Response to Whitaker and Atkinson

Jason Hughes University of Leicester, Kahryn Hughes University of Leeds, Grace Sykes, University of Leicester, Katy Wright University of Leeds

We thank Whitaker and Atkinson for their highly constructive and generous response to our discussion of their work in our 'Beyond Performative Talk' paper (Hughes *et al.* 2020). We fully accept that the chief danger of presenting the 'Radical Critique' as a singular position is that this has the effect of diminishing significant differences between those variously associated with that position. Central here is the degree to which advocates of the Radical Critique share a commitment to an ethnomethodological stance, or at least, a stance that has its origins in ethnomethodology. We acknowledge important differences between the work of Whitaker and Atkinson and others associated with the position, Silverman included, in this and other respects. We also fully accept that it would be false dichotomy indeed to impel an iron-clad distinction between questions of form and content in the analysis of interview data; considerations of the 'how' and the 'what'.

Our key argument, however, is to suggest that in issuing a corrective to a widespread tendency to treat interview material as the unmediated conveying of experience, advocates of the Radical Critique have variously tended to 'swing the analytical pendulum' in the opposite direction such that a consideration of the 'what' becomes at least partially eclipsed by the 'how'. Our paper sought to draw examples (from the applied work of Whitaker and Atkinson, among others) of how aspects of the approach when extended empirically, including when such principles are 'used against themselves', entails the danger of analysts 'displacing' a preoccupation with the 'what' with a near exclusive consideration of the 'how' and relatedly, the 'experienced' with the 'expressed'.

Indeed, our aim was not simply to call into question the employ of such oppositions as they are realised in the extended analytical practice of advocates of the radical critique, but more fundamentally, to shift the debate from questions of what interview talk can be said to 'do' (narratively and/or performatively) towards a consideration of what researchers *do with* interview talk. That shift opens up a range of analytic and synthetic possibilities for how interview data might be rendered as particular kinds of evidence allowing researchers to 'speak to' or 'tell about' questions of the 'how' and the 'what' not only of interview encounters themselves (as, say, 'speech events'), but of the broader social contexts within which these are conducted. It is in this connection in particular that we questioned an observed epistemic hesitance to consider how interview data might be used to speak beyond themselves — their broader 'referential value' — bar the pervasive cultural tropes and idioms variously invoked and performed in interview encounters. This tendency, we argued, axiomatically veers towards an *homo clausus* 'retreat into discourse' and an allied set of naturalist and constructivist principles concerning empirical proximity and 'directness' which, while not necessarily dependent upon an ethnomethodological stance, find clearest expression within it. Here, again, we sought to draw out inherent tensions between certain principles of the radical critique and their realisation in applied analytic practice.

In sum, we find ourselves once more in partial agreement with Whitaker and Atkinson: that in researchers' analysis of interview data the *how* can, and arguably should, be considered alongside and as part and parcel of the *what;* the 'expressed' with and part of the 'experienced'; 'form' with and of 'content'. However, that such concerns might be handled separately does not mean they are separate and, as we have argued, are best approached 'synthetically' so as to yield insights not available when either set of concerns is considered in relative isolation. We also agree that in this respect at the very least, the stance adopted by certain advocates of the Radical Critique is not that 'radical' at all. While not perhaps yet 'mainstream' to the pervasive analysis of interview data within the social sciences, it would be hard to disagree that both sets of concerns, the how *and* the why,

should be considered together, indeed, cannot be considered as separate, irrespective of how they are treated analytically. What counts, of course, is what happens in researchers' analytic practice — how interview data are put to use, how they are rendered as particular kinds of evidence in relation to specific analytic foci and substantive concerns.

To this end, we return to the central argument of our (2020) paper: that the potential of interviews resides not simply in what is 'done' *within* them, but in what can be done *with* them. In other words, it is arguably what researchers *do* with interview data that is most important: specifically how they *apprehend* them. Treating and approaching interviews primarily as 'speech events' which produce particular kinds of 'talk' has considerable utility to formal analysis, but also certain limits. There are other ways to apprehend interviews and the data produced within them that arguably offer greater analytic potential to balance both form and content, the how and the what, neither at the expense of the other, perhaps separately, but never as separate. Maintaining such a synthetic balance – steering a course between both a neglect of the formal characteristics and dynamics of interviews, on the one hand, and an analytical retreat to the crucible of interview encounters, on the other – is, we would argue, among the defining challenges for the practice of analysing interview data.

**References**

Hughes, J., Hughes, K., Sykes, G., Wright, K. (2020) 'Beyond performative talk: critical observations on the radical critique of reading interview data'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(5): 547–563.