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## **Creating Togetherness and Experiencing Difference in Feminist Interviews – Knowing in a post-standpoint way?**

### Abstract

*In this article we start from feminist interdisciplinarity and focus on the interview method as a site of interaction and production of knowledge. Interviews have traditionally been and continue to be one of the basic data collecting methods in social sciences, and this is especially true for Women's Studies. Our aspect is in our own PhD research on rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students. Both use feminist theories and methodologies and, in addition, one takes place in the discipline of Regional Studies and the other in Adult Education. The material has been collected through two different ways of interviewing: by telephone and face-to-face.*

*We discuss what consequences our "dual position" as producers and analysers of research material brings to knowing and how we produce knowledge in this setting. We agree with the idea that knowledge is social. Thus, striving for knowledge means finding shared communities and making use of and accepting differences. We take as our point of departure both standpoint feminism and postmodern ways of practising feminist research when we stress the influence of location, differences and respect. We conclude that our research method is best described as post-standpoint as it relays both standpoint and postmodernist theory to produce knowledge about women's lives.*

**Key words:** feminist interdisciplinarity; interviews; standpoint theory; postmodernism; post-standpoint.

### **Introduction**

Interviews have traditionally been one of and continue to be the basic data collecting methods in social sciences, and this is especially true for Women's Studies. In recent years it has become popular to use so called natural materials, and methodological and epistemological attention has moved mostly to the questions of analysis. It is still contemporary to discuss

interview as a method and, particularly, the viewpoint of material collecting. In this article<sup>1</sup> we focus on the interview method as a site of interaction and production of knowledge. We engage in the discussions of the interview method in Women's Studies especially from the viewpoint of changing methodological and epistemological emphasis, and discuss situatedness, reflexivity, feminist standpoint with its recent added contents, and postmodern feminism.

Our starting point is in our own studies on rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students. We will discuss what situatedness means in our cases in which the material has been collected through two different ways of interviewing: by telephone and face-to-face. In contrast to using material that exists despite of the researcher, we take into account our "dual position" as producers of research material on the one hand and as analysers of the same material on the other. We discuss questions this fact brings to knowing. With interview research the context of the interaction affects the analysis. Bringing together the contexts in which the studied people talk and the contexts in which we listen to them is a challenging task. How we find solutions to this task has an effect on the analysis of the interaction and, thus, the results we present. When thinking through on how we should conceive the research relationship, interaction and our dual position, we find ourselves at the same time in the middle of discussions on standpoint feminism and postmodern ways of practising feminist research. We stress the influence of location, differences and respect and conclude that our research method is best described as post-standpoint as it relays both standpoint and postmodernist theory to produce knowledge about women's lives.

We commence with describing different characteristics and emphasises of feminist interviews. We look at how the so called second wave feminism and the influence of feminist standpoint epistemology have had a transforming effect from the viewpoint of interview research. These approaches are affected by the cultural turn, and the changes it has brought on are overlapping with the shifts in social sciences in general. Next we turn to a description of our own PhD research and their methodological frames. The fact that we have collected our research material through interviewing and are sharing some similarities with standpoint epistemology but nevertheless position our studies "in the era of the cultural turn" has occupied our thoughts. It is for this reason that we want to consider the epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was published in Finnish in the journal for Women's Studies 'Naistutkimus-Kvinnoforskning' (Ikonen and Ojala 2005) and presented at the 6th European Gender Research Conference, University of Łódź, Poland, September 2006.

questions of collecting and analysing interviews in the social scientific frame in which we are currently operating. We discuss our different ways of collecting material (telephone and face-to-face interviewing) and what consequences this brings or does not bring to our analysis. We demonstrate how we have been handling differences and creating togetherness in interview situations and thus try to gain knowledge. As a conclusion we will examine the potential of a post-standpoint methodology in feminist interview research.

### **Interview in a feminist context**

Interviewing has been one of the most frequently used data collecting methods in Women's Studies. Discussions of feminist methodology and, above all, the interview method increased during the second wave of feminism around the 1970s, even though some feminists had been using it (Reinharz and Chase 2002: 223-224). Pivotal in these discussions was the concern that no such theoretical or methodological practices existed in mainstream social sciences in which women's realities and the ways of knowing could be analysed and understood (e.g. Roberts 1981, Keller 1985, Harding 1986). Feminists were searching for new ways of researching with the aim of giving audience to previously unheard voices, to make visible what had been previously unseen and to move away from the biologically informed concept of sex towards the more cultural concept of gender. Epistemologically, it meant looking from the standpoint of women or a particular group of women – taking women's experiences, instead of men's, as a point of departure. In early standpoint feminism it was argued that women are better equipped to understand certain aspects of the world because they see the world from margins, and from the margin one can also see the center (e.g. Harding 1986, Hartsock 1987). When seeing from particular and identified standpoints, important truths about the lives of more affluent, powerful groups can be revealed and critical questions raised about the social order and gender systems (Hill Collins 1990, Harding 2004b: 130).

In early standpoint feminism the overriding concern was to take into account the perspective of women and their everyday life, which had been ignored before (e.g. Smith 1987). Purportedly on account of this interviews appealed to feminists, because it was thought to offer the researcher better access to women's ideas, thoughts and experiences than the other, more masculine methods. Even though the interview method was applied in

mainstream social sciences, feminists saw its usefulness in cases based on unstructured, free woman-to-woman discussions. This way of interviewing was called a feminist interview. (E.g. Oakley 1981, Oinas 2001, Reinharz 1992, Riessman 1991, Ronkainen 1989; 1990.) The feminist interview was based on the idea of open, free, considerate and equal interaction between two women. In this kind of interview situation, the interviewee would not only answer questions passively but, would additionally; produce knowledge together with the interviewer. The idea was that it was better for a woman to be interviewed by a woman because men do not share the same experiences of being in the world as women do (Reinharz 1992: 23).

With this comprehension of an ideal interview feminists were criticising mainstream social sciences on the “hygienic” attitude in which the political and emotional contexts of the research had been largely ignored (e.g. Oakley 1981, Reinharz 1992). In feminist interview research the aim was not only to collect research material but also to offer an opportunity to emancipate the interviewed women by helping them find their own voices and use it to change their oppressed situation and status (e.g. Opie 1992). Thus, a feminist form of interview was thought to offer knowledge about and of women differently than the mainstream social sciences which had ignored women’s ideas altogether or let men speak for women (Reinharz 1992: 19).

The aim of using interviews was to get women to be more involved in the study which was seen to happen during semi-structured face-to-face interviews (i. e. a given topic but free discussion) (Graham 1984). Because the face-to-face encounter existed in the core of interviewing – engagement, empathy, understanding and the interchange of experiences of being a woman – this meant the use of in-depth interviews (Maynard 1994). This implied that large-scale, structured and quantitatively analysed material could not enable the ideal of a feminist interview. For example telephonic interviews as a traditional survey research tool became a questionable and problematic form of material collecting. Telephonic interviews were carried through with a technical tool (understood as masculine) without the face-to-face encounter of the researcher and the researched, which probably did not yield the desired results for feminists.

The image of incompatibility is caused by the fact that there exist very few studies on which telephone interviewing is used with an open-ended question frame and a small amount of interviewees. Karin Filander (2000) is an exception to this as she has conducted qualitative

interviews by phone in Finland. Veli Matti Autio (1994) points out that irrespective of the mode (telephone or in person), one can expect structured answers to structured questions. However, in a widely used methodological textbook telephone interviewing is introduced followed by a few lines which give the idea that those interviews could be semi-structured (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2004: 64-65). Also internationally comparisons are few between qualitative telephone and face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004: 107). Typically telephonic interviews are seen as suitable for very specific situations or for short and structured interviews (op. cit., 108). In their study Judith E. Sturges and Kathleen J. Hanrahan (op. cit.: 112-113), using both interview modes in the same study, discovered that the “depth” of responses did not differ by the type of interview and none of their interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the research method. Roger W. Shuy (2002) states that one can mobilise different interactive means also in the telephone interviews and that female interviewers seems to be better at this.

A few feminist contributors, especially those influenced by postmodern thoughts, emphasise that the goal of the feminist interview method has been romanticised.<sup>2</sup> The argument goes that the feminist interview does not necessarily result in a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched. It is neither possible to guarantee that an interviewee will be understood correctly during the feminist interview (Oinas 2001, Reinharz and Chase 2002: 228-229). Inescapable power relations are always present in interview situations (e.g. Ribbens 1989). What is more, there is not necessarily any shared female experience on which research relationship can be built and which can be used when gendered social processes are analysed. In reformulated standpoint theory womanhood itself is not, or has never been, an adequate stance for a feminist standpoint. “Feminist knowledge has started off from women’s lives, but it has started of from many different women’s lives; there is no typical or essential women’s life from which feminisms start their thought” (Harding 2004b: 134). However, the process of developing a standpoint is similar and therefore it offers a method for developing standpoints to different kinds of women and women groups (Hirschmann 2004: 320-321). Gender is always made up in a relation to and entwined with other analytical and political aspects (see DiPalma and Ferguson 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> By framing the inquiry around the past and present of the feminist interview method, it inevitably becomes constituted as opposite categories and juxtapositions. This story about interviewing can be read as a developmental narrative, as Clare Hemmings (2005) has argued is the case of Western feminist theory in general. Even though we have learnt this logic of development, it should not be underlined excessively.

Methodologically this has meant emphasizing multiple differences beyond and between the genders, the intersectionality of gender and other categories (like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, age, location) and the performance of gender (e.g. DiPalma and Ferguson 2006, Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002). Rather than having the attention in a dialogical sharing between women, the focus lies on interviews as places of interaction and performance (Reinharz and Chase 2002). What have become essential questions are how the social locations of researchers and the ones who are being researched affect the interview interaction and the research relationship, and how our knowing is socially situated. Taking situatedness seriously calls for reflexivity. It can mean, as Sue Wilkinson (1988) has written, the consideration of researcher's own identity (personal reflexivity), research itself (functional reflexivity) and research's relation to different disciplinary traditions (disciplinary reflexivity). For Reinhartz and Chase (2002: 234) reflexivity refers to the need to recognise how our knowing - interpretation of women's lives - is socially located and variable over time. This means identification of our complex social positions and subjectivities as well as personal, political, and intellectual agendas.

The interview as a method constitutes knowing in a particular way. The certain knowledge brings consequences that are differently valid or adequate for different subjects. An interview has to be perceived as a structure in itself. The call for reflexivity has also raised questions on the analysis and different textual practices, such as the politics of representing "others" and the power of interpretations in interviews. Always present, multiple contexts and the intersectionality of different categories create a lot of challenge for the analysis processes and for the methods in use and, more generally, for feminist knowing. In Finland Anna Rastas (2005), who has studied racism in the everyday life of children and young people, has considered how to become sensitive to differences and, at same time, question the essentiality of differences. Slightly similar questions have exercised our minds when we have been thinking about differences and similarities and how to overcome and utilise them in our studies.

These processes of the feminist interview research as well as the methodological and epistemological aspects of Women's Studies in general have prompted us to reflect on the methodological choices of our PhD studies. We have perceived many epistemological and methodological discussions as debates between standpoint and postmodern (e.g. Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2004, Harding 2004a and

b, Hekman 2004, Hirschmann 2004). We have thought over how to locate ourselves in the standpoint-postmodern continuum. On the one hand, we have used the interview method in gathering the research material and have conducted the interviews ourselves. We analyse the interaction in the interview situation, research the concrete gendered practises among rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students, and produce a cultural understanding of these practices. On the other hand, we have been and are very aware of the boundaries of the interview method. We are also aware of the twofold power positions which we have as researchers: first we use power in interview situations and then during analysis process. We understand that we produce different representations in research. Even if we study women exclusively, we rather speak about women in plural than a woman: womanhood is diverse.

### **Two cases and their methodological choices: rural women as entrepreneurs and aged women as students**

Both of our studies take place in social scientific Women's Studies which is combined with regional studies (Hanna-Mari Ikonen) and adult education (Hanna Ojala). Hanna-Mari's PhD study deals with women entrepreneurs in the rural areas in Finland<sup>3</sup>. Her interest on this arose when she recognised that rural areas were repeatedly discussed in connection to entrepreneurship (also in other European contexts, see Labrianidis et al 2004). She discovered that even more generally entrepreneurship was a shared discourse in the Finnish society (also Heiskala and Luhtakallio 2006, Keskitalo-Foley et al 2007, Komulainen 2004; 2006). The talk about enterprising was supposed to make people not only to start their own enterprises (and thus to help reduce unemployment by becoming employers) but also gain enterprising attitudes as employees and students. In the context of the accelerated economic, social and cultural interconnectedness, often called globalisation, the Finnish nation state had to find ways of keeping up with the other EU countries and the wider global competition (e.g. Alasuutari and Ruuska 1999). There was, and still is, a widely shared hope that people would

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<sup>3</sup> Finland is the most rural-like country among the European Union Member States which means that a bigger share of the population than in any of the other EU countries is living in the countryside (Rural Policy Committee 2006). However, there are big differences between the rural areas in Finland. The most problematic remote areas are to be found in Northern and Eastern Finland, while areas near the big towns in Southern Finland are quite affluent (Malinen et al. 2004). Nevertheless, in the whole country the population density is lower than in any other European Union countries (Eurostat Yearbook 2006-07: 50).

learn an innovative, risk-taking, growth-oriented and individualistic that is an enterprising attitude.

In the context of Finland's peripheral rural areas, structural problems such as ageing and people's migration from the countryside, decreasing services and the shortage of jobs are facts that have led people to think about new ways of developing the countryside. The share of agriculture as an employer has diminished for many decades and this situation has taken a turn for the worse after the country joined the European Union in 1995 which caused severe profitability problems for agriculture. To alleviate these problems the rural development authorities introduced enterprising as a means for preserving the necessary economic and living conditions in the rural areas (see Finnish Journal of Rural Research and Policy 2004, Rural Policy Committee 2004). In some versions of the enterprising discourse it is thought that women have to work for the nation and rural areas as well. The enterprising discourse channeled towards women stresses that women are also capable of starting enterprises and both the rural societies and the women themselves would benefit from this. "The liberation" or "emancipation" of women by allowing them to enter into businesses of their own is a central issue in this discursive version of enterprising. (See Keskitalo-Foley et al 2007, Komulainen 2005, Koski 2006, Koski and Tedre 2004.)

In her study, Hanna-Mari was interested in knowing what it is like to live in the current situation in the Finnish countryside if one is a woman and has started an enterprise. Her main questions were what kind of practices do life as an entrepreneur includes and what sort of meanings are attached to it. She wanted to situate rural women entrepreneurs in the context of the enterprising discourse but in a manner that does not suppose that the women themselves are feeling that they are affected by that discourse.

In Hanna's study the focus is on age, gender and agency in attaining education later life. The context of the research is the University of the Third Age and the aged women students of the University.<sup>4</sup> The research is tied to the fact that Western societies are "greying". In a few years the third agers (i.e. people between 65 and 75 years) will constitute

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<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the University of the Third Age (U3A) as an institution is to disseminate up-to-date research findings among aged people and offer them opportunities for independent university studies without, however, aiming at formal examinations and the like (e.g. Swindell and Thompson 1995, Williamson 2000). The idea of offering university education to people who have left the working life was borne in France at the University of Toulouse in 1973. Nowadays U3A activities are organised all around the world (Midwinter 1984). The first U3A in Finland was founded in 1985 and today nine universities have these programmes (University of the Third Age, Yeneral 2003). The U3A programmes have been extremely popular in Finland, especially among women. In 2005 approximately 80 percent of the students of U3As were women (KOTA database).

a significant proportion of the population of the Western societies. For example in the area of the European Union (EU-25) the proportion of population aged 65 and over stood at around 17 % in 2005. Eurostat forecasts that this ratio will rise up to 30 % by 2050. This trend is also seen in the old-age dependency ratio, which is expected to rise above 50 % for the EU-25 by 2045. This means that for every pensioner there will be less than two persons of working. (See Eurostat Yearbook 2006-07: 59-64.) Above and beyond the growing number of aged people, they live longer and are healthier. Aged people will be wealthier than the earlier generations in many ways, for example they are better educated, more active and, therefore, better resourced to create and participate in post-retirement opportunities, such as studying.

Two simultaneous cultural trends can be found in the later life perspective. On the one hand, Western societies have strong positive discourses on third age, lifelong learning, the learning society and active ageing (e.g. Laslett 1989, Jarvis 2001, Gilleard and Higgs 2000; 2005). From the aged people's point of view, these discourses are meant to emphasize active participation and especially a chance to stay as or become again a competent agent, consumer, learner, citizen etc. On the individual level the discourses seek to generate a feeling of keeping track of the society, being independent and living a meaningful life. On the other hand, many negative old age discourses exist, such as "grannyfying" (e.g. Arber and Ginn 1995) and such beliefs as "old dogs can't learn new tricks" (e.g. Jarvis 2001). There are several kinds of ageism and discrimination of aged people, which have often arisen from the thought that aged people are an economic burden to society because they are not productive (e.g. Ginn and Arber 1995, Gullette 2004). Even if ageing is primarily thought to be a biological process, the increasing numbers of aged people have caused social changes, and thus ageing is above all a social question. The framework of Hanna's research builds upon and against these two simultaneous cultural trends. She contextualises the aged women students in this ambiguous situation and asks how studying in the later life constructs and constitutes the women's agency and experiences of ageing.

In both our studies, the research material was collected through interviewing. Hanna-Mari conducted her interviews by telephone and Hanna face-to-face. In addition to collecting a rather small survey which was mainly analysed with qualitative content analysis, Hanna-Mari decided to conduct her interviews with rural woman entrepreneurs by telephone. A couple of issues influenced this choice which she thought would be of interest in the context of Women's Studies. First, it would have been difficult for the researcher to travel to rural

areas over long distances and the poor public transportation. Secondly, and more importantly, it would have been difficult for the entrepreneurs to host a researcher coming from afar and thus then given an impression of something more than an hour's interview. The entrepreneurs are constantly busy and it would have been demanding for some of them to organise a day or half a day with respect to the needs of a visiting researcher. If we think in terms of twenty interviews, putting together travelling, distances and timetables of both the researcher and the entrepreneurs the research process would have been especially challenging. Third, Hanna-Mari's interest in telephonic interviews was her observation of very few disciplines performing qualitative, semi-structured telephone interviews (see Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). She did not see the method as complicated or unthinkable as feminist idealism or qualitative textbooks seem to imply. Telephone interviewing should not necessarily be structured, uncommunicative, exploitative and superficial.

Hanna chose face-to-face interviews in her study mainly for two reasons. Firstly, she had extensive theoretical knowledge based on previous research on the University of the Third Age students' motives and the meanings of studying in their lives. Secondly, she had practical knowledge about the students' thoughts and working manners based on her previous work at the University of the Third Age as a planner and teacher. Therefore she had the aim of challenging the students towards thinking profoundly about their reasons for studying in later life. Interviewing and especially using multiple deep-interviews was conceived to be the gentlest way to face this challenge. Each woman was interviewed three times which also enabled the women the opportunity to air their thoughts thoroughly.

### **Does different ways of interviewing mean different ways of knowing?**

After all the methodological knowledge we had learnt we thought that different interviewing forms had given us different kinds of research materials. Or more likely, we had not considered the possibility that different interview conventions would be able to produce quite similar material. As colleagues we discussed our interview processes, transcription work and the trials of analysis. Gradually we came to notice that we had much in common in our thoughts on the transcribed interviews. Hanna-Mari reflected that the telephone interviews had gone pretty well. She was unsure whether she had asked relevant questions or whether

she knew what to do with the material, but the method as such impressed her as successful. Hanna experienced a phase of confusion: she had had dialogical interview situations, for sure, but where was the big difference these were supposed to produce?

We each chose an actual extract of our interview material and put them together to compare typical interaction processes.

### Extract A: Marja

- *Right. So, can you tell me a little bit more about why you set up the business?*

> *Well it has in a way to do with this, my husband's background that I was [in a restaurant in the small town] I was the restaurant manager; I had come there [to the small town] from [a bigger town] because the restaurant manager's job was open and I applied and got it and then, well, then came this that in my case all of this has got to do with all the other things in a way, like starting a family and buying a house and all this, like in a way, a total life change happened then.*

- *Yes.*

> *And my husband has an entrepreneurial background and it was him that really urged me that why couldn't I start a catering business. And then [the small town] did not really have such a business, there was only the matron at the parish who was old and apparently about to retire. That was in a way the fact that, a sort of an incentive that from the parish, that from there I would be getting jobs from time to time.*

- *Yes.*

> *So that it was this start-up grant. And that helped that I got the start-up grant and knew that I, like, would get started.*

- *Yes. What about the start-up grant, did you have to be unemployed to apply?*

> *Yes, and I left, like*

- *Yes*

> *the job, like it was six mon..., no was it six weeks*

- *Yes.*

> *The time that. But it happened that [laughs] that at the same time when we like, that we had, we bought a house here in the countryside so in a way it was meant to be that I wouldn't be working nights anymore [laughs]. However, it was I worked*

*shifts as maitre d' so that I was almost always working on the weekends, this was what I meant to do the year before, before we came up with something else.*

*- Yes.*

*> And then it happened that I became pregnant with our first child at about that time when I was making plans for my own business [laughs]*

*- [the interviewer laughs]*

*> that almost on my maternity leave it started but I did have time to run the business and the start-up grant discontinued while I was on maternity leave and then it started up again.*

### Extract B: Elisa

*- Okay. Well, when you participate in the literature seminar*

*> Yees*

*- there is always something to do outside the seminar. I mean, basically, you can just sit in the lecture and it does not bring any homework or anything. So, how much do you work at home?*

*> At the time that I didn't have a computer it was hard work. I sometimes just thought, I'm a very poor typist. I always made misspellings especially at the end of the page. So I had to type it all over again.*

*- Yeah*

*> At the time writing felt particularly more troublesome. But nowadays when I got the computer it has been easier.*

*- Okay*

*> Of course I remember, wasn't it one of Helvi Hämäläinen's books how I took on by accident that awful, that autobiography, that kind of an awfully thick book.*

*- Mm*

*> I remember that time there was always those papers scattered all over the big table the whole week [laughs] which I took for Sunday...*

*- Okay yes*

*> away. And it has been interesting, so I have been doing it willingly.*

*- Mm*

*> But it doesn't feel like work, because it's pleasant.*

Despite our somehow different starting points (if one considers the physical differences between telephone and face-to-face interviews), the transcriptions look very alike. These short extracts do not tell much about our research themes, contents of discussions, tensions and clumsy situations but our point here is just to depict the structuring of interaction. In the quotations, both of us while asking questions show active listening by agreeing, accompanying, asking for complements, laughing and using acknowledgement tokens and other small filling words. However, the interview situations did differ from method to method and between each interview. The transcript does not show all the interaction that took place during the interview process. At the same time, it appears as if the basic interactive structure of the research interview is the same on all occasions.

When describing research, commonly well-known terms should be used. If interviews have been conducted by telephone, this must be mentioned, as just what it was; telephonic interviews. Deep interview is also a commonly shared name for an interviewing style<sup>5</sup>; if one plans to interview people face to face with open questions, deep interviewing becomes the name for the method. Naming the method brings firm associations to mind. However, we argue that the name of the method does not directly describe the way in which the method is used. (Ikonen and Ojala 2005.) Telephone interviewing could be reevaluated by feminist scholars as a usable tool for conducting unstructured interviews.

### **Striving for knowledge and handling differences in interview situations**

Even if interview forms do not directly lead to any certain kind of knowledge, material gained by interviewing has to be dealt with in a somewhat different manner than “natural material” that exists despite the researcher. In recent years it has become popular to study texts and use natural material such as doctor-patient or expert-customer discussions, political documents, newspaper articles, TV-series and other media representations (e.g. Alasuutari 2001: 156, Jokinen 1999: 42-43). Our material was different in relation to these because we used interviews we had conducted personally and thus had had a remarkable influence on

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<sup>5</sup> Reinharz (1992: 281) notes that feminist interview researchers interchange the terms unstructured, intensive, in-depth, and open-ended interview.

what they included. Therefore we did not want to close off the communicative aspect involved in conducting the interviews. Still, a romantic story of getting into the interviewee's deepest thoughts was not anything we believed in. Things are culturally affected but seeing knowledge as such does not necessarily assume material that exists without the researcher. The communication between the researcher and the researched has just to be taken into consideration.

Another aspect we noticed as enlightening was the comprehension that producing knowledge is social (see Code 1995, Harding 2004a, Hartsock 1987, Ribbens 1989). We all act in various social and cultural communities and all have slightly different ways of knowing. As researchers, it was crucial to find means of entering those communities as much as it was necessary in order to be able to understand their ways of knowing, and reflect upon how we could find these ways. Because no-one can get to totally know other people's thoughts, it is important to grasp what it is possible to know for us who have a background of our own (academic, disciplinary, personal) communities to carry within the research process. In the same way, we have to consider the positions the interviewees talk from. How can we find shared communities of knowing and how to bring together these aspects that both the researcher and the researched are familiar with? This became a key question that unified us both even though we had started from different methodological apparatuses, who came close to each other during our mutual discussions and who, originating from this question, began to differ again and follow the lines of our own research materials.

In Hanna-Mari's case, what was shared with the interviewed women was the knowledge about a problematic situation in the countryside and entrepreneurship as a commonly offered solution to it. Hanna-Mari called it a discourse in her mind but the interviewees were able to identify it as well. This was the common thing that served as a starting point of communication even though the big difference between them was that one had experience on rural enterprising or enterprising altogether, and the other did not. So the positions in the interviews were based on this theme and their roles around it.

In the interview plan, Hanna-Mari's aim involved inquiring about the people's relation to their place of residence as this was definitely important to their whole way of living. On occasion during the interview Hanna-Mari and the interviewee noticed they had affinities in their living conditions: an older house they had renovated and enlarged or were planning. The episode in which houses were discussed opened up a natural way of

communicating about an abstract issue, the meaning of place. In addition to that, the house episode revealed interesting aspects that were relevant to the research questions but that the researcher had not thought of beforehand. Thus, the material became a part of the analysis as well.

In Hanna's study, the shared starting point was the practical experience obtained from the University of the Third Age, one as a teacher and the others as students. This simplified the starting point of the interview discussions as there were many familiar issues to talk about. The challenge rose from trying to encourage the students of the University of the Third Age in finding new perspectives to think and talk about the theme in which they were so involved. With her choices of implementation of the interviews, Hanna managed with the mutual knowledge they shared to challenge their most striking ways of thinking. During a fluid interaction process, they found new areas they could share or learn to know and the interview process could continue.

There were, however some uncomfortable situations that had to be dealt with during the research process. At the home of one the interviewees Hanna was served warm sausage sandwiches. Hanna is a vegetarian but in the situation she realised the rudeness of declining the offer. At the beginning of the interview, rejecting what had been served would not have been a very good starting point of interaction and the differences between the generations would have been unnecessarily elucidated.

Commonly, differences between the parties of a research process can be seen as a problem. For example Reinharz and Chase (2002: 230-232) argue that if the interviewers' and interviewees' social locations, such as ethnicities, classes, ages and sexual orientations, differ dramatically, it is not easy to achieve a satisfying interaction. Because of differences in social locations, the interviewer and the interviewee may have difficulties in "hearing" and thus achieving a gratifying research relationship (see Riessman 1991, Ronkainen 1989). We too considered these differences as problems at first but then we tried to challenge our own way of handling them.

We came to notice that differences can be utilised, and we actually had already made use of them unintentionally. Hanna-Mari was not an expert on rural development or enterprising (even though she was sometimes treated as if she was), whereas the interviewees had practical knowledge about enterprising. This frame made it possible to ask unauthorised and naïve questions which, in turn, helped to overcome the governing enterprising discourse.

In Hanna's case, there existed a great age difference between herself and the women who took part in the research. Their lives rich with experiences could be employed as a background for asking about the past, like wartime experiences.

All the examples above give an idea how our shared thoughts about grasping emerging small issues, interpreting them and creating togetherness, and how these were put to use in a unique manner in diverse interviews. When we first found out that idea of how to conduct an interview, we were then able to sort out sections in the transcribed interviews in which we were doing situational acts, combining intuition and planning, and navigating within various interview episodes.

We came to the conclusion that differences in social locations can be useful – not only problematic, as they are said to be. In spite of different social locations, we think that the interviewees are not total strangers to the researcher. Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that a “stranger” is somebody we know previously since the stranger is already constituted as strange in relation to the familiar. In other words, several subjects that are discussed in interviews may be unfamiliar to the researcher on the level of personal experience but they may still be culturally identifiable. What we now think about differences in the interview process is that they can be overcome by finding something to share with each other and by entering into the other's communities of knowing. In all cases this is not probable or even necessary and then one can make use of the differences which always exist between two people. The differences can for example open up new perspectives and offer new ideas for analysis.

### **Concluding thoughts: between stand and post**

Sandra Harding (1991) criticises modern science for theorising knowledge disconnected from the knowing persons and their contexts. In the same vein we have in this article wanted to maintain that the context, in which the research material is produced, is significant for knowing and the knowledge that is subsequently gained. Knowledge produced through interviews is produced through interaction in which the researcher is present. If we take the fact that entering into other people's social and cultural communities are ways towards

knowing in interview situations, it has to be taken into account in the analysis, too. But what might this mean for the analysis in practice?

At least it could lead to the notion that the interpretations we present out of our material have to be related to the interviewees' everyday life. They live in the middle of certain local and general discussions and practices and produce e.g. gender from these perspectives. We may wonder about some of their ways of thinking and acting but we have to be careful in criticising them. Taking into account the fact that we have by ourselves encouraged them to speak openly, it would be unethical to forget the context in which they live and speak from. Jane Ribbens (1989) has puzzled over how a feminist researcher should engage with women's culture that is not apparently feminist, how to treat what is said with respect even though one does not agree, and how to be close to participants' own perceptions and provide a researcher's interpretation of them at the same time. She makes reference to Sue Wise (1987: 84) who has written that we have to recognise the power a researcher always holds and deal with it wisely as feminists (see Ribbens 1989: 590). Also Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002: 105-106) point out that making knowledge claims across differences calls for responsibility because a researcher has the power to contribute to knowledge that has effects on women's lives.

That means that we cannot locate the research material directly in the contexts of academic Women's Studies, for example. If we are wondering or want to criticise something, it has to be directed towards a cultural way of acting, a dominating discourse etc. instead of the interviewees. Theories, concepts and other research findings can offer channels from interview stories to a theoretically informed analysis. By theorising and conceptualising we may, however, lose notable parts of the liveliness of the women's lives we initially were attracted to and wanted to valorise.

When we are dwelling on how we should conceive the relationship between ourselves and the interviewed and whether we can criticise some viewpoints they present, we are at the same time in the middle of a discussion on the standpoint and postmodern ways of practising feminist research. In our studies, both of us have some aspects of standpoint feminism: we have been asking questions directly from real women about real life. We have been interested in certain phenomena and expressly the women's experiences around them. However, we also find aspects typical to postmodern thinking in our cases: we share the idea of the discursive nature of things and the understanding that subjects can always be represented in

various, ideologically coloured ways. We understand the gender of our researched people to be intertwined with vectors of power (DiPalma and Ferguson 2006: 134). We have wanted to deconstruct the phenomena we have been dealing with, bring some new – multiple – aspects to them and represent them more from a counter-discourse perspective.

With regard to feminist political projects, which academic feminism must not forget, the dichotomy between standpoint and postmodern theories is fruitless. The aim is not to sustain opposite views or claim better knowledge than those who have been before us but to gain a better understanding because of those precursors (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2004). We are in agreement with Nancy Hirschmann's (2004) elaboration of standpoint theory that emphasises materiality alongside with postmodern discursivity. It is materiality that constructs the concrete and abstract communities of knowing and thus the knowledge that can be produced. We are always situated in different communities, times and places, and realising this helps us make it a resource. Hereby one can yield knowledge that is conscious of its restraints and thus less partial and strongly objective, as Sandra Harding (2004b) has stated. Also Haraway insists on maintaining the commitment to objectivity because it is politically necessary (see Code 2006: 159).

Donna Haraway (1991) has articulated the idea about inevitable but complex situatedness. With this she refers to the fact that a researcher is always situated, but that site is neither deterministic nor freely selectable. Also objectivity is attached to specific historical positions but does not cast aside the possibility of alliances. (Op. cit.) We would like to suggest that the idea of distinctive locations and permanent as well as temporary assemblies is tenable also in concrete interview research. We consider the importance of this as well after reading Haraway. For Haraway (1991), objectivity means learning to see well – but that not everybody can see in the same way. Seeing well does not just happen. These are exactly the positions and contexts we have tried to describe in our article that lay at the core of seeing (or listening to, interpreting, experiencing, knowing) well. We gain different kinds of visions in multiple contexts. In order to be able to see well one has to be conscious of one's own position and the contexts from which she or he faces the others, for example those she or he is studying. One can reflect upon his or her own position although not disengage from it.

In this article we have endeavoured to show what seeing well might mean in empirical study and particularly in interview research. We have reflected where we could be located: on whose shoulders are we standing (Bordo 1990: 141) and whose fingerprints can be found in

our research (Harding 2004b: 128)? The Harawayan (which is parallel with other standpoint approaches influenced by postmodern ideas) stance locates us somewhere in-between or towards post-standpoint.

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