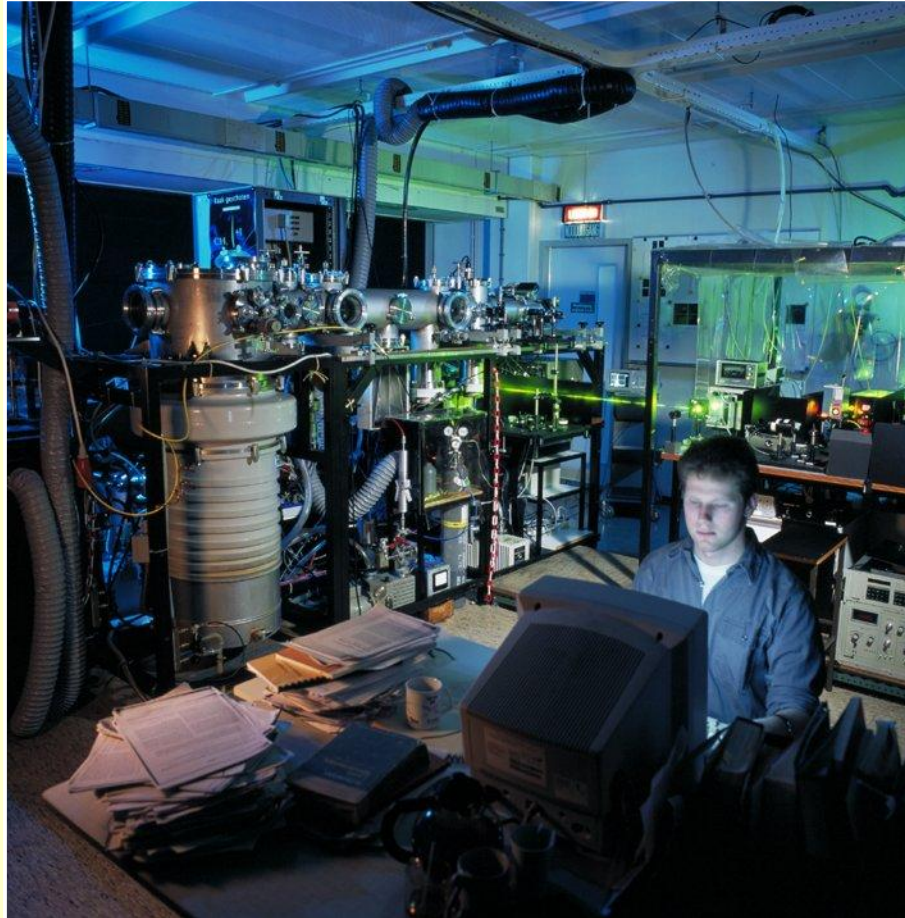


## Interviewing researchers



**Do we need to understand the content of academic's research?**

## **Pro**

**General social science  
methodology**

**Scientific content affects  
outcome of actions**

## **Contra**

**Tacit adoption of  
interviewee's perspective**

**Cannot be adequately done  
by social scientists**

**[Remember rule number one!]**

## **When do we need to understand the research of our interviewees?**

**How has New Public Management affected promotion policies at universities?**

**How does the Research Assessment Exercise influence attitudes towards teaching?**

**How does New Public Management affect the recruitment of researchers by universities?**

**How does the Research Assessment Exercise influence the research-teaching nexus?**

**How does New Public Management affect the direction of research?**

## **Generalisation: We need to understand the research whenever...**

**Independent or dependent variables include aspects of research content**

**Dependent variables are likely to vary between fields of research (i.e. if research practices contribute intervening variables)**

**How much of our interviewees' research do we need to understand?**

**Simple but unsatisfying answer:**

**Enough to fully ascertain the role of research content and variables deriving from it (such as specific epistemic cultures) in our explanations**

□ Example: Conditions affecting collaboration:

Why did the collaboration fail ?

“ It didn't work”

“ The .. protein .. he [the biochemist] gave us, .. was always too contaminated .. it has never worked. .. If you want to crystallize it, it must be perfectly pure, otherwise it doesn't work. Some proteins are very difficult to purify... “ (crystallographer)

□ Example: Probing into content:

**A: ...If we hadn't had to worry so much about keeping the costs under \$50,000 we might have been a little more liberal on some of the things that we did but I don't know that it's had a detrimental affect on it really.**

**Q: 'More liberal', what do you mean?**

**A: We might have done things on a slightly bigger scale. We've limited ourselves because of the amount of time available to a certain amount of interviews, we could have done more interviews, possibly. That might have allowed us to have slightly more definitive conclusions but I'm not sure, I think it's probably worked out all right.**

**(Political scientist)**

# How can we include the content of research at all if it is the subject matter of a different discipline?

Strategy of informed interviewing:

- ➡ Ask about research
- ➡ Translate scientific descriptions into sociologically relevant variables

## □ Example

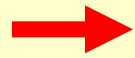
My first question concerns a methodological point of your research. Now, your attempt to cool semiconducting nanostructures down to the Millikelvin range could be doubted by many because semiconductors are bad heat conductors and therefore close to impossible to cool. How are you going to work around this problem?

“ Well, yes, you are right but ...

**Nonsense!**



# How can we include the content of research at all if it is the subject matter of a different discipline?



**By creating an ad-hoc pidgin**

**Pidgin** = reduced language that enables communication between people who don't know each other's languages

**Basis for such an interlanguage** = general elements of researchers' **life worlds**

[see Galison on pidgins in interdisciplinary research]

Researchers:

- Solve problems derived from existing knowledge
- By applying methods
- To objects.

They

- Use resources,
- Utilise formal (published), informal communicable and tacit knowledge,
- Collaborate, and
- Communicate by publishing, visiting each other or meeting at conferences.

## ☐ Examples of questions about the interviewee's local work

What research problem do you deal with?

Could you explain to an outsider what it is you try to find out?

What methods do you apply? What equipment do you use?

What substances do you use? Where do these substances come from?

**These questions must be specified for each interview!**

□ Example: Ad-hoc pidgin for the interviewee's local work

**Q: And have you applied additional methods in your project?**

**A: Well, I would say yes, I did try something different... We tried to characterise these layers by ellipsometric methods, for example, because we were never sure what they look like ...**

**Q: Where did you do this?**

**A: I gave the layers to these people, that means in the clinical research centre. Y. and the current undergraduate student are working at it. And they tried it, because I do not know the equipment very well. I looked at the equipment and watched them when they were working. (biophysicist)**

## ☐ Examples of questions about the interviewee's field

Does your field have its own journals?

Does your field have its own conferences? How many people usually attend these conferences?

Are there groups in your country/ world-wide that work on similar topics?

Is there strong competition in your field? Is there a danger of being anticipated by others? Has your work ever been anticipated by others?

□ Example: Ad-hoc pidgin for the interviewee's research field

**Q: .. The fact that the system was already established here and that other people were working on it would suggest that there is an Australian community in your field, that there are several people around in Australia who work on this sort of problem.**

**A: There's a very small group in Australia, yes, working on this particular area of cancer. In fact there's not many of us at all. I think I know everybody in Australia who does do anything of this nature with cancer.**

**Q: So it wouldn't be sufficient to have an Australian conference on this topic I guess.**

**A: Yes, if you do it much more broadly as, say you had a Proteome conference or an inhibitor conference you could but it would be much broader than just this particular system.**

**Q: And how is it internationally? I mean if it's relevant for therapy one would expect strong competition between groups.**

**A: Yes there's a lot, especially in Europe and in the States there's a lot of people working on this system. Lots and lots and lots. Especially in a clinical sense too**

...

(Biochemist)

# How do we create an ad-hoc pidgin?

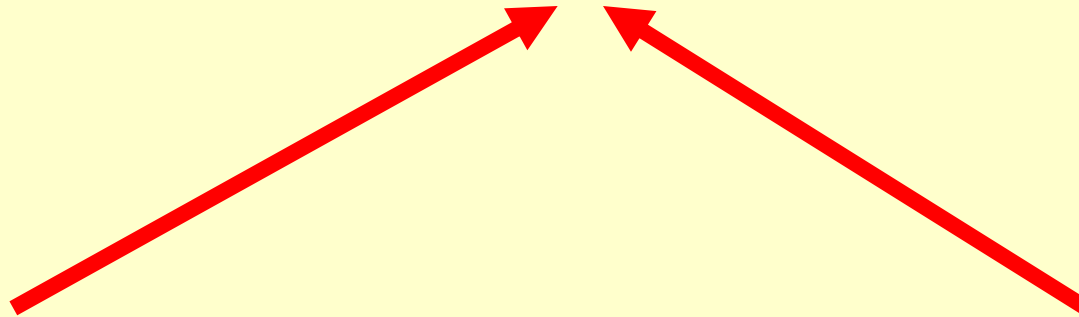
Well, we don't. It emerges in the interview

## Interview

Implicit negotiation of the  
level of communication

Our knowledge and  
communication skills

Interviewee's ability  
to simplify and  
willingness to adapt



# Acquisition of knowledge

- 1) Acquisition of general knowledge about the science
  - textbooks, Wikipedia, (other) lay-level descriptions
  
- 2) Acquisition of knowledge about the interviewee's research
  - information from the internet about projects, methods, equipment ..
  - publication lists from publication databases
  - research proposals and reports
  - posters, lab visits
  
- 3) Studying structural properties of the interviewee's publications (bibliometric research trail)

**See next two sessions**

# Negotiating the level of communication

- 1) Deliberately using scientific terms
- 2) Feeding back your understanding of interviewee's research
- 3) Asking more 'scientifically enriched questions' if the level is too general
- 4) Encouraging detail
- 5) Asking for explanations if the answers become too complicated

**See last session**



# How can answers about research content be analysed?

**Research question: How do institutions of evaluation-based funding influence the content of research?**

**Interview sequence:**

**A: ...If we hadn't had to worry so much about keeping the costs under \$50,000 we might have been a little more liberal on some of the things that we did but I don't know that it's had a detrimental affect on it really.**

**Q: 'More liberal', what do you mean?**

**A: We might have done things on a slightly bigger scale. We've limited ourselves because of the amount of time available to a certain amount of interviews, we could have done more interviews, possibly. That might have allowed us to have slightly more definitive conclusions but I'm not sure, I think it's probably worked out all right.**

**(Political scientist)**

# How can answers about research content be analysed?

Translation:

A: ...If we hadn't had to worry so much about **keeping the costs under \$50,000** we might have been a little more liberal on some of the things that we did but I don't know that it's had a detrimental affect on it really.

Q: 'More liberal', what do you mean?

A: we might have done things on a slightly bigger scale. **We've limited ourselves because of the amount of time available to a certain amount of interviews, we could have done more interviews, possibly. That might have allowed us to have slightly more definitive conclusions** but I'm not sure, I think it's probably worked out all right.

(Political scientist)

Scarcity of resources

Reduced empirical basis

(Possibly reduced validity of results)

# How can answers about research content be analysed?

## Adaptation to funding conditions:

Table 10.2. Academics' coping with scarcity

|                         | Biology | Physics | Geology | Maths | Political science | History |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------|-------------------|---------|
| Use of student projects | X       | X       | X       |       |                   |         |
| 'Jobbing'               | X       | X       | X       |       |                   |         |
| Reduce empirical basis  | X       |         | X       |       | X                 | X       |
| 'Retard' research       | X       | X       | X       | X     |                   | X       |