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# 1

# Interviews

Tim Rapley

I was originally asked to write a chapter on something called 'in-depth interviews'. Now, I knew by that specific term that the editors wanted me to tell a story about something understandable as an 'interview' – a story that describes how two people, often relative strangers, sit down and talk about a specific topic. One of those strangers – an interviewer – introduces the specific topic, then asks a question, the other speaker – an interviewee – gives something hearable as an answer to that specific question, the interviewer listens to the answer and then asks another question … and so the pattern repeats itself until at some point the interviewer says 'Thank you, that was really helpful/interesting/useful' and then they part company. So far so good – I know what it means to talk about 'interviews'.

Then I came to the term 'in-depth' and I was very aware that they don't want me to talk about interviews that *only* require 'yes-no-maybe' types of answers. But then I got stuck. I knew they wanted a description of a style of interviewing that encourages interviewees to produce 'thick descriptions' – where interviewees are specifically encouraged, by questions and other verbal and non-verbal methods, to produce *elaborated* and *detailed* answers. A doubt emerged; what specifically makes an in-depth interview an 'in-depth interview' compared to the academic literature that names such interviews as: active, biographical, collaborative, conversational, depth, dialogical, focused, guided, informal, life-history, non-directed, open-ended, oral-history, reflexive, semi-structured, etc.? So I decided to write the chapter on *qualitative* interviews, as this term seems to be a useful gloss for the disparate descriptions of the practices of this version of interviewing.

Now, some people may be thinking that I am being pedantic. Others may see those paragraphs above as 'setting the scene' for the argument that follows. My commentary is trying to highlight two things. Firstly that, as Silverman (1993: 19) notes, we are currently part of an '"interview society" in which interviews seem central to making sense of our lives'. The interview – seen in various forms of news interviews, talk shows and documentaries, alongside research interviews – *pervades and produces our contemporary cultural experiences and knowledges of authentic personal, private selves*. The face-to-face interview is presented as enabling a 'special insight' into subjectivity, voice and lived experience (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Importantly, we all just know 'at a glance' what it takes to be an interviewer or an interviewee.

Secondly, the sheer range of terms available to encompass the various formats of qualitative interviews begins to outline the trans-disciplinary 'industrial complex' of academic work on interviewing. Interviewing is currently *the* central resource through which contemporary social science engages with issues that concern it (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Since the emergence of the classical social survey interview, the interview has been deconstructed and theorized and consequently re-emerged in various guises. Symbolic interactionism sought to 'open' the talk so as to obtain more 'textured' and 'authentic' accounts. Feminist accounts sought to 'unmask' and then 'de-centre' the power balance. Alongside this work emerged an interest in the interview itself as a topic of research (notably Cicourel, 1964) and, following the linguistic turn, the gaze fell to the interviewee's shifting and complex discursive, identity and narrative work.[1]

As my discussion above begins to highlight, qualitative interviewing is, in some senses, both 'simple and self-evident' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 3). It draws on the everyday practices of asking and answering questions and the everyday identities of questioner/answerer and interviewer/interviewee. And I argue below that, contra most of the current literature on 'how to' interview, interviewers don't need massive amounts of detailed technical (and moral) instruction on how to conduct qualitative interviews. This how-to-interview literature, with its concerns with the production of 'neutral and facilitative' or 'rapport building' questions and gestures, is the outcome of specific theoretical concerns about the analytic status of interview data. I argue that interview talk, and hence the 'interview data' that emerges from this, is the product of the local interaction of the speakers. As Gubrium and Holstein note, interviewers 'cannot very well taint knowledge if that knowledge is not conceived as existing in some pure form apart from the circumstances of its production' (2002: 15). Following from this, interviewers don't need to worry excessively about whether their questions and gestures are 'too leading' or 'not empathetic enough'; *they should just get on with interacting with that specific person*.

Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) *accounts* or *versions* of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts. As Fontana notes, 'given the irremediably collaborative and constructed nature of the interview, a postmodern sentiment would behove us to pay more attention to the *hows*, that is, to try to understand the biographical, contextual, historical, and institutional elements that are brought to the interview and used by both parties' [author's emphasis] (2002: 166). When it comes to analysing interviews, I argue that *you should analyse what actually happened* – how your interaction produced that trajectory of talk, how specific versions of reality are co-constructed, how specific identities, discourses and narratives are produced.

Prior to offering a textured picture of the range of practices and the processes involved in doing qualitative interviewing, I want to present a very brief outline of debates over the analytic status of interview data.

## INTERVIEWING AND THE 'REAL'

Seale (1998), in his overview of qualitative interviewing, identifies the two major traditions on which the analysis of interviews has centred: interview data as a *resource* and interview data as a *topic*. I am aware that such a divide glosses over the myriad of approaches that these terms encapsulates, but, put simply, the story goes something like this:

- *Interview-data-as-resource*: the interview data collected is seen as (more or less) reflecting the interviewees' reality outside the interview.
- *Interview-data-as-topic*: the interview data collected is seen as (more or less) reflecting a reality jointly constructed by the interviewee and interviewer.

The data-as-resource approach has undergone considerable critique from those working in constructionist traditions.[2] Much of this critique stems from highlighting that interviews are *inherently interactional events*, that both speakers mutually monitor each other's talk (and gestures), that the talk is *locally and collaboratively produced.* The critique also centres on the idea that data-as-resource researchers often incorrectly assume that interview-talk is *only* about the official topic of the interview. The talk in an interview may be as much about the person producing themselves as an '*adequate interviewee*', as a '*specific type of person in relation to this specific topic*'. In this sense, interview data may be more a reflection of the social encounter between the interviewer and the interviewee than it is about the actual topic itself. As Dingwall notes, '[t]he interview is an artefact, a joint accomplishment of interviewer and respondent. As such, its relationship to any "real" experience is not merely unknown but in some senses unknowable' (1997: 56).

This leads to considerable analytic attention to view interview-talk as the joint production of *accounts* or *versions* of experiences, emotions, identities, knowledges, opinion, truth, etc. A focus on interview-talk as locally and collaboratively produced does not deny that the talk is reflexively situated in the wider cultural arena (Silverman, 1993). In this sense, interview-talk *speaks to* and *emerges from* the contemporary ways of understanding, experiencing and talking about that specific interview topic. However, these ways of understanding, experiencing and talking about that specific interview topic are contingent on the specific local interactional context and should be analysed, at least initially, from the circumstances of their production.

Confused? Well let me try to offer a brief translation: *Don't rip the words out of context*. Let me now offer a brief demonstration. In a transcript of an interview given below (Excerpt 1,

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lines 28–36), an interviewee says drugs are meaningful to him by way of the 'fact' that they are *meaningful to everyone* – drugs are 'everywhere', 'so much of it around' and it's 'so much … in the news'. The interviewee's account – that *drugs are an 'inescapable' part of our culture* – is intimately tied to his prior talk, his identity as someone who was trained to conduct drug peer-education and the interviewer's question. The interviewee has already noted that drugs are only 'meaningful to him' as he comes from a 'medical family', so any interest in drugs has *only* entered his life through *legitimate and ordinary* ways.[3] The interviewer then asks whether there was any other 'particular interest' in the fact the training would be about drugs. The interviewee then produces the account that *drugs are an 'inescapable' part of our culture*. So that specific account is intimately tied to that specific interactional context, that the interviewee is arguing that 'I don't do drugs and I didn't become a drug peer-educator because I'm either pro- or anti-drugs' – and 'good' peer-educators should not be overtly pro- or anti-drugs.

Now, that was a (brief) focus on how that account or version was locally accomplished. However, that account – that *drugs are an 'inescapable' part of our culture* – emerges from and is shaped by the broader social context of the *contemporary debate about drugs*. The interviewee, in the very act of drawing on that account, is demonstrating (and reinforcing) that broader social norm. The interviewee is demonstrating *one of the possible ways* that are available to understand, experience and talk about drugs. These can be contrasted with the *other possible ways*, be it in the context of other interviews, government reports, newspapers, etc.

Hopefully, that very brief tour begins to outline the debates over the analytic status of interview data. I will return (again and again) to this debate throughout the chapter. I now want to shift to more 'practical' issues, to offer an account of the process that leads up to the interviews.

## RECRUITMENT

The process of finding interviewees and setting up interviews is, as may be obvious, central to the outcomes of the research. Rubin and Rubin (1995) note four key areas around 'recruitment': initially finding a knowledgeable informant, getting a range of views, testing emerging themes with new interviewees, and choosing interviewees to extend results. These are valuable ideals; however, the actual practice can deviate from this – like many things, recruitment routinely happens on an ad-hoc and chance basis.

For example, in one research project I was involved in I had to interview a range of employers – multinational companies to small one-person firms – to understand their experiences and perceptions of employing women in the construction industry. Initially, just finding knowledgeable informants was problematic. When I contacted large organizations, I was repeatedly passed from one department to the next as no one representative was 'officially' responsible, or felt able to talk 'on the record', for the organization's policy in regard to employing women. In comparison, while out socializing, whenever I discussed my research on 'illegal drug-use', people would often put themselves forward as potential interviewees, sharing part of their 'drug biography' in the process.

As the above examples begin to show, the actual 'problems' of recruitment can vary dramatically. When accessing potential interviewees you have to follow many trails, often relying initially on friends and colleagues and then on contacts given by other interviewees.[4] It is important to *try* and get a range of views on the topic of your research, as those few interviewees who produce 'radically different' or contrasting talk can often be central to modifying your theories. Above all, it is vital to take notes about the recruitment process and to offer it in reports of the research as questions of access and recruitment can be central to understanding the 'outcomes' of the research.[5]

## YOUR (INITIAL) LIST OF QUESTIONS

So once you've arranged an interview you have to consider what issues you want to cover with this specific interviewee. Some of the how-to-interview literature discusses taking an interview guide, outline or schedule (e.g. Mason, 1996); some simply talks about interviewers going '[a]rmed with a list of questions' (Warren, 2002: 90). Whatever approach is taken, whether you produce a typed schedule on official headed paper or a handwritten list, it is useful to have something with you, be it 'key' words or written, 'finely crafted', questions.

The actual content of the list of questions is *initially* generated in negotiation with the relevant academic and non-academic literature, alongside your thoughts and hunches about what areas *might* be important to cover in the interview. You need to be aware that the questions you ask can change

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over the life-cycle of the project. The list of questions I take to interview is always shifting in relation to various influences. They 'mutate' in relation to the specific person I am interviewing – my 'recruitment' conversation on the phone with them, what I've read about them or been told about them. Also, this list is influenced by my conversations with my fellow researchers, what I've read in the recent literature, conferences I've attended, the interviews I've done previously and (increasingly) what the funders and steering group of the research are 'interested in'.

Interestingly, the list of questions can do various things *other than* just help to remind you of questions to ask and, possibly, give some structure to the interaction. They can provide a piece of paper to write down key words interviewees have said as an aide-mémoire for later questions or discussion; help to produce you as an official, competent, interviewer; be something to focus on when the interviewee is 'briefly called away'; help to close the interaction, etc.[6] Above all, irrespective of whether I actually ask any of the questions I have written down, it can come in use for the reasons outlined above (and that inventory is only the start of the ways it is used).

I want to stress that you don't 'have to' use *any* of the questions that you initially prepared. The point is to follow the interviewee's talk, to follow up on and *to work with them* and not strictly delimit the talk to your predetermined agenda. With some interviews I have just asked a 'broad' opening question, with the answer becoming the main source for my questions and our discussions in the rest of the interview. In other interviews I have worked more closely with my schedule – glancing at the list for a suitable 'next question' when I can hear one theme coming to a close and I don't want to follow up on anything more that the interviewee has said.

You don't have to ask the same question in the same way in each interaction. You often cover the same broad themes in different interviews – either through the interviewee or you raising it as a subject for talk. This is a central rationale of qualitative interviewing – *that it enables you to gather contrasting and complementary talk on the same theme or issue*.

## BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

So you've got your list of questions and you try and arrive a little early (but not too early) so as to create the right impression. We don't and can't always arrange interviews in 'private' spaces – the point is to be aware of your immediate environment and how that can and does affect your and the interviewee's talk. For example, when interviewing someone in a coffee shop and we turned to the subject of his sexuality, he began to speak in hushed tones. After the interview he noted that 'This is a small community and I don't want to upset future business clients'. For this interviewee this was a problematic topic to talk about in this *specific* space. So the actual space where you interview someone can sometimes make a difference. Obviously you need to be able to easily interact – to hear one another and be in a space without too much 'outside interaction', be it fellow workers, partners, children. Again, there are no hard-and-fast procedures to follow – just rely on your everyday knowledge and take note of the possible impact of the space on your talk.

I routinely begin by getting out my tape-recorder, re-asking their permission to record and re-explaining issues of confidentiality and anonymity. I also ask the interviewee if they want me to retell the story behind the research project, to remind them of our initial phone conversation where I first introduced the project.

I always try and use a tape-recorder, for some very pragmatic reasons: I want to interact with the interviewee, and I don't want to spend a lot of my time head-down and writing. Also, the tape provides me with a much more detailed record of our *verbal* interaction than any amount of note-taking or reflection could offer. I can replay the tapes, produce transcripts and then selectively draw on these to provide demonstrations of my argument.

The tape-recorder alongside the presence of the interview guide, the initial greetings, and talk about the aims of the research create 'a particular social context for the interview communication' (Warren, 2002: 91). They can work to forecast a specific interactional context, to shift the identities of the speakers to interviewer and interviewee, where the interviewee is produced as 'having something of importance to say'.

A question remains – does the tape-recorder influence the talk? The simple answer is, yes and no. On the brief moments it is mentioned, the how-to literature says things like 'The idea of taping *might* increase nervousness or dissuade frankness' [my emphasis] (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 105) and you '*may* find that [it] inhibits interaction. … The informant *may* feel he or she has to be interesting or dramatic and this *can alter the account*' [my emphasis] (Minichiello et al., 1995: 99). I have found that the tape-recorder is often a topic for discussion before, after and during interviews. Some interviewees want reassurances around how the recording will

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be made anonymous, who will be able to listen to it. One noted that the recording is 'like a painting, fixed and unchangeable'. Others focus their gaze on the tape-recorder prior to saying something, often implicitly marking it as 'sensitive talk', or others glance at it and say, 'as this is confidential…'. But not all interviewees explicitly orientate to the tape, and for those that do this is only for parts of the interaction.

So there appears to be an issue at stake. For some interviewees the issue is chiefly around trust: will you as a researcher *misuse the information* as this is a 'permanent record' that they could be identified through at a later point (cf. Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 126). This can infer debates about 'authenticity, truth and bias' – that if you build up trust, interviewees will be more 'open and truthful' (cf. Douglas, 1985) – as well as debates around the binary of 'private' and 'public' accounts (Cornwell, 1984). However, I think this is too simplistic a reading of interactions in interviews.

To be sure, interviewees offer 'on and off the record' talk: 'Well, I can say more about [organisation X] after you turn the tape off as well.' It is interesting that *sometimes* different and contrasting talk is produced off-tape. Such off-tape talk is not somehow more 'authentic', it does different work, it emerges from and reflexively creates a different context. It can often construct interviewees as a different type of person, 'Well, *personally* I feel …', that with prior talk 'I-was-speaking-as-a-spokesperson-for-the-company' or 'I-was-being-polite'. Importantly it documents that the prior talk was the product of a specific interactional context (and a specific identity) and that now the context (and identity) has shifted again.[7]

There are *multiple possible* 'influences' on the interaction and the trajectory of the talk – your recruitment conversation, the physical space, your introduction, your status, your gender, etc. – the tape-recorder is another part of that context. However, the central 'influence' is *both* speakers' actual conduct in the interview – your questions, their answers, your comments, your gestures. There is no *ideal* interview. The idea that interviewer/interviewee 'matching' along gendered identities 'automatically' creates a space of rapport and understanding has recently been problematized (see Reinharz and Chase, 2002: 228–33). The overly essentialized authentic subject, of both interviewer and interviewee, along a single and static aged, classed, gendered, racialized or sexualized, etc., category has given way to speakers producing complex, shifting, *subjectivities* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 1997).[8]

As Reinharz and Chase note, '[i]t is crucial that the researcher take account of his or her own and the interviewee's social locations and how they might affect the research relationship' (2002: 233). As I will argue in more detail below, the point is to understand *and* demonstrate which specific subjectivities are relevant at various moments of the interview-interaction.

## INTERACTION IN INTERVIEWS

The great majority of methodological discussion about interviewer conduct discusses two ideals-about-interviewer-practices that can be glossed as: *rapport* and *neutrality*. Rapport is something that should be worked 'at/up'. Interviewers, whatever prescriptions they follow, must work to establish 'a suitably relaxed and encouraging relationship. … The interviewer must communicate trust, reassurance and, even, likeableness' (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992: 108). This is one gloss of the 'ideal' that nearly all interview methods texts share. Put simply, if the interviewee feels comfortable, they will find it easier to talk to you.

The second ideal is 'neutrality'. There are a range of perspectives in regard to interviewer neutrality. Within some methods texts this is held as:

- an *essential* practice (e.g. Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992; Weiss, 1994). If an interviewer is not neutral they will 'unduly bias' the interviewee's story and thus 'contaminate' the data.
- a *bad* practice (e.g. Oakley, 1981; Douglas, 1985). When an interviewer is neutral they create a hierarchical, asymmetrical (and patriarchal) relationship in which the interviewee is treated as a research 'object'. As interviewees offer their own thoughts, ideas or experiences they begin to treat the interviewee as another human being. This cooperative, engaged relationship – centred on mutual self-disclosure – can encourage 'deep disclosure'.

The narrative of *non-neutral* interviewing is dominant in contemporary methodology texts on interviewing. For example, in the conclusion of Fontana and Frey's 'brief journey … through the world of interviewing', they argue:

> 'as we treat the other as human being, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about the other' (1994: 373–4).

So, two strands emerge, one arguing for 'facilitative and neutral' interviewing, the other for 'facilitative and self-disclosing' interviewing. However, there is a third perspective which argues that interviewer neutrality is

- a *misleading* practice (e.g. Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 1997; Rapley, 2001). '*Doing* neutrality' is *interactionally* possible – interviewers can and do ask non-leading questions and never offer their own thoughts, ideas or experiences. However, actually '*being* neutral' in any conventional sense is actually impossible – interviewers are always active. Interviewers have overarching control, they guide the talk, they promote it through questions, silence and responses tokens (e.g. 'okay') and chiefly *they decide which particular part of the answer to follow up* (cf. Watson and Weinberg, 1982).

This last position, that appeals for interviewer neutrality are misleading, emerges from the constructionist critique of interviewing. As noted above, from this position interviewees' talk is never just a 'reality report', never merely a transparent window on life outside the interview. As Gubrium and Holstein note, both interviewer and interviewee are 'seen as actively and unavoidably engaged in the interactional co-construction of the interview's content' (2002: 15). Interviewers 'cannot very well taint knowledge if that knowledge is not conceived as existing in some pure form apart from the circumstances of its production' (ibid.).

From this perspective, the binary of 'neutrality/mutual self-disclosure' no longer holds. They are no longer polar opposites, but just part of the range of interactional practices that interviewers can, and do, draw on. You do not have to worry if 'that question was far too leading' or wonder whether 'If I'd been more open about my actual feelings on the topic he would have shared a different side of himself'. *Just get on with interacting with that specific person*. Try and explore their thoughts, ideas and experiences on the specific topic and, if you feel it is relevant, offer your thoughts, ideas and experiences for comparison. When it comes to analysing the interviews, *you should analyse what actually happened* – how your interaction produced that trajectory of talk and how specific versions of reality are co-constructed.

The position I am advocating above needs 'unpacking'. Initially, I will show what the various interactional formats of interviewing – 'facilitive and neutral', 'facilitive and self-disclosing', and a more generalized format of 'cooperative work' – can actually look like in practice. I want to compare the interactional practices with the ideals about these approaches and highlight what work each format can achieve. I will then go on to consider in more detail how to analyse interviews as products of 'cooperative work'.

## GENTLY NUDGING WITHOUT BIAS

The 'traditional' account of qualitative interviewing goes something like this: 'The interviewer's task is to draw out all relevant responses, to encourage the inarticulate or shy, to be *neutral towards the topic while displaying interest*. Probing needs skill because it can easily lead to bias' [my emphasis] (Fielding and Thomas, 2001: 129). The interviewer should facilitate without overly directing the interviewee's talk. Considerable attention is played to question wording, with the aim of asking non-leading questions and probes (e.g. Berg, 1998; May, 1993). The interviewer's non-verbal work also comes under scrutiny, for example, '[f]rowns on the interviewer's face should indicate lack of understanding, not disapproval!' (Minichiello et al., 1995: 102). As was noted above, such work is concerned to minimize the interviewer's presence, so that they become *neutral* (but interested) *observers*. Let us see an example of this type of conduct in action.

Below is an excerpt from a qualitative interview with a teenager who was trained as a drug peer-educator. I didn't conduct the interview but I transcribed it following some of the conventions of conversation analysis (see below for a discussion of transcription practices). It is *very* typical of the twenty-seven interviews I analysed to discover the lived practices of 'facilitative and neutral' interviewing.[9]

The talk in Excerpt 1 is taken from near the start of the interview. After some ice-breaking questions, the talk shifts to the 'official' topic of the interview – discovering something about Dan's experiences of being a drug peer-educator. They have briefly talked about how Dan heard about the training. We enter the interview as IR asks whether Dan was told that he would have to actually deliver drug-education sessions.

### Excerpt 1

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | IR: | °.h° so is it made clear right at that early stage that you |
| 2 | | could be expected to come back and deliver sessions |
| 3 | dan: | Well Yeah he said it is ultimately with you |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | | and then we'd (.) we discussed it seriously |
| 5 | | individually he spoke to us |
| 6 | | about i[ t u ]n and explained |
| 7 | IR: | [°°yeah°°] |
| 9 | dan: | what was really the (.) the set up of it and how it was |
| 10 | | going to be done. |
| 11 | IR: | °°(all right) (.) okay.°° .h so can you tell me why why did you |
| 12 | | put yourself forward at that stage |
| 13 | dan: | erm phh Well it is the sort of thing erm (0.4) I like to do |
| 14 | | and I do I enjoy you know (.) <u>learn</u>ing things I didn't |
| 15 | | know before and then you know teaching it its |
| 16 | | °things that I do you know° I teach a lot of other things |
| 17 | | as well as drama and so forth so um .hh quite used to doing |
| 18 | | °it° and I come from a medical family so er (0.3) |
| 19 | | [you k]now drugs and so forth we do |
| 20 | IR: | [m m] |
| 21 | dan: | it we discuss quite a lot °and er° |
| 22 | IR: | yeah |
| 23 | dan: | °and it is something it doe- did interest me really° |
| 24 | IR: | okay=was there any other particular interest in the |
| 25 | | fact that it was drugs I mean is that something |
| 26 | | that is meaningful to you pa[rticularly or not |
| 27 | dan: | [°well-° |
| 28 | | yeah well it is I mean cause >>it's everywhere |
| 29 | | I think is mean- its got to be meaningful t- t- to |
| 30 | | you know<< a greater or lesser extent to everyone |
| 31 | | [because there is so] much of it around and |
| 32 | IR: | [ ° r i g h t ° ] |
| 33 | dan: | er you know it's good to know things as well |
| 34 | | °I think its er° simply because its you know its so much |
| 35 | IR: | °mm° |
| 36 | dan: | °you know in the news° °°and everything it's er-°° |
| 37 | | (0.4) |
| 38 | IR: | so you saY it'[s it's so much around [>and then you ((continues)) |

The transcript begins to demonstrate the massive amount of *verbal-interactional work* that both speakers are engaged in. I want to make a few observations about IR and Dan's interaction:

- *IR just asks questions*. He doesn't produce any stories about his own experiences, he doesn't compare Dan's experience with that of the others he has interviewed or offer any substantive comment on Dan's answers. You only get something like '°°yeah°°' (7), 'mm' (20), '°right°' (32) which, among other things, works to acknowledge Dan's talk rather than offer an agreement.
- *IR mainly asks follow-up questions*. So, IR asks a question that introduces the topic for discussion (11–12) and Dan produces an answer (13–23) and then IR just produces follow-up questions. By producing follow-up questions (and by allowing Dan space to speak) IR is constantly demonstrating to Dan that he is *trying to work with him*, that he is *trying to understand his story, that he is listening* and that *he is interested*. Note also how the questions are asked. We get questions designed as invitations 'so can you tell me' (11) and that are non-leading 'pa[rticularly or not' (26).
- *Dan routinely produces some 'thick descriptions' of his experiences, motivations, and thoughts*. Dan never asks IR any questions, he never works to 'unpack' IRs perspective.[10]

What is really wonderful about IR and Dan's interaction is that in and through their *lived practices* they are reflexively producing some of the *ideals*-about-a-format-of-interviewing. IR works to 'just' follow up on Dan's talk, to facilitate his talk, without asserting his opinions or making any appreciative or critical comments. IR is doing being 'neutral towards the topic while displaying interest' (Fielding and Thomas, 2001: 129) . He is engaged in 'neutral*istic*' conduct *but* he is not 'being neutral' in any conventional sense (cf. Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991).

So, '*being* neutral' is a mythological (and methodological) interviewer stance. This mythology/methodology of interviewer neutrality has the fundamental effect of 'silencing', and in some cases totally banishing, the very active, collaborative work of the interviewer in producing the talk as it is. Equally, this format can assume that Dan is passive. Dan is not just offering

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*the* truth of his experience; in other interactions, with other questions, other (and Other) truths would emerge.

However, we, as interviewers, can learn a lot from this sequence. It demonstrates some key interactional practices of qualitative interviewing:

- you should ask some questions;
- selectively follow up on specific themes or topics;
- allow interviewees the space to talk at length.

Quite simple ideals but pretty effective at gaining *very detailed and comprehensive talk* – which I take it is a central rationale to qualitative interviewing. Yet, as both speakers are unavoidably co-implicated in producing the talk, interviewers no longer 'have to' ask non-leading questions, they no longer 'have to' withhold their experiences, ideas and thoughts.

Much of the more contemporary literature, irrespective of broader theoretical commitments, argues for an *engaged*, *active* or *collaborative* format of interviewing. As Denzin notes, 'In the *collaborative or active format*, interviewer and respondent tell a story together. In this format a conversation occurs. Indeed, the identities of interviewer and respondent disappear. Each becomes a storyteller, or the two collaborate in telling a conjoint story' [author's emphasis] (2002: 839). What Denzin describes is very much an (overly) idealized understanding of the possibilities of this interactional format.[11] What he does offer us access to is the interactional directives of this approach: that the interviewer, the previously silent (and silenced) partner, can and *should* now speak. The question is, what should this person now say?

Two specific, and related, trajectories emerge about what action interviewers should take: those advocating 'cooperative *self*-disclosure' (e.g. Douglas, 1985) and those advocating a more generalized strategy of 'cooperative work' (see especially Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Both formats are intimately related, and often overlap in the literature, but I want to tease apart the differences. First, let us briefly explore interviewing that advocates 'cooperative work'.

## INTERVIEWERS AS 'PERSONS'

Collins, reflecting on his own practice, argues:

> As the interviewer I am not, I cannot be, merely a passive observer in all this, even though it is primarily the interviewee's life which is under scrutiny. … As I take less seriously the manuals' advice to maintain a lofty silence, I am increasingly moved to contribute my own stories, to hold them up for contrast or comparison with those of the interviewee. (1998: 7)

Offering the interviewees your own 'stories' can take various forms – your personal experience, your personal opinion or ideas, or the opinion or ideas of other people.

At its broadest level, interviewer self-disclosure just means no longer being 'passive' – no longer censoring your every utterance and gesture for signs of being 'too leading'. You become a *vocal* collaborator in the interaction. Take, for example, my talk in Excerpt 2, below.

**Excerpt 2**

1 Tim: I'm quite interested in this idea
2 of the maleness of this context,
3 how that's dealt with. What are
4 the issues about that?
5 Helen: One of the things that I should
6 say is, whatever the external
7 image is of the industry, I've been
8 here nearly five years now, I'm
9 very aware of these issues and I
10 don't get any of the
11 traditional overt sexual harass-
12 ment, which is great. It's not an
13 issue that comes up. We do
14 sometimes get women feeling
15 that men are not valuing them
16 for their contribution. But I have
17 to say there also, it tends to be
18 the admin rather than the
19 builders. If you asked 98% of my
20 surveyors or women's site
21 mangers, they would say they are
22 treated the same as the men.
23 Their experience is exactly –
24 they don't actually experience
25 sexism. Which a bit of
26 me found really extraordinary,
27 but on another level, to be
28 absolutely honest, they're fairly
29 exceptional women I've got
30 here, they really are. You know,
31 they're quite feisty, they're very
32 confident, they're better, often,
33 than the men.
34 Tim: I mean that's the story here, you
35 always have to be better than.
36 You're good at your job, well fair
37 enough, you have to be better.

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 38 | Helen: | Yeah, yeah. To be honest, they |
| 39 | | won't survive if they're not. We |
| 40 | | do have some women who we |
| 41 | | take on who are, if they're |
| 42 | | mediocre it's much they drift |
| 43 | | down and they go. You've just |
| 44 | | got to be very good. That's no |
| 45 | | different, really, to any other sit- |
| 46 | | uation where they're in a great |
| 47 | | minority ((continues)) |

My initial question directs Helen to talk about 'the maleness' of the construction industry. She produces quite a detailed, elaborate response, drawing on various sources of evidence – her professional experience, her professional conversations, her personal awareness and doubts. She argues that 'maleness', in the form of overt sexual harassment, undervaluing women's work and differential treatment, is not that prevalent. She ends this part of her answer by saying that these women 'they're better, often, than the men' (32–33). I then take up that part of Helen's answer, re-positioning this situation as problematic – that women always '**have to be better than**' (35), that they can't just be 'good'. Helen then marks her agreement 'Yeah, yeah' (38) and then re-positions this as not just specific to the construction industry but rather that it is 'no different … to **any** other situation where [women are] in a great minority' (44–47).

Excerpt 2 is on the one hand quite unremarkable – two speakers producing contrasting positions on a specific topic, and in the process 'debating' a specific issue. However, this is an interview, and I, as the 'interviewer', have offered 'my story', I have disclosed myself as a person, someone who has ideas on this topic. And one of the outcomes of me offering my ideas was some more talk. The point is to *engage* with the interviewee's talk.

At some moments you may offer contrasting *and* complementary ideas to the interviewees or ask leading questions. At other moments, for example in Excerpt 3 below, you may just ask a 'neutralistic' question.

**Excerpt 3**

Chris: There's a need for a cultural shift in the way we work, not in just what we do, but in the way we think and our attitudes.

Tim: What kind of shifts can you see that are needed?

Chris: What kind of shifts? Well at the moment, as I say, we tend to pass risk on and pass responsibilities on to other ((continues))

You should be flexible – listen and ask question, offer your ideas and opinions *if you feel it is relevant*. There is another, very specific version of self-disclosure work that we need to see in action – when interviewers offer their *personal-biographical* experiences. Obviously, this is only possible if you have actually had a relevant experience similar to that of the interviewees.

## WORKING WITH INTIMATE RECIPROCITY

Johnson argues that, what he labels in-depth interviewing 'differs from other forms because it involves a greater involvement of the interviewer's self. To progressively and incrementally build a mutual sense of cooperative self disclosure and trust the interviewer must offer some form of strict or complementary reciprocity, (2002: 109). Offering 'strict reciprocity' means that interviewers disclose their personal-biographical-emotional experiences. 'Complementary reciprocity' involves the exchange of 'some form of help, assistance, or other form of information' (ibid.). Note that Johnson tells us that you '*must*' engage in reciprocity. Such an extreme view emerges from the idea that by disclosing some aspect of your 'self' interviewees *will* feel more at ease and that this *will* lead to rapport. However, as Reinharz and Chase note, interviewers should not adopt an 'abstract commitment' to it, rather you need to think about 'whether, when, and how much disclosure makes sense' (2002: 288) in reference to each specific interaction.

In order to explore the kind of work interviewer *self*-disclosure can do, look at Excerpt 4 below. It is taken from an interview I conducted with a friend about their illegal drug-use. It has been going on for about an hour, with Adam explaining in detail the various stages of his drug-taking. We enter the interview as Adam explains how he has covered a lot of my questions.

**Excerpt 4**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | adam: | there's so much information all I've all I've done is told you the A to Z really |
| 2 | tim: | yeah [yeah |
| 3 | adam: | [there's loads of places along the way |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | tim: | yeah yeah [yeah yeah |
| 5 | adam: | [and you need to think of some questions about what I've said |
| 6 | tim: | yeah (1.0) I don't know I mean (1.0) I mean for me I mean this is yeah this is |
| 7 | | very yeah this is my confession for me um I am that alcoholic but but |
| 8 | | from my own point of view you know |
| 9 | adam: | mm |
| 10 | tim: | I I I got to that point where no you know I could you know when you |
| 11 | | were saying about um I'm not functioning any more as a human being |
| 12 | adam: | mm |
| 13 | tim: | I'd really got to that point when I wasn't a human being any more that I |
| 14 | | could recognise [in any |
| 15 | adam: | [yeah |
| 16 | tim: | way shape or form and I and that was purely my you know |
| 17 | | addictive personality I don't know whether that exists you know me |
| 18 | | being um (0.6) just a monster |
| 19 | adam: | yeah |
| 20 | tim: | you know |
| 21 | adam: | not saying no more |
| 22 | tim: | yeah yeah yeah basically it got to the point where erm for me it got to |
| 23 | | like I mean [the end of the line] |
| 24 | adam: | [was that all drugs ] |
| 25 | tim: | all drugs, yeah [other than alcohol and tobacco ] |
| 26 | adam: | [ you never taken anything ] ever since |
| 27 | tim: | nah nah nah but that was literally to save my sanity [you know |
| 28 | adam: | [yeah |
| 29 | tim: | it got to that point when my sanity was [ ( ) |
| 30 | adam: | [I remember that |
| 31 | tim: | yeah do you |
| 32 | adam: | yeah I can remember that |
| 33 | tim: | yeah yeah |
| 34 | adam: | (er) I know lots of people who who sort of have to say it that way I |
| 35 | | mean that's something that crosses my mind sometimes when I'm totally |
| 36 | | spannered and I think How can I cope |
| 37 | tim: | mm huh |
| 38 | adam: | right I know lots of people who or no no not not when I'm totally |
| 39 | | spannered when when I'm into doing drugs its like over this summer I've |
| 40 | | not done drugs |
| 41 | tim: | mm huh |
| 42 | adam: | yeah as I've said I've smoked a spliff ((continues)) |

From 6, I start to tell my story, 'my confession' (7), in which I compare and contrast my experience with drugs to Adam's. I am not just offering any old story, but a very 'personal' story – when I gave up drugs to 'save my sanity' (27) – a story that does biographical work. As Adam retakes the floor, he initially marks the similarity between my experience to that of some unnamed generalized 'others' that he has known: 'I know: **lots of people** who who sort of have to say it that way' (34). Note how Adam marks that they '**have to** say it that way', in this way he nicely echoes the 'no-choice-but-to-quit' element of my talk. He then goes on to produce his own 'personal sanity' story – 'I mean that's something that crosses my mind sometimes when I'm totally spannered and I think **How can I cope**' (34–6) – which then continues well beyond the excerpt.

Our talk is intimately tied as we:

- Closely follow each other's talk and provide timely responses and follow-up questions.
- Both worked to show 'I-really-got-the-point-of-what-you-are-saying. …' Rather than just *telling* each other that 'I understand', we work to *show* each other that we understand.
- Both 'reflected on' and 'disclosed' our personal/biographical thoughts about and experiences with drugs. We used the language of the self. We both talked about our experiences, feelings, emotions in relation to drugs and produced a specific 'reflective drug-user' identity.

What is central is that we both talked about drugs *in and through* a 'language of personal experiences, feelings, emotions', over, say, a language of biomedicine or legal theory.

There is tension in the how-to literature that advocates mutual *self*-disclosure in the form of

disclosing personal/biographical elements of your life. For example, Johnson moves between advocating understanding the *multiple* views and interpretations of interviewees with arguing that in-depth interviewing goes 'beyond common-sense explanations … and aims to explore the contextual boundaries of that experience or perception, to *uncover what is usually hidden* from ordinary view or reflection or to *penetrate to more reflective understandings* about the nature of that experience' [my emphasis] (2002: 106). There is a discourse of discovering hidden voices that runs close to advocating the *authenticity or truth* of these hidden voices over other voices. As Atkinson and Silverman remind us, the uncritical 'celebration of narratives of personal experience' can 'implicitly reinstate the speaking subject as the privileged hero or heroine of his or her own biography. … We do not reveal selves by collecting narratives, we create selfhood through narrative and biographical work' (1997: 11–12).

Interviewing can be used as a way to enable previously hidden, or silenced, voices to speak. With my work on women in the construction industry, the interviews literally gave some women the chance to voice something that is very rarely openly acknowledged in the industry: a politics of daily scrutiny around dress and conduct and a politics of inequalities in career progression and pay. I am *not* arguing against interviewers' offering up their own personal stories for contrast and comparison with interviewees' talk. In thinking about my own practice, I don't 'do self-disclosure' just to encourage respondents to be 'more forthcoming' – although that is often an *outcome* of my action. It can encourage more talk – interviewees respond to your talk, they may agree, argue with it or ignore it, but it does routinely continue the discussion in new paths. However, I want to argue that for interviewers and interviewees to engage in 'mutual self-disclosure' *it takes work and does work*.

It can take work, in that both speakers need to talk in a language of their emotions, feeling and experiences. It can do work, 'rapport work' and 'emotion work' and say 'I understand' or 'You're not alone in your experience'. It can produce interviewers as specific types of people in relation to this interaction and this specific topic (cf. Firth and Kitzinger, 1998). It is a specific technology of the interview society that incites a speaker to speak of and for their 'selfhood'. As Gubrium and Holstein note, 'In in-depth interviews, we "do" deep, authentic experiences as much as we "do" opinion offering in the course of the survey interview' (2002: 11).

You may feel, as I do sometimes, that talking about interviewees 'doing rapport work', 'doing emotional work' is a rather sterile, clinical, way to treat people's interactions. It may seem strange that I treat my own personal/biographical drug experience in such a manner. I, above anyone, should know that it 'really happened', that I can take it as 'the authentic truth'. The point is, I am more than aware that there are a multiple number of ways I could, *and routinely do*, describe my experience with drugs. The way I describe it is intimately tied to who I'm speaking to, where I am, the way I feel, what has been said before – in short the local interactional context. But this local interactional context is also intimately embedded in, and emerges from, the broader historico-socio-cultural context.[12]

I only ever offer *versions* of my experience, I can do nothing else. As Rose notes, 'The realities that are fabricated, out of words, texts, devices, techniques, practices, subjects, objects and entities are no less real because they are constructed, for what else could they be?' (1998: 168). As he notes, this does not necessarily lead back to a debate around realism and anti-realism. It does offer me a direction, one in which I take seriously *how* experience (biography, emotion, identity, knowledge, opinion, truth) is produced and negotiated, where I focus on the practical, active, *work* we engage in as part of our everyday life. Part of that practical, active, work of everyday life is doing self-disclosure in interviews.

## INTERVIEWING AS MUNDANE INTERACTION

We have finally arrived at the 'format' of interviewing I feel most comfortable with. It involves at its most basic *asking questions and following up on various things that interviewees raise and allowing them the space to talk*. It does not involve extraordinary skill, it involves just trying to interact with that specific person, trying to understand their experience, opinion and ideas.

I want to offer a list of some of the phenomenally mundane interactional 'methods' cooperative interviewing involves:

- Initially introducing a topic for discussion.
- Listening to the answer and then producing follow-up questions (e.g. Excerpt 1).
- Listening to interviewees talk and asking them to unpack certain key terms (e.g. Excerpt 3).
- Listening to interviewees talk and following it up with talk about your own personal

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experience (e.g. Excerpt 4) or your personal opinion or ideas (e.g. Excerpt 2) or the opinion or ideas of other people.

- And whilst listening going 'mm', 'yeah', 'yeah, yeah' alongside nodding, laughing, joking, smiling, frowning.[13]

Now that list is by no means exhaustive, but it gives you a flavour of what I see as '*engaged*, *active* or *collaborative*' interviewing.

However, I am not advocating an 'anything goes policy' in relationship to interviewing. I wouldn't suggest ignoring them, falling asleep or shouting a lot.[14] You have to rely on your own common sense: if you know you often 'daydream' in mid-conversation, just remember to concentrate; if you know you routinely 'talk over people', try and hold back and listen. If you see that interviewees are clearly becoming uncomfortable or very emotional, ask them if they want to take a break or maybe you need to think about ending the interview or switching the topic. Above all, treat them with respect, they are never just 'more data'.

Interviewing is never just 'a conversation', it may be conversation*al*, but you as the interviewer do have some level of control. You routinely decide which bit of talk to follow up, you routinely decide when to open and close various topics and the interaction as a whole. For me, interviewers may choose to produce themselves through their talk and other actions as more 'passive' (facilitative and neutral) or more 'active' (facilitative and self-disclosing, collaborative, active, reflexive or adversarial) or another identity. Whatever ideal about interviewer practices that are locally produced (if they are at all), *no single ideal gains 'better data' than the others*. You cannot escape from the *interactional* nature of interviews. Whatever 'ideals' interviewers practice, their talk is central to the trajectories of the interviewees' talk. As such, it should be analysed in relation to that specific context. However, we are never interacting in a historico-socio-cultural vacuum, we are always *embedded in* and *selectively* and *artfully* draw on broader institutional and organizational contexts. With these last points in mind, I want now to briefly explore how you can analyse interviews.

## SOME INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON ANALYSING INTERVIEWS

As should now be obvious from my discussion above, when analysing interviews I follow a broadly 'discursive' approach (see Wetherell, 2001, for various analytic positions under this banner).[15] I'm not trying to establish the 'truth' of interviewees' actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts but rather how specific (and sometimes contradictory) *truths* are produced, sustained and negotiated.

On one level, the process of analysis can seem quite 'routine'. You've got your transcripts in front of you, you read them, re-read. You then note down some interesting themes and may start applying codes, or key words, to the data. You then re-read, apply the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and so start to constantly refine your codes. Hopefully, you find a few negative instances (deviant cases), things that make you re-think and then refine your whole analysis (see Seale, 1999). Then you end up with a collection of extracts for each code. You write up what you've found. Now that is one way to describe a process you often go through while doing analysis, or rather, it describes in rather practical terms what you sometimes practically do.

However, I want to offer another description, one that is more layered with some theoretical, methodological *and* practical concerns. First and foremost, analysis *is always an ongoing process* that routinely starts prior to the first interview. As soon as I become interested in a specific topic, I'll start to collect some literature on the topic – both 'academic' and 'non-academic'. This reading, alongside conversations, past experiences and 'bizarre bolts from the blue' (often over a strong coffee), gives me an initial clue as to possible interviewees, interview questions and analytic themes. These sources of knowledge often become analytic themes that I explore with interviewees in interviews. I'll then try and recruit the interviewees, making notes on this process – these notes cover both the successes and the failures, the kinds of accounts people provide for not taking part (again providing more 'data' and more possible questions). Once I've got some interviews lined up, I'll prepare a brief topic guide. In choosing those specific interviewees and in producing that specific topic guide (that is shaped for that specific interviewee), I am already making some specific analytic choices about what types of people, what *voices or identities*, are central to the research (and which ones will remain silenced) alongside what sorts of topics of discussion might be important. I then go to the interview.

During the interview, I often try to raise some of the themes I've been thinking through either by asking interviewees specific questions about them or, sometimes, telling them about my thoughts and letting them comment on them.[16] So

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in one sense, the actual interview interactions are a space in which I seek to test 'my' analysis of these specific themes by asking interviewees to talk about them. Or to put it another way, *interview interactions are inherently spaces in which both speakers are constantly 'doing analysis' – both speakers are engaged (and collaborating in) 'making meaning' and 'producing knowledge'* (cf. Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 15; see also Hester and Francis, 1994).

After the interviews I write up my notes on the encounter, noting both pre- and post-tape talk alongside my reactions and observations about the interview itself (another moment of analysis). I then re-think about the trajectory of the research, refine the kinds of themes and ideas I want to think through with interviewees, and go and interview someone else.

In the past, I always used to transcribe the interview tapes myself. In this way, I got to repeatedly listen to the tapes, and so generate, check and refine my analytic hunches whilst simultaneously producing a *textual* version of the interaction that could be used both for further analysis and reports.[17] Increasingly, my tapes have been sent to transcribers, which means I always check the transcript against the tape and add the sort of detail I'm often interested in (pauses, stress, overlapping speech).[18] However, when it comes to sustained periods of analysis, I always prefer to re-listen to the tapes alongside re-reading the transcript. This allows me to get a sense of the interactional, collaborative, work of the speakers. I then try and write up the research (and re-write it, and re-write…).

I've now offered a slightly richer account of the process of analysis – that analysis, in the sense of 'producing knowledge' about a specific topic, is an inherently ongoing accomplishment. Importantly, the interview is a central moment of this analytic work, especially as the interaction itself is a moment of 'knowledge production' – but it is always only part of that analytic work. What remains noticeably absent from my discussion is any detailed, theoretically informed, account of how to analyse these interviews.

## HOW I THINK WITH INTERVIEW 'DATA'

To be honest, I don't really want to (and don't feel I can) offer a step-by-step guide on 'how to analyse interviews'. How you analyse interviews is *always* inextricably linked to your specific theoretical interests. And your theoretical interests will, in part, define what sort of questions you ask in interviews, what sort of questions you ask of the 'data', what sort of level of transcription you feel is necessary. So I would prefer it you read my take on 'how I analyse interviews' as just that, a *description of my analytic choices* and not, in any way, a prescription.[19]

I want to return to Excerpt 2, to demonstrate how interviewees and interviewers 'do analysis' and how I, as an academic analyst, try and think about analysing interviews.[20] On one level, Helen's analysis is that in this firm women don't experience overt sexual harassment. However, she does then note, after my re-reading of this (34–37), that what we could call 'covert, institutionalized, sexism' is still prevalent – these women have 'just got to be very good' (43–44), as 'they won't survive if they're not' (38–39). However, we have to view mine and Helen's analysis as *situated,* in that it is intimately tied to the contexts of:

- *The here-and-now interaction*. Both my questions (1–4) and my comment at 34–37 were central to the trajectory of her talk. For example, Helen produces the idea that these women are '**better**, often, than the men' (32–33) as a possible reason why these women '**don't** actually **experience sexism**' (24–25). I then take up this last point in her talk – 'that the story here, you always have to be better' (34–35) – and *re-position this as an example of sexism*: that women 'have to be better than [men]' (35), that they just can't be 'good' (36). Helen *then agrees with this* 'to be honest, they wouldn't survive if they're not' (38–39) and then re-positions this as 'no different' from any situation where women are 'in a great minority' (46–47).
- *This interview interaction.* We both work to produce ourselves as specific types of people in relation to this specific interactional context. As Dingwall notes, interviews are 'a situation [in] which respondents are required to demonstrate their competence in the role in which the interview casts them' (1997: 58). Helen works to produce herself as a *competent interviewee* – able to offer detailed and elaborated descriptions. I work to produce myself as a *competent interviewer* – able to offer timely questions and comments that are appropriate and relevant, that demonstrate I have some knowledge of this topic. Alongside this Helen is also asked to, and does, speak as *an expert in connection with women's employment in her firm*. Note the range of sources of evidence she draws on: her professional experience (5–10), her professional role 'I'm very aware of these

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issues' (8–9), other professionals' experiences 'If you asked 98% of my surveyors or women's site managers …' (19–21), and her professional/personal surprise and doubts 'Which a bit of me found really extraordinary' (25–26). In the very process of being interviewed, she actively demonstrates her expertise and knowledge. Intimately connected to this is her role as *a spokesperson of this specific firm*. She works to produce this specific firm as (relatively) free of 'sexism' – and when this firm is cast as potentially 'sexist', this firm's experience is marked as no different from any other situation where women are a great minority (44–47).

- *The broader research project*. My question about the 'maleness' of the industry, and my comment on 'women always having to be better', emerged from my past experiences of working on building sites, my reading around sexism and the interviews I had previously conducted. Also, prior to the tape being turned on, I had outlined that the research project was interested in the 'barriers women face in the construction industry'. Helen answers my question about the 'context of maleness' as a question about the *problems of maleness*: 'traditional overt sexual harassment' (11–12), 'women feeling that men are not valuing them for their contribution' (14–16), 'sexism' (25). In so doing, she orientates to the research project's interests in the 'barriers'. My comment at 34–37 also orientates to and reflexively produces the research project's interest in, and awareness of, current 'barriers women face'.

So even with this brief and relatively fleeting moment, both speakers are engaged in some rather beautiful and artful work. Compare the above analytic work of Helen and Tim with another interview I was involved in.

**Excerpt 5**

Tim: Okay what do you think, because in the car I said thinking about this industry is institutionally sexist, do you think that is a fair description?

Ben: **Yes of course it is**.

Tim: You say of course, can you tell me why you would say of course then?

Ben: You just have to be on a site for five minutes to know it is, the conversations that go on, the attitudes that go on, I mean it's racist as well. ((continues))

With my initial question, I shift the topic from our previous talk, and introduce something Ben and I originally spoke about while travelling to the space of the interview. For Ben, my description of the industry as institutionally sexist is *just obvious* – 'Yes of course it is'. I then ask Ben to 'unpack' this obviousness. Note how he renders it as obvious – 'You just have to be on a site for five minutes to know it is' – it's just there for anyone to discover in the *everyday activities of the site*, people's 'conversations' and 'attitudes'. So Ben produces himself as the type of person who has knowledge of the sexism in the industry and his entitlement to speak with authority on this is based on his 'ethnographic' experience of the day-to-day activities on building sites.

So how can I as an academic analyst make sense of these situated moments of talk, how can I draw any conclusions? How can I work so that I don't rip this talk about sexism out of context?

On the one hand, you can begin to see that talk about sexism is tied to doing specific work; Helen is not just offering a description of sexism in the company she works for, in and through discussing sexism Helen produces her company as a 'responsible employer' and herself as a 'responsible employee'. Similarly, Ben produces himself as aware of the problems in the industry (and at other moments in the interview as an employer who has tried to overcome these problems). When compared to the thirty-three other interviews I did with people on this topic – including representatives of small firms, housing associations, local authorities and large national employers – I got a huge range of competing and contrasting ways that 'talk about sexism' produces specific biographies, experiences, identities, knowledges, etc. So from one perspective, a way to make sense of the interviews is to focus on the situated ways that 'talk about sexism' enables specific work.

From another perspective, these specific interactional moments reflexively document the contemporary ways of understanding, experiencing and talking about sexism in the construction industry. To be sure, their talk is intimately tied to the contexts of its production – these local interactional contexts. However, in and through producing these local interactional contexts, the speakers draw on and reflexively produce the broader context of 'women experiences in the construction industry'. The speakers are actively and collaboratively producing, sustaining and negotiating contemporary *knowledges* about women's experiences in the construction industry.

As I've stressed above, the 'data', or more preferably talk, you gain in a specific interview *is just one possible version*, a version that is

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contingent on the specific local interactional context. And we can see how mine and Ben's and mine and Helen's versions, our knowledges, our analysis, are somewhat 'competing'. We have in these two small fragments various truths: *overt* sexual harassment is not a problem, *some* women feel undervalued, women *don't* experience sexism, women *have to be* better than men to survive, *covert* sexism is always a problem where women are in the minority, sexism is an *everyday feature* of the site. Throughout all the interviews – alongside my observations at industry conferences, my reading of the academic and industry writing, informal conversations with people working in the construction industry alongside my experience of working on building sites – sexism is produced as a 'routine truth'. The questions then become: how is it that the contemporary truths of the construction industry are so intimately tied to 'talk about sexism'? How is it that sexism is reproduced as a 'routine truth' of this industry? And how is this 'routine truth' refused and resisted?

## SOME CLOSING ASIDES

I want to end this brief encounter on the practices and possibilities of qualitative interviewing by introducing a comment made by Strong (1980), immediately prior to his insightful analysis of interviews with doctors about their treatment of alcoholic patients:

> One further aside. No form of interview study, however devious or informal, can stand as an adequate substitute for observational data. The inferences about actual practice that I or others may draw from those interviews are therefore somewhat illegitimate. My excuses must be that at present we have no better data on the treatment of alcoholic patients and that, more generally, I have at least attempted to ground myself as fully as possible in these few observational studies of medical consultations that have so far been undertaken. Whether all this is a sufficient guide to the specific matter of practice with alcoholics must remain an open question for the moment. (1980: 27–8)

I am inclined to agree with Strong's version. For me, an interview study that *only* uses interviews to understand peoples *lived, situated, practices* seems highly problematic.[21]

The interview may be an economical means, in the sense of time and money, of getting access to an 'issue'. It may also be an economical means of getting access to issues that are not easily available for analysis, to get people to 'think out loud' about certain topics. However, saying this, most topics are 'freely available' for analysis. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note, to understand the topic 'family' we do not *need* to interview people or enter people's homes. We can see *how* 'family' is organized, produced and negotiated on the bus, in supermarkets, in newspapers, in talk shows, in legislation, etc. But again we should be sensitive that these – like interviews – are contextually situated practices.

Some may argue that what I'm advocating is 'absurd' – that such work could never gain access to the *individual's* actual thoughts, feelings or experiences. We need to take a slight detour to think through this potential 'reaction'. Mahonny (in Kong et al., 2002: 253) notes in his research diary, whilst reflecting on his 'little empathy' for an interviewee, that '[t]his distancing prevented me from becoming more interactive, which further prevented an expansion of *our* knowledge construction of *his* story' [my emphasis]. This account presents one of the central ironies of qualitative interviewing: that the inherently collaborative interviewer/interviewee interactions can become seen as 'just' about the interviewees' singular or individualized story. A question remains, do we as researchers treat interviewees as *just* individuals? Or do we treat them, at one and the same time, as individuals-*and*-part-of-broader-story-of-the-whole-research? I think this second rendering is more in alignment with a lot of research practice. I feel such work can happen:

- *after the interview*, as we write up the report the 'individual' account becomes part of a broader collection of voices;
- *as part of the interviewing process*, in that we sometimes ask interviewees to speak as a representative of a specific perspective;
- *as part of the interview interaction*, in that we sometimes tell interviewees 'What you've told me is very similar to what I've heard from so and so. …'

In this sense, as researchers, we don't always orientate to interviewees as 'individuals'.

Similarly, interviewees don't always speak 'as individuals'; they can speak, at various moments, as representatives of institutions or organizations or professions, as members of specific (sub)cultural groups, as members of specific gendered, racialized, sexualized categories, *as well* as thoughtful individuals, feeling individuals, experiencing individuals, etc. As Gubrium and Holstein note, 'Treating subject positions and their associated voices seriously, we might find that an ostensibly single interview could actually be, in practice, an interview with several subjects, whose particular identities may only be

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partially clear' (2002: 23). So sometimes interviewees talk as (and are reflexively produced as, by interviewers' questions) individuals, at other points they talk as members of 'broader' collectives. So the question remains, if interviewees do not always see themselves, or speak of themselves, as individuals *per se*, why do we, sometimes, insist on interviewing them/writing about them/speaking of them *as* individuals *per se*?

I have one final – more practical – aside which is tied to the practices of conducting interviewing. Nearly twenty years ago, Mishler noted some problems with survey research interviewing: 'In the mainstream tradition, the nature of interviewing as a form of discourse between speakers has been hidden from view by a dense screen of technical procedures' (1986: 7). Unfortunately, some twenty years later, that 'dense screen of technical procedures' has migrated to the very form of interviewing that Mishler was advocating – the qualitative interview. As I see it, interviewers don't need massive amounts of detailed technical (and moral) instruction on how to conduct qualitative interviews. For me, Turkel's (1995, cited in Plummer, 2001: 140) description of how to interview is pretty convincing:

> 'In the one-to-one interview you start level in the unconfidence, in not knowing where you are going. … You do it your own way. You experiment. You try this, you try that. With one person one's best, with another person another. Stay loose, stay flexible'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council and the Social Fund for funding parts of my work. A 'large' thank you must go to all those interviewees who have spoken with me and to those whom I worked alongside on the 'Gender in Construction' Research Project. Thanks also to Ben Gidley and the two anonymous readers who read and commented on this chapter. A final thanks must go to David Silverman; my conversations with him were central to the intellectual trajectory of this chapter.

## NOTES

1 Interestingly, by following the trajectory of debates about the appropriate conduct of interviewers and the appropriate way to analyse the products of these face-to-face encounters, you simultaneously follow the trajectory of debates around how to theorize 'the social'.

2 For some 'early' empirical critiques see Baruch (1981), Cuff (1993), Mishler (1986), Potter and Mulkay (1985) and Riessman (1990).

3 He does not connect 'an interest in drugs' to any *other* part of his life, be it friends, school or strangers or a desire to help drug-users.

4 This is often termed 'snowball sampling' (see Seale and Filmer, 1998: 138).

5 For example, the reluctance of people to speak 'on the record' about women being employed in construction and the absence of any representatives responsible for what I was repeatedly told was an 'important issue', reflexively documents the industry-wide *awareness but inaction* with regard to employing women. This discourse – 'awareness but inaction' – was also a central theme in the interviews.

6 For example, I routinely look at the list, while simultaneously offering an on-line commentary on my actions – 'Is there anything else I want to say' – as a preface to closing the 'official' on-tape part of the interaction.

7 It is interesting that the off-tape talk does routinely stay on the topic of the research, often covering new and highly relevant topics. I generally find myself writing up this part of the interaction as soon as I leave the interview.

8 Although see Bourdieu's call for 'social proximity and familiarity' as helping provide ' "nonviolent" communication' (1999: 610) and so reduce distortions and favour 'plain speaking' in interviews. He returns us, again, to an essentialized ideal interview, this time based on 'cultural symmetry'. As one reviewer reminded me, cultural (or professional) asymmetry can be useful. As Carl May (personal communication) noted, being a relative stranger enables you to ask 'stupid questions' which often produce answers that illuminate what the interviewee may take for granted and leave unsaid.

9 For detailed discussion of the various lived practices of facilitative and neutral interviewers see Rapley (2001).

10 In my 'facilitative and neutral interview' data-set, I only have one interview where *the interviewee* (Hal) *asks the interviewer* (IR) *questions* about IR's 'personal' relationship to some of the topics of their talk.

**Excerpt A**

hal: draw or (like) I mean have you smoked draw (0.5)
IR: °we'll talk about that afterwards.°
hal: no. I'm asking you °now°
IR: °no lets talk about that afterwards°

In this, and other moments when Hal 'breaches' the interview, IR tells Hal that such answers will be given 'afterwards'. This 'afterwards' refers to: *after this interview*. Within this format, the interviewers are not available to answer 'personal' questions relating to the topic of the interview whilst the tape is on.

11 Does the identity of 'interviewer' really disappear? Or does it temporarily, at certain moments, appear, say when opening and closing the interaction, opening and closing specific topics? How do 'interviewees' orientate to these speakers, as 'interviewers' or

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some other identity – ‘knowledgeable experts’, ‘novices’, ‘institutional agents’ …? Above all, the identities of the speakers is very much an empirical question.

12 For example, note how I answer Adam’s question at 24. I say that I have stopped using ‘all drugs, yeah [**other than alcohol and tobacco**]’ (25). I redefine my identity from ‘ex-drug-user’, to ‘current drug-user’. In this context, alcohol and tobacco are rendered as ‘drugs’. What is hearable as relevant to the category ‘drug’ is historically situated. Contemporary British pro- and anti-drugs discourse is often centred on debates about whether ‘we’ are already, through our large consumption of alcohol and tobacco, a nation of ‘drug-users’.

13 And despite Minichiello et al. (1995), frowning sometimes to indicate understanding, sometimes to indicate disapproval!

14 Although such a style of interviewing may produce radically different ‘data’.

15 I have drawn on various approaches to analyse interviews, including conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, discourse analysis, membership catergorization analysis and narrative analysis.

16 To make it even more complex, the things I raise are an amalgam of the question I have written, the things I’ve just been thinking about and, most common of all, questions or comments I think of while interacting with that specific person.

17 There have been calls for ‘vigilance’, that when researchers produce detailed transcripts, such transcription (and the analytic gaze that ties to it) can help reveal previously unnoticed practices (e.g. Seale and Silverman, 1997; Rapley, 2001). Alongside this – growing from various postmodern angles – is a call for a more explicit and reflexive stance in relation to the inherently representational and interpretative nature of transcription (e.g. Richardson, 2002). The main point is that interview-talk is (re)constructed in the process of transcription as a result of multiple decisions that reflect both very theoretical and pragmatic concerns (see Poland, 2002).

For example, in the excerpts above I have used various styles of presentation: Excerpts 1 and 4 follow some of the conventions of conversation analysis and read more ‘as said’, whereas Excerpts 2 and 3 read more ‘as written’. In part, I choose the specific format of presentation in line with the argument I was making at that specific point: with Excerpts 1 and 4, I wanted to stress the massive amount of verbal interactional work it takes for interviews to happen; with Excerpts 2 and 3, I was more concerned to demonstrate the ‘content’ of interview talk. The choice of transcription style *for presentation* will always depend on what is necessary for the specific argument and the needs of the research project. For me, the tidying of quotations is appropriate when writing up for publication. Care should be taken that what is removed does not appreciatively alter the meaning of what is said. I would also always recommend that for your main arguments, extracts from interviews should be presented in the context that they occurred, with the question that prompted the talk as well as the talk that follows being offered. In this way, readers can view how the talk was co-constructed in the course of the interview and, thereby, judge the reliability of the analysis.

18 See Poland (2002) for a rich description of the practices (and problems) of transcription and using transcribers.

19 Some discussions I’ve found useful, and that may help see where my analytic take is coming from, are Riessman’s (1990, 2002) perspective on narrative analysis, Baker’s (1984, 1997) ethnomethodological account, Kong et al.’s (2002) queering of interviewing, Reinharz and Chase’s (2002) feminist overview, alongside the more ‘general’ discussions of Holstein and Gubrium (1995, 1997), Dingwall (1997) and Silverman (1985, 1993).

20 In fact, the commentaries I have given on all the excerpts begins to demonstrate how interviewees and interviewers ‘do analysis’, alongside how I try and analyse that work.

21 See especially Dingwall’s (1997) call for observational research.

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