What is 'good' anyway?

The interviewing of acquaintances

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Why not?
The interviewing of friends and acquaintances

by
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WHY NOT?

THE INTERVIEWING OF FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES
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ABSTRACT
Why do interpretive researchers not interview friends and acquaintances? Or, if they do so, why do they (we) not explicate it in their (our) methodology section? This is rather obvious when claiming and striving for objectivity and referring to a positivist or neo-positivist ontology (being-realism). It is, however, not so obvious when referring to a social constructivist ontology and a subjectivistic conception of reality (becoming-realism). On the contrary, researchers who refer to reality as being socially constructed through interaction among individuals and their life-worlds of subjective interpretations may generate especially valuable results by interviewing friends and/or acquaintances. Drawing on an interpretive piece of research in which friends and acquaintances were interviewed, this paper discusses the advantages as well as the limitations of such interviews. Furthermore, we give an account of a set of evaluation criteria which, in our opinion, is relevant when using this type of interview in a research context.

Keywords
Interpretivism, being-realism, becoming-realism, subjectivity, objectivity, interviewing, qualitative interviews and, evaluation criteria.

INTRODUCTION
The main purpose of this paper is not to suggest yet another new set of possible validity/evaluation/goodness criteria applicable to interpretive research. Instead, the purpose is to touch upon one aspect of the art of interviewing that is, strangely, almost lacking from the methodological discussion. This aspect is the issue of acquaintance (i.e. that the researcher interviews people whom he/she knows rather well before they engage
in an interview). Apart from a few research contributions (foremost Hirschman’s (1994) seminal work), most interpretive consumer researchers rely on informants whom they do not know prior to doing qualitative interviews with them. Obviously, if one seeks and believes to obtain objective knowledge, it seems to be a wise choice to rely on informants whom the researcher does not know in advance. On the other hand, if our fundamental belief is that “…it is not possible to achieve objective knowledge because the only knowledge available to humans is subjective and relative” (Polkingthorne 1989: 27), then it seems that there is no reason why one should prefer to do interviews with informants with whom the researcher has not interacted before. On the contrary (and concordant with the ideas underlying the hermeneutic spiral and the phases of pre-understanding, understanding and post-understanding), if one defines an in-depth interview as a process, during the course of which the interviewer and the interviewee construct meaning in collaboration, then one would expect the interviewing of friends, acquaintances, etc., to have several advantages – at least in some situations.

This paper draws upon an empirical study of which the initial purpose was to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon ‘a nice vacation’. A deliberate methodological choice in relation to this study was that the researcher drew on personal networks in order to conduct in-depth interviews. At the closing of interviews (i.e. when informants were asked about their experience of participating in an interview), many informants elaborated on the issue that they – to varying degrees – knew the researcher prior to the interview. Hence, although not anticipated at the outset, several informants addressed the issue that the interviewer was someone they knew prior to the interview (forth on this issue is labeled ‘interviewer acquaintance’). These comments may offer new
knowledge in relation to the epistemological and methodological ‘quality’ conversations. Thus, after having accounted for the findings of the empirical study that relate to the interviewing of friends, relatives, acquaintances, etc. (although a bit simplistic, subsequently this is referred to as ‘interviewing of acquaintances’), these issues are related to the concept of validity/trustworthiness in qualitative research and especially to the on-going discussion on objectivity and subjectivity. Hence, although this paper does not answer the ‘million dollar question’ on what exactly validity/trustworthiness in interpretive interviewing is, it does contribute to one part of that question; i.e. the interviewing of acquaintances. Hence, on the basis of the informants’ comments regarding effects of acquaintance on the quality of interviews, the purpose of this paper is to relate the issue of acquaintance to the broader discussion on quality of in-depth interviewing. Obviously, the aim of the paper is not to suggest that interviewing of acquaintances is an altogether superior methodological choice and thus, the closing section of the paper suggests situations, where the interviewing of acquaintances is (not) a valid choice for the interpretive researcher.

SETTING THE SCENE: OUR PREUNDERSTANDING
Twenty years ago, Kvale (1989a:9) wrote that “… within qualitative research milieus, the established evaluative criteria have tended to be neglected or rejected, without, however, developing other criteria for the truth value of qualitative findings”. Twenty years down the road, few would argue that it is wise to rely on positivistic evaluation criteria when doing qualitative research. On the other hand, on the basis of her survey of texts on qualitative interviewing, Roulston (2010:201) concludes that “… there is no consistency in the terms used in relation to the assessment of ‘quality’ of qualitative
interview research” and thus, her survey suggests that we have troubles assessing how to evaluate quality of qualitative interviews – so perhaps the only thing we do know is that positivistic criteria are inadequate. Guba (as quoted by Smith, 1990) uses the term ‘goodness criteria’ and asks the following questions: “Is it possible to devise a set of goodness criteria that might apply to an inquiry regardless of the paradigm within which it was conducted? Or is it the case … that goodness criteria are themselves generated from and legitimated by the self-same assumptions that undergird each inquiry paradigm, and hence are unique to each paradigm? (Guba, 1988, p.16)”. (Smith 1990:168). In order to discuss underlying paradigmatic assumptions and perspectives pertaining to the interviewing of friends and acquaintances, one may chose among a welter of definitions and classifications of paradigms. We make a short cut and choose a holistic definition, which adheres to a perspective on scientific work as a life world perspective. In this view, a paradigm is “… a basic set of beliefs that guides action, whether of everyday garden variety or action taken in connection with a disciplined inquiry” (Guba1990:17). This definition corresponds with our constructivist view of the world and with the hermeneutic, dialectic methodology, which contains the (overlapping) phases of pre-understanding, understanding and post-understanding (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997). Kvale (1989b:76) argues that; “… from a relativist position, the multiple individual experiences of reality all have their own truth, none being more valid or real than others”. Accordingly, to the relativist, the quest for objectivity is not an integral part of the qualitative interview. Instead, the researcher aims at inter-subjectivity, on the basis of which the interviewer and the informant construct meaning; a meaning which during the process of internalisation might be called objectivated.
According to Guba (1990:18), there are three basic questions to be answered for any given paradigm: “Ontological: What is the nature of the ‘knowable’? Or, what is the nature of ‘reality’? Epistemological: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable)? Methodological: How should the inquirer go about finding out knowledge?” In his classification, Guba distinguishes between positivism (realism), post-positivism (critical realism), critical theory (critical realism) and constructivism (relativism). The constructivist way of seeing covers a wide range of relativist paradigmatic perspectives, referring to subjectivism at the ontological level and, given this broad definition, the methodological consequences can be manifold. Within the constructivist paradigm, the three questions above lead to the following answers: “Ontology: Relativist – realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the person who hold them. Epistemology: Subjectivist – inquirer and inquired are fused into a single (monistic) entity. Findings are literally the creation of the process of interaction between the two. Methodology: Hermeneutic, dialectic – individual constructions are elicited and refined hermeneutically, and compared and contrasted dialectically, with the aim of generating one (or a few) constructions [Gestalten] on which there is substantial consensus” (Guba 1990:27). Drawing on Lincoln & Guba (1985), Hirschman (1986) discusses the use of evaluation criteria and their appropriateness in the field of marketing. According to her, positivist and humanist ontologies are so fundamentally different that comparison is not possible and thus, she introduces four humanistic evaluation criteria, which may substitute the positivist ones (i.e. intern validity, extern validity, reliability, and objectivity). The humanist set of evaluation criteria that Hirschman (1986) introduces consists of credibility,
transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In regard to credibility, Hirschman (1986: 244) argues that; “… the persons most capable of evaluating the competence and completeness with which that world view has been interpreted are those who originated it”. In regard to transferability, Hirschman (1986: 245) argues that even though social contexts differ, “… the only way the transferability of a particular interpretation can be assessed is by comparing it with interpretations constructed in other contexts”. As for dependability researchers are not seen as ‘research instruments’ in a positivist sense of the word, but human beings with more or less different world views. As a result, ‘replicability’ is not possible, but; “… by comparing the interpretations constructed by multiple observers, we can determine which elements are consistent across interpretations and, thus, are more dependable” (Hirschman 1986:246). The last of Hirschman’s (1986:246) four criteria is confirmability and this relates to; “… assess whether or not the interpretation is drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner from the data gathered and the rationale employed, humanistic inquiry relies on the judgment of an outside auditor or auditors. These individuals should be researchers themselves, familiar with the phenomena under study. Their task is to review the documentation, field notes, methodological diary, and other supportive evidence gathered by the investigator to confirm (or disconfirm) that the conclusions reached do flow from the information collected”. Among others, “… the auditors should be personally familiar with both the researcher and the phenomenon being investigated. This familiarity ensures that the auditors are aware of personality traits and value orientations of the researcher and can discern whether and how those factors may have shaped the researcher’s interpretation of the phenomenon” (Ibid). The application of the four criteria has to be seen as a process where a later evaluation criterion cannot be put into
motion until the evaluation by the former has taken place. But, remembering the concept of the hermeneutic circle/spiral, there might be minor and partial evaluative processes, e.g. relating to the phases of preunderstanding, understanding, and postunderstanding, respectively. With reference to the paradigm in question, hence a few more comments on these three phases. Pre-understanding is seen as all kinds of knowledge and experiences, which the inquirer bears in her or his mind from situation to situation. When it comes to a specific research situation, we talk about pre-understanding as diagnostic, i.e. pre-understanding relates to and brings the chosen subject matter and purpose into focus. The process of understanding has its precondition in the relations, dialogs, trust, and confidence established beforehand with the aim of generating a common and shared understanding of the situation/phenomenon in question. Here, the concept of understanding also requires a common process of reflection in order to generate patterns which yield importance and meaning to all partakers, thereby developing the capacities and insights of both inquirer(s) and inquired. The intention is to construct a good post-understanding – a good Gestalt – i.e. the inquirer relates the results of the understanding process to relevant theory and context in preparation for future activities, including further research of the phenomenon (Arnbor & Bjerke 1997). Today’s post-understanding thus becomes tomorrows pre-understanding where the dialectics of the hermeneutic circle/spiral means that each of the three phases in themselves (e.g. pre-understanding) contains minor processes of pre-understanding, understanding, and post-understanding. The consequence of this way of thinking and doing research is to an ongoing process of evaluation, or, as historically appliquéd from positivism, the use of evaluative criteria. More researchers (e.g. Damgaard et al. 2000) resist Hirschman’s reference to positivist criteria and advocate development of humanist
criteria. Nonetheless, Hirschman makes a contribution which might not have been heard in social sciences if she had not made this critical correspondence, but referred to world views of the humanities only.

INTERVIEWING FRIENDS AND ACQUINTANCES
As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of the empirical study was to explore the phenomenon ‘a nice vacation’. Thus, the initial purpose of the study was to uncover informants’ enactment of what constitutes ‘a nice vacation’ within their individual life contexts. As mentioned previously, a crucial part of the research design of this study was the choice to rely on informants, all of whom were (to varying degrees) personally known by the researcher. Especially this choice originated from a wish to facilitate a flow of conversation characterised by a natural and emotionally supportive atmosphere (as experienced by Hirschman (1994)). Furthermore, the choice relates to Stebbins’ (1972) claim that interviews should resemble interpersonal relationships. Hence, drawing on Stebbins’ argument, the choosing of informants known by the researcher was supposed to insure that interviews do not only resemble interpersonal relationships, but that they are, in fact, drawing on the advantages of interpersonal relationships (e.g. trust and openness). The choosing of informants already known by the researcher was also expected to ensure that previous knowledge on informants would help to form more complete portraits of informants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997; Roberson 2003). Hence, the researcher relied on personal networks in order to facilitate longer-lasting, in-depth dialogues with informants (individuals or families) on the subject of ‘nice vacations’.
Although not anticipated at the outset, the ‘choosing’ of informants whom the interviewer (to varying degrees) knew in advance seemed to matter to the informants. For example, at the end of one of the interviews (i.e. with the couple Ben and Mary), these two informants (who, as most informants, had never been subject to face-to-face, in-depth interviewing before) were asked about their attitudes and feelings towards the interview. When prompted as to whether they thought that the interviewer questioned them too closely, they engaged in the following dialogue (as all parts of interview transcripts that are presented in this paper, the interview fragment below has been subject to the authors’ translation):

B. No. No, not at all. No, no I don’t think so

M: No. But I think that it helps that we have met you before

B: Yes. Because I would say that, because when you talk to one of those people, who call [phone interviews – typically market research], sometimes I tell them, ‘that’s none of your business’, when they go too deeply into something

M: I don’t think you questioned us too deeply, but it helps that we have met you before and that we have sat down together and talked with one another previously - at least to me

B: Yes, I think it helps too

M: Because if you had been a total stranger

B: Yes, I think that would have been very different

M: But it makes sense, because with total strangers, then you become more formal and then you don’t open up. It becomes somewhat out of tune
Although the interviewer’s acquaintance with Ben and Mary was not close, the fragment of the interview reproduced above indicates that it mattered to Ben and Mary that they had talked with the interviewer previously. An identical pattern emerged at the end of the interview with Linda:

I: Do you think it has made a difference that I know you?

L: Yes! It gives more … Because I know you and you know me, it is less formal. So, during the interview I have told things that weren’t exactly vacations, but things that matter in relation to vacations. I wouldn’t necessarily tell a total stranger those things, right? In that situation I would stick more to the topic. I mean, you could say, I think that we got further away from the topic, or, I think the adequate term is that you get a broader view on the topic when you know people than when you don’t know them.

A similar pattern emerged at the closing of the interview with Ellen as indicated by the following fragment of that interview:

I: One last thing; you haven’t tried something like this before?

E: No, but I think that it is going okay.

I: How does it feel?

E: It feels good.

I: Have I gone too deeply into something, have I asked too much?

E: Not at all, I don’t even feel like it has been an interview. I just feel as if we have sat around talking as we usually do […] I think it is more relaxing to know people beforehand. Because, when they call, you feel a bit like ‘why do they nose about my life’.
I think it is nicer to sit here and talk with you, because I know you […] It helps a lot, I think. I open up more talking to you than I would if it was someone I didn’t know …

Also informants with closer acquaintance with the interviewer thought that the fact that they knew the interviewer (and that the interviewer knew them) had an effect on the quality of the interview. For example, Henry, whom the interviewer has met several times at mutual friends’ home during the last 8 to 10 years, offered the following comments regarding this topic:

H: Well, I can spend less time telling who I am and what my background is like. And I can also tell some things only halfway and then anticipate that you understand me. So in that way I think that we go deeper into me … I think it will affect your interpretation that you know my background. But it could make the interpretation more genuine […] But you also know that when I say the things I do, you roughly know what my work situation is, where I live, what kind of relationship I have with my neighbours. I mean, actually you know a lot about my values and things like that, things that don’t only emerge in this interview […] But it might be a question on how close to your sphere I am. Like if we had known each other for 15 years and closely, then it might be more difficult for you to relate to it

As Henry points out, the fact that he and the interviewer knew each other before they engaged in the interview seems to affect the interview positively although, at the same time, he thinks that a closer relationship would perhaps have hampered the interview. Henry is one of the very few informants who has done in-depth interviews himself and,
at the same time, Henry is one of only two informants who suggest that high levels of acquaintance may hamper quality of research. Although very tentative in nature, there might be a linkage between these two issues.

Henry’s comment that high levels of acquaintance could hamper interviews with people well known by the researcher does not align with the comments made by informants whom the researcher knows very well. For example, when Owen and Karen (whom the researcher had known for 15 and 10 years respectively) were asked whether it had affected the interview that they knew the interviewer quite well, the following conversation took place:

\[ O: \text{There’s personal stuff that you wouldn’t discuss in the same way [if they hadn’t know the researcher in advance]} \]

\[ K: \text{Yes. Those issues that we disagree on and that give rise to discussions every time, I wouldn’t have brought them up} \]

\[ I: \text{You would have been more ‘respectable’?} \]

\[ K: \text{Yes} \]

\[ O: \text{Yes, I wouldn’t have gone, I mean, I would only have touched upon the extremes and then I would have smoothed over them once I had mentioned them. I wouldn’t have mentioned [a person that he felt had had a negative effect on a vacation they took with relatives]. I wouldn’t have pointed at [that]. I would just have referred to it as ‘do you remember that vacation when …’ and then you [Karen] would know what I was talking about} \]
Quite interesting, Owen and Karen argue that they were far more open and honest during the interview than they would have been, had they not known the researcher. Furthermore, they argue that they would not have introduced some issues if they had not known the researcher; or at least that they would not have elaborated on these issues to the same extent, had they not known the researcher beforehand. A similar pattern emerged during the interview with Ken (an informant whom the interviewer knew very well before doing the interview). When, at the closing of the interview, Ken was asked about his perception of participating in the interview, the following conversation took place:

K: I guess it’s quite normal, although with a curious asking

I: Had the interviewer been someone you didn’t know …

K: Yes?

I: Would that be easier or more difficult?

K: I think it would have been easier

I: Why?

K: Because then I could make you believe that the vacations I hardly remember, that I hadn’t had them. So some of them – this sounds almost awful – but some of them, I could have told you; ’no, I haven’t been there’, because you wouldn’t know where I’ve been

I: Would it be nice to be able to deny that?

K: It would have been nice for me

I: Why?

K: Because you wouldn’t know, you couldn’t be sure … It has to do with lying, I don’t know how to explain it. But somehow, I wouldn’t be accountable for what I’m saying. I
mean, you would have to believe that I’m telling the truth

I: It would be nice if you had been able to select which vacations we talked about?

K: Yes. To choose

I: If I hadn’t known about many of your vacations, would you have left some out?

K: Yes, I would. I didn’t need to ... the ones I don’t define as vacations and the ones I define as failures

I: And that would have been nice?

K: You would never have known about those vacations. I would not admit that I’ve had bad vacations

I: How come?

K: Why? But, again, why should I go back to work after a shitty vacation and brag about it? I would never do that. Would anyone do that?

I: So you think you might be tempted to screen out ...

K: No, I’m confident that I would

Drawing on the different informants’ comments, which are reproduced above, it seems that the fact that the researcher (to varying degrees) knew informants prior to the carrying out of the interviews was important to informants. Rather surprisingly (at least to the interviewer, the academic career of whom has been greatly influenced by neopositivistic criteria for assessment of quality of research), informants mainly find that knowing each other in advance has affected interviews positively. Thus, apart from Henry, only one informant (Beth) explicitly argued that knowing each other in advance might influence interviews negatively:
B: ... actually, it is fun to talk to strangers that you’ll never meet again. I mean, you are able to talk about some other things and you can explicate feelings that you would never do with people you know. Actually, that’s a rather funny experience […] So, what you might experience in another form of interview might be that you could talk about some feelings that you might not talk about to people you know. But now, I don’t have a problem talking to you because, well, we know each other, and it’s different to dare to use one another than it is with people with whom you ‘keep up appearances’

Contradictive to Beth, most informants argue that they were more relaxed and honest and that they opened up more than they would, had the interviewer been a stranger. Furthermore, informants whom the interviewer knows well even suggested that – during the course of the interview – they would have screened out different vacations and experiences if they had not known the researcher. This finding is rather different from what traditional approaches to qualitative interviewing suggest. For example, Hiller & DiLuzio (2004) argue that the interview is a researcher-driven experience, during which the researcher controls the agenda. In the same vein, Oakley (1981: 49) argues that informants only have ‘some’ control over two dimensions of the interview: (1) When it takes place and (2) How much detail is divulged. However, drawing on the fragments of interviews reproduced above, it seems that informants have more than only ‘some’ control over the content of the interview. Thus, apart from their control over level of information, informants argue that they can, and may, screen out various vacations and experiences during the interview. Hence, it seems that – at least in the empirical study accounted for in this article – informants play a much more active role in the meaning-making process than we traditionally assume. For example, informants’ choosing to
withhold information and/or to only disclose certain vacation experiences seems to impact quality of interviews profoundly. Secondly, whether informants choose to “allow the researcher to see the more hidden, less straight-forward, more personally intimate and perhaps less flattering aspects of the issue, *i.e.*, the back stage” (Hiller & DiLuzio 2004: 10) also seems to affect quality of interviews. In relation to our empirical study on ‘nice vacations’, the interesting thing is that more informants suggested that the interviews were somehow ‘better’ than they would have been, had acquaintance not been an integral part of the research design.

As a supplementary note, one of the authors has previously carried out a cultural study of the auditing profession. The experience was that trust and confidence emerged through stays, interaction, and mutual observation in the audit departments. At the beginning of a stay, some auditors were a bit reluctant to interact with the researcher, and some were even suspicious. After the first round of interviews, which the more suspicious auditors chose to make very short, some of them later returned, wanting to be interviewed again. Quite interestingly, these interviewees turned out to be quite informative and, later on, during the phases of interpretation, great discussants and commentators. Some of the former reluctant ones were re-interviewed twice on their own initiative and, among other things, said: “Now, since we know you, it makes the whole thing much easier!” As this small example shows, we are aware of the fact that the prolonged engagement that organisational researchers often have with a certain organisation, department, or profession makes the researcher form bonds with interviewees, which – over time – come to resemble those one has with acquaintances. However, in this paper we delimit ourselves from any further discussion of these kinds

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INTERVIEWS AS COLLABORATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING
The informants’ comments on ‘quality of interviews’ are rather important, as the role of
the informant as a co-producer of interviews has not received much attention by
academics. For example, in Kvale’s (1994) seminal book on qualitative research
interviews, only one page is dedicated to the notion of the ‘interview person’. Furthermore, primarily this page introduces the notion that ‘some informants are better
than others’; that we, traditionally, define ‘good’ informants as people who align with
the characteristics of upper-middle class intellectuals; and that, although some people
are more difficult to interview than others, the researcher holds the obligation to make
‘good’ interviews. The fact that Kvale (1994) only dedicates one page to the interview
person corresponds with the fact that most academics discuss the research interview “…
from the vantage point of the researcher” (Hiller & DiLuzio 2004: 1). However, as
indicated by, for example, Denzin (2001), Gubrium & Holstein (1997), and Mischler
(1986), constructivism broadens our perspective on qualitative interviews as it
emphasises the collaborative and dialogic nature of qualitative interviews. Hence, the
interviewee is not merely seen as “… a container to be emptied of its relevant
information” and thus “… the interview, according to the constructivist perspective,
could no longer be viewed as a data-yielding process but as a meaning-making process”
(Hiller & DiLuzio 2004: 3-4). However, as Hiller & DiLuzio (2004) point out, the
research interview will, nevertheless, still be an asymmetrical encounter, during the
course of which the researcher seeks to gain as much insight as possible in the
informant’s life-world. Obviously, issues such as trust and rapport thus become critical
to the interview. As a result, most academics argue that the first parts of an interview will mostly be characterised by informants’ guarding and reliance on ‘front stage’ descriptions. Furthermore, most academics would claim that; (1) it takes time for the interviewer and the interviewee to ‘warm up’ and, (2) informants are not likely to ‘open up’ before trust and rapport are established. If we do acknowledge that; (1) objectivity is not a goal in relativistic interviews and, (2) creation of trust and rapport are decisive for the quality of interviews, it is peculiar that we, mostly, rely on informants that we do not know before we ‘do’ the interview. Especially, it seems that interviewing of acquaintances would enable us to start the interview on a platform of trust and rapport and henceforth, we do not need to build this into the interview ‘from scratch’.

Kvale (1989b:80) argues that “… a common critique of [both] research and therapeutic interviews is that their findings are not trustworthy because the interviewees’ or the patients’ reports may be false. This is no doubt correct in some cases”. But, as Hirschman writes; “To the humanist, people really are as they appear to be. Humanists believe that if people are approached with the sincere intent of genuinely understanding them (as opposed to the intent of manipulating and testing them) they will extend to the researcher as much honesty and openness as is possible between two or more human beings. If there is some intimate deceit that an individual cannot share with another person, it will never be known to the humanist researcher.” (Hirschman 1986: 244) – neither to the positivist researcher, we might add. The interviewing of acquaintances, however, offers a unique opportunity to evaluate falseness (or selective forgetfulness) on informants’ behalves. In relation to the ‘nice vacation’ study, not all of the informants, whom the interviewer knew fairly well, mentioned all of the vacations they had in the
past while the interviewer had the unique opportunity to ask them about these vacations (as indicated by the fragment of the interview with Ken that was reproduced previously). Hence, we argue that the interviewing of acquaintances holds unique advantages in relation to; (1) the issue of building trust and rapport and, (2) safeguarding against ‘false’ reporting. In light of these potential benefits, it seems crucial to ask the question:
Why do interpretive researchers not (or at least very rarely) interview acquaintances?

Obviously, the reason why we do not interview people we already know, may be grounded in the simple fact that we seek out informants who hold a ‘special’ kind of knowledge. Especially this arguments seems reasonable in relation to organisational research (i.e. most of us would, for example, not know many (‘enough’) marketing managers prior to doing a study on intra-organisational marketing issues). To some extent, that argument also makes sense in relation to consumer research. For example, if the topic of a piece of research is anorexia and young female consumers’ self-image; heavy drinking and brand loyalty towards beer brands; or transvestites’ buying of women’s clothing then, obviously, there is no guarantee that the researchers’ personal networks allow for them to engage in interviews with people, who posses the kind of knowledge that we aspire to ‘tap into’. However, consumer researchers also investigate a myriad of topics, in relation to which most consumers (and thus, also our acquaintances) qualify as ‘knowledgeable’. For example, if the topic of a study is companion animals, then (at least in some countries) the researcher would have many friends, neighbours, or acquaintances that meet the primary criterion for participation. As another example, if the topic is the buying process in relation to consumer durables (e.g. cars, motorcycles, furniture, or clothes), then it may actually be only a small
portion of our acquaintances that do not meet the criteria of inclusion. Finally, and as indicated by the study drawn upon in this paper, if the topic is something like ‘nice vacations’, then not only are most acquaintances knowledgeable on the subject matter, but the researcher also has a unique opportunity to ‘choose’ informants on the basis of criteria that would be far more difficult to employ in relation to strangers (e.g. to identify informants who have not travelled much, informants who go on vacation mostly with the extended family, or informants the travel careers of whom are highly diversified). Thus, the reluctance to interview people we already know (or perhaps the reluctance to admit that we do so) seems to go beyond the criterion on informants’ possession of certain knowledge. Now if the question why we do not interview acquaintances is not fully answered by the topics we investigate, it might be that the answer has more to do with ‘the way we do research’ than it has to do with the phenomena we seek to shed light on. The next section of the article looks into such additional reasons.

WHY DO WE NOT INTERVIEW ACQUAINTANCES?
Today most social scientists would argue that they acknowledge both objectivity and subjectivity to be valid ontologies in social science. Thus, most researchers would probably agree with Jensen (1989: 96), when he argues that “… the traditional survey interview tries to eliminate the elements of interaction as far as possible; the aim is to register which ideas or perceptions the respondent held prior to the interview session. In-depth interviews, in contrast, try to turn the fact of interaction to their own advantage in the process of probing the positions of the respondent.” Nonetheless, as pointed out by Polkingthorne (1989: 35) “… the debates in the human sciences have taken place within the context of a commitment to objectivity”. Apart from the fact that many (most?)
researchers ‘drank objectivity in with their mothers’ milk’, the researcher who aims for objectivity might be confronted with a much easier task than the researcher who adheres to subjectivity. Thus, the criteria on how one reaches the goal of objectivity are much more well-established than the suggestions as to how one does ‘good’ interpretive interviews. Kvale (1994), rightfully, argues that the positivistic–grounded evaluative criterion of correspondence is in-adequate insofar interpretive research is concerned. Further, Kvale (1994) argues that the criterion ‘good workmanship’ is decisive in regard to evaluation of quality of interviews that rely on subjective stances. However, suggestions as to ‘what’ constitutes ‘good workmanship’ still differ across academics. Thus, the researcher who is doing interpretive interviews experiences difficulties insofar (s)he wishes to affirm that (s)he has done ‘good’ and valid/trustworthy research. In relation to the ‘nice vacation’ study, at the outset we were confronted with severe concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the research design when fellow researchers heard about it. Thus, the initial response of many researchers was either; “But how do you make sure that people don’t just stay in the ‘friend’s role?’” or; “But how will you analyse/interpret those interviews?” One interpretation of these comments could be that they indicate that fellow researchers had genuine concerns regarding quality of interviews with acquaintances. Thus, it seems that somehow the notion of acquaintance triggered concerns regarding ‘good’ interviewing and ‘good’ research. In order to grasp these concerns, it thus seems crucial to look into what constitutes ‘good’ interviewing. Obviously, if objectivity is a goal in science, then the interviewing of acquaintances cannot constitute ‘good’ research. However, if we adhere to subjectivity, the argument is that acquaintance would not – per se - hamper quality of research. On the contrary, quite possibly it might increase trustworthiness of research. How comes then, that the notion
of acquaintance triggered fundamental concerns of researchers who heard about it? Could it be that we are more influenced by the ideal of objectivity than we think we are? If that is true, then, perhaps, we experience severe problems when we try to define what constitutes ‘good’ interpretive interviews due to the fact that objectivity lures its way into our assessments of ‘goodness’ of empirical studies.

According to Polkingthorne (1989: 37), Taylor pointed out that “… the activities studied by the human sciences are already interpreted by those who engage in them”. Hence, when we do interpretive interviews, we are not looking for the ‘facts’ in relation to informants’ lives (e.g. their behaviour as consumers or ‘consuming tourists’). On the contrary, we are trying to tap into their interpretations of their own behaviour. As a result, we cannot rely on any evaluative criterion that emphasises correspondence, and instead we have to rely on evaluative criteria that take informants’ interpretations into account. What is a ‘good’ interview then? Foremost, it is an interview that allows for us to tap into informants’ interpretations of their experiences and actions in the context of their life-worlds. However, such a definition of a ‘good’ interview is not particularly helpful in relation to evaluation of validity in traditional terms. For example, it makes little sense to try to assess whether Ken’s definition of some vacations as failures is ‘true’ (validity as correspondence). However, if the researcher knows the informant in question well, then the researcher’s a priori knowledge on the informant’s values, norms, characteristics, travel career, and vacation experiences might enable the researcher better to understand and comprehend the informant’s lines of interpretation. Thus, on the basis of the ‘nice vacation’ interviews, we would argue that one way in which we may enhance trustworthiness of interpretive interviews could be to interview
acquaintances (insofar the topic to be investigated allows for such an approach). Walford (2007) suggests that some of the key problems of qualitative interviews are that interviewees may have incomplete and faulty memory; always have subjective perceptions; and will only give what they are prepared to reveal. However, the interviewing of acquaintances might reduce these problems due to the fact that the interviewer might better be able to relate to the bits and pieces that interviewees retrieve from memory during the interview; may have knowledge that enables the interviewer to better understand the interplay between ‘objective’ events and subjective perceptions hereof; and might be able to engage in conversations beyond that which interviewees, themselves, reveal, as exemplified in the interview fragment with Owen and Karen.

To sum up with reference to Hirschman’s (1986) humanist criteria of evaluation, which is given account of earlier in this paper, trustworthiness, and thereby the striving for quality, relies on the way we use and relate evaluation criteria in interaction with each other; i.e. as sets of criteria. To reflect credibility, this has to be supplemented by transparency; i.e. the choice of sources and the resulting data are well documented and argued for. This is one of the preconditions for transferability; i.e. making analytical generalisations - Gestalten - across interpretations from other contexts; the choices here have to be well documented and argued for, too. Documentation and arguments of choice strengthen dependability, i.e. add to consistency of the study in question, and thereby to its stability. The final concept of this set of criteria, confirmability, draws on the results of using the three former ones, where peer reviewers evaluate the study in question by putting special attention to transparency and consistency. Using this set of evaluation criteria leads to one way – amongst others - of defining a concept of quality,
when it comes to qualify the results of a research, which has its offspring in a constructivist perspective on the way of interviewing.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As mentioned previously, the interviewing of acquaintances does *not* constitute ‘good’ research insofar the researcher adheres to the ideal of objectivity. However, this does not mean that the interviewing of acquaintances is recommendable in regard to all research that adheres to constructivist ontology and/or dialectic epistemology. On the contrary, it seems that the (dis)advantages of interviewing acquaintances make it crucial that the researcher considers whether the research project at hand would benefit from researcher-interviewee acquaintance or, whether the interviewing of strangers is to be preferred. Accordingly, this closing section highlights some issues to be addressed when researchers decide whether to interview acquaintances or ‘strangers’.

As a general rule of thumb it seems that the relevance of interviewing acquaintances increases as life context becomes (especially) important. To illustrate this line of reasoning, a key result of the ‘nice vacation’ study is that people define ‘nice vacations’ more on the basis of their life contexts than on the basis of the vacations themselves. Hence, a vacation is enacted as being ‘nice’ insofar it adds positively to people’s everyday lives at a specific point in time. However, if the interviewer had not known the informants in advance, we would have had severe difficulties understanding informants’ life contexts. Thus, as Henry suggested, the knowledge on informants’ values, backgrounds, and lives enabled us better to ‘follow informants’ lead’ when they related the different vacations they have had to their lives as ‘ongoing projects’. Informants
drew heavily on their life contexts when they tried to explicate their conceptions of ‘a nice vacation’. For example, most informants offered various examples of what had been especially nice vacations at different points in their lives and further, explicitly they defined these examples as ‘nice vacations’ because they provided something especially important at that point in life. Obviously, context always matters (and especially so in relation to interpretive research). However, on the basis of the ‘nice vacation’ study, we would argue that the more context matters, the greater are the advantages of interviewing acquaintances.

Apart from context, some additional elements seem to (dis)favor the interviewing of acquaintances. Obviously, the first of these elements is the definition-in-use of relevant informants as our social networks may simply not include the kinds of people we would like to interview (e.g. young female consumers suffering from anorexia; brand loyal heavy beer drinkers; or men buying women’s clothing for their own purposes). Thus, it seems that the relevance of interviewing acquaintances increases when we seek to understand more general lines of consumption (e.g. the buying of houses, cars, bikes, vacations, clothes, foods, etc.) and/or when we seek to investigate more special lines of consumption, in relation to which we are part of special networks due to special interests (e.g. one of the researchers being a dedicated BSA owner may open parts of the biker society to her). However, also in relation to more special kinds of consumption in relation to which the researcher has no special bonds, it seems that the benefits attainable by means of interviewing acquaintances may be substantial. For example, let us imagine that we were to do a piece of research focusing on men’s buying of women’s clothes for their own uses and let us imagine that we were fortunate enough to know
such a man. If he would be willing to participate in an interview, such an interview could probably qualify as an excellent ‘first’ interview. That excellence would not only relate to the research topic at hand (i.e. the buying of women’s clothes), but even more importantly it could make us more sensitive to the kind of people we are to interview later on. For example, we could prompt the interviewee to tell when he feels uncomfortable during the interview and/or we could ask him to voice his critique whenever the dialogue divulges prejudices, stereotyping, etc. on the interviewer’s behalf. Accordingly, as a rule of thumb it seems that the interviewing of acquaintances may be especially relevant during the initial, exploratory phase of a research project and at the point in time(s) when the researcher works with his/her pre-understandings. Drawing on the preceding lines of reasoning, the interviewing of acquaintances does seem to add positively to interpretive research insofar it adds to openness, honesty, and trust; to the researcher’s pre-understanding; and to her/his interpretations and contextualisation.

CONCLUSION
Most certainly this article should not be read as an appraisal of the interviewing of acquaintances. However, what we would like the reader to take from this article is a critical stance towards the ‘hidden agenda’ that may make us, uncritically, turn towards interviewees that we do not know in advance. Feyerabend (1975) warned us not to be stuck in methodological rites and technicalities. Instead, we should always choose the tools that will best enable us to investigate the topic of interest. In the same vein, Gummesson (2003) urges us to make methodological choices that offer us the best possible access to reality and which are best at making results that fit that reality.
Further, Gummesson (2003) reminds us that at its core, theoretical and purposeful sampling is about finding the cases that give a maximum of information. We do not claim that acquaintances always qualify as ‘best cases’. However, what we do claim is that we should regard the preference towards the interviewing of ‘strangers’ as a methodological rite and/or technicality that makes good sense for the researcher who strives for objectivity. However, in relation to all studies for which objectivity is not a goal, the researcher may choose freely between the interviewing of strangers and the interviewing of acquaintances. And the one thing we would like the reader to take from this article is that this choice should be deliberate, well thought through and explicit and further, that it should be based on consideration of the (dis)advantages that acquaintance versus ‘strangeness’ brings to the piece of research at hand.

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Why not?
The interviewing of friends and acquaintances

by

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