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## Commentaries on Potter and Hepburn, 'Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and possibilities' - Commentary 2

### Journal Item

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Hollway, W. (2005) Commentary 1 on J.Potter and Hepburn's 'Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and prospects.' Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2 (4) 312-314.

I welcome and support, with reservations, both the immediate and longer term aims set out in Potter and Hepburn's evaluation of the state of interviews in psychology. Debate about the role of interviews in psychology is sparse (although lively in social sciences more generally) and there is a dominant tendency to treat the interview method as unproblematically transparent (you ask, they answer and then you know). A critical debate should encourage more focussed and better theorised use of interviews in future. Given decades of critical social psychology about the reflexive, relational, discursive and narrative character of subjectivity, it is unfortunate that most psychologists using interview methods are still not taking epistemology seriously. In particular, I agree on the importance of attention to the effects of the interview setting (including the frame, the schedule and the interview relationship) in producing what then counts as data, data that are therefore treated as the appropriate evidence supporting an argument when they might be an effect of the setting. However, although I partially agree with Potter and Hepburn's diagnosis, I disagree with their remedies. I shall exemplify this by following their structure through what they call five contingent and four necessary problems of the qualitative interview in psychology.

Undoubtedly it is good practice to reinsert the interviewer into the analysis (their minimum recommendation), but this is a peripheral part of a greater problem which is the separation of relatively short extracts of text from the context of the whole interview encounter for analytic purposes. The responses of the interviewee at a particular juncture do not just relate back to the last few utterances of the interviewer and not just to the last question that was asked. They are built up out of the whole history of the research encounter: how they were recruited, what they were told the interview was about, what happened before the tape recorder was switched on, the continuous dynamic (not just conscious) between interviewee and interviewer. This cannot all be represented in the text and so it becomes part of the researcher's responsibility to reflect on these effects and trace them in the context of the whole, providing evidence from the record.

In Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 44-52), I briefly traced the effects of a subconscious positioning of the interview pair (myself as the interviewer and a young woman interviewee) in terms of our mutual positioning as mother and daughter and the effects this had on what she told me. This involved using specific extracts as evidence, but these were linked into the whole through the argument. Clearly in such an analysis, the treatment of the interview as a relational event is the starting principle.

This point exemplifies a broader principle in my approach to recording and analysis of interview data: that the meaning of any part of an interview (or conversation) inheres in the whole, so that extracts of text can never function satisfactorily as whole units for analysis, only as selected bits of evidence

(and counterevidence, where appropriate) for an argument that is being constructed bearing in mind this larger whole.

However, such a principle depends on what the text is being used for. Many discourse and conversation analysts have a descriptive purpose to show aspects of conversational interaction such as turn taking and troubled positions and these can be demonstrated in almost any piece of text. In contrast, my data analytic purposes are invariably interested in aspects of the subjectivity of the interviewee and how these are expressed in the interview (which in important respects resembles a naturalistic conversation). Their talk also invariably refers to aspects of their lives beyond the current interaction and I do not reduce it to that. This is partly a question of difference in interests, but it is more than that because I find that so often their approach draws out the most inconsequential, least important aspects of the data. This is illustrated in the case that Potter and Hepburn draw on: the extract, even in the example that is supposedly inadequately transcribed, is suggestively rich in bigger issues than the ones that they then choose to focus on.

Because my aims are so different from most conversation analysts, I do not use Jeffersonian (or Jefferson-Lite) transcription conventions. I find them unhelpful because they are based – as are Potter and Hepburn's recommendations – on the belief that the more detailed and rigorous the transcription, the more faithful the researcher can be to the meanings and connotations of the conversation. There is an implication in their claims that transcription can be total and therefore leave nothing out on which meaning depends. This fetishizes words and symbols captured in writing and actually contradicts CA's starting point which is that meaning is constructed in interaction. It behaves as if the flux and complexity of subconscious modes of communication were dispensable. The maximum meaning is derived from being *in situ*. This is why interviewers should keep field notes and why these notes should not just record what people did and what the context was like, but should regard emotional responses to all this as valid data. Once the face-to-face situation is reduced to a visual and especially an audio record, much is lost. But the audio record is still a far richer record than a Jeffersonian transcript. For me, the interruption of flow that is involved when I read such a transcript, even if I am familiar with all the symbols, means that I lose much more meaning than I gain. When analysing interview data I regularly go back to the audio record to check my progressive sense-making.

While there is, as Potter and Hepburn point out, a whole system of evaluation built up around referees and journal readers which relies on transparent data, I think that there are ways of providing sufficient relevant evidence to be convincing, inserted to be sure in a theoretically rigorous argument. If problems of trust arise, then the audio record should be available. On the whole however, there is no substitute for trust in researchers, as long as it is coupled with better training. When the analysis is poor, it is usually apparent whatever the transcription conventions.

I don't agree that the problem of flooding with social science categories is a necessary one, except to the extent that social science borrows from lay

language and vice versa. The problem is when interviewing technique reproduces social science knowledge by asking inept questions at a general and abstract level, but this is avoidable. I have written about this pitfall and how to avoid it (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, chapter one). Our solution was to move towards the use of narrative questions of the kind that would elicit experience-near accounts from interviewees and steer them away from sounding like social scientists. It also successfully avoided eliciting well-worn discourses. If you want attitudes and opinions, you should design your interview accordingly and put the interviewee on an appropriate footing through the level and style of question. Well designed questions can largely avoid abstractions and generalisations.

Stake and interest are necessary features of research interviews but are integral parts of any conversation and can be welcomed as such, rather than treated as confounding variables that can be neutralised. Thus they cannot be reduced to an initial declaration of the interviewer's relationship to the research project, although the interviewee has every right to know this. The interests of the researcher are multiple, subtle and not entirely transparent to the interviewer her/himself. Like micro-power, they are discoverable potentially in every verbal and non-verbal element of the ongoing process and, also like micro-power, have effects and therefore should be analysed.

Potter and Hepburn's treatment of the interview literature in psychology is narrow in scope. There are lively debates going on about interviewing method in other areas of social psychology and social sciences: narrative interviewing is probably the most popular example. Another is psychosocial methods, on which I edited a special issue of the *International Journal of Critical Psychology* (2004). More regrettably, they narrow their analysis to a reductive debate between conventional uncritical interview approaches (the problem) and conversation or discourse analysis (the solution). Most if not all of the problems raised in this article have been raised before, so it is a shame that Potter and Hepburn do not widen the frame of debate to include this valuable work. I do not want the new traditions of social psychology to be as exclusive and dogmatic as the old ones that so badly need transcending.

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method. London: Sage. (2000)

Hollway, W. (ed) Special Issue on Psycho-social Research. International Journal of Critical Psychology 10. (2004)

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