Conversational Knowledge and Gifts of Chance: On the State of the Method

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Abstract
For more than 15 years, I have been an active qualitative researcher, working in particular with semistructured qualitative interviews, both in empirical research projects and as an author of textbooks on interviewing. In this state of the method article, I first articulate an approach to qualitative inquiry based on the fundamental idea of the conversation on ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds. I then diverge a bit from standard methodological approaches to qualitative research and introduce the notion of gifts of chance: As conversational creatures, we sometimes stumble upon interesting and thought-provoking conversations that we may analyze in a knowledge-producing process, even if this process has not been carefully planned and designed. As an example, I refer to an ongoing research project I now conduct with a woman in her 90s, which began when she contacted me unexpectedly as a veritable gift of chance.

Keywords
methods in qualitative inquiry, philosophy of science, case study, existential phenomenology, historical narrative

Introduction
For more than 15 years, I have been an active qualitative researcher, working in particular with semistructured qualitative interviews, both in empirical research projects and as an author of textbooks on interviewing. In this state of the method article, I first articulate an approach to qualitative inquiry based on the fundamental idea of the conversation on ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds. I then diverge a bit from standard methodological approaches to qualitative research and introduce the notion of gifts of chance: As conversational creatures, we sometimes stumble upon interesting and thought-provoking conversations that we may analyze in a knowledge-producing process, even if this process has not been carefully planned and designed. As an example, I will refer to an ongoing research project I now conduct with a woman in her 90s, which began when she contacted me unexpectedly as a veritable gift of chance.

Before proceeding to the outline of ontological, epistemological, and methodological aspects of conversations, however, I should perhaps spell out what I mean by the very concept of conversation. There is an everyday use of the word, where it signals something informal, unlike interrogations, examinations, and other such forms of questioning. In this text, I use the term to refer to human encounters that involve the use of language, and which are based on a degree of reciprocity and responsibility. A qualitative research interview is—or at least can be—a professional conversation in this sense since all parties contribute to the production of knowledge, albeit in different ways.

According to an online etymology dictionary, the term comes from Latin (conversationem), with the prefix (con-) meaning “with,” and the suffix meaning “turn about.” So, to converse with someone means to turn about with someone. In conversations, one moves with another and is affected by the presence of the other person and her utterances. Not in a mechanical way, as if pushed by the other but rather in a responsive way where two or more conversation partners wander together with and around a given subject matter. In conversations, people do not simply react to each other but respond willingly and with interest. In this sense, conversations begin before children learn to speak, at least in the form of protocounters. From the earliest days of our lives, human infants are able to enter into such protocounters with

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caregivers in ways that involve subtle forms of turn-taking and emotional communication. The dyads in which our earliest conversations occur are prior to the child’s own sense of self. We are communicating, intersubjective, and indeed conversational creatures before we become subjective and monological ones (Trevarthen, 1993). Of course, most of us do learn to talk privately to ourselves and hide our thoughts and emotions from others (Vygotsky, 1978), but this is possible only because there was first an intersubjective communicative process with others.

Our relationships with others—and also with ourselves—are thus conversational. In order to understand ourselves, we must use a language that was first acquired conversationally, and we try out our interpretations in dialogue with others and the world. The human self exists only within what philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) has called “webs of interlocution” (p. 36). Our selves are conversational at their very core; they are constituted by the numerous relationships we have, and have had, with other people. On this basis, Stephen Mulhall, another philosopher, has concluded that humankind simply is “a kind of enacted conversation.” (2007, p. 58). Mulhall states that culture in general has a dialogical or conversational structure and that being able to speak—perhaps the most essential human characteristic—involves being able to converse (p. 26). Speaking is not grounded in the disinterested transmission of information between different parties but in a form of dialogical relationality or what Heidegger (1927) called Mitsein, being-with. The root sense of dialogue is also that of talk (logos) that goes back and forth (dia-) between persons, and cultures as larger, conversational wholes are constantly produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members (Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995, p. 2).

In the remainder of this article, I shall unfold my argument on the basis of this understanding of conversational speech as a fundamental feature of human life. If we fish, conversation would be our water. As thinking, feeling, and acting creatures in social and cultural worlds, we cannot escape being in conversational relations with others. Using Heideggerian terminology, we are from the outset “thrown” into preexisting conversational structures. This means that we do not create meaning individually, out of nothing, but necessarily draw on existing conversations. In saying something, a speaker “necessarily locates herself in a preexisting field of language and culture, and in relation to present and future audiences with preconceptions that are similarly historically specific” (Mulhall, 2007, p. 59).

**Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology**

Obviously, conversations are not just ways of being together. They are also knowledge-producing practices, and since the late 19th century (in journalism) and the early 20th century (in the social sciences), the conversational process of knowing has been conceptualized under the name of interviewing (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The very term interview itself testifies to the dialogical and interactional nature of human life, as we have seen. An interview is literally an interchange of views between two persons, conversing about a theme of mutual interest. We should thus conceive of the concept of conversation in the human and social sciences as much broader than simply another specific and technical research method. Certainly, conversations in the form of interviewing have been refined into a set of techniques, but they are also a mode of knowing, part of an epistemology, and a fundamental ontology of persons to which I now turn.

Ontologically, as philosopher Rom Harré (1983) has put it: “The primary human reality is persons in conversation” (p. 58). Human lives are lived within conversational realities. When encountering others, we normally intuitively approach them in what Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1957) called the participant mode. We interact with them based on the idea that they are somewhat rational, autonomous creatures that can give an account of themselves (Butler, 2005). Only in special cases do we suspend the participant mode and take the spectator’s stance toward the other. This can happen if the other behaves very irrationally, for example, expresses herself in a way that leads one to suspect for example mental illness. Our primordial relationship with each other is one where we participate in conversations and seek to understand what the other is saying and doing. A derived relationship is the spectator mode where we ask why someone is saying or doing something, looking for the factors that may bring them to entertain their irrational beliefs. As spectators to the lives of others, we objectively look for the causes of their behaviors and utterances, but as participants, we take seriously the reasons people have for believing, feeling, or saying something. Spectators operate in what philosophers sometimes refer to a space of causation (resulting in behavior that we try to explain), whereas participants operate in a space of reasons (leading to actions that we try to understand; Sellars, 1956/1997).

As already hinted at above, we know from developmental psychology that human infants can only develop full personhood if they are approached and taken up by others as persons—even before they are able to give an account of themselves as persons—in order to become persons. This is known in psychology as the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). It involves something that looks like magic or a kind of Münchhausen bootstrapping, where something can only be brought into existence when others presume that it already exists. More capable persons need to address the less capable as a bit more proficient than they are, in order that they may develop finer skills. If one is not interpreted by others as a rational, intentional, conversational creature, then one will not become a rational, intentional creature. If one is only looked at toward the other. This can happen if the other behaves very irrationally, for example, expresses herself in a way that leads one to suspect for example mental illness. Our primordial relationship with each other is one where we participate in conversations and seek to understand what the other is saying and doing. A derived relationship is the spectator mode where we ask why someone is saying or doing something, looking for the factors that may bring them to entertain their irrational beliefs. As spectators to the lives of others, we objectively look for the causes of their behaviors and utterances, but as participants, we take seriously the reasons people have for believing, feeling, or saying something. Spectators operate in what philosophers sometimes refer to a space of causation (resulting in behavior that we try to explain), whereas participants operate in a space of reasons (leading to actions that we try to understand; Sellars, 1956/1997).

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form of spectator research in the human sciences but also approaches as diverse as psychoanalysis, cognitive, neuroscientific, and poststructuralist forms of inquiry often build on the ambition of analyzing the driving forces behind human lives, instead of seeing persons in conversation as the primary human reality.

Epistemologically, it follows from the ontological considerations about the human world as a conversational reality that there is a need for methods that may open up this kind of reality and study it in a way that respects its nature. Across the decades, qualitative inquiry has routinely been accused of violating scientific demands for objectivity (see the discussion in Hammersley, 2012), but if objectivity means being able to adequately reflect the nature of the subject matter (Brinkmann & Kvøle, 2015), then conversational methods such as interviewing appear as objective in the sense of enabling us to comprehend the conversational aspects of our lives. Psychology and other human and social sciences have often borrowed methods from the natural and health sciences. These have been developed to identify a causally working factor and ideally culminating in the formulation of causal laws as seen from the spectator’s stance. However, taking the participant stance to human beings seriously means that we can uncover those dimensions that pertain to humans as interpreting, responsive creatures that are able to act for reasons. This paves the way for another understanding of objectivity as “allowing the object to object,” which has been emphasized by Bruno Latour (2000). Also this definition of objectivity suits the conversational epistemology that I try to unfold here, for it is through conversations that people can raise questions in their own terms and move beyond preconfigured measures as employed in quantitative research (e.g., Likert-type scales, psychometrics, and experimental results). I hasten to add that I do not wish to argue against quantitative research or knowing in the spectator mode in general, both of which are perfectly legitimate and often needed in order to answer specific research questions. My argument simply is that if we want to understand people as agents, as persons acting in a conversational world, we then need another kind of epistemology and other methods.

However, perhaps the term “methods” is not optimal to describe what we need after all? At least not if we interpret methods as mechanical ways to obtain knowledge by following discrete steps or procedures that are meant to eliminate the influence of subjectivity. For eliminating subjectivity would seem to imply eliminating the only way we have into conversational realities. This was once emphasized (although without using these exact terms) by anthropologist Jean Lave, when she was asked in an interview with Steinar Kvøle about methods:

SK: Is there an anthropological method? If yes, what is an anthropological method?

JL: I think it is complete nonsense to say that we have a method. First of all I don’t think that anyone should have a method. But in the sense that there are “instruments” that characterize the “methods” of different disciplines—sociological surveys, questionnaire methods, in psychology various kinds of tests and also experiments—there are some very specific technical ways of inquiring into the world. Anthropologists refuse to take those as proper ways to study human being. I think the most general view is that the only instrument that is sufficiently complex to comprehend and learn about human existence is another human. And so what you use is your own life and your own experience in the world. (Lave & Kvøle, 1995, p. 220)

If we want to understand human beings as people (and not as organisms, brains, information-processing machines, etc.), we need another human who can enter into participatory relationships with these people. We need “methods” or “instruments” such as observations and interviews, which are basically refined ways of employing our ordinary skills of conversation. We need ways of entering the conversational reality so that we may discover it and its properties, as if we were fish in need of ways of discovering water. Communication scholar John Shotter once put it as follows:

we live our daily social lives within an ambience of conversation, discussion, argumentation, negotiation, criticism and justification; much of it to do with problems of intelligibility and the legitimization of claims to truth. (Shotter, 1993, p. 29)

We need to locate ourselves as participants in this ambience of conversation, bearing in mind that “conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general” (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 211).

**Gifts of Chance and Abductive Reasoning**

Qualitative methods, particularly in the form of interviewing, can be seen as deliberate ways of designing such conversational transactions. And this is something I have been engaged in myself, both as a researcher studying phenomena such as the impact of psychiatric diagnoses on people’s lives (e.g., Brinkmann, 2016), and the experiences of grief following bereavement (Brinkmann, 2020). I have also authored and coauthored textbooks on interviewing, recommending careful qualitative research designs based on methodological steps toward knowledge-production (e.g., Brinkmann & Kvøle, 2015). But in the remainder of this article, I shall focus on a different kind of research that springs from conversations one stumbles upon in the course of living a life. Previously, I have referred to this kind of research as qualitative inquiry in everyday life because it begins from something peculiar or problematic encountered in the life of the researcher themselves (Brinkmann, 2012). I have found inspiration in the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) who has recently advocated C. Wright Mills’s famous plea for intellectual craftsmanship, questioning traditional divisions between “life,” “theory,” and “method.” We do not always need to begin human and social research with a theoretical agenda that is then operationalized into testable hypotheses through methods, according to Ingold. Rather, we should acknowledge “that there is no division, in practice,
between work and life. [An intellectual craft] is a practice that involves the whole person, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future” (p. 240). We do research for purposes of living, and theories of social and psychological life are just some of the tools we employ in the process (others are art and education).

The kinds of situations in one’s life that I refer to here give rise to what can be called “stumble data” (Brinkmann, 2014). These are data, empirical materials, upon which one accidentally stumbles. Another word for this might be “instances.” According to Denzin (2001; who follows Psathas), what we should do as qualitative researchers, especially if we are interested in understanding something of some generality (which I believe is one worthy aim of inquiry), is to take “each instance of a phenomenon as an occurrence that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members” (p. 63). An instance is an occurrence that is evidence that “the machinery for its production is culturally available” (Psathas, quoted by Denzin, 2001, p. 63). When faced with an instance in this sense (I will give an example in a second), we should ask “How is it possible?” What discourses, relationships, and theories of self and subjectivity must obtain for this material, this instance, to make sense? These are questions that invite us into abductive reasoning.

Abduction is a form of reasoning that is concerned with the relationship between a situation and inquiry. It is driven neither by inductive data collection nor by theoretically based deduction but by breakdowns in understanding (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). It occurs in situations of breakdown, surprise, bewilderment, or wonder. And, as conversational creatures, such breakdown situations typically occur in the conversational flow of our lives. As a form of reasoning, abduction is associated with the pragmatist Charles S. Peirce who is often credited with being the original pragmatist because of his formulation of what has since been known as the “pragmatic maxim”: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the objects of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (quoted from Bernstein, 2010, p. 3). According to Peirce, things are their effects. The world is not a collection of things in motion, but of lines and associations of events and effects (Ingold, 2011).

Abduction is a form of reasoning employed in situations of uncertainty; when we “stumble” and need an understanding or explanation of something that happens. It can be formalized as follows: (1) We observe X, (2) X is unexpected and breaks with our normal understanding, (3) but if Y is the case, then X makes sense, (4) therefore we are allowed to claim Y, at least provisionally. As an example, let us say (1) that we observe a person swimming in a lake, who waves her arms wildly. And let us say (2) that this is unexpected in the context (the situation is not, e.g., a water aerobics class). We can then conjecture (3) that the person needs help, perhaps because she is drowning. This would make the person’s behavior understandable, even expected, and therefore (4) we infer that this is the case (at least until we arrive at a better interpretation). The point is that we do not know for sure that the person needs help, but it seems to be a reasonable conjecture, especially if we relate to the other as a conversational being who is using her arms to communicate with us. The spectator’s mode that would see the behavior as caused by neurochemical signals, a behaviorist history of reinforcement, or something else along such lines, is beside the point, if we are facing a situation where a fellow human being needs help. We thus participate in this situation, so to speak. It may, of course, turn out that the person does not need help but is suffering from a kind of Tourette’s syndrome, leading to uncontrolled movements, but as participants in a relationship with this person, we would only resort to that kind of causal explanation if our ordinary interpretation were somehow discredited. The participant stance is primary, and the spectator stance is secondary.

It is a basic point in pragmatism that we engage in abduction regularly as we are living our lives (Brinkmann, 2012). And if we, as qualitative researchers, allow ourselves to be sensitive to the strangeness of the world, there are numerous things to stumble upon: in conversations, media, books, advertising, consumer objects, architecture, and everyday episodes and situations. On such occasions, we should allow ourselves to stay unbalanced for a moment longer than what is comfortable, for this is where we may learn something new. Perhaps it is even in these situations that objectivity is possible because this is when the “objects” of the world “object” to our dealings with them in ways that make us stumble. Let us look at this more closely.

Letters From Lili

I should now introduce an example, which comes from something I work on at the moment. It represents a piece of conversational research that I stumbled upon in the sense that the person involved approached me with a number of questions and concerns. I shall refer to this person as Lili. It is uncertain if she wishes to appear under her own name in a book that I am currently writing about her life, so, to be on the safe side, I will use a pseudonym.

Lili is now 91 years old, and I first heard from her when she sent me a long, handwritten letter a couple of years ago. The letter contained a short story or poem (a kind of hybrid between the two) that Lili had authored, and also a personal message to me. In the letter, she explained that she had read a few of my books in Danish, and also some interviews with me from newspapers, and she wanted to know what I meant when I had critiqued the lack of reflection in psychology on the topic of human dignity (see Brinkmann, 2017). She had been in psychoanalysis, she wrote, for 33 years, and her psychoanalyst had always emphasized the importance of human dignity. This is how our correspondence began. I wrote a letter, which I sent back to her, she responded once more, and now I have received around 50 letters from Lili, including a large number of poems and short stories that she has written. Everything in her own handwriting.
A year and a half ago, I was contacted by a publisher that expressed interest in her story. I had shared a photo (anonymized) of one of her letters on social media, and many people reacted with great interest and warmth to the story of this elderly woman, who had read some books by me, a professor of psychology, who was less than half her age. I went to meet Lili in her apartment, and we immediately began to talk as if we had known each other for a long time. She quickly decided that it would be worthwhile to become a part of a book project or research project. I have now visited her many times and conducted more than 10 hr of conversational interviews with her. It has turned out to be an amazing learning experience for me not only to get acquainted with Lili as a person but also to listen to her stories, answer her questions, and simply just be a participant conversationalist in her life. While ethnographers talk about participant observation, I believe it is relevant in this case to talk about participant conversation, and it is something I had probably not dared to do 10 or 15 years ago when I would have seen this kind of project as much too loose and random. Now, I see it as a gift of chance, which enables me to study numerous aspects of human life, not least those aspects that become particularly visible when one is confronted with such a long and intense life story as Lili’s.

Why is Lili’s life and her stories interesting? In an obvious sense, all human lives are interesting, especially with as many years lived as in Lili’s case. But there is an additional drama in her life, which was made clear already in the first poem that she had sent me: When she was just a young girl, around the age of 13, she fell in love with a German soldier, who was in Denmark as part of Nazi Germany’s occupation of the country. Her poetic short story about this was called “Under the eternal stars,” and it recounted how they met and had a love affair in the Danish summer. After he was sent to the Eastern front without much notice, Lili met another German soldier, this time an officer in the army, and she also had a love affair with him. These early experiences of love have been decisive for Lili, and she repeats again and again, both verbally and in her letters to me, that she feels guilty and ashamed of herself, but that she at the same time does not regret it. There is a kind of fatalism in her reflections, as she emphasizes that this was bound to happen. It is not that Lili does not want to take responsibility for her actions, but she is aware that her life is lived within a framework that she cannot fully control. There is a sense of destiny, and I am reminded of the story of the Norns in the old Norse mythology, who craft the fate of women and men by weaving the thread of life.

Theoretically, I have been inspired by my conversations with Lili to reflect on the notion of fate, which has almost totally disappeared from our modern mentality, and instead, we operate with the idea of the powerful, autonomous individual, who chooses her own life course and is an architect of her own fortune. When pondering Lili’s life, a more apt image than that of “architect” seems to be that humans are born into “houses” that are not of their own making. They are not so much architects as “dwellers” in their lives. They can of course refurbish the “house” in which they live (i.e., cultural ideas, social practices, and historical circumstances), and sometimes even demolish it to construct a new one, but there is always this aspect of “thrownness” that Heidegger emphasized. Lili did not choose where or when she was born, that her country was occupied, and that she was a young girl full of desires that happened to be wrong, according to most Danes.

After Denmark was liberated in 1945, and the occupation ended together with the war, the girls and women who had been with German soldiers were referred to as “German girls” or even “field mattresses.” They were considered traitors, and many of these girls were attacked in the days and weeks following the liberation. Some of them had been politically on the side of the Nazis and had perhaps even told the Germans secrets about the Danish resistance, but others, probably the large majority, were just young girls like Lili who had fallen in love with young men from the enemy. When the war ended, Lili was taken by the Danish resistance and incarcerated for 3 weeks under very harsh circumstances. She was around 15 years old at the time. Unlike many other of these women, she was not physically abused, and her hair was not cut in public, but she did suffer different kinds of humiliation and trauma. Her whole life has in many ways been determined by these early experiences, and she is still very anxious and lives with a fear that someone will attack her because of her love affairs with German soldiers almost 80 years ago.

Not long after the war, she left her family in Denmark to go to Sweden, where she lived and worked for several years. In this neighboring country—that had been neutral during the war—nobody knew her story, and she could live without fear. But she eventually returned to Denmark, where she met her future husband, and together they moved from the provincial town in the area where she had grown up and went to the capital of Copenhagen, where they could start a new life together in relative anonymity in the big city. They married but never had any children, and Lili believes that this is because of a psychosomatic reaction in her body, going back to what she experienced as a teenager when she was traumatized. She worked part-time for decades in an office, but her life was changed when she began in psychoanalysis, which was a genuine educational process, one of Bildung, an intellectual and personal journey. Her psychoanalyst not only worked with her mind but instructed her in reading the great classics of literature, and Lili also enrolled in college and eventually obtained a degree.

Life as an Education

Lili describes her life as an educational journey toward maturity and dignity. She is now an old woman with a witty and ironic view of herself. She has one foot in the classics—Russian, French, and British novelists in particular—but another foot in contemporary literature like Michel Houellebecq, and she is broadly interested in popular culture and listens to Lady Gaga, for example. There is no doubt that she has used art and literature in a process of ethical and personal formation or Bildung, much like symbolic resources with which to
understand and transform her own life to some extent (Zittoun, 2006). She uses the works she reads conversationally, both internally with herself and with people like me, whom she encounters and often questions about this or that existential question she has thought about as a result of her readings. Her own literary production is also a way of coming to terms with life and fate, and many of her stories are about life-changing events that may have seemed insignificant when they happened, but which eventually turn out to be epiphanies. She keeps returning to one such epiphany in her own life, and I will quote this to let her speak for herself:

I began in psychoanalysis immediately after having seen Gone with the Wind in Malmö [a Swedish town]. I had seen that terrible Scarlett. It was as if someone showed a mirror to me, and I thought, ‘Oh, my God, isn’t she terrible! Moody and manipulative.’ I could recognize much of what I struggled with myself in her. I had this moodiness. I was unhappy with the fact that I did not use all my talents. I was just an ordinary office worker. You know, I really wanted to use all my abilities, but it did not happen, and I was so angry with myself. And my psychoanalyst saw this immediately!

Being confronted with the image of Scarlett led to the second sudden change in Lili’s life. The first was when she fell in love with the German soldier, and the last one was when her husband developed dementia, and Lili had to provide care for him in their home for around 10 years until he died. This was a few years before I met her, and in all our conversations, she keeps returning to him.

In one of our most recent conversations, I introduced a technique from life story interviewing and invited Lili to imagine that her life was a book, and I asked her if she could divide it into chapters, but we quickly began to talk about films instead, and I asked her who should play the leading role, if her life were a movie:

Well, I don’t like the Danish actresses all that much. So, wait . . . Kate . . . Winslet! I really like her! I don’t know if you have seen the movie called The Reader? It is so good! I have seen it five, six, or seven times. It takes place right after the war, and she plays a tram conductor in Berlin. And she falls in love with a boy who is just 15 years old. He feels sick and vomits, and she helps him and takes him home. And when he feels better, he brings her flowers, and then it begins! He becomes totally obsessed with her. Who can blame him! And after he has helped her carry her coal, he has to take a bath, and then it begins. She also takes off her clothes. And then we see a love relationship. It is so strong and beautiful. And understandable. Even if she is much older, a woman in her 30s. And suddenly, one day, she is gone, and he is really upset. It turns out that she was guilty of assisting in the killing of several hundred people during the war by closing some doors to a church on fire. He then studies law, and years later he is going with his class to a court room, and imagine this: There she is! He hasn’t seen her since, and he suddenly remembers how she loved it when he read to her, because she was unable to read herself. She was more ashamed of this than of the fact that she had helped kill all those people. He had read Chekov to her: That beautiful short story, The Lady with the Dog, which she so loved. And we see that they read and made love, read and made love, right? And then she is sent to prison for life. Even though she could have proven that it was not her responsibility, for she could not read or write. But she doesn’t reveal that! She prefers to serve twenty years in prison! And he then contacts her and continues to send her letters, and she learns to read and write in prison.

“I think I have seen it several years ago,” I say, totally fascinated by Lili’s way of telling the story.

It is strong. When she is finally released, he helps her with a job and a place to live, and when he comes to get her, she has committed suicide in the cell. She cannot bear coming out. And we see the table in the cell and her books that she has learned to read, and the top one is The Lady with the Dog. Oh, I like that, and Kate Winslet, she is totally fantastic.

Let me ask you, Lili, because I was really intrigued by your retelling of the movie, and I may exaggerate the parallel, but you tell me that Kate Winslet herself goes through a kind of education in the movie. She learns to read, including all those novels that are next to where she ends up killing herself. And she has done something terrible early in her life . . .

Yes, you can say that.

So, is there a parallel to your own life story?

Yes. I see that. I have not thought about that.

It may be accidental, but if I were a psychoanalyst . . .

“But you are!” Lili laughs.

I guess I would say that it is no accident that you choose to talk about this movie. What do I know? But there is the obvious difference that Kate Winslet committed a terrible crime, and you didn’t.

Well, no, you can put it like that, but one can say that I have been a traitor to my own country.

Many different conversational layers are nicely woven together here by Lili, and I have quoted it at length to illustrate how she thinks and talks. Her life is full of art, of stories, which she uses to understand herself and others. In an immediate conversation with me, she is telling the story about a movie she has seen that affected her deeply, and, in that movie, there is a further reference to a Chekov story that Lili also knows. In our conversation, I offer an interpretation of her relationship to the movie that borrows from the psychodynamic practice she has been engaged in for more than 30 years. I really believe that her fascination with the story stems from its similarity to her own life. Thus, narrative and discursive lines interact and crisscross in our encounter, testifying to the complex conversational structure of a human life. Understanding a life in this way is only possible in the participant mode, from the inside so to say, provided that one is invited and does not simply intrude from the outside as a spectator.

Learning to Stumble

I was engaged in other research projects when I suddenly stumbled upon Lili’s story. She approached me, and, given standard procedures of knowledge production, I probably should have replied politely, but negatively, considered it
Choose a topic. Normally this will be based on something that genuinely interests you, bothers you, or confuses you. It is preferably based on something you do not yet understand and which you would like to understand, perhaps in order to be able to act more appropriately toward it. The first step can often be conceptualized as a breakdown in understanding. As we have seen above when considering abduction, it is the case that good human science research frequently springs from a breakdown (“I don’t understand this”), coupled with a mystery (e.g., the framing of the breakdown as a riddle) and then a possible resolution of the riddle, for example, based on a novel perspective on the matter that confused you (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). If you are in the process of learning how to do research, you may be required by the teacher or the curriculum to choose a topic that might not constitute a breakdown. In this case, you can favorably practice breaking down your own understanding of the phenomenon you are going to study. Different techniques exist that may help you to defamiliarize yourself with the phenomena that you take for granted, thus creating a sense of curiosity that is conducive to good qualitative research. In the case of Lili, I was at first simply struck by the fact that this person had read my books and interviews, and when I began to get a glimpse of her story, there was a kind of breakdown in my understanding. As a Dane, I had learned that the “German girls” during the war were deeply immoral, but by understanding more of Lili’s story, I have begun to see the deeper complexities concerning life and morality.

Collect materials. When you choose a topic, you are simultaneously collecting materials. These steps are deeply related—as are all of them. Lili’s first letter to me is an important part of the empirical corpus that I work with in studying her life. Collection of materials thus begins even before one has decided on the “design” of the study. Recollections that you write down, newspaper articles that you read, commercials that annoy you, or conversations that seem to stick in your memory can all be examples of materials that may enter into defining the topic that interests you. “Data collection” is thus not a separate process that gets started only after the research project is designed, but something we all constantly do as living human beings with the capacity to talk, observe, and recollect.

(3) Consult the literature. We should never underestimate the insights that other researchers have provided us with, so it is important to read about empirical analyses in the topical area, and it is also important to develop one’s imagination and powers of observation by reading theoretical literature. In the case of Lili, I was quickly led in many different, and quite unusual, directions. I have used conventional psychological theories on narrative identity (e.g., McAdams, 1997) and hermeneutical theory on self-constancy and its relation to morality (Ricoeur, 1992), but I have also read about old Norse and Greek ideas of fate and destiny in order to understand how a person’s thread of life is woven with materials that one has not chosen. I am still in the process of understanding this and trying to develop a psychology of the life thread, which I hope will be the theoretical backbone in my forthcoming book about Lili.

(4) Continue collecting materials. Try to think broadly about what may be needed and include visual as well as textual materials whenever possible. Don’t try to purify data (e.g., by conducting only standardized research interviews), but use everything that helps you clarify the situation. Have you read novels about your phenomenon? Or media stories or television programs? Where and how is your phenomenon represented in the social world? Think of yourself as a participant who has stumbled upon something interesting, and not just a spectator to the phenomena that you study. As Bruno Latour (2005) argues in his book on *Reassembling the Social*: From now on, when you think of what you are doing as a research project, everything is data! That everything is data in everyday life research is both a burden and a blessing. It is a blessing since it makes it easy to get started on an often enjoyable research quest, but it is also a burden since the researcher risks losing focus. The researcher must, therefore, frame the research project very carefully in order not to end up with a deeply fragmented analysis. My argument is that theory is the most important tool to help in this regard, which means that you must constantly go back to Step 3.

(5) Do analytic writing. As we know from Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), writing is itself a method of inquiry. I call the writing that you need to do “analytic” to stress the idea that good qualitative writing often uses theoretical concepts to analytically unpack the lives, social situations, events, and processes that are scrutinized. I am not saying that you should avoid using the concepts of everyday language to write about everyday life—indeed you often must use the vernacular—but I am anecdotal. Instead, I decided to make Lili’s life and experiences into a piece of everyday life research: It emerged from something unusual—an elderly woman confronting me—that in certain ways spoke to different existential questions of fate, guilt, and grief that I myself have been interested in. No “German girl” has never publicly told her story in her own voice in Denmark, so I felt a need, almost a duty, to try and understand and communicate Lili’s life to Danes.
saying that the concepts of everyday language are theoretically loaded in the first place, and you can do a much better analysis if you understand both how they are so loaded and can evaluate whether this works for or against what you want to say. I discovered, for example, when analyzing Lili’s stories, that our modern language about life is full of words about the will, choice, and motivation. We have fewer words left about the accidental, the nonchosen, and all that we cannot control. This is why I have become interested in Norse mythology and Greek tragedy, where the opposite is the case, and where life is depicted as depending on a past to which one is tied (see Critchley, 2019, for a recent exposition of the existential importance of Greek tragedy).

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that human beings—considered as acting, interpreting persons—live in conversational realities. Conversations, in a broad sense, are therefore significant means of studying and understanding the human world. Much of our conversational life runs smoothly, but sometimes there is a breakdown in understanding, and we stumble upon things that are interesting. These “stumble data” can occasionally turn out to be gifts of chance that one may study more carefully, even if it is difficult if not impossible to plan that in advance, as standard methodological textbooks require. We need to engage in creative, abductive reasoning when trying to understand what happens. This is an exercise in intellectual craftsmanship, where the inquiring person is his or her own research instrument, and subjectivity is a way into relevant studies of conversational realities in ways that can be, yes, objective.

I hope that my example of Lili and her long and dramatic life story illustrates how we as researchers can engage in “participant conversation” with people we encounter—sometimes as a gift of chance. In order for this to generate knowledge about the human condition, we need to be participants in the lives and the phenomena that we study. We cannot remain at a distance as disinterested spectators.

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