# The "Theme-centered Interview". A Method to Decode Manifest and Latent Aspects of Subjective Realities

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**Abstract**: In this article, the method "Theme-Centered Interview" which draws on the theme-centered group discussion conceived by LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG is introduced. Besides practical research steps of the survey, single steps of evaluation in vertical and horizontal hermeneutics are explained.

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## 1. Preliminary Note

In the following the method "theme-centered interview" is presented and described as it was applied in my study about the development of the father-child-relation. This contribution focuses on the practical research steps of survey and evaluation. Further, I will consider the methodic tradition of theme-centered interviews and the research intention of this method. [1]

Since the single steps of the method are explained in the form of examples from the study, the study shall be described briefly: Numerous developmental psychological studies and clinical examinations of the last years have stressed the beneficial function of the father for the development of the child. However, comparatively little is known about the etiology of the father-child-relation as well as about the (psychological) factors and coherences which support or harm the development of father child relations. The study "The Development of The Father-Child Relation" (working title) is based on the assumption that processes which already take place during pregnancy set up the later parents-child relation. In this context, a special meaning befits the affectively significant ideas and fantasies which refer to the developing child and to the future living together. The study aims on the manifest and latent fantasies of expecting fathers. With each of the ten interview partners three theme-centered interviews are conducted; two before birth, one in the fourth month after birth. The interviews are evaluated by depth hermeneutic method. [2]

The theme-centered interview draws on the theme-centered group discussion conceived by LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG (1979, 1988). It was developed at the Bremen Institute for Psychology and Social Research and was already applied to different studies (cf. SCHORN 1996, LOECHEL 1997). LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG took up a group discussion method which was developed at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. However, they changed it in regards to the self-comprehension of the discussion leader, who is not defined—as in an experiment—as a neutral observer, but takes part in the discussion process. The missing of a "neutral" observer can be viewed as a strong offer for transference. It can cause uncertainties and irritations which makes it more difficult for the discussion participants to draw their attention towards the topic of discussion. However, trying to reach modes of everyday communication can ease the conversation situation. The influence of the researcher, as well as his emotional involvement in the research topic, can be used by systematic reflection. Then, the influence is only a problematic variable if it is not recognized, reflected and understood with a view to the topic. If this turns out well, then essential object-based data can be obtained. [3]

LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG refer their the group discussion method further to the model of theme-centered interaction developed by COHN (1978). The discussion leader has to produce and to maintain a "'dynamic balance' between the individuals, the group, and an explicitly formulated topic" (LOECHEL 1997, p.56) [4]

The theme-centered interview shows some parallels to the problem-centered interview developed by WITZEL (1989). There is a difference e.g. regarding the research intention. Whereas WITZEL focuses on a qualitative analysis of the subjective context of meanings, the theme-centered interview aims to decode manifest as well as defended and latent meanings of communication. Such a request makes it necessary to clearly differentiate between hermeneutic field I (survey) and hermeneutic field II (evaluation) (cf. LOECHEL 1997). Consequently, the reflection of the interaction between the interviewer and the interview partner during the interview is stressed more (Are there any latent aspects of the research topic recognizable within the context of interaction of an interview?, cf. TIETEL 2000). [5]

## 2. Steps of the Survey (Hermeneutic Field I)

The theme-centered interview offers interview partners the opportunity to develop their special point of view in detail. More strongly than in a group discussion, the focus is on the individual person and his or her experiences and opinions concerning the topic. An open conversation situation has to be established during the interview. The interview starts with a short explanation of the topic of the study and a clarification of the interview frame (duration, process, promise of confidentiality etc.). The interview partners are informed that they are not confronted with a prepared list of questions as they might have expected. Instead, they have the opportunity to unfold and to explain what is important for

them in regards to the topic. The interview topic is held present by a formulated (and written) leading question which is placed well legibly (e.g. on the table).

> Example:
>
> "What does it mean to you to become a father?" [6]

The leading question should be formulated in such a way that it is on the one hand open enough to prevent an early breaking off or decline of the conversation. On the other hand, it should not be laid out too vaguely so that ideas and thoughts would be presented endlessly. The interviewer does his/her best to follow the explanations and ideas of the participants with confirmation and reflection (of the spoken) as well as with clarification and deepening questions. If the conversation threatens to dry up, the flow of conversation is supported by further questions, brought in by the interviewer.

> Example:
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> "What was particularly important for you as an expecting father in the last weeks/months?" [7]

The interview ends with the question of whether or not there still is something that was not or only marginally mentioned before but is important for the interview partner in connection with this topic. [8]

Immediately after the interview a postscript is made which contains the first impressions. Part of this are ideas and feelings, referring to the interview partner and the interviewer. Of special interest is everything that—so to speak—took place "between" the protagonists (their interaction, atmosphere of conversation, dynamics of conversation, specific "scenes" etc.).

> Example:
>
> Mr. P. welcomes me with a firm handshake. While sitting down, I try to talk about the frame of the interview, when Mr.. P. suggests to use first names. He would find this more coherent for himself. I agree a little dumbfounded and with the feeling to be taken a bit by surprise... [9]

The interview is followed by a (cooperative) supervision where the content of the interview as well as the impressions and the feelings concerning the interview can be reviewed. The research-related supervision is an essential help next to the postscript in tracking down latent aspects of the research topic. By contribution of supervision, the network of transference and countertransference, which becomes effective in an interview situation, can be made accessible for reflection. The research-related supervision can be understood as a first evaluation step.

> Example:
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> On request of Mr. D. the first interview took place in his house. His wife is in the 33rd week of pregnancy. Summarizing once again at the end of the interview, he explains that little has changed for him and that this is the reason why he is hardly occupied by

the circumstance of becoming a father. The only thing might be that he has laid out a garden pond. I could not resist to say that this is something to fall into. During supervision I consider to avoid this sequence. Not what I said is embarrassing but the aggressive fantasies which came into my mind while Mr. D. spoke of the pond. For a short moment Mr. D. had lost his harmlessness for me. I do not want that the supervisor gets similar thoughts. As it became clear in the joint reflection, I would like to "erase" this side of my research material (there are similar examples). Possibly my interview partner and I share a social taboo here: Aggressive fantasies and feelings toward the child are socially offensive and must remain hidden. [10]

## 3. Method of Evaluation

The evaluation of the theme-centered interview draws on the method of depth hermeneutic text interpretation developed by LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG (1979, 1988).[1] With the consent of the interview partner, the interview is recorded on tape. The tape recording is transcribed word for word, including paraverbal signs ("ahs", "hmm"), emotional comments (e.g. laughter) and identification of longer interview breaks. [11]

As said before, a depth hermeneutic text interpretation aims on the comprehension of more than the manifest content of a text. It is intended to disclose also ideas and fantasies which are not immediately accessible for the consciousness of the speaker. The focus is on the latent meaning of a text which is excluded from the explicit language, on the—so to speak—"psychosocial structures and mechanisms which move the language process as if they were its underworld" (LEITHAEUSER & VOLMERG 1988, p.253). LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG (loc. cit.) distinguish two ways of evaluation. An evaluation perspective is the "vertical hermeneutics". This is a single cases analysis, which aims on detailed interpretation of a "text" and in this respect allows for the complexity and dynamics, which are inherent in every interview, in a special way. Single case analyses have the advantage of considering the interview partner's experiences, point of views and ideas, which are relevant for the research topic. The consideration is comparatively detailed and obtains the dynamics of an interview (When does a certain topic appear, what comes next? etc.). This makes it easier to develop latent meaning coherences and to unfold complex interpretation figures. A second evaluation way leaves the context of a single interview. From the sum of all interviews, special topics are chosen for an exact reflection ("horizontal analysis"). Interpersonal correspondences and differences with regard to certain fantasies, ideas, experiences and point of views, can be worked out here. [12]

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1   In this article, it is not possible to consider differences and modifications in detail. The synoptical retelling of the interviews was added, the importance of the key sentences was taken back and the importance of the scene was stressed more. There are also differences regarding clusters of interview texts (in this case).

## 3.1 Research steps of evaluation

In the following the evaluation steps of vertical hermeneutics are at first explained as they were applied in the mentioned study. Secondly, the steps of horizontal hermeneutics are described. [13]

At first a short, synoptical retelling of the interview is made. This gives an overview of the contents which were picked out as central themes in the interview and helps to identify central topics and thus also helps to identify the first focus of interpretation.

> Example:
>
> The first interview with Mr. D.: Whether he and his wife would like to have children some time seems to have been no great question for Mr. D. However, before this step, the financial stability has been important. He says that his friends had been faster. For a long time his parents had been putting pressure on him with regard to this topic. He thinks it would be delightful to have a child to experience something like a second childhood. He does not care if it is a girl or a boy. You cannot change it anyway. That he is going to be a father is still kind of unreal for him. Mr. D. wonders, whether he is mature enough and can live up to the responsibility ("Will I do what I expected from my parents?"). He tells that he found it difficult as a child to come into contact with his father. The circumstance that he and his wife are becoming parents still is not important in everyday life. Unlike his wife he does not think about it much. His work is more concrete, there he is needed... [14]

In a further step the text on hand is carefully examined for remarks and conversation sequences which are relevant to the research topic. Passages which refer to the research intention of the study with their manifest contents are regarded as relevant. However, passages which do not directly refer to the research question can be of interest, too. If passages point to a strong emotional participation of the interlocutors (interviewer or interview partner) or if they cause irritations, they find special attention. The remarks and conversation sequences which emerge at this "looking through" are marked, gathered from the text and joined together to a new text. At this point, the text is studied for natural generalizations which are called key sentences according to LEITHAEUSER and VOLMERG. A key sentence is a significant sentence of a text in which central experiences, points of view, positions and action orientation were compressed to a clear-cut term. "Key sentences are (...) natural generalizations in the flow of discussion. They usually summarize a section of a discussion" (VOLMERG, SENGHAAS-KNOBLOCH & LEITHAEUSER 1986, p.271).

> Example:
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> I.: "If you could choose, would you prefer a girl or a boy?"
>
> Mr. P.: "Both."
>
> I.: "Both?"

> Mr. P.: "Both, I believe at the moment first a girl. Perhaps just to say, a girl, well a... A boy, you have to, a boy is more, I don't want to say assigned to the mother. But sticks more to the mother.. *Perhaps*, I will try to say it this way, something deep inside of me says that *a girl orientates herself perhaps a little more to the father*. This may be."
> (1/9) [15]

The passages which are gathered from the interview are headed with keywords describing the theme precisely.

> Example:

> "A girl orientates herself more to the father" (keyword for the above mentioned passage), "As a father you have to be a perfect example for the son", "Girls are more sociable". [16]

Then the "text" which is the result of the previous step is subdivided further. For this purpose, passages are arranged which can be assigned to a certain topic by their manifest and latent content. For each group a keyword has to be found which points out the thematic coherence.

> Example:

> "I would like to have a daughter, because ..." [17]

At this point the extracted remarks and text passages are object to a detailed analysis or interpretation. Everyday language—and this is what we are dealing with—stands out due to its fragmentary and ambiguous features.[2] The meaning of a remark only seems to be immediately accessible. However, there has to be a necessary effort in order to understand the meaning. The scientific (text) interpretation draws on everyday, so to speak intuitive ways of understanding, but uses our everyday rule of knowledge systematically. For the research practice this means that the researcher asks questions about the text (opening-up-the meaning questions) which draw the attention towards the different layers of meaning of a text/ text passage and help to develop the content of meaning (LEITHAEUSER & VOLMERG 1988, p.259):

- "What do they talk about?" The leading interpretation question discloses the objective content (logical understanding).
- "How do the interview partners talk to each other?" The interaction of the interviewer and the interview partner is determined (psychological understanding).
- "In which way and how do they talk about what?" This leading interpretation question focuses on the way of speaking (scenically understanding).

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2  An on first appearance banal and unambiguous remark as "it is cold", can have different meanings apart from the bare observation itself. Whoever notices that "it is cold" probably would like to ask to put the radiator on. However, the statement "it is cold" can contain a relation aspect as well (I am cold close to you).

- "Why do they talk how about what?" Why it is talked about in this way is inquired. The leading interpretation question should decode the latent, not conscious intentions and meanings (depth hermeneutic understanding).[3]

  Interpretation example (2nd interview, 32nd pregnancy week):

  Mr. J.: "It already has become much closer, it fidgets like crazy. You can see it and you can feel it, too. You can distinguish, this is an arm, this 'n leg. If it kicks this way. If it punches that way. Well, this already is like it, it pushes itself to reality. Slow, but...Well, it has changed."

  I.: "How do you experience this? What is this like?"

  Mr. J.: "It's good. Well, you can already really imagine, that there is a little human being in there. And then it will come out finally. It is not so abstract anymore. Well, at the beginning it was only the belly becoming huge more and more. You couldn't imagine anything concrete. Now it is concrete, no longer that abstract." (2/4)

  Here Mr. J describes a clearly perceptible change for him. At the time of our first conversation (22nd pregnancy week) it was an abstract reality for him that a child grows up in the belly of his wife. In his experience the thick belly was not or only partly a sign for the fact that there is a developing child in there. This seems to have changed. In the last interview Mr. J. still spoke of "something" pushing against the belly, if he laid the hand on the belly (without this haptic contact the belly seemed to be empty), now he speaks about a little human being whom he can imagine in the belly of his wife. From a more diffuse "something"—at this time—a more detailed determined subject developed. Primarily, growth processes and developmental steps of the fetus seem to be the cause of mentioned difference. In the meantime vital movements of the child can also be observed by outsiders. This gives the baby a contour and supports Mr. J. to clarify the reality of the child by his visual and tactile senses. Mr. J. can indirectly touch the baby. He even seems to be able to distinguish different parts of the body like arms or legs. Thus baby and wife become presumably somehow separated. They are perceptible as subjects which are different from each other. Mr. J. says that the child "slowly but surely" presses into reality, therefore makes itself noticeable. "Reality" seems to have a double character: The baby "pushes" itself—so to speak—into the outer reality and at the same time more and more into the emotional reality of Mr. J. It seems to be relieving for Mr. J. to be aware of this. [18]

The horizontal evaluation follows the explained evaluation steps up to point three. At this point a further step is inserted (3b) which is followed by the procedure described in point four: A grid is made in which the keywords worked out in step 3 are recorded, differentiated by participant and examination time (here: interview 1, 2 or 3). This grid summarizes relevant fields, which can be examined more thoroughly.

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3   If possible, the analysis of the interview should be conducted by the interviewer himself.

Example:

The (possible) sex of the child was mentioned almost in every interview carried out during pregnancy. In this context it was spoken of a variety of ideas and fantasies, therefore I decided to make this topic an object to the horizontal evaluation. [19]

## 4. Criteria for Quality of Research

VOLMERG, SENGHAAS-KNOBLOCH & LEITHAEUSER (1986) describe survey and evaluation as two dependent hermeneutic fields to which respectively specific control criterions correspond. A central criterion of the hermeneutic field I is whether a work alliance between interviewer and interview partner had been established. This does not guarantee sincerity and a certain degree of truth, nevertheless it is a base for it. In connection with this, the reflection of the dynamics of interaction, which was produced during the contact of the respective protagonists, is also important. The postscript as well as the (cooperative) supervision are helpful here. In the hermeneutic field II, the survey and evaluation are explained and the basic rules are made explicit. Interpretations are verified by literal quotations from the interview if possible. The reader should be able to comprehend the interpretations and check their plausibility and coherence. The interview quotations are so detailed that the reader is enabled to draw his own conclusions or to develop alternative versions. The validity of an interpretation is verified in the researcher discourse. Here the focus is on the plausibility, coherence and comprehensibility of an interpretation. This feedback is not only a essential corrective, it also gives important suggestions for supplementary or alternative "versions". Lastly the degree of reality of the research results does depend on whether the chosen methodological approach is adequate for the object of the examination. [20]

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