Beyond Performative Talk:
Critical Observations on The Radical Critique of Reading Interview Data
Jason Hughesⁱ, Kahryn Hughes, Grace Sykes, Katy Wright

Abstract

We centrally consider the question of what interview data can be used to 'say' through a dialogue with advocates of the 'radical critique' of interview studies. We propose that the critique has considerable utility in drawing attention to 'the social life of interviews' and the pervasiveness of notions of the 'romantic subject' to how researchers often approach interviews and their analyses, highlighting some of the implications of that position. However, we suggest that the radical critique simultaneously goes too far in respect of its reduction of interviews to narrative performance, and not far enough in terms of its own critical departure from core characteristics of the romantic subject. Here we consider how certain aspects of the conceptual imagery employed by proponents of the radical critique lead towards a dichotomisation between the experienced and the expressed, a concomitant retreat into discourse, and a tendency to conflate what interviews can be used to say with what can be said at interview. We explore how the radical critique might productively be built upon via more 'synthetic' forms of research engagement, outlining alternative modes of apprehending interview data through a further critical departure from the romantic subject. We suggest that such an approach helps researchers move beyond a sole engagement with questions of how data are constructed and produced and towards how such data might otherwise be used to speak about the social world beyond the social nexus that constitutes an interview encounter.

Key Words: Radical Critique. Interviewing. Analysis and Synthesis. Qualitative Methods.

Introduction[ii]

We explore a central concern of this special section: what can be said and read with and from interview data. In doing so, we seek to contribute to an ongoing set of debates regarding the 'radical critique' (Dingwall 1997; Hammersley and Gomm 2008). We develop a response to the critique that incorporates elements of competing sides of this debate. Consistent with the radical critique, we acknowledge the limitations of interview data, particularly those realised in approaches which unquestionably assume a correspondence between what is said at interview and the unmediated 'inner' experiences, perceptions, and 'lifeworlds' of those to whom we have supposedly 'given voice'. However, we also identify certain limitations of approaching 'interview talk' as, essentially, a form of discursive performance forged in the artificial interactional crucible of interview encounters. We highlight alternative possibilities with regard to how researchers might approach interviewing as a practice, how they may conceive of the problem of establishing the 'authenticity' or 'worth' of interview data, and of how they might address questions of analysing and using interview data.

In responding to core aspects of the radical critique, we centrally consider the conceptual imagery (Hughes 2015) invoked by different positions relating to the radical critique — imagery, variously, of social and cultural forms such as 'tropes', 'contrasts', 'inner' and 'outer-selves' and indeed, of social beings more generally. We explore the extent to which such imagery serves as an adequate basis for addressing some of the very questions generated through different positions in the debate. In responding to these concerns, our central aim is to develop a more open and relational way of reframing several questions raised by the radical critique and, in an allied fashion, to foreground issues of synthesis, not simply analysis, as a primary concern in the apprehension of interview data.

The Radical Critique

The 'Radical Critique' relates to a set of debates spanning the past three decades or more stemming, in particular, from Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) analysis of the 'interview society'. This centres on a critique of the growing tendency in qualitative research to treat interviews as encounters in which an authentic voice is permitted to speak, typically in ways that ignore the biographical and narrative work involved in such interview talk. The radical critique also encompasses critical responses, notably (Hammersley and Gomm 2008; Hammersely 2003; 2017), significant contributions from key figures such as Gubrium and Holstein (2003), and more recent extensions from *inter alia* Atkinson (2015), Silverman (2017) and Whitaker and Atkinson (2019). At its core, the radical critique calls into question many of the orthodoxies surrounding the practice of interviewing, the question of how qualitative researchers might rightfully regard the character of interview data, the kinds of interactional encounter that an interview can be understood to constitute, and, most crucially, the kinds of claims that can be made on the basis of data generated via interviewing. These arguments have major implications for the practice of qualitative research

more generally, and are allied to, in part, a call towards a more expansive consideration of research techniques, in particular sincere ethnographic approaches which permit an engagement with data generated in 'natural' settings — a term to which we shall return later in this paper. Below we briefly outline core aspects of the radical critique before advancing a response that seeks to draw out both our complementarities and critical departures from the position.

In essence, there are five key components of the 'radical critique' as it has been originally formulated and subsequently developed:

1. Interviews — whether those of the talk-show host, therapist, or recruitment consultant — have become so culturally pervasive that it increasingly makes sense to speak of the 'social life of the interview' (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019: 621). Indeed, social research is part and parcel of this tendency, so much so that over the past half century, interviews have become the 'go-to method of choice' for a range of qualitative researchers. Typically, such researchers adopt a 'Romantic' view of the subject at interview (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Following from this, they understand their interviewees to be expressing their inner, subjective life — recalling experiences, perceptions, feelings, and evaluations in a manner that authentically conveys these. Also allied to this tendency is the unquestioned assumption not only that it is possible to gain access to the interior lifeworld of the subject, but that what participants say at interview directly corresponds to their subjective understandings and experiences, albeit that this is dependent in part upon the skill of the interviewer — assumptions the radical critique calls into question (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019).

2. This way of thinking about interviewing and interview data has partly emerged through feminist, poststructuralist and post-colonial epistemologies comprising a laudable 'revolt against monologic modes of authorship' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 311) — against, in particular, the privileged dominance of white, middle class, male voices. From these positions, there is also a concomitant ethical obligation to solicit, empower and enable a polyphony — a plurality and diversity — of voices from groups otherwise muted, disempowered, marginalised and effectively silenced (1997: 312). However, this ethical imperative is, in and of itself, insufficient as a basis for adequate methodology. Too often the concern to permit an authentic voice to speak at interview effectively, often inadvertently, engenders a romanticised view of the subject realised through dialogic revelation (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 305; 318). This tendency, found in qualitative research across the social sciences, is characteristically expressed through and in research with individuals and groups who are, or have come to be, identified as socially marginal, subjugated and/or under-represented. Verbatim extracts from 'depth' interviews with these groups are then represented as direct illustrations of participants' lifeworlds, comprising a methodological approach to 're/presentation' which seeks to 'give voice' to those in contexts to which they rarely have access or purchase. The problem with this treatment of interviews and the kinds of data they generate is that it typically ignores the narrative,

biographical and emotional work involved in such encounters. This is all the more paradoxical given that qualitative researchers who undertake work of this kind are often centrally interested in selfhood, subjectivity, biography, affect, interpretation and representation (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019: 621).

3. Researchers who approach interviews in this vein characteristically invoke luminary thinkers — Weber, Husserl, and Schutz among them — in appeals to establish the epistemic pedigree of their analyses, albeit that the central ideas and paradigmatic orientations of such figures are sometimes misappropriated and misconstrued (Silverman 2017). A closer consideration of the work of such key figures reveals that each, in different ways, stressed the significance of treating normative categories such as 'experience', 'perception', 'motive' and so forth as the 'subjects' not simply the 'objects' of analysis. Thus, an important part of any analysis of interview data involves paying attention to the social and discursive dynamics of the situated encounter in which such data were generated (2017: 147–149).

4. Accordingly, rather than seeking to 'discover' or 'enable' 'authentic' accounts of 'experience' at interview, interview researchers must instead consider how 'authenticity' is 'done': that is, how it is displayed and performed within this particular (artificially generated) social setting. This also entails a heightened sensitivity towards how such performative displays draw upon various cultural tropes pervasive to the social life of interviews. Historically, interviews emerged as a tool which enabled powerful social agents to assess the eligibility of various kinds of 'claim' (for treatment, welfare, or salvation) (Savage 2011; Blakely and Moles 2017) via the employ of a panoply of inter-related discursive technologies — confession, revelation, disclosure, authenticity, truth (Foucault 1979; Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Atkinson et. al 2003; Whitaker and Atkinson 2019). An orientation towards interview talk as involving narrations of the self[iii] — as, essentially, 'biographical work' — effectively tunes-in to the social characteristics of interviews as exchanges in which participants make various kinds of 'credibility appeal' in ways expressive of specific nexuses of power/knowledge, authority/legitimacy, particularly those which pivot on a dramaturgy of self-revelation. The exposure of the private self of a celebrity (particularly when contrasted with a public persona) on the Oprah Winfrey Show serves, in this way, as a kind of cultural exemplar that parallels, perhaps directly informs, the 'special value accorded to interview and the narrative study of lives' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 313 see also Rojek 2001; 2012; van Krieken 2012).

5. In sum, this critique is 'radical' because it encourages qualitative researchers fundamentally to reconsider interviews as a particular kind of social encounter: one that has been engineered for the purposes of research and is replete with an historically ascendant and culturally specific set of associations, expectations, discursive tropes, and rhetorical motifs consistent with the more general 'social life' of interviews. Interview 'data' then, need to be analysed not as glimpses into the experiential life-worlds of participants, but rather, as a form of performative *action* which centres on the generation of 'interview talk', where selves are enacted principally via biographical narration. Crucially, the critique rests on a core ethnographic principle: that

interviews are a specific kind of social encounter with their own attendant characteristics which are, in many ways, constraining since they '... furnish no opportunity to study the techniques and skills that social actors deploy in the course of their daily lives' (Atkinson 2015: 92). In other words, interview data tell researchers about what people do in interviews. By contrast, ethnographic techniques such as participant observation provide a more direct means to apprehend the multisensory textures, characters, and practices involved in the full array of encounters that comprise social life in the round (2015: 60, 92). Here a core notion is that 'being there' constitutes a key basis for being able to develop observations about the social world (see Hughes, K. *et al.* this Themed Section).

The Radical Critique: Extensions, Qualifications and Critical Departures

Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) initial formulation of the radical critique has been widely-cited, and has stimulated much valuable debate about the use of interviews in qualitative research. Some two decades later, however, 'little seems to have changed' (Silverman 2017), with many popular qualitative journals still carrying a high proportion of work featuring interviews and other forms of 'manufactured data' (Silverman 2013; 2017). Even studies which claim to be 'ethnographic' in orientation may still be heavily dependent on interview data (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019: 620). The radical critique, then, remains a powerful and highly valuable corrective to a 'stubbornly persistent' tendency for qualitative researchers to treat interviews as though they permitted an 'authentic gaze into the soul of another' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 305). In sum, the critique raises fundamental and crucially important questions regarding the kinds of claims that can be made on the basis of interview talk, our central concern in this paper.[iv]

We are broadly sympathetic towards core aspects of the radical critique, but with significant qualifications and counter-critical departures. Specifically, our critical departures relate to: 1) how problems of 'access' to the 'inner life' of research participants are conceived and depicted in the conceptual imagery of the radical critique; 2) limitations to conceiving of interview data as, primarily, 'performative display'; 3) analytical/stylistic dangers with the concept of 'cultural tropes'; 4) problems with the exclusive focus on the intrinsic character of data and their degree of fixity to the specific social 'context' of their creation; 5) a danger of 'caricaturing' the social life of interviews; and finally 6) certain of the constructivist/naturalist axioms upon which the critique is predicated.

We would like to stress from the outset that, while this list of critical departures may read to be something of a 'tall order', it is testament to the utility and immense value of the critique that it has stimulated and prompted so much further debate and reflection. Any critique that is radical is apt to stimulate an equally 'radical' response. However, our task here is not one of 'ground-clearing', dismissing, or even refuting the radical critique, but of developing a dialogue around core aspects of the debate sparked by the critique, and further to reflect upon its implications for how researchers 'do interviewing' and what interviews can be said 'to do'. Below, we discuss each of these areas of departure and counter-critique in turn.

Imagery of the Self

As we have suggested above, we are in considerable agreement with Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) critique of the pervasive conception of interviews as a privileged social space in which a subject whose 'true essence', otherwise masked by the imagery of public persona, is 'revealed' through the authentic narration of biographical experience. This is not simply because it is problematic to assume a direct correspondence between what people say at interview and their 'authentic' feelings, experiences, understandings, and so forth. Crucially, it is also because the idea of a coherent, separate, private self, hidden from public view, warrants further critical scrutiny, particularly if it is to be employed in the service of social research.

Following Foucault (1979) and Elias (2012a), Atkinson and Silverman show how this 'neo-romantic' way of thinking about human subjects is itself predicated upon the historical emergence of 'the self' as a product of disciplinary technologies that have their own distinctive sociogenesis and psychogenesis. In other words, this way of thinking about the self (and relatedly, about authenticity and self-revelation) should be treated as more the 'topic' than the 'resource' of social scientific analysis (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 315). At the very least, this should be recognised as part and parcel of a set of historical processes in which 'we' have come to think of and approach 'our selves' in this distinctive way. Atkinson and Silverman seek to disrupt this construction of social actors through employing insights from Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality* (1992) which centre on replacing the '*homo sentimentalis*' idea '...that our image is only an illusion that conceals our selves, as the only true essence independent of the eyes of the world', with the insight that 'our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others' (Kundera 1992: 143 in Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 308). This insight ultimately undergirds Atkinson and Silverman's central call for researchers to focus upon interview talk as biographical and narrative work in which a coherent self is more *constructed* than *revealed*.

It is here where we find our first key point of critical departure from the radical critique, which involves a return to a figure whose work on the sociogenesis of the self was among the foundations of Atkinson and Silverman's critique: Norbert Elias. Kundera's imagery of *homo sentimentalis* foregrounds a Romantic preoccupation with the construction of the self through a language of sentiment. This sensitises us to the significance of the 'back-story', 'the journey', and through it, the *invention* rather more than the *discovery* of the biographical self in the interview society (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 321). However, it neglects and leaves intact an arguably more fundamental concern with the depiction of the Romantic subject: the idea of a separate, private, hermeneutically-sealed 'inner self', a 'me in here' that is somehow closed off from 'society out there', sequestered by an invisible 'dividing line' (Elias 2010; Dunning and Hughes 2012). Elias (2010) refers to this image of people — an image which, he suggests, has become particularly dominant throughout Western thought since the Renaissance — as *homo clausus*: the closed subject. Through painstaking time-series documentary and archival work, Elias traces the sociogenesis of the *homo clausus* self-

6

image as part and parcel of 'civilising processes' which involved, over the longer-term, greater social complexity, growing social demands for more differentiated, reflexive, foresight and emotional nuance, and with it, an 'advancing threshold of shame and repugnance' that increasingly finds expression in the experience of a dividing 'wall of affects' and 'controls' separating 'the self' from others (Elias 2010, 2012a; Penna 2016).

Accordingly, it is not just the notion that there is a coherent, singular, 'authentic', 'true' self that awaits 'discovery' or 'revelation' at interview that is problematic in the conception of the Romantic subject, it is also the idea that what people think and feel, their 'inner' emotional lives, their 'private' experiences, are somehow entirely separate from, and unknowable by, others. Elias argues that, for the purposes of sociological analysis and research, we should orient our thinking towards a conception of people as *homines aperti*: open, pluralities of people bonded through chains of interdependence with others forming 'figurations' stretching across time and space (Elias 2010; 2012b)[v]. This shift away from a focus on 'the individual' as an isolated abstraction, from the *homo clausus subject*, has manifold implications. Principal among these, for our arguments here, is how a *homines aperti* conception of people throws into question the existence of an invisible interpretive and/or experiential 'barrier' that 'blocks access' to 'real' or 'authentic' feelings and experiences (both their recounting and elucidation). Equally, and on the same basis, a *homines aperti* conception problematises the depiction of interviews as arenas in which, perhaps by virtue of some special gift, an interviewer reaches into the separate, private 'inner world' of a respondent and reveals (or gets them to reveal) an 'authentic' experiential 'truth'. As we shall explore below, departing from *both* these conceptions has a number of further implications for how we might rethink certain aspects of the radical critique.

Cultural Tropes: The Limits of Interviews as Performative Talk

Of course, where the radical critique is particularly valuable is in highlighting how researchers' appeals to the veracity of their data by virtue of having permitted an authentic voice to speak typically neglects how such accounts are culturally mediated. Put simply, the radical critique highlights how a supposedly 'authentic' voice is never solely the unique experientially-grounded simon-pure voice of a social actor in isolation. It is always a voice that is informed, shaped, and expressed via particular forms of discourse in ways attuned to the specific dynamics of the social conditions under which it speaks. As such, a voice at interview should not be understood as a mere conveyor of 'data' or information, let alone experience. Rather, it is simultaneously a way of saying, seeing, and doing: it is a form of social *action* governed by speech cues, response tokens, and the full panoply of 'cultural tropes' associated with the performance of the self in the interview society (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019). Indeed, the influence of the social life of interviews is such that both interviewer and participant know their respective parts. These parts echo the roles of talk-show host and celebrity, of therapist and patient, with the outcome of such interviews collectively assumed to be

the 'revelation' of an 'inner' 'secret', 'hidden' truth realised through their biographical and narrative work (Atkinson and Silverman 1997).

However, there are limits to this view of 'interview talk' as performative display, and to the constructivist dramaturgical analogy on which is predicated more generally. This way of conceiving of interviews is heavily stylised, and risks ultimately becoming both self-confirming and self-confining. The focus on interview talk as performative display involves an epistemological substitution that, at the most basic level, replaces a concern with the content of *what* was said with an almost exclusive concern with *how* it is said (Hammersley 2017). Further, it involves *the saying* understood as akin to actors invariably rehearsing a script that is already known, albeit one around which they might improvise. From here, the task of social analysts is to elucidate how 'the self' is 'done' or 'produced' via 'appeals' that are, to varying extents, consistent with a culturally-received and *a priori* stock of biographical and narrative conventions centring on authenticity, sincerity and revelation. Silverman, Atkinson, Whitaker and various other of the proponents of the radical critique, effectively swing the analytical pendulum so far away from the 'what' to the 'how' that we face the danger of losing any sense of the former, and of 'how the what' might differentially be used to *tell* about society (Becker 2007; Hughes, K. *et al.* in this special issue). If we might be permitted a metaphor, adopting the approach advocated by proponents of the radical critique is akin to entering a library only to focus predominantly, even exclusively, on how the books, pamphlets, articles and other kinds of text are ordered and classified. This might be used to highlight the pervasiveness of the conventions and limitations of the duo-decimal system, the architectural layout of space and its correspondence to particular archival and classificatory priorities; perhaps even the modes of knowledge curation these orders engender. All such investigations have their own considerable value, but so, of course, does a consideration of the vast quantities of content within the texts so ordered, classified, distributed — not just in terms of how that content is consistent with particular literary conventions, styles, genres, and so forth — but in terms of *everything else we might be able to read from it.*

Equally, however, people are not 'open books' in any simple sense, they are not passive texts to be read, rather they are active producers of 'talk'. Moreover, as advocates of the radical critique are at pains to stress, the 'talk' they produce should be considered in ways attuned to the particular characteristics of the interaction in which such 'talk' is generated. Examples of where advocates extend the insights of the radical critique to the analysis of their own interviews are illustrative in this respect. For instance, Whitaker and Atkinson (2019) consider an interview with a Director of Children's Disability Services, Peter, offered to demonstrate empirically how analysis faithful to the performative nature of interview encounters might be undertaken (2019: 622). In the course of his interview, Peter is understood, variously, to be performing certain tropes emblematic of the Romantic self — narratives expressed through appeals to credibility and authenticity via rhetorics of: survival against the backdrop of adverse circumstances; longevity and commitment, being a 'lifer' in it for the whole journey; contrasts — between 'us and them', between those

who 'bring themselves to work' and those who are not fully there, and so forth (2019: 624–629). In sum, Whitaker and Atkinson show how Peter's interview talk is shot through with new public management, and in turn, is inscribed with the discourse of the Romantic self. His words are analysed as 'formulaic', 'rhetoric'-laden, 'tropes', with the interview encounter one in which Peter is at pains to present himself as a 'hero' of his own biographical narrative, itself little more than a cultural story. Indeed, it would be interesting to know how Peter might feel about his depiction in this account of his 'performative interview talk': as, someone who was concerned with making 'appeals' to his interviewer, and whose occupational journey and life-story more generally, was little more than that — a story, a 'rehearsal of narratives' already known. This raises both ethical concerns, and questions concerning how the character of his research participation and engagement is depicted (see also Hughes, K. *et al.* this Special Section).

Peter was seen to be 'doing' or 'performing' honesty, sincerity, authenticity, and so forth, and the feelings associated with these because from the perspective of the radical critique, that is *all that these are in terms of how they might be apprehended by researchers*: a particular kind of emotional, biographical, narrative work. In this way, the analytical style advocated by proponents of the radical critique involves replacing a naive faith in the revelatory power of the interview with a sceptical constructivism. Moreover, this constructionism is one that involves implicitly attributing certain kinds of intentionality — that an interviewee is either consciously or not making certain kinds of appeal: that, in the case of Peter, that he is genuine, is the 'real deal', and that his occupational story is an authentic one. Paradoxically, such 'reading of intent' faces the danger of committing the self-same analytic mistake of which advocates of the radical critique accuse other researchers. Namely, of implicitly assuming to know what is inside the heads — the intentions and motives — of their participants. Accordingly, Peter's words are analysed by Whitaker and Atkinson not in terms of what they 'mean', but in terms of what they 'do' and how that 'doing' can be seen to involve certain forms of display that invariably lead analytically to the mythology of the Romantic subject. A 'faith' in the revelatory power of the interview is thus supplanted by an equally implicit faith in the inscriptive power of discourse. No doubt inadvertently, this analytic practice has the effect of discounting the subjective value of what is said through and in performative talk at interview. If what is said is 'old wine in new bottles', if it sounds a lot like something seen or heard before, we are compelled to question its sincerity, authenticity, its truthfulness, particularly if we approach 'sincerity', 'authenticity' and 'truth' primarily, if not exclusively, through the prism of discourse.

Herein resides a core problem with the radical critique: that it expresses a kind of axiomatic belief in the pervasiveness of the social life of interviews, and moreover a conviction that all interviews are essentially variations on a more or less paradigmatic theme, one shared by all involved, one more or less uniformly understood and interpreted, and one so consistently rehearsed that it can be found everywhere in the Interview Society. If we start with this belief, it all too easily becomes self-confirming. When we adopt this lens, we face the danger of finding the same tropes every time and everywhere: the actors come and go, but

the story stays the same. This analytical style, through the eclipse of its own confirmation bias, potentially blocks access to empirical discovery. It also neglects a consideration of how there might be varying degrees of 'accuracy', or perhaps better, *congruence* between what people did, thought, felt, understood, and so forth, and what they *said* they did, thought, felt and so forth at interview — between, in short, the *experienced* and the *expressed*. This is a question that not only pertains to the particular dynamics of interview encounters — what researchers and participants 'do' at interview — but how what is 'said' is apprehended.

The modes of apprehension brought to interview talk advocated by proponents of the radical critique are characteristically expressive of the principle that the only *experience* that we can observe is that which we can 'see' or otherwise directly apprehend via the senses: in this case, that which plays out in the artificial context of an interview encounter. It is as though what people say at interview cannot describe or in any way even approximate the 'unseen' in this respect, of what happened, or is happening, beyond the interactional crucible of the interview itself. As though the 'recounting' or 'retelling' of 'experience' can only be treated as yet another 'cultural story', and at that, one that is likely to be familiar to the properly 'tuned-in' analytical listener. Our concern with this aspect of the radical critique is that following their analytic direction may lead us to treat what is said at interview as narrative, all as 'story'. To reinvoke our earlier metaphor, rather than concerning ourselves with the extent to which such stories are 'fictional', we instead assume they are all a kind of fiction, of a particular genre, the chief characteristics of which it is our task to observe. Once we find any consistency between an interviewee's 'narrative performance' at interview and the culturally received stock of biographical tropes to which an understanding of the interview society makes us keenly alive, we are encouraged by virtue of Whitaker and Atkinson's exemplar to pull at that thread and keep pulling to unravel the narrative work undertaken. Again, we face the danger more of 'constructing' than 'revealing' the cultural tropes we understand ourselves to be 'discovering'. Accordingly, we might neglect to consider the *extent* of consistency between 'individual narratives' and 'cultural stories', and face the danger of analytically superimposing the latter everywhere.

Indeed, if we turn the radical critique upon itself, we might read Silverman's (2017) own narrative account of the ascendancy of, and response to, the radical critique as employing precisely the same 'contrastive rhetoric' as that observed from Peter's transcripts. Silverman invokes a familiar rhetorical device to contrast, and establish the validity of, what 'they' (he and other advocates of the radical critique) do when they do research with what 'others' (qualitative researchers who 'don't get it') do in order to 'reveal [himself and other proponents of the radical critique] as the only successful, rational, or knowledgeable actor[s]' (2017: 627). In a manner consistent with the Romantic subject, Silverman is the hero of his own narrative. As this example serves to demonstrate, social scientific writing too involves various forms of 'credibility appeal' (Silverman's work is not exceptional in this respect), but of course that is not *all it is* — if it were, why should we take seriously any of his or anyone else's arguments? Why should we try to assess their merits? If we follow the radical critique, we become more concerned with how Silverman's article, like all journal

articles, expresses the 'cultural stories' of social scientific writing — in particular, a strand of writing on qualitative research which rehearses the 'epistemic trope' that 'discourse is everywhere and is all we can know' (see also Hughes, K. 2007; Hughes and Valentine 2016). However, our doing so involves a highly stylised reading of his work and that of the others involved; reading it in this way is rather ungenerous, it also discounts the other insights it manifestly has to offer.

Crossing the 'Divide': Analysis and Synthesis

Silverman (2017) anticipates the critique that his approach leads us to neglect experience and reduces 'all interaction to storytelling' (2017: 155). In response he asks: 'but do experiences speak for themselves and so should what interviewees say be treated as unmediated products of their psyches'? Our answer to either question is a resounding no. However, again through the employ of contrastive rhetoric, Silverman has presented a problematic dichotomy. We are compelled to choose between either a naïve reading of experience as self-explanatory — 'the unmediated expression of psyches' — or as something mediated by discourse. There are likely few who would dispute that 'discourse' has a 'mediating effect', but rather more who would stop short of considering discourse and language as the primary, perhaps exclusive, focus of their analyses. The opposition, predicated upon a binary of mediated/unmediated, expressed/experienced, inner/outer, is reproduced time and again, both in Silverman's work, and that of other proponents of the radical critique. To support his argument in this respect, Silverman cites Denzin (1991) who states:

> The subject is more than can be contained in the text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. What the subject tells us is itself something that is shaped by *prior* cultural understandings. More important, language which is our window into the subject's world (and our world) plays tricks. It *displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent*, *so that what is always given is a trace of other things, not the thing — lived experience — itself*' (Denzin 1991: 68 in Silverman 2017: 155–6 *our emphasis*).

Here Silverman's implicit dichotomous opposition finds support in an allied set of divisions: between subject and language, referer and referent, language and experience, and so on. From this viewpoint, language and discourse do not simply *mediate* the expression of experience, they 'displace' 'it': we can only access 'traces' of 'other things' in and through language, not the 'thing itself'. Herein resides a basic substantialist fallacy: that experience is a 'thing' albeit one expressed by other 'things' — 'language', 'stories', 'tropes', and so forth — which stands in relation to, but ultimately separate from, another 'prior' 'thing', 'cultural understandings'. It is as though there could be language without experience, text without subjects, culture without people: indeed, culture is tellingly understood as 'prior' to experience, an *a priori* somehow divorced from 'its' enactment or performance in various speech acts and narrative work. Silverman, of course, is not intending to *say* this. But the work he draws upon, the terminology he employs, the imagery he invokes, can all be understood to *speak to* this divide. This simultaneously epistemic and stylistic practice, then, opens up a conceptually unbridgeable chasm, a barrier, a surrogate dividing line that perfectly

corresponds to the sociogenetic reified separation of the *homo clausus* self which, all the more paradoxically, is exemplified by the Romantic subject. However, here it is the resource, not the topic — the object, not the subject — of the analytical approaches advocated by proponents of the radical critique.

This axial divide is compounded when we employ certain metaphors, adopt certain imagery, in our means of orientation towards the social world. For instance, if we apprehend social reality primarily through language we are further steered towards a dichotomous conception predicated on the division between 'speech' and 'grammar', 'parole' and 'langue', which, as Anderson (1980) has argued, is a dangerous model, ill-suited as an analogy for other human practices. It impels parallel distinctions and divisions between structure and agency, object and subject. Similarly, if we proceed from a dramaturgical perspective, we find corresponding divides between experience and rehearsal, off stage (everyday life) and on stage (at interview), performance and script, albeit that the latter term might be discarded in favour of looser formulations such as tropes, cultural stories, and narratives.

If we proceed, instead, from the starting point that language and experience are different aspects of a relational nexus, from a *homines aperti* conception of people, we may come to conceive of such problems in a qualitatively different way that avoids such dualistic substantialist reductionism. Such an approach points beyond an exclusive preoccupation with discursive topography towards a more synthesis-oriented form of engagement (see Hughes K. et al. this Themed Section). Indeed, the linguistic connotations of 'analysis' — the intellectual practice of reducing some 'thing' to 'its' constitutive elements — embody an academic trope perhaps more pervasive than any other in the social sciences: the idea that reductionism is what we must 'do' when we engage with data through analysis. Though the distinction is in many ways problematic, a focus on problems of *synthesis* — how 'things' are connected, inter-related, how, indeed, they *are* relational not least in as much as they are irreducible to their component substances or parts — can be helpful in this respect. Where a primarily 'analytical' engagement might steer us towards breaking things down into component parts (categories, perhaps, prior atemporal and fixed) a more 'synthetic' form of engagement involves a focus on inter-relationships, inter-dependencies, emergent orders and gestalts, different ways of approaching and treating, in this case, interviews. Synthetic orientations move us beyond a sole focus on the Sociology 101 question of how 'we' are 'separate from', how we 'stand outside' of, the 'interior lifewords' of those whom 'we' interview (questions in part founded upon a *homo clausus* subject). They point towards an enterprise that both individually and collectively involves attempts to forge understandings through the pursuit of alloys and blends of 'involvement and detachment' (epistemic, social, linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and so forth) with and from those with whom we are engaged in interviews (Elias 2007).

That 'we' (and for the moment, let us assume a separation as 'researchers') are even able to 'talk' together with our 'participants', that there is some basis for symbolic exchange, is part and parcel of our 'involvement' with participants, and theirs with us, eliding any simple division between 'our' respective social worlds.

Similarly, our degree of 'detachment' relates in part to the extent that we and they might have radically different understandings, uses and interpretations of those symbols so exchanged, albeit these might be more or less consistent with the cultural stock of associations from which such symbols both are drawn and form part. Also, that our subject positionings, and power chances within broader social figurations might markedly contrast with — and our biographical experiences might be substantially different from — those with whom we are conducting the research is part and parcel of our 'detachment'. As are the differences in our plans, aims, intentions as researchers and participants that interlace via our mutual engagement in interview processes.

Once again, following Elias (2007), involvement and detachment are not separate poles, entities, or even enterprises, but rather different aspects of a relational whole, each of which is capable of yielding insights that when synthesised might be greater and richer than either in isolation from the other. We prefer, then, to talk of different degrees, alloys and blends of involvement and detachment in our research, rather than treating these as logical alternatives akin to the dualistic correlates of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. Moreover, these terms signal forms of *engagement*, forms of social scientific *practice* both within and beyond the specific 'encounters' comprising interviews. It is precisely when the exchanges that are the stuff of interviews confront, disrupt or otherwise 'make strange' our own, or indeed participants', more involved and/or more detached understandings and thinking that opportunities for insight are afforded. For instance, when Hughes *et al.* (2014) interviewed refuse collectors as part of a broader research strategy also involving observational methods, a key insight stemmed from a recycling worker who described residents who had 'polluted four ton of cardboard' by placing wood into a recycling bin (Hughes *et al.* 2016: 114). Through this, the researchers became aware of the possibility of a perceptual ordering of 'dirt' which differed from their own, and which had the potential to yield further insights when pursued through subsequent research engagement and consideration. Hughes *et al.* did not make the claim to have 'got inside this participant's head and looked out' or somehow accessed the 'inner recesses of his psyche'. Rather, they used this extract as a 'lead' to develop insights into how 'dirt' might be understood, negotiated and reframed by those engaged in refuse collection in the communities they studied.

Speaking and Telling about the Social World

As we have shown, key to the radical critique is the argument that researchers who claim to have 'uncovered truths' at interview do so via the supposed authority and licence of having allowed 'an authentic voice to speak'. In this way, such claims to truth are understood: 1) to be predicated upon the 'elevation of the experiential as the authentic' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 305) and 2) to involve a 'special faith in the interview' (1997: 304) as the primary means to access such 'experience'. As we have suggested, there are numerous cases where researchers might make precisely this order of claim. However, there are also many other cases where they do not. Other claims to insight might be made by taking what is said at interview as a form of evidence from which researchers can pursue particular forms of engagement and through doing

so construct arguments about certain aspects of the social world. The distinction is significant. It implies that for many researchers what is said at interview does not *in and of itself* 'tell about the world' in some direct, unfiltered way, rather *it has the capacity to tell about the world* through researchers using what is said not just by this interviewee, but by others, and indeed other researchers, through a dialogue between theory and evidence, to say something about the social world both within and beyond the interview encounter (Edwards and Holland 2013).

Here Silverman's comments in which he recounts his guidance to doctoral students are particularly instructive: he says 'I ask PhD students who earnestly desire to understand how certain people "see" *their* world: "do you really think you can do better than an expert counsellor or even Oprah Winfrey"? (Silverman 2017: 145 *our emphasis*). This, of course, points to but one way of conceiving of the interviewer, interviewee and the interview (one Silverman does not share). However, while it may indeed exemplify what he understands to be the guiding example of the interview society, it is by no means the only way to conceive of this enterprise. Indeed, it is precisely because this is not what many interviewers actually do, that this imagery is misleading. An oft-invoked adage in the training of doctoral students elsewhere is to tell them not to try to get their interview participants to answer their research questions, but instead to use interviews as part of a research strategy to gather evidence from which they as researchers can address their research questions (see, for example, commentaries in Baker and Edwards 2012). Moreover, arguably the bigger problem with Silverman's PhD student's question is that it is predicated on the understanding that people operate within entirely separate 'worlds'; again, we are oriented towards imagery of *homo clausus*: separate, inner and outer worlds that stand in relation to each other.

Where Atkinson and Silverman (1997: 317) are critical of the faith placed in the 'revelatory power of the narrative', there is an assumption that the power for 'revelation' or perhaps better, the capacity for empirical discovery resides solely in the substantive character of the narrative 'itself' and the related claim that 'it' authentically conveys experience, which, of course, they robustly dispute. We agree with Atkinson and Silverman in questioning those who claim to have facilitated immanent revelatory insights on this basis. However, as we show elsewhere (see Hughes, K. *et al.* this Special Section), narratives can be *both* constraining and enabling in this respect. Moreover, empirical 'revelations' rarely stem from accessing a singular, or essential 'truth', but rather through researchers engaging with the evidence produced at interview to 'tell about' the social world beyond the interview encounter. This might include, for example, empirical and conceptual engagement with the broader sets of relationships of which the data produced by both researchers and participants form an integral part; the broader interdependencies, the broader social complexities, the social conditions, under which such things are said and done. In this way, their 'revelatory potential' is not confined to the interview encounter, not least because participants can speak with varying degrees of accuracy, of 'encounters' before and outside of this. Thus, such 'revelatory' potential is realised not so much as a substantive characteristic of any particular interview account, but *in the manner of engagement*

through which such data are apprehended. As Bourdieu proposes: '...the power of a mode of thinking never manifests itself more clearly than in its capacity to constitute socially insignificant objects into scientific objects ... or ... to approach a majorly socially significant object in an unexpected manner' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 51). Even when interview talk does not directly reference broader relationships, the enduring social dynamics, of, say, class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, it nonetheless can be 'seen' to be *infused* with gendered, classed, racialised positions and dispositions through the manner of its apprehension and rendering via methodological engagement (see, for example, Skeggs *et al.* 2008; Back 2012).[vi]

Via this more synthetic engagement, we propose that even the most performative, gestural, trope-laden discursive display of 'interview talk' might have the potential (precisely through its involving an interplay of form and content in the performative dance of an interview figuration) to yield insights not so much in and of itself, but through its serving as the basis (whether through corroboration, disruption, distinction, etc. in dialogue with other evidence, theory and research) for more expansive knowledge of the social world. Furthermore, such 'revelations' might not be realised or uncovered in a singular moment, but through subsequent engagements, perhaps secondary analysis by later researchers, or even via a much longer-term intergenerational process of knowledge development. To return to our core theme, this involves a somewhat different way of thinking about interviews, what they are, what they are for, and therefore what and when they can be used to 'say'.

Revisiting the Interview Society
At this juncture it is pertinent to revisit the social life of interviews as it has been depicted by Atkinson and Silverman. In their (1997) paper, they start by discussing the full panoply of interviews that comprise the interview society, but ultimately focus upon a single type: the biographical interview in which a self is revealed, exposed, and thus constructed. Following Foucault, the interview is stylistically rendered as a paradigmatic technology of the self — a confessional — albeit one that is given 'new twists' through different media technologies (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 315). They write:

> Whether the interviewer be a talk show host inviting confidence from a celebrity, an Oprah Winfrey soliciting personal testimony that can be shared with the audience, or a researcher interrogating an informant, the responses are always likely to be couched in an idiom that reflects prior narration. *The self is rehearsed.* (1997: 314 *our emphasis*)

This list of three actually focuses on only one, particular, kind of interview that consciously solicits biographical elucidation. The social life of interviews includes many kinds beyond the celebrity interview — those of police interrogations, legal cross-examinations, job interviews, and many others besides. We might, for instance, consider as interviews a discussion with a stranger on a transatlantic flight; a text exchange with a friend to find out what happened on a night out; an escalating flame war on Twitter (see

also Edwards and Holland 2013). Indeed, interviews are everywhere, both in the sense of their 'social life' within and beyond the academy, and in terms of their expressing a paradigmatic technology of selfhood pervasive to late modernity (Foucault 1979). To the extent that we accept, for the moment, Burgess's definition of interviews as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1988), we might also accept that such purposes vary considerably. Some may centre on biographical work and self-narration. Indeed, this may be intentional and core to the interview's purpose. However, others may follow a range of different purposes in which recourse to biographical narration might intentionally be minimised. We fully accept that such accounts at interview are likely to be 'couched in idiom', and that such idiom might typically be biographically and narratively oriented, however *that is not all they are.*

The extent to which interviews *focus* on biographical and narrative work varies enormously. The paradigmatic imagery of 'confessional' highlights the pervasiveness of a model of interviews in which the outcome is personal revelation (confession), typically through a more or less coercive dialogic process. Indeed, in the case of *certain kinds of* interview, interviewees are indeed intentionally 'interrogated': they are forced to get their 'story straight'. However, in others *the data* collaboratively produced are 'interrogated', or perhaps better, 'investigated' in a different way, often post-hoc, and perhaps not for the purposes of confession or biographical revelation but, again, for what these might be used to tell about the social world (see Hughes, K. *et al.* in this Special Section for examples). Just as a lie can sometimes be more useful than a truth in a police interview, a sensationalised account of an event in a newspaper can tell about the political values of is editorship, an historical document written from the perspective of dominant groups can tell much about the mythologising of a nation. The point, of course, is not to treat what is said in any such cases an 'uncontentious revelation', or unfiltered 'truth', but to understand each kind of text as part and parcel of the relational social nexus of its becoming (Hughes *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, it is also important not to restrict, or even close off, how one conceives of, or apprehends, that social nexus. If we treat all interviews as places where all of those involved implicitly understand their central task as one of revelation, and where actors make or adjudicate different kinds of appeal, we risk over-stylising and so limiting our apprehension of the bewildering array of forms that what we deem to call interviews can take. Interviews may well have enduring discursive regularities that can be studied empirically, but they are also *different every time* in terms of their emergent dynamics, particularly in and through the interlacing of the plans, intentions, understandings that those involved have within those 'encounters'. It is precisely in those differences *and* those consistencies that they have the potential to produce evidence that can be used to speak beyond the specific social context (or narrow relational nexus) of their generation (see Hughes, K. *et al.* this Themed Section).

Part of why advocates of the radical critique resist this view of interviews — that interviews can be used to speak beyond the narrow nexus of the 'encounter' they comprise — links to a more general epistemological and methodological stance. As Hammersley (2017) has argued, Atkinson and Silverman, along with other

advocates of the radical critique, pursue a 'naturalist' stance via a particularly strong form of social constructivism that has its origins in ethnomethodology. Essentially this position holds that important data about behaviour outside of interview settings will not be available via the indirect, culturally mediated, reports and accounts collected at interview, and thus, moreover, it is 'only via direct observation … we can understand and observe social forms … [since]... the indirect reports provided in interviews will be insufficiently detailed and may also be unreliable' (2017: 174). Hammersley's counter-critique is to question the radical epistemic scepticism that such assumptions are based upon: the 'blanket suspicion that informants are lying or mistaken, or that what they present is misleading because constructed' (2017: 183). In everyday life, he suggests, we only doubt that what we are told by others is accurate if we have good reason to do so. Why, he asks, should we do so differently in the context of research?

Here we find partial agreement with Hammersley, but again would caution against relying on the 'truthfulness', 'plausibility', or 'reliability' of interview accounts as the final arbiter of their worth. As Becker (2007: 72) suggests, all kinds of representation (and here we include those produced at interview) are 'perfect — for something'. To labour the point somewhat: the greatest lies can yield 'truths' of their own *through the manner of their apprehension.*[vii] Notwithstanding this point, Hammersley's arguments serve to highlight something of an inherent contradiction in the arguments of proponents of the radical critique. This involves their oscillation between, on the one hand, the idea that interviews cannot speak beyond their own context: about 'everyday life'; and on the other, the idea that 'everyday life' is saturated with interviews, and conversely, that interviews are saturated with the cultural tropes of everyday life. Paralleling this is the idea that we can never trust what respondents tell us at interview as faithfully consistent with their experience, and yet we can seeming trust with absolute conviction that what they say is consistent with the cultural tropes that *we through our experience as researchers* read in and through them.

Furthermore, we encounter, once again, a dichotomous opposition between the idea of 'natural' data and settings, and those 'manufactured' in as much as they have been orchestrated intentionally for the purposes of research. At one level, the distinction makes good, plausible sense: there are important differences between a conversation that would have occurred *irrespective* of a research study taking place, and one that occurred *because* of it. However, the distinction becomes less iron-clad when it is further considered. If we accept the arguments concerning the interview society — that the social life of the interview is so pervasive that it extends across all social contexts, all cultural imaginaries, that it, indeed, paradigmatically expresses *how we do ourselves* — then, to put it provocatively, what could be more 'natural' that setting up an interview for the purposes of research? Why, moreover, is social research a particular case that must be treated differently from, say, researching an online purchase, researching prospective partners through a series of dates, researching a potential job move, and so forth? In each case 'our' purposes vary, the kinds of conclusions we might want to draw differ markedly, and our forms of engagement, involvement, detachment, conceptual and ethical investment, and so on are also different, but all to a greater or lesser

extent are part of 'everyday life'. We again encounter a distinction that involves a series of dividing lines, here as a parcelling out of the social world into ontologically distinct realms that stand in a somewhat contradictory relation to one another. It is as though 'the research interview' stands outside 'everyday social life', and thus must be treated as a special type of crucible in key respects, one unable faithfully to 'speak to' relationships beyond the performative encounter that it constitutes, bar, paradoxically, those which express the cultural tropes of the interview society *so pervasive to everyday life*.[viii]

Conclusion

Proponents of the radical critique offer a now indispensable point of departure from which to explore what can be said and read with and from interviews. Their analyses of the conceptual imagery exemplified by the 'Romantic subject' highlight significant limitations to understanding interviews as encounters in which: 1) an authentic voice is speaking in a manner seemingly unmediated by cultural idiom; 2) interview talk can speak directly of and to authentic experiences; 3) 'giving voice' is in itself a sufficient methodological principle to ensure a polyphony of voices, particularly from those otherwise marginalised. The radical critique effectively highlights the problems of understanding interviews in this way, and accordingly, guards against making claims to having discovered authentic and true accounts of experience on this basis. Its proponents' stress on the performative character of interview exchanges rightly highlights how interview accounts are mediated by cultural conventions, particularly those that relate to the biographical and narrative 'work' that has come to be strongly associated with interviews.

However, the radical critique's critical interrogation of the Romantic subject simultaneously goes too far in one sense, but not far enough in another. Significantly, it leaves intact a residual *homo clausus* 'dividing' line between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds that finds repeated expression in a range of parallel divisions, most significantly, in a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between content and discourse, referent and referer, the experienced and the expressed. Partly because of this, advocates of the radical critique have suggested researchers should primarily treat interview data as narrative performance. In relation to their own work, they have deployed analytical strategies that treat interviews as at once manufactured performative artifices which can scarcely speak beyond themselves about everyday life, and simultaneously as encounters which invariably speak of (prior) cultural tropes that characterise not just the interview society, but the self-reflecting subject more generally.

In response to the radical critique's contention that interviews cannot faithfully 'tell' about everyday social life, we have sought to show how people engaged in interviews invariably invoke and 'speak to' relationships beyond the social nexus that these 'encounters' constitute. That they can is, paradoxically, core to the idea of narrative performance and rehearsal. However, as we have argued, there are more analytical and synthetic possibilities on the menu than solely the examination of tropes and cultural repertoires in exploring these

broader relationships. Crucially, these other choices might also include a further move away from the inductivist axiom that we can only get revelations directly from our participants.

We have argued that adopting a more open, relational, and plural way of expressing some of the problems identified by proponents of the radical critique provides part of the means to overcome these. Here, we have drawn upon Elias's conception of *homines aperti* as a basis to foreground 'synthesis'-oriented, not simply 'analytical', modes of engagement through alloys and blends of 'involvement' and 'detachment' from and with those with whom we are engaged via interviews. Such an approach also entails the understanding that the revelatory potential of interviews resides not simply in the 'data' they 'produce' or 'construct', but in how they are imagined in the full process of research. Our position is that is necessary to move beyond equating what people tell about themselves at interview with what interviews can be used to tell about the social world. Accordingly, the power of the mode of analysis that apprehends interviews, how the 'talk' generated in interview encounters might be brought into dialogue with other sources of evidence, other studies, other theories, and so forth are integral to how they might be used to develop knowledge with greater revelatory potential, or perhaps better, greater analytical purchase upon the social world of which it forms part.

References

Anderson, P. (1980) *Arguments Within English Marxism*. London: Verso.

Atkinson, P. (2015) *For Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Atkinson, P. and Silverman, D. (1997) Kundera's immortality: the interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry* 3(3): 304–325.

Atkinson, P., Coffey, A. and Delamont, S. (2003) *Key Themes in Qualitative Research: continuities and changes*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press.

Back, L. (2012) 'Les Back' commentary in Baker, S. and Edwards, R. (eds) *How Many Interviews is Long Enough*. Discussion Paper. NCRM. http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/ Accessed March 2020.

Baker, S. and Edwards, R. (2012) *How Many Interviews is Long Enough*. Discussion Paper. NCRM. http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/ Accessed March 2020.

Becker, H. (2007) *Telling About Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Blakely, H. and Moles, K. (2017) 'Interviewing in the 'Interview Society': making visible the biographical work of producing accounts for interviews'. *Qualitative Research*, 17(2): 159–172.

Burgess, R. (1988) 'Conversations with a purpose: the ethnographic interview in educational research'. In Burgess, R. (ed.) *Studies in Qualitative Methodology: a Research Annual*. Vol. 1. London: JAI Press.

Denzin, N. (1991) *Images of Postmodern Society*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Dingwall, R. (1997). Accounts, interviews and observations. In: Miller G and Dingwall R (eds) *Context and Method in Qualitative Research*. Sage, pp. 51–65.

Dunning, E. and Hughes, J. (2013) *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology*. London: Bloomsbury.

Edwards, R. and Holland, J. (2013) *What is Qualitative Interviewing*. London: Bloomsbury.

Elias, N. (2007) *Involvement and Detachment*. Edited by Stephen Quilley. Dublin: UCD Press. (Collected Works, vol. 8).

Elias, N. (2010 [1987]) *The Society of Individuals*. Edited by Robert van Krieken. Dublin: UCD Press. (Collected Works, vol. 10). (First published in German (1987) *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*, ed. Michael Schröter. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag; earlier English edition published by Blackwell 1991).

Jason Hughes, Kahryn Hughes, Grace Sykes & Katy Wright (2020) Beyond performative talk: critical observations on the radical critique of reading interview data, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2020.1766757

Elias, N. (2012a [1939]) *On the Process of Civilisation*. Edited by Stephen Mennell, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Richard Kilminster. Dublin: UCD Press. (Collected Works, vol. 3). (First published in German (1939) *Uber den Process der Zivilisation*. (2 vols). Basel: Hans zum Falken; earlier English editions published by Blackwell (2 vols) 1994 and 2000 (both in one vol.)).

Elias, N. (2012b [1970]) *What Is Sociology?* Edited by Artur Bogner, Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell. Dublin: UCD Press ((Collected Works, vol. 5), First published in German as *Was ist Soziologie*. Munich: Juventa).

Foucault, M. (1979) *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1. Allen Lane: London.

Gubrium, J. and Holstein, J. (2003) 'From the individual interview to the interview society'. In: Gubrium J. and Holstein J. (*eds*) *Postmodern Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage. 21–49.

Hammersley, M. (2003) 'Recent radical criticism of interview studies: any implications for the sociology of education'. *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 24(1): 119–126.

Hammersley, M. (2017) 'Interview data: a qualified defence against the radical critique'. *Qualitative Research*, 17(2): 173–186.

Hammersley, M. and Gomm, R. (2008). Assessing the radical critique of interviews. In: Hammersley, M. (2008) *Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*. Sage, pp. 89–100.

Hughes, J. (2003) *Learning to Smoke: Tobacco Use in the West*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hughes, J. (2013) 'Norbert Elias and the habits of good sociology', *Human Figurations*, **2**(1). https://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0002.107?view=text;rgn=main

Hughes, J. (2015) 'Looking elsewhere: Howard S. Becker as unwilling organisational theorist'. *Organization*, 22(6): 769–787.

Hughes, J., Simpson, R., Slutskaya, N., Simpson, A. and Hughes, K. (2016) 'Beyond the Symbolic: A Relational Approach to Dirty Work through a Study of Refuse Collectors and Street Cleaners'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(1): 106–122.

Hughes, K, (2007) Migrating identities: the relational constitution of drug use and addiction. *Sociology of Health and Illness,* 29(5):1–19. See also a 2019 review of this paper for the Society for the Studies of Addiction: https://www.addiction-ssa.org/knowledge-hub/qmjc-april-2019-migrating-identities-the-relational-constitution-of-drug-use-and-addiction/

Jason Hughes, Kahryn Hughes, Grace Sykes & Katy Wright (2020) Beyond performative talk: critical observations on the radical critique of reading interview data, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2020.1766757

Hughes, K., Goodwin, J. and Hughes, J. (2016) 'Documenti e reperti umani come figurazioni'. *CAMBIO: Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali – Journal of Social Transformations,* 6(11): 123–138. http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/cambio-18788

Hughes, K. & Valentine, G. (March 2016) The time of our lives: towards a temporal understanding of internet gambling, *Belvedere Meridionale, http://www.belvedere-meridionale.hu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/02_Hughes%20&%20Valentine_BelvedereMeridionale_vol28_2016_01.pdf*

Hughes, K., Tarrant, A., Hughes, J. (2020) 'Re-approaching interview data through Qualitative Secondary Analysis: Purposeful participation in interviews with internet gamblers', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*; Themed Section.

Hughes, J., Saramago, A., Dunning, M., Hughes, K. (forthcoming) 'Fields worlds and figurations: problems with "depth" conceptual imagery and "flat" social ontology'. Paper based upon Hughes, J. (2016) 'Fields, Worlds and Figurations: Conceptual Imagery and Political Investments in the work of Bourdieu, Becker and Elias'. Keynote address to the sixteenth International Civilising Processes Symposium, Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES) Vitoria, Brazil. 21st–25th November, 2016.

Kundera, M. (1991) I*mmortality*. London: Faber& Faber.

Penna, C. (2016) '*Homo clausus, homo sacer, homines aperti*: challenges for group analysis in the 21st century. A response to Haim Weinberg's 40th Foulkes lecture'. *Group Analysis*, 49(4): 357–369.

Rojek, C. (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.

Rojek, C. (2012) *Fame Attack*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Savage, M. (2010) *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Silverman, D. (2013) *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, Reasonably Cheap Book about Qualitative Research* (second edition). London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (2017) 'How was it for you? The Interview Society and the irresistible rise of the (poorly analyzed) interview'. *Qualitative Research*, 17(2): 144–158.

Skeggs, B., Wood, H. and Thumim, N. (2008) "Oh goodness, I am watching 'reality' television': How methods make class in audience research'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11: 1: 5–24.

Van Krieken, R. (2012) *Celebrity Society*. London: Routledge.

Wacquant, L. (1989) 'Toward a reflexive sociology: a workshop with Pierre Bourdieu', *Sociological Theory* 7(1): 26–63.

Whitaker, M. and Atkinson, P. (2019) 'Authenticity and the interview: a positive response to the radical critique'. *Qualitative Research*, 19(6): 619–634.

Winnicott, D.W. (1947) *The Child and the Outside World*. London: Tavistock Publications.

[i] Corresponding author, Jason Hughes. Professor of Sociology, School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester. School of Media, Communication and Sociology. Room 1.06.107–111 Princess Road East. Leicester, LE1 7LA. jason.hughes@le.ac.uk

[ii] We thank Ros Edwards and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[iii] Narratives are invoked here in two senses. The first is to convey the idea that, particularly in late modernity, we have a tendency to understand ourselves through stories; the second to promote the notion that interview talk is a form of storytelling, not a direct recounting of experience.

[iv] We might consider a number of possibilities for this 'persistence' in this respect. One is the pervasiveness of particular academic trends, but these do not occur in a vacuum. As Hughes (2013) has explored, 'extra-scientific' standards, expectations, institutional pressures, and 'tropes' may also play a key part. These might pertain to particular disciplinary norms that vary across space and time and follow a series of 'turns'. They might also include particular policy and institutional shifts. For instance, the 'impact' and 'engagement' agenda may have an important role to play in this respect (see Edwards and Holland in this Themed Section).

[v] A sociological focus upon 'pluralities of humans bonded together' is part of a much more nuanced sociological position that has been outlined elsewhere (see, for example, Dunning and Hughes 2013). Briefly, Elias's position is founded in a particular sociology of the body that encompasses, for instance, how the development of complex musculature to the human face is interrelated to the importance of expression, smiling, bonding and other means of social connection. A view of human beings as *always* plural is key to notions of interdependence. At its core, this involves the recognition that from birth, humans are born into bonds of interdependence. As the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has saliently expressed it 'There is no such thing as a baby ... if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship' (1947: 135)

[vi] Our use of the specific terminology 'broader social relationships' and 'enduring social dynamics' in this respect is part of an attempt to challenge received conceptual imagery invoking 'deeper' structures which, in turn, typically pivot on variants of a division between the noumenal and the phenomenal. Elsewhere we explore such alternatives as part of a critique of the notion of 'flat' social ontology and the limits to 'depth' conceptual imagery (see Hughes *et al.* forthcoming).

[vii] For example, Hughes (2003) discusses a seventeenth century interview with a French visitor to England in which he (the visitor) comments on the pervasiveness of smoking. The French visitor describes how smoking was so widespread in England at the time (the early 1600s), across all social strata, genders, ages, and so forth that mothers would pack their children's satchels with pipes instead of lunches since English people of the time viewed tobacco as more important than food because, by the visitor's account, 'they say it dissipates the evil humours of the brain'. Hughes, like many other observers of the period, casts considerable doubt on the veracity of this account, indeed, over whether the 'interview' even took place. Nonetheless, the particular locutions involved, its position in a time series of accounts forming the longer-term development of tobacco and the broader 'figuration' of which these all formed a part, were observed by Hughes to 'speak to', for instance, the discursive positioning of tobacco in early European medical cosmology (including the humoral conception of the body), the cultural translation of Amerindian practices and substances, the development of a shifting relationship between tobacco and disease, and so forth. Whether or not the account was 'true' (it was likely not), it had its own potential 'truths', or perhaps better, it offered its own kind of evidential value when apprehended in particular ways and when brought into dialogue with a broader array of theory and evidence.

[viii] Of course to view the everyday through the prism of 'research' is itself to employ and extend a kind of 'trope'. The point is to show how through apprehending any, if not all, aspects of the social world through a model of analytical engagement which foregrounds cultural forms has its own utility and also its own limits. It ultimately can also be used against itself, here in relation to highlighting the 'cultural work' at play in delineating between 'natural' and 'artificial' settings, 'research' and 'everyday life', and as discussed earlier, between the 'experienced' and the 'expressed'.