's get going! […] In my present group, it's obvious that there is a female student besides me who takes the leading role. But I think that this role can sometimes be attributed to you. You may say that you can struggle for power but power can also be given to you. Power is not just something you take.
>
> (Student interview; own translation)

Interpreted in accordance with Foucault's power concept and the concept of positioning, my question about group roles directly positions Christopher as the one who takes the leading role in his groups, i.e., the 'group leader'. While this positioning is based on his narratives in the first part of the interview, Christopher transforms my question into a narrative about relations of power in the students' project groups in general. In this narrative, Christopher positions himself as 'the powerful student'. His powerful position is legitimized through his definition of power as 'assigned to him'. Thus, he has not had to struggle for power. Struggling for power would be considered as illegitimate; as an act of abuse in the university

discourse of equality, equivalent to how the position as group leader is a violation of the university myth of egalitarianism.

As was the case in the former interview, possessing power as 'the leader' of the group seems to trigger a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, it is an attractive position, but, on the other hand, it represents an illegitimate act because it illuminates differences among the students. Christopher does not seem nearly as affected as Marie, however. Part of the explanation might be that he was interviewed on his own and, thus, positioned only by me and not his fellow students. The positioning may therefore have seemed less problematic and threatening for Christopher than for Marie and Arne. This explanation is supported by the fact that all the students I interviewed individually positioned themselves as leaders of their groups, while group leadership was denied when the students were interviewed as a group (Christensen 2013).

Although the subtle and productive mechanisms of power can also be considered operative in the individual interview, the group interview is much more complicated; there seems to be much more at stake for the participants in a group interview. The themes introduced and discussed in the interview may refer to at history shared by the participants but unknown to the interviewer. Foucault's power concept adds an important layer to the analyses of both the individual interview and the group interview, but the group interview still demands a more acute awareness.

Conclusion

Foucault's productive power concept can profitably be applied to any interpersonal situation and research practice. I consider it of great value to ethics in general and to research ethics in particular. It adds an extra dimension to the relational and situational ethics of Ellis (2007): the dimension of the power of discourse and the production of subject positions. Because of

its relational focus, it seems to be of particular value when it comes to understanding the complexity of the group interview[ii]. While the traditional (Marxist) concept of power focuses on the obligations of the person in possession of power, the Foucauldian concept of power changes the focus from possession to production. This means that the Foucauldian power concept adds an extra dimension and an additional demand to the traditional research ethics: it is imperative for the interviewer to be constantly aware of which discourse and which possibilities for interpersonal positioning she introduces in the interview. In other words, the researcher needs to pay attention to which forms of interpersonal subjectification she facilitates in the interview.

Thus, understanding relations of power as productive can provide the researcher with a developed view on the ethics of interpersonal relations. The view moves the focus from possession to production, and from subjects to subjectification. This may be considered as a general point of concern whenever one enters an interpersonal relationship of any kind. Applied to research ethics, the view forces the researcher to be more aware of what she is the (co-) producer of, that is, which (possibilities for) subject positions she introduces, and which ones she nourishes during the interview. This is not to say that the interviewer should be paralyzed by her concerns. According to Foucault, ethics is a critical stance (Foucault 1994b), a stance that encourages continuous reflection and critique.

A poststructuralist perspective on ethics will inevitably have to focus on language as the tool for construction (Briggs 2002). In the research practice of qualitative interviews, this frequently leads to the semi-structured interviews being replaced by narrative interviews. Although there are different approaches to narrative methods in interviewing, which vary in regard to the extent of researcher guidance, narrative interviews are generally characterized by decrease in the guidance from the interviewer. Thus, the interviewee will

have an increased authority over the interview, as it will be the interviewee's language and constructions that define the interview.

The Foucauldian power concept additionally demands that the researcher is continuously critical (observant) of the interpersonal relations, and how they are produced and reproduced as a product of discourse. This includes the researcher's own contribution to and interaction with the participants.

The Foucauldian concept of power must be considered as an additive rather than a substitute for a more traditional concept of power in research and interview ethics. In any case, it may be applied in order to widen the researcher's vision. This is particularly the case when more than one person is interviewed. As mentioned above, groups are powerful forums for positioning and subjectification and must be handled with respect and ethical care.

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[i] Ethical approval has been obtained. Thus, the researcher has secured informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm.

[ii] In this paper, I have not discussed what happens when the researcher confronts the participants with the interpretations, like e.g. Ellis does (Ellis 2007). This interesting focus would ad one more layer to the discussion of *power/knowledge* and the production of subjectivity in academic research.