

Evidence of Constructivism and Co-Constructivism in a Qualitative Research Interview: A Doctoral Pedagogy

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Abstract: Within the interpretivist research paradigm, meaning is generated through constructivist processes, interactive dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant. However, qualitative interviewing practices in doctoral research often remain methodologically modernist and procedurally unidirectional, privileging the researcher's questions while silencing the interviewee's capacity to interrogate, challenge, or shape the knowledge-making process. When interviewees are not afforded dialogical opportunities to pose questions, interviews risk becoming extractive rather than interpretive encounters. Drawing on sustained doctoral supervision and facilitation experiences across South African public and private higher education institutions, this paper explores the extent to which qualitative interview practices operationalise core interpretivist principles. A qualitative document analysis was conducted on interview schedules, methodology chapters, and analysis chapters from 20 completed Master's and Doctoral theses in Business Administration and Business Management. The analysis focused on identifying explicit and implicit evidence of interactive dialogue and co-construction of knowledge within examinable research artefacts. The findings reveal a persistent misalignment between claimed interpretivist positioning and actual research practice. While all students employed semi-structured interviews and articulated interpretivist or constructivist assumptions, none of the interview schedules explicitly enabled interviewees to pose questions or initiate dialogical exchanges. Furthermore, the methodology and analysis chapters rarely document moments where participants actively shaped meaning, corrected the researcher's interpretations, or influenced the analytic trajectories, despite such moments being central to co-constructed knowledge. Where interpretive corrections by interviewees occurred, these were typically untheorised and under-analysed, resulting in their exclusion from the formal methodological narrative. The paper concludes that many master's and doctoral qualitative interviews remain governed by modernist logics of control and standardisation, even when framed as interpretivist inquiries. This disjunction undermines the epistemological integrity of interpretivist research. The paper argues for a paradigmatic shift toward dialogical interview designs that explicitly legitimise participant questioning, reflexive interruptions, and negotiated meaning-making. Practically, the paper offers conceptual guidance for doctoral researchers on designing, documenting, and analysing interviews in ways that more authentically enact constructivism and co-creation of knowledge, thereby strengthening both methodological rigour and epistemic credibility in interpretivist doctoral research.

Keywords: Constructivism, Co-Constructivism, Doctoral Pedagogy, Interview, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

A doctoral study grounded in constructivist theory posits that knowledge is actively constructed through experience. The argument is that, during the interview process of qualitative data collection, interactive dialogue functions as the primary pedagogical mechanism through which the participants engage in meaning-making. This type of dialoguing results in the co-construction of knowledge as a measurable outcome of the collaborative research process. Thus, during the interview process of qualitative data collection, the interviewer's questions usually follow a one-way sequence from interviewer to interviewee. There is usually no evidence in the interview schedule of co-constructed knowledge arising from an interactive dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, or of the interviewee's co-constructed knowledge, given a voice during the interview.

Interview research instruments are a key development and expectation in the doctoral research process. The formulation of these instruments should be driven by the research paradigm chosen by the doctoral researcher. Quantitative research is supported by research instruments derived from the positivist paradigm, which are usually questionnaires. Such questionnaires, unlike interview schedules, are true to the positivist paradigm. For example, the use of Likert Scale items in the instrument. Whereas qualitative research is conducted with interview schedules true to the interpretivist, or phenomenological paradigm chosen by the doctoral researcher. Invariably, constructivist engagement has not been part of both the development of instruments and the actual administration of the interview schedule. A constructivist engagement between the interviewer and interviewee, true to the expectations of an interpretivist paradigm, is expected to occur unless the interviewer engages in an interactive dialogue with the interviewee or conducts an interactive focus group interview based on such a dialogue. The idea is that the researcher enables a co-construction of knowledge between the interviewer and interviewee in which knowledge is co-constructed or co-created. This paper is important

because it prompts the doctoral interviewers and interviewees to be reflective during the interview data collection process. It is important to outline the core concepts in this paper.

Interpretivism is an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon (Confrey, 1992). Interpretivist approaches to research differ from the positivist paradigm in their emphasis on the interpretation of qualitative data as opposed to quantitative data, and the focus on context. Constructivism is based on the principle that knowledge is a constructed entity (Alanazi, 2016). Constructivists are interested in how individual realities are constructed, and as researchers believe that reality is socially constructed through an interactive dialogue between or among people in which meaning is co-constructed and co-created (Densa and Luvigsen, 2016). The relevance of interpretivism, constructivism, and co-construction of knowledge to the study is that interview schedules are designed with the intention of obtaining data from interviewees.

The purpose of the paper is to impact the qualitative research character of doctoral research projects in Business Administration and Business Management degrees, to develop and implement interview schedules designed for interpretivism from a constructivist perspective. The key objective of this paper is to explore the structure of interview schedules for evidence of a constructivist engagement between interviewer and interviewee in the co-creation of knowledge through interactive dialogues in doctoral research.

The paper reviews the literature, explores the research interview instruments in relation to the methodology used, and discusses data presentation and analysis. The paper ends with a conclusion and provides key references.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Review of Literature

A review of literature uses theoretical and conceptual approaches to synthesise existing research on interpretivism, constructivism, and postmodernism. Applicable theories are established, and core concepts are defined to structure the analysis. It provides a critical, systematic foundation that guides research design, identifies gaps, and maps expected relationships between variables.

2.1 The Interpretivist Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world as it is from the subjective experiences of individuals. Meaning-oriented methodologies related to interpretivism and phenomenology, such as interviewing or participant observation, rely on a subjective relationship between the researcher and subjects, as opposed to measurement in positivist strategies. Interpretivism is more sensitive towards individual meanings and contributions, unlike positivism, which is based on universal laws. Interpretivism as a paradigm assumes that reality is subjective and can differ depending on different individuals, and data is mainly dependent on a specific content, viewpoint, and values (Saunders et al., 2012).

2.2 Constructivism

Ernst von Glasersfeld (1974) developed the notion of constructivism in the context of education and states that all knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through the senses. Learners construct new knowledge on the foundations of their existing knowledge. Radical constructivism also argues that there is no way to directly access an objective reality, and that knowledge can only be understood through the individual's subjective interpretation of their experiences. This theory asserts that individuals create their own understanding of reality, and that their knowledge is always incomplete and subjective, and needs to be developed further.

According to van der Walt (2020), the voice of the researcher, who is an interviewer, and the voice of the interviewee, who is the research participant, provide two different voices in an interview. van der Walt (2020) claims that in an interview, every individual constructs their own worldview from an individual constructivism perspective as opposed to social constructivism. In social constructivism, a social group of one kind or the other reaches an agreement (van der Walt, 2020). There is consensus among scholars that human beings construct their own perceptions of the world (Owen, 2014). Co-construction, or co-creation of knowledge, through social constructivism, is indeed a process emerging from a philosophical research paradigm called interpretivism. However, there is limited specific research optimising the user experience, as in the interviewer experience, in interview dialogues. Understanding how to make these interactions more user-friendly, engaging, and effective

is crucial. Hence, the concern is that the doctoral student researcher needs to invest in a constructivist approach when interviewing the participants, or to make room for it in a structured, semi-structured, or open interview.

The process of the interviewer posing all the questions in an interview reflects, or represents, individual constructivism. Typical of traditional interviewing, the interviewer becomes the sole beneficiary of knowledge from a modernist perspective. In such a process, the interviewee, doctoral research participant, has no real voice since a social construction of knowledge occurs through an interactive dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, and not through a one-way intervention directed to the interviewee. An interactive dialogue is rooted in postmodernism as a shift away from traditional interviewing.

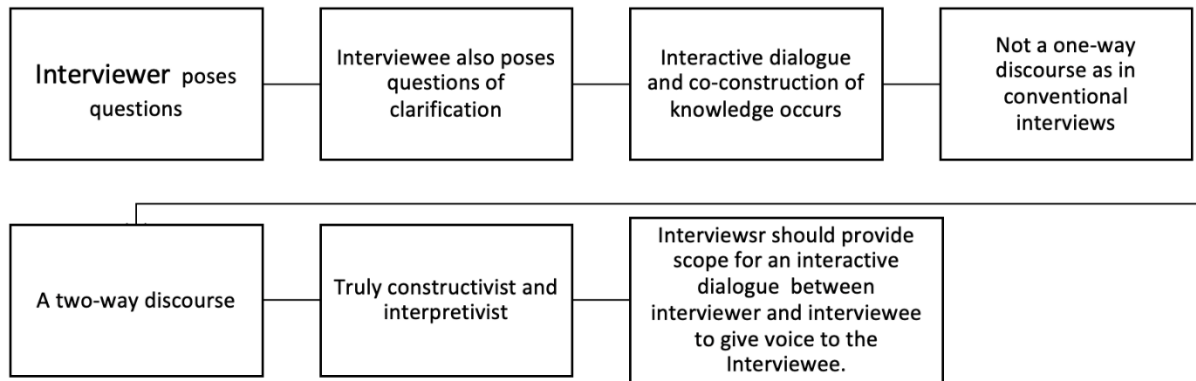


Figure 1: A constructivist interview process flow

2.3 Postmodernism

Interpretivism-constructivism is rooted in postmodernism. A postmodern orientation is polythetic as opposed to being monolithic and inclines the researcher towards listening to all voices concerned as opposed to being monolithic. Postmodernism assumes that social life should be fundamentally conceived as the negotiation of meanings (Barrat, 2009). In the current thesis, the tendency of the interviewer to dominate the discourse in planning interview schedules/guides so that the interviewee is marginalised and is left with no voice in the discourse is the key issue under study. The idea is to break the tendency of modernistic approaches to research and engage in a post-modernistic approach to interviews by giving the interviewee a voice.

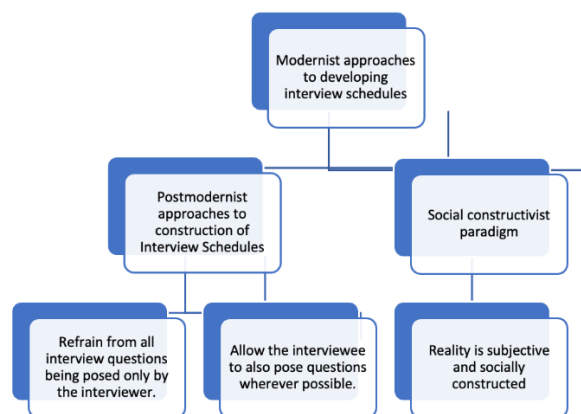


Figure 2: From a modernist to a post-modernist perspective of conducting interviews

3. Research Instruments

Research instruments are a key development and expectation in the research process and should be driven by the research paradigm chosen by the researcher. Quantitative research is supported by research instruments derived from the positivist paradigm, which are usually questionnaires. Such questionnaires, unlike interview schedules, are true to the positivist paradigm, e.g., the use of Likert Scale Items.

A structured interview is a qualitative research method commonly applied in survey research. This approach aims to ensure that each interview is presented with the same questions in the same order. Such interviews usually do not allow for interactive dialogues. Unstructured interviews, also called non-directive interviews, refer to an interview concept without any set format in which questions are not predetermined, so that the lack of structure enables the interviewer to pose questions that come to his or her mind on the spot. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that combines a predetermined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with an opportunity for the interviewer to explore themes or responses further.

Qualitative research is conducted with interview schedules true to the interpretivist or phenomenological paradigm chosen by the researcher. However, as indicated in the theoretical frame presented above, there is a tendency for such schedules to be dominated by the interviewer, leaving the interviewee with little or no opportunity to engage in interactive dialogues with the interviewer. Such interactive dialogues can be developed through the use of informal participatory conversations that are richer than the structured components of the interview (Swain and King, 2022; Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

4. Methodology

Doctoral theses were read in relation to the methodology employed and especially the research philosophy declared. There was a document analysis of the proposed research instruments for qualitative research in the form of semi-structured, structured interview and semi-structured interview schedules. In the process, evidence of interview questions provoking interactive dialogues between interviewer and interviewee was sought. Analysed excerpts of transcripts were also scrutinised for recordings of interactive dialogues that were incidental to responses to interview questions, yet with pertinent evidence of constructivism and co-construction/co-creation of knowledge provoked by interviewee stimulation of an interactive dialogue with the interviewer.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

There was a document analysis of the proposed research instruments for qualitative research in the form of semi-structured, structured, and open-ended interview schedules. Evidence of interview questions provoking interactive dialogues between the interviewer and interviewee was sought. Analysed excerpts of transcripts were also scrutinised for recordings of interactive dialogues that were incidental to responses to interview questions, yet with pertinent evidence of constructivism and co-construction/co-creation of knowledge provoked by interviewee stimulation of an interactive dialogue with the interviewer. The key objectives of the research were fulfilled, nevertheless.

5.1 Narrative

This narrative is drawn from the doctoral students coded St1D and St2D, and master students coded StM3, StM4, StM5, StM6, StM7, StM8, StM9, StM10, StM11, StM12, StM13, StM14, StM15, StM16, StM17, StM18, StM19, StM20. The analysis of student submissions revealed varying degrees of alignment between claimed interpretivist research positions and the actual operationalisation of constructivist principles within interview practices.

St1D demonstrated the strongest methodological consistency. The study was explicitly located within an interpretivist paradigm, seeking to understand the sustainability of state-subsidised independent schools by engaging with participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations. Consistent with Thanh and Thanh's (2015) assertion that interpretive researchers access socially constructed realities mediated through language and shared meanings, the student grounded her inquiry in dialogical engagement. Similarly, Wahyuni's (2012) view that reality is co-constructed through interaction underpinned the students' recognition that meaning emerges more authentically when participants are afforded opportunities to articulate and interrogate their experiences.

Drawing on Rosenthal (2016), the student employed in-depth, open-ended interviewing to elicit rich qualitative accounts supported by follow-up probes. Such an approach enabled participants to communicate more freely within an interpretive frame, consistent with Walle (2015), who argues that interactive dialogue facilitates nuanced meaning-making. Evidence of co-constructed knowledge emerged when a participant from the Gauteng Department of Education corrected the interviewer's assumptions regarding departmental perspectives. This moment reflected a genuine interpretivist exchange in which the participant exercised epistemic agency, thereby

contributing substantively to the analytic process. Such negotiated clarification exemplifies the kind of collaborative meaning-making that constructivist scholarship positions as central to qualitative interviewing.

In contrast, St2D claimed adherence to interpretivism and acknowledged the relevance of constructivism in interview design; however, the interview schedule and resulting data revealed no instances of interactive dialogue. The structured format employed constrained opportunities for participant-led clarification or co-construction of insights, resulting in methodological inconsistency between the stated paradigm and practical execution.

Across StM3 to StM20, students variously employed semi-structured or structured interview schedules. Yet, across these submissions, there was no identifiable evidence of dialogical exchanges or co-constructed meaning. Despite the theoretical suitability of semi-structured formats for interpretivist inquiry, their application here remained largely unidirectional, reinforcing interviewer dominance and reducing participant voice. The absence of interactive dialogue suggests that the constructivist potential of these interview formats was not fully realised, limiting the extent to which the research processes aligned with the underlying interpretivist claims.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the long-standing epistemological position that social reality is not an objective entity but is continuously constructed through human interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Within this ontological frame, interpretivist research seeks to understand how individuals experience, interpret, and attribute meaning to phenomena in their social worlds. The close alignment between interpretivism and constructivism, therefore, demands research practices that facilitate, not constrain, the co-construction of knowledge between interviewer and interviewee. Interview processes that are dominated by the researcher, and that limit dialogical engagement, undermine the epistemic assumptions of interpretivist inquiry and risk invalidating the methodological integrity of a study. As Barrat (2009) argues, postmodernist orientations, which prioritise multiplicity of perspectives and dialogical meaning-making, offer a necessary corrective to traditional, researcher-led interviewing practices.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary instrument for data collection. This choice aligns with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning the research. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to engage with predetermined themes while retaining flexibility to pursue emergent insights. This flexibility creates space for participants to articulate subjective viewpoints, clarify assumptions, and introduce new dimensions of meaning that may not have been anticipated at the outset. Such dialogical flexibility is essential to the co-construction of meaning and is consistent with the interpretivist tradition, which privileges participants' lived experiences as central to knowledge generation.

However, the analysis of the student's interview schedule revealed substantive limitations in operationalising these interpretivist commitments. Despite employing a semi-structured format, the schedule did not provide opportunities for interviewees to pose questions or introduce lines of inquiry that would support the co-construction of knowledge. Instead, the interviewer retained exclusive control over the direction of the dialogue. This unidirectional approach reflects a transactional model of interviewing and contradicts interpretivist expectations that view participants as co-constructors rather than passive data sources. As a result, the interview process risks replicating modernist, hierarchical dynamics that marginalise participant agency and reduce the richness of potential qualitative insights.

To address these limitations, interpretivist interviewing must foreground relationality and collaboration. A relational focus positions the interview as an iterative interaction shaped by trust, mutual engagement, and shared meaning-making. Enhancing the interviewee's agency requires transforming the interview from a one-sided question-answer exchange into a dynamic, participatory conversation. Strategies to achieve this include building rapport early in the interaction, asking open-ended questions that invite reflexive exploration, actively listening, and explicitly encouraging participants to raise their own questions or seek clarification. Through such practices, interviewees become epistemic partners, contributing substantively to the development, interpretation, and refinement of emerging knowledge.

Furthermore, participatory research principles highlight that collaborative approaches can mitigate hierarchical power dynamics embedded within interview guides. When interviewees, conceived as co-researchers, are empowered to shape the direction of dialogue, the interview becomes a site of negotiation rather than extraction. Such negotiation facilitates richer data, deepens interpretive accuracy, and supports methodological

reflexivity within the research process. Designing interview schedules that permit dialogical reciprocity, therefore, strengthens both the ethical and epistemological foundations of qualitative inquiry.

In sum, the discussion underscores the essential role of dialogical, co-constructive engagement in interpretivist interviewing. Semi-structured interviews possess inherent potential to support such engagement; however, this potential is only realised when researchers intentionally create opportunities for participants to influence the interview trajectory. Moving toward postmodern, participatory, and relational models of interviewing will enhance the rigour, credibility, and interpretive depth of studies grounded in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that semi-structured and structured interview schedules include some questions that will enable an interactive dialogue to prevail. Focus-group interviews should also not be unidirectional and should provide scope for an interactive dialogue not only with the interviewer, but also between the interviewees of the focus group in a true constructivist/ interpretivist fashion. It becomes necessary for students to revisit interview schedules, or the one they may have designed, be it at a master's or doctoral level, and critique it to determine the extent to which it is truly interpretivist or constructivist.

8. Conclusion

The main finding of the study is that if it is in an interpretivist paradigm, it should be informed by research instruments that are of a truly constructivist nature. The interviewer and the interviewee should engage in an interactive dialogue to co-create knowledge wherever possible. While realizing the objectives of the study through a one-way dialogue with the interviewee is important, it is equally important that the interviewee should not be marginalized but be given a voice in the interview process through such an interactive dialogue of co-construction of knowledge with the interviewer. It is advised that postgraduate students should become aware of the need to produce data through an interpretivist paradigm by developing a constructivist engagement with the interviewee.

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