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# Introduction: Making the case for Qualitative Interviews

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***Abstract***

*We introduce four papers comprising a Themed Section for this issue of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology, which together 'Make the Case for Qualitative Interviews'. Here our aim is to show how this collection provides a timely contribution to key debates concerning the value of qualitative interviews, particularly as these are employed and analysed in much recent social scientific thinking. We explore ways to move beyond recent, sometimes constraining and occasionally dismissive, approaches to interviews in the social sciences through reframing and reconfiguring central questions germane to these debates. We also seek to challenge a broader neo-liberal trend towards valuing quantitative over depth qualitative research. Through this Introduction, and the collection of papers that follows, we seek to re-establish the value of qualitative interviews by shifting the focus from a preoccupation with what interviews can be said to do, towards questions centring on what can be done with interviews.*

**Key words**: analysis, epistemology, qualitative interviews, qualitative methods Radical Critique, synthesis.

## Introduction

This Themed Section has its origins in a one-day conference convened by Fabienne Portier-Le Cocq at the University of Tours early in 2019. The focus of the event was qualitative interviewing. The central theme was 'freedom of speech', or as we have taken it forward in this collection of papers, the *freedom to say*. The event was a timely response to a particular moment in the development of qualitative research where interviewing in particular had come repeatedly to be called into question as a secure and worthwhile basis for social scientific knowledge of the world. Part of the challenge to interviewing in this respect draws from the growing emergence and analytical utilisation of 'big data', representing a possible crisis for conventional methods in the social sciences (Savage and Burrows 2007; Burrows and Savage 2014). Another, longer-standing, but recently reenergised axis of challenge draws from a 'radical critique' (Dingwall 1997; Hammersley and Gomm 2008) of interview studies. This critique has raised major questions concerning both the character of 'talk within' and the possibilities for 'saying with' interviews.

The radical critique centrally challenges approaches which treat interview data as *directly* representative of peoples' thoughts, feelings, intentions, understandings, meanings and so forth. In particular, the critique questions the idea of interview 'data' being able to 'speak for themselves'. Advocates of the critique (see, in particular, Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Silverman 2017, Whitaker and Atkinson 2019) have drawn attention to the cultural mediation of 'interview talk'. Their aim is to facilitate a shift from focusing upon interview 'data' as an unmediated product and towards instead interview 'talk' as a form of action. Further, they highlight how the latter 'interview talk' is best conceived as a particular form of performative, narrative and biographical *work*. Together, then, these authors foreground what people *do* in and with interviews in order to challenge some of the common ways researchers use interviews to make certain kinds of claim.

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Following from this, the challenge for research using qualitative interview methodology is to move away from conceiving of interviews as a kind of 'tool' that permits a gaze into the interior lifeworlds of participants. Instead we are encouraged to think about how interviewing is 'done' in ways that are more or less consistent with the broader 'social life of interviews' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Proponents of the critique have, accordingly, urged qualitative researchers to rethink claims to have solicited 'depth understanding' from interviewing, particularly when depth is treated as synonymous with the psychic or experiential depth understood to be derived from permitting a supposedly 'authentic' voice to speak. The critique is highly significant, particularly since interview methodology has become something of a cornerstone to 'depth' qualitative research. Indeed, over several decades, interviews have emerged as a foundational strategy for researchers seeking to engage with 'things that matter, in ways that matter' (Mason, 2000:1; see also Edwards and Holland 2013).

The papers in this Themed Section variously respond to this challenge by building upon a consideration of what can be said to occur in interviews, and what interviews can be said to 'do', through also exploring a range of questions and possibilities concerning how researchers apprehend interview 'evidence' (Becker 2017). 'Evidence' has somewhat different connotations from 'data': the former is more active, requiring us to explicate the different ways researchers render interview talk as certain kinds of evidence and how such 'data' can be (re)purposed through particular forms of *engagement*. However, the distinction between 'data' and 'evidence' is relatively mutable, and our contrasting the terms here is intended principally to foreground epistemologically a consideration of precisely how researchers engage with what is said and done at interviews in subsequent forms of intellectual endeavour. That term *subsequent* too is significant — it is here intended to draw attention to the processual character of research, not just the interview 'encounter' itself, but also the broader sets of processes of which these form part. Subsequent endeavours include transcription, analysis, the development of findings and published outputs. Further, these might also include subsequent research-theorising, dialogue with other forms of evidence, and the use of interview-derived data, perhaps by later generations of researchers, in the pursuit of new kinds of research questions and problems not anticipated at the inception of particular studies. Thus, a central argument made across this collection of papers is that it is not just what people 'do' at interview, it is what we as researchers *do with this* that also warrants careful consideration. This builds upon core aspects of the radical critique, but also involves an emphasis that constitutes a challenge to it by further revisiting how interviews might be used, and thereby reclaiming their potential as a cornerstone to qualitative research.

As suggested above, 'making the case for interviews' is especially important in the current research climate wherein investments are increasingly directed towards 'Big Data' driven approaches to identifying and addressing globally relevant social questions. Governments, funding councils, even universities, can be seen to privilege such research as apparently providing the empirical foundations for the most accurate and comprehensive insights and findings. Arguably such data do indeed have their own affordances that, in certain key respects, eclipse those of traditional methods within the social sciences (Savage and Burrows, 2007; Burrows and Savage, 2014). However, consistent with the arguments presented in the various papers that constitute this Themed Section, we need to consider not just the properties,

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affordances, and character of the data as providing the basis for social scientists to make authoritative claims about the social world. We need also to think about how such data are apprehended and utilised. Once again, it is what we do with such data that is also of importance in this respect. Since social scientists typically do not work in evidence silos, there are new possibilities for how researchers might *synthesise* different forms of evidence both within datasets and also across different kinds and sources of data including the various disciplinary knowledge terrains that have developed around these.

Taken together, the collection of papers presented in this Themed Section develop a range of arguments and debates on the continuing value of qualitative interviews for social sciences research and the significance of attention to how we treat what is said at interview. While these papers focus primarily on Euro-Western settings, the debates covered and advances presented arguably speak to similar work in a broader global context. The collection starts with tackling questions of the value of qualitative interviews in wider contexts: how might we use interview evidence to 'tell about society' (Becker, 2007)? The paper by Jason Hughes and colleagues presents a central critical engagement with key features of the radical critique. After finding considerable common ground with core aspects of the critique, Hughes *et al.* develop their own counter-position founded upon further challenging the conceptual imagery entailed by notions of the 'romantic subject'. They argue that in considering how interview talk comprises particular kinds of narrative and biographical work, proponents of the radical critique apprehend interview evidence in a way which has both certain affordances and analytical limitations. Hughes *et al.* consider how more 'synthetic' forms of engagement might move beyond a preoccupation with what can be said at interview towards a fuller consideration of what interview talk might be used to 'say', not just about interview encounters, but the broader social contexts in which such encounters are situated.

These arguments are further developed and explored empirically in the paper by Kahryn Hughes and colleagues in relation to a study of problem internet gamblers. Here, Hughes *et al.* address questions concerning the value of a shift from a predominant or exclusive focus upon how data are constructed and produced at interview, and towards how such evidence might be *reapprehended* through different forms of research engagement. Recasting the debate on primary and secondary analysis in terms of different degrees and qualities of 'proximity' and 'distance' from the formative contexts of data generation, they revisit a common assumption underpinning ethnographic approaches: that researchers are required to 'be there' to say anything of worth about the evidence so generated. Instead, both proximity to and distance from, the temporal, relational and epistemic nexuses of data production are considered to offer their own distinctive affordances. Using qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) of interview data, Hughes *et al.* explore how participants reflexively negotiate the limits to the 'stock' of narratives within which to frame and recount their experiences. In this way, they address a core concern of this themed section, namely how we might apprehend participants' 'freedom to speak' in what are highly mediated research contexts. Additionally, they show how interview evidence can be used both to *speak of* the temporal, relational, spatial, epistemic contexts of its production, and also to *speak to* contexts and questions beyond these.

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In their paper, '*Reviewing Challenges and the Future for Qualitative Interviewing*', Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland reforge the methodological terrain and importance of qualitative interviews in a climate characterised by neoliberal orientations towards speed, cost-effectiveness, and 'Big' quantitative data. Reclaiming the importance and epistemological value of qualitative interviews, they demonstrate the opportunities for innovation, engagement, and resistance through revising epistemological questions about qualitative research. Their work emphasises a theme central to the paper by Jason Hughes and colleagues, namely how qualitative evidence may be used to inform upon social processes. Relatedly, they consider the question of who might listen to research evidence, and of the barriers for qualitative research findings to reach broader audiences. In these and other ways, their paper attends to the question of how qualitative interview data may be used to 'tell about society' through elucidating how broader political contexts and periods characterised by neoliberal orientations towards particular conceptions of what constitutes 'evidence' constrain and enable how qualitative research is both understood to 'speak' and be *heard*.

The final paper in this Themed Section revisits questions of *listening* and *representation* in relation to how we treat interview data. Using contrasting examples of researching 'poverty' and 'riches', Kate Summers argues for greater distinction between ethical commitments to individual research participants, and to the 'groups' to which participants belong. Her account of ethical reflexivity foregrounds the complex navigation involved in attending to issues of 'representation' in research through considering what stories are available to participants in interview encounters. Here, a central concern is that of which narratives become elevated over and above those of others, particularly within contexts involving a complex asymmetrical interplay between participants' individual interests and those relating to researchers' broader disciplinary commitments. As Summers argues, this is especially important to considering the potential longer-term impact of research engagement upon those with whom we conduct research. Summer's arguments in this respect are complementary to themes developed in the paper by Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, particularly with regards to Edwards and Holland's discussion of the longer lifetimes of findings as they are translated through various, possibly unanticipated, contexts.

Thus, together, the papers explore not only what *we*, researchers and participants, do with data, but also invite us to consider how what we do with interview data may entail recursive processes over the longer lifetimes of findings. Such processes may unintentionally involve the ongoing shaping of cultural tropes about participants which they may have been expressly trying to discredit, work against, and otherwise resist (Fink and Lomax, 2016). In this regard, we need to consider questions of what we do *in* interviews, what we do *with* them, and what this use *does* as a set of interrelated processes which play out over time, often in ways not fully anticipated and intended at the inception of particular studies, and never perfectly known. It is through these and other modes of careful and comprehensive engagement with interviews and indeed other forms of qualitative research that we might in a more secure way reclaim some of our *freedoms to say*.

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