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Moving from what data are to what researchers do with them: a response to Martyn Hammersley

In his (2021) response to our (2020) paper, Martyn Hammersley argues that we ‘seem to accept’ that all approaches to analysing interview data ‘must base themselves on discursive, rhetorical, or narrative analysis’. While we do not dismiss these modes of analysis, we are in fact at pains to stress that there are many ‘more analytical and synthetic possibilities on the menu’. Hammersley’s key point, nonetheless, is to dispense with the notion that researchers are ‘required’ to attend to the discursive characteristics of interview talk, not least because they, like everyone else, typically develop ‘nous’ — a capacity founded in a kind of everyday realism — which equips them to interpret and assess the accounts of others. Accordingly, for Hammersley, a naively empiricist failure to attend to the formal characteristics of interview data is better understood as a failure of ‘nous’, not a failure of, or omission from, the analytical approach brought to bear on those data (as advocates of the radical critique would have it).

This distinction — between nous and analysis — seems to us to be a partly false one. Indeed, in our paper we reframed these and related concerns by focusing upon how researchers *apprehend* interview data through different kinds of research *engagement* both within and beyond research encounters. A concern with engagement involves a move away from a substantialist analytic assessment of the ‘worth’ of interview data solely in terms of themselves, and towards a more synthetic consideration of such data, including an examination of the relationships researchers have with the subjects and objects of their study. Accordingly, an interviewer’s practical consciousness, tacit knowledge, ‘nous’ or however we refer to it, is not simply a substantive individual capacity, it expresses aspects of the relationships with those with whom they are engaged (participants and other researchers) in the broader enterprise of seeking to develop knowledge about the social world. Thus, for instance, a researcher’s capacity for such ‘nous’ is profoundly related to the degree to which they are ‘hermeneutically’ proximate or distal from the life-worlds of their study participants. A European white, male academic researcher’s ‘nous’ in an interview with someone with whom he went to school will differ markedly from that of an interview with, say, an impoverished female sex worker based in South America. What Hammersley conceives of as a cognitive capacity, we have sought to reconceive in terms of social relationships, social processes, and, following Elias (2007), blends and alloys of involvement and detachment with those with whom researchers are engaged in the process of knowledge generation. The development of knowledge about the social world is not, then, simply a question of individual skill or cognitive capacity, but of the epistemic, social and institutional conditions under which groups and generations of researchers might be able both to develop and combine their collective insights.

In sum, through these exchanges the argument has run from seeing the value of interviews as residing in their allowing an authentic voice to speak, to the notion that interview data have value when understood as forms of performative talk, to the position that the value of interview data is contingent upon the ‘nous’ of the researcher. All three approaches have their merits, but suffer from the same basic limitation: the value of data resides not simply in themselves, but in what is done with them — the manner and character of researchers’ engagement and relationship with them, and ultimately, how they are apprehended and collectively brought into conversation with other sources of theory, evidence, and insight.

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