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Authenticity and the interview: a positive response to a radical critique

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Abstract

We respond to recent discussions of the interview, and the ‘radical critique’ of interviewing, as reiterated in publications by Silverman and Hammersley. Reviewing and extending the critical commentary on the social life of the interview and its implications for qualitative research, we endorse criticism of the Romantic view of the informant as a speaking subject, arguing that the interview does not give access to the interiority or private emotions of social actors. We focus especially on the search for the ‘authentic’ voice of experience and feeling, arguing that the expression of authenticity is performative, and that such interviews need to be analysed for their performative features. The biographical work of the interview demands close, formal analysis, and not mere celebration. The argument is illustrated with a single case-study, derived from an ethnographic study of a social-work service in the UK. It is suggested that it is possible to derive constructive responses to the radical critique, by adopting an analytic stance towards respondents’ biographical work, as expressed through extended, qualitative interviewing. The speaker’s use of positioning rhetoric is discussed.

Keywords: Interviewing, Biographical Work, Authenticity, Narrative

The radical critique and the social life of the interview

Recent papers (Hammersley 2017; Silverman 2017) have re-visited the recurrent debate concerning the nature of interviewing within in ethnographic and other qualitative research. The arguments derive particularly from re-evaluations of the paper by Atkinson and Silverman (1997) on the ‘interview society’ described as the ‘radical critique’ of interviewing. Our own summary of the radical critique starts from Atkinson and Silverman

(1997). Their argument requires only a brief recapitulation. There are two key points of departure. First, there is the criticism of a prominent strand of ‘qualitative research’, that seems to take for granted that the conduct of interviews is the method of choice: even studies that are claimed to be ‘ethnographic’ can turn out to be based primarily on extended interviews. As Atkinson (2015) has argued more recently, the interactionist tradition in sociology needs to be reclaimed from what passes for ‘qualitative’ research, in which simplistic perspectives on interviewing are pervasive. Secondly, Atkinson and Silverman identified a convergence between this growing tendency among qualitative researchers, and what they called ‘the interview society’. That is, a pervasive reliance on the interview, whether it be a celebrity interview, an interview with the women-or-man-on-the-street. Social scientists who relied disproportionately on the interview were, they argued, in danger simply of recapitulating the cultural preoccupations of the interview society. Much the same observation concerning the interview society was made by Gubrium and Holstein (2001).

Silverman (2017) and Hammersley (2017) have recently re-examined the ‘radical critique’, from differing points of view. Silverman points out that despite the fact that the original paper has been much cited, little seems to have changed in the research community. Reliance on under-analysed ‘qualitative’ interviewing seems still to be widespread. Appeals to understanding social actors’ experience or personal dispositions still inform much ‘mainstream’ qualitative research, Silverman suggests. Fundamentally, he also comments on the *analysis* of interview-derived data. All too often, what passes for analysis consists of authors’ commentary on what a data extract means, with little or no technical analytic apparatus beyond what anybody might say about such a stretch of reported speech. In other words, Silverman forcefully reiterates the view that the conduct of interviews is not self-justifying, and that what counts is what can legitimately pass for sustained, disciplined analysis of such materials. We elaborate on this perspective in the course of this paper, suggesting positive responses to the ‘radical critique’. Hammersley adopts a complementary perspective. Hammersley (2017) focuses on Atkinson’s criticisms of interview-based research, to be found in his various methodological pieces, including his manifesto in support of ethnographic fieldwork (Atkinson 2014). Hammersley finds some areas of agreement with Atkinson, notably in the strictures concerning over-reliance on interviewing and under-analysed data. But he finds the ‘radical critique’ excessive. However, as we shall argue here,

it is certainly not necessary to adopt a radically *negative* stance as a consequence of the general critique.

Since the original formulation of the ‘interview society’, we can think in terms of the ‘social life of the interview’, as a cultural and social-scientific phenomenon in its own right. Hardly surprisingly, since 1997 it has continued to be pervasive in everyday life. And despite the repeated critiques, it continues to be used uncritically by many qualitative researchers in the social sciences. A central element of the critique was what Atkinson and Silverman described as an essentially Romantic view of the interview-informant as a speaking subject. While interactionist, modernist, structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives on the social actor would all avoid any simplified view of the subject and speech, it is – they argued – all too common for qualitative researchers to write and research as if the speech recorded in the interview were an unproblematic representation of the responding subject’s private and personal thoughts and memories. The general perspective celebrates the exploration of ‘experience’, while implying – sometimes tacitly – that the task of qualitative research is to reproduce the informant’s ‘point of view’. This carries with it some crucial assumptions. First, it assumes, often uncritically, that research can give access to the interiority of the subject – indeed that an interior, private life is the preserve of the subject. Secondly, it assumes that interviewing such actors provides access to that interior world of subjectivity. Thirdly – and paradoxically – it glosses over any constitutive or representational work of speech itself. So for all the sophistication of social scientists’ theorisation of language and speech, the interview itself gets treated as a privileged encounter through which an authentic voice speaks, and authentic experience is made visible. In many contexts ‘qualitative research’ or ‘qualitative inquiry’ has become almost synonymous with the Romantic version of the social actor (Atkinson 2013).

The Romantic vision seeks the authentic voice of the interview respondent. Roulston (2011) describes some interviewers as attempting to build rapport and trust with participants in order to generate ‘intimate and self-revealing conversations’ (p. 79) that are used to ‘produce in-depth and intimate portraits of participants’ life-worlds, and the beliefs, perceptions, experiences and opinions of the authentic selves of interview subjects’ (p. 80). In a similarly critical vein, Gubrium and Holstein (2003) suggest that critiques of the ‘standardised’ interview – such as that by Mishler (1986) - stress the extent to which respondents should *own* the content of the interview, expressed in her or his *own voice*, and they summarise the

perspective: ‘The image is one of a respondent who owns his or her experience, who on his or her own, can narrate the story that is uniquely the respondent’s in that only his or her own voice can articulate it authentically’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2003: 36).

The romantic or emotionalist interview in the social sciences is shared with celebrity culture and the interview society more widely. For instance, Meyers (2009) writes of media that celebrate celebrity gossip: ‘The supposedly “true” intimate and behind-the-scenes details of the celebrity’s private life are of the utmost concern for these media sources, as they emphasize the notion of a “real” celebrity who, in her unguarded or supposedly outside the public eye moments, is just like the average person.’ And Meyers cites Dyer’s *Heavenly Bodies* in suggesting that ‘most audiences are engaged in a project of discovering the truth behind the appearances, or, in other words believing that what lies behind the surface of the professional image of the celebrity is authentic and real’ (Meyers 2009). There is, therefore, a double purpose to any close reading of interview data. We need simultaneously to attend to the everyday nature of the interview as a common cultural form, while also creating the *methodography* of the interview as a social-science technique.

Methodographically speaking, we recognise that the interview – like any other research method – reflexively constructs the phenomena it seeks to describe. The interview invites – sometimes implicitly, often explicitly – the production of biographical accounts (Whitaker & Atkinson, forthcoming). The respondent is thus positioned as a narrator of her or his own life. When interview respondents fulfil that role, then they affirm the value of the interview as a revelatory, and even therapeutic, event. They certainly engage in processes of self-presentation (or self-creation). In doing so they draw on a variety of discursive resources in order to accomplish biographical, revelatory or therapeutic work. In the following paragraphs we shall touch on just some of the analytic strategies that illuminate that interview-work.

Clearly there is a danger that the ‘radical critique’ can be taken to be just *too* radical or unduly critical. There need be no absolute injunction against the collection of certain kinds of spoken accounts, including interviews, and there should certainly be no moratorium on their analysis. Indeed, in the main body of this paper we shall outline a number of ways in which interviews and similar spoken performances have been, can be, and should be subjected to sustained and systematic analysis. The interview and the data that it generates should not be regarded as in any sense special or privileged. On the contrary, our perspective leads us to

conclude that talk derived from social encounters called interviews are no different, in principle, from a variety of enactments that help constitute social realities, social identities and shared perspectives. The analysis of interviews should, therefore, be aligned with core methodological principles of the social sciences. Our emphasis on the performative nature of interview talk recognises that the encounter is an invitation to the speaker to account for her- or himself, to account for actions, to undertake biographical work, to construct and warrant memories, or to describe personal responses. Consequently, analytic perspectives need to be faithful to the phenomenon, reflecting its performative nature and the work it performs.

Biographical work and the interview

There are many possible approaches to the sustained analysis of interview talk that reflect the nature of that encounter, while furnishing analytic possibilities that respect the nature of the interview itself: as a speech event; as embodying particular kinds of narrative; as performing biographical work and self-presentations; as enacting speech acts of various kinds. Here we focus on a number of complementary approaches to narrative analysis that illuminate the empirical materials, and that address the wider methodological issues surrounding interview narratives. While there are numerous discussions of ‘narrative’ and ‘story-telling’ as a generic cultural phenomenon (e.g. Ricoeur 1990, McAdams 1993, Polanyi 1989), we still need empirical analysis of the activity of narrative in interviews that pays close attention to the speaker’s performative activities (cf Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2000). There is a multiplicity of analytic strategies for interview-derived narrative (Robert and Shenhav 2014). We do not intend to review, much less use, all of those possible perspectives. Rather, we focus on the discursive organisation of identity through the positioning of self and others.

In generating and performing interviews, actors engage in the construction of biographical and emotional work. In undertaking biographical work, informants construct themselves as narrative types: heroes, victims, survivors, successes or failures. These are as much narrative functions as they are personal experiences. They are conveyed through characteristic genres of narrative, such as stories of ‘overnight success’, stories of victimhood and survival, or through atrocity stories. Such accounts simultaneously reconstruct past events while portraying the teller, and others, as moral actors. Such performances can, therefore, be couched in terms of conventionally expressed speech-acts (thought of in the broadest possible

terms). In accounting for themselves and others, in justifying or explaining themselves and their activities, informants often formulate complaints, moral tales, accusations, and the like. They provide accounts through which moral responsibility is described, and responsibility for actions is claimed or allocated.

Authenticity performed

Interview talk accomplishes biographical work on the part of informants, who create autobiographical accounts of themselves, often incorporating descriptions of others and their actions (cf Peräkylä and Silverman 1991). Biographical work is undertaken in its own right, and it also embeds distinctive kinds of speech-act, such as justifications and blaming. While individual biographies are, in principle, unique, the resources that actors have to hand in constructing them are culturally shared. In undertaking biographical work, informants construct themselves as particular social (or rather narrative) types: heroes, victims, survivors, successes or failures. Autobiographical revelations of moral worth, credibility and authenticity thus present themselves for analytic inspection, not uncritical celebration. While the interview may be a pervasive phenomenon in the interview society, as Blakely and Moles (2017) remind us, that does not mean that all interviews are unproblematic for the participants. Interviews can be disruptive. Biographical work may be accomplished in the face of challenge and threat in the interview encounter, for instance. Even when no overt threat to identity or moral worth is experienced, interview respondents may act in ways that justify their actions and responses, in enactments of self, authority and authenticity.

In the rest of this paper we shall exemplify the kind of biographical and moral work that can be exhibited in the course of an interview. In doing so we address what we, following Atkinson and Silverman identified as the essentially Romantic view of the interview respondent as a speaking subject. The issue here hinges on the quest for ‘authenticity’, paralleled by the enactment of authenticity by informants. The Romantic version of the interview describes authentic dialogue, focusing on respondents’ meanings and experiences (Alvesson 2003), while Silverman (2001) writes in terms of ‘emotionalist’ interviewing that seeks to render visible the speaker’s feelings. Here, therefore, we bring together two aspects of ‘authenticity’. The Romantic interview seeks to uncover the authentic voice of the speaking subject, while the analyst seeks to uncover the biographical work and discursive means whereby an ‘authentic’ self is enacted. As Gubrium and Holstein (2016) suggest:

If authenticity is produced, we might refer to its constructive activities as *authenticity work*.... The term ‘work’ suggests that those concerned skilfully engage the task of interpretive authenticity – giving or receiving the impression that something or someone is authentic, genuine or real. In this sense, authenticity work is purposeful. It is craft-like in that it relies on the artful application of communicative tools’ (p. 123, emphasis in original).

In a similar vein, Holden and Schrock (2016) examine how actors individually and collectively ‘*signified* their authenticity’ (p. 203, emphasis in original). So while the quest for authentic actors and authentic voices informs the Romantic or emotional style of interviewing, we – along with Gubrium, Holstein and others – seek to display how forms of authenticity might be displayed in the course of an interview encounter. Again, like Gubrium and Holstein, we recognise that the auspices of authenticity are themselves highly variable, and context-specific. We are not positing a universal form of revelatory authenticity: clearly, authenticity can be accomplished in relation to a wide range of mundane activities, of artistic and cultural commitments, or in organisational, professional settings. The example we discuss in the second part of this paper derives from a professional setting. It is, therefore, context-specific. But the lessons of the interview are generic.

In exploring interview materials, we display some of the discursive features that constitute the speaker’s work in constructing a biographical account, and the practices that are deployed (cf. De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). The speaker’s rhetorical work can be understood as a series of *positioning* actions (Georgakopoulou 2000; Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrrin 2011): that is, the discursive accomplishment of identities - of self and others - in the course of narrative talk. Such positioning is embedded in the unfolding of biographical reflections and attributions. It is a key aspect of self-presentation in the course of interaction (Bamberg 1997). The key to analysing such narrative positioning lies in examining the relations that are inscribed in the narrative, and the narrative framing that is implied. Professionals’ positioning discourse involves the articulation of *contours of competence* and the attribution of responsibility to others (Atkinson 2004). As we shall show, the speaker’s autobiographical work establishes a version of ‘authenticity’ through various rhetorical devices that construct him as a particular kind of manager, leader and character.

The context of the interview

The data provided and analysed below stems from an ethnographic study conducted by one of the authors. The study centred upon one Social Work team within an English County Council with fieldwork undertaken over a 12 month period. This study set out to explore how social workers experience and understand the shift toward marketisation and client choice in the sphere of their practice (cf Whitaker 2015; Needham 2011; Lymbery 2013). The focus of the study was on the practical, everyday accomplishment and experience of these moves, so the research was predominantly situated back-stage, exploring peer to peer and system interactions, documentation and everyday chatter within the team office. In addition to extensive participant observation undertaken in the team offices, at meetings and training days, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with all frontline social workers in the team and their immediate managers. The interview at hand was undertaken with Peter, the Director of Children's Disability Services. He had overall responsibility for the team the researcher was based with and for the vision, development and implementation of the local form of practice he was keen to see take root.

The interview was planned to last for an hour, but ran to almost two. It took place in a council office not far from where the ethnographic fieldwork would shortly commence. Prior to this interview, the participant and researcher had met at team meetings whilst issues of access were being negotiated and had spoken on the phone about the potential contours of the research study. This interview was the first the researcher had undertaken with any member of the study site. It was approached very much as an introductory meeting, an opportunity to garner the bare bones of the fieldwork site and its participants, to understand the history and the current state of play of specific policy initiatives and organisational goals. In many ways it was an opening gambit, a scoping exercise, an information gathering opportunity. Further interviews, more probing, more specific, were envisioned by the researcher as taking place much further down the line after an extensive period of ethnographic fieldwork - once the researcher was more fluent in the local particularities of participants, policy and practice. These interviews with team members and management did take place four months later after a period of immersive fieldwork.

The interview was led by the participant firmly away from mundane, perhaps banal, features of organisational life, decision-making, policy and practice and into much more emotive

territory. This ‘leading’ was accomplished through his responses to questions about policy development, key organisational moments and altered forms of practice which were starkly unbureaucratic. Despite the length of the interview, less than 10 questions were posed, indeed the interview was less one of question/response and more often one of monologue. Peter would often speak for minutes, uninterrupted, at a time. Transcripts reflect this, his accounts often filled three single-spaced pages per question asked. His account was full of appeals to feeling, rich in personal history and steeped in a nature of telling quite unexpected to the researcher. We now turn to specifics of the data to consider the routes open to us to deconstruct and analyse them for the work they do. Importantly and with the focus on the work of accounts in mind, we consider how the interview adeptly delved and tied together threads to form an ‘authentic’ account.

Rhetoric of survival. One device for the display of an authentic self is through the rehearsal of narratives and events that display the speaker as a heroic survivor. Such accounts can draw on the equivalent of ‘formula’ narratives, reflecting commonly shared cultural story-types (Loseke 2012): recognizable and predictable narrative forms that are familiar to the speaker’s audience. (The implied audience is much wider than the single interlocutor who is the interviewer.) Here, therefore, Peter displays one of the originary myths of the Romantic self: the self that is forged through difficult circumstances that are overcome, or at least endured, and thus contribute to the authentic self. For a professional (such as a manager in social services) the moral career and the occupational careers are constructed simultaneously, and can be used to display the kind of past experiences that have contributed to selfhood.

Peter: I guess the other bit as well especially having had longevity in the work, is the bit about what we are trying to achieve. If you think when I was training back in ’81 I did a six-month placement in an 800-bed hospital where disabled people ran around locked wards almost naked, so I’ve been through that. I’ve managed a team that closed a hospital. I’ve been involved in setting up lots of supported housing projects. And so in terms of the values for me the bit about disabled children and adults being treated as ordinary citizens, that’s the journey we’re on. To a degree in terms of material progress if you chart my thirty years of qualified

work the evidence base is clear, from locked wards to tenancy, there is some evidence of progress.

The career, here partially summarised, is described as a 'journey'. That is, of course, part of the professional discourse of caring and managerial professions. But it is also part of the discourse of authenticity. The journey unfolds in such a way as to construct a professional biography that simultaneously warrants a distinctive kind of identity. The successive 'I've... I've....' statements add to that cumulative sense of biographical unfolding. Peter positions himself as a distinctive kind of person as well as a distinctively successful leader in social services. The successful accomplishment of the 'journey' thus warrants the speaker's current position, as well as drawing on familiar tropes of survival, success and progression. The narrative also positions the speaker in the present state of success by embedding a contrast with the past. The latter is invoked by a graphic instance, of 'disabled people [who] ran around locked wards almost naked'.

Longevity. The trope of survival is The speaker thus presents himself as someone claiming authority through experience, and as a successful professional, whose authentic voice and self are warranted through longevity and success.

Peter: By and large what we're doing is what I set out to do. At one level as a lifer, as I describe myself sometimes, that's what I'm about. As long as they keep employing me to do what I'm doing, I'm likely to be doing this for the next ten years and will continue that trajectory. The trick is to be thinking about the notion of developing critical mass and the notion of succession. So around critical mass part of what I've done is to write every policy paper in a way that slipstreams behind adults, so whether I'm talking to senior management or county councillors I can put that on the front page of every report that ____ County Council is committed to personalisation. The fact that they thought they were doing it for adults and I've slipstreamed it into children's is by the by.

So as a 'lifer', Peter can thus construct himself in terms of a long-term commitment. The professional career and the moral career again converge into a single autobiographical

account. Moreover, he constructs himself in terms of a trope of shrewdness, by achieving his ends by means of ‘slipstreaming’ his preferred strategy.

Similarly, he continues:

Peter: I shamelessly use my relationships with adult services. So I will pull the Director from Adults’ in if I need support and there are still people there if I ask them a question in a certain way they forget I still don’t manage them. But also part of forming the disability service is to get the physical critical mass of managers where our tones and styles might be different, but if you were to come in two years’ time success would be my name would not be in the second sentence.

So success again lies in the productive management of self and operating shrewdly. This account celebrates the interviewee’s resourcefulness in accomplishing and fulfilling his professional intentions. This again involves the positioning of the self in relation to others (such as County Councillors), and the implied contrast with ‘people’ with whom he claims a particular kind of professional relationship.

Rhetoric of contrast. As we have already described, positioning and articulating the self often rests on contrastive rhetoric (Hargreaves 1984). Peter articulates his positioning work through the use of comparisons and contrasts. Contrasts, whether implied or explicitly formulated, can be used to establish the validity or authenticity of what the speaker (and her or his fellow professionals) does, as opposed to what ‘they’ do elsewhere. The extreme form of contrastive rhetoric pits the speaker against ‘others’ in such a way as to reveal the speaker as the only successful or rational, or knowledgeable actor (see Atkinson 2004) . For instance, Peter talking about his long-term vision, itself a continuation of his response:

But that’s a long task, because the problem and the messages I want to get over, I’ve spent an adult lifetime internalising those things, a lot of our workers, even if they’ve worked in disability for quite a few years, don’t have a philosophy of disability. And they have been encouraged, I think, to articulate a description of themselves as ‘social workers’, doing something called standard social work that just happens to be with a client group called ‘disability’. I think that’s a really difficult issue. I’ve inherited some workers who , on one level, you’d expect an awful lot [of] because of the amount of years they have on the clock. But they haven’t had managers who have been saying to

them ‘What’s your direction of travel? Where do you want this young person to be in ten years’ time? Have you thought about the five accomplishments? What do you know about person-centred work? Do you understand the five keys of citizenship?’ And I’m guessing in terms of the number of people you’ve interviewed, probably Lucy and I would be the only ones who would understand all of those things at the moment.

And in the same vein he continues:

My experience, when I used to manage quite a large management service is that I had workers who could work beautifully in extreme circumstances, but actually when I understood them I realised they only did beautiful work by responding to the extreme circumstance. They could never get ahead of the curve. So if I asked that person to do a bit of thoughtful transition to help a young person engineer their life for a year’s time, they’d be rubbish, they’d fail dismally and often collude with families who had gone shopping for the first thing they saw....

Despite the mitigation that those ‘other’ social workers could do ‘beautiful’ work, the account establishes them ultimately as being ‘rubbish’ at longer-term, planned intervention, as opposed to reacting to a crisis. Again, Peter stands alone in his own account, in stark contrast to the unidentified, collective social workers, whom he managed (‘had’).

This account of contrasts is richly developed. Although the workers are ‘ours’, they are distanced through a litany of deficits and absences. Peter (and one other) are fully present, knowing as they do the mantras of ‘five accomplishments’ and ‘five keys of citizenship’. A lot of workers do not have such authentic knowledge, operating as they do as ‘standard’ social workers. Peter, by contrast, has spent a lifetime internalising those things.

Consequently his co-workers become the ‘others’ within this framework of discursive contrasts. As Wortham (2000) points out, such positioning can – as here – use the trope of reported direct speech in order to characterise self and others. In using such a graphic trope, Peter dramatises his and others’ competence. And in doing so he constructs his authentic self, having ‘internalised’ the relevant professional values and competences.

Articulating authenticity. Significantly for our discussion, Peter articulates a view (for himself and others) that is based on a particular – professional and personal – view of the authentic self. Authentication is here articulated through an occupational trope of ‘bring

yourself to work'. The authentic worker, notably Peter himself, is articulated through the rhetoric of 'bring yourself to work':

I have a way of thinking about where I put people and one of the questions I ask myself is, 'Does this person bring themselves to work?' Somebody who brings themselves to work, so they understand themselves, you know, the philosophy 'know thyself' – they know where they're coming from, they understand their own prejudices, and therefore because they understand their own prejudices they actively work in a non-discriminatory, non-prejudicial way because they are able to observe themselves at the same time as they are working.

Once again, the authentic, professional self of the manager is constructed and justified through a rhetorical positioning of the self and others. And a little later in the interview Peter continues:

It goes back to 'Do you bring yourself to work?' For non-disabled children there's that whole notion that they try things and they stick, or you try other things and they don't stick at all, or they fit for a period of time and then they don't fit anymore. For me the notion of bringing yourself to work is you engaging with a young disabled person and applying that notion.

So the rhetorical trope of 'bring yourself to work' portrays an authentic self, for the worker and clearly for Peter himself, that is simultaneously articulated through the personal and the professional. In doing so, Peter develops a narrative construction of 'leadership', which is accomplished through narrative means (Clifton 2014).

Georgakapoulou and her colleagues have developed an analytic perspective that contrasts 'small' stories with 'big' stories (e.g. Bamberg and Georgakapoulou 2008, Georgakapoulou 2006). 'Big' stories they associate with extended autobiographical accounts derived from interviews, and 'small' stories with those less extended tellings that are embedded in naturally-occurring interaction. While the distinction is heuristically useful, we do not make that same hard-and-fast distinction. Both kinds of narrative are performative and occasioned. Moreover, we can identify a sequence of 'small stories' embedded in Peter's unfolding professional biography. As Bamberg and Georgakapoulou (2008) suggest, the 'big' stories address macro phenomena of social identity (masculinity, diversity, managerialism). Here we

can see how the ‘small’ narrative elements that Peter deploys contribute to a larger narrative of professional authenticity, managerial competence and leadership.

The Social Life of the Interview: Therapeutic telling

The work of Bamberg and Georgakapoulou (2008) on ‘big’ and ‘little’ stories provides a useful segue into considering how interview accounts speak to broader accepted cultural repertoires and scripts. As the original work on the ‘interview society’ made clear, and as we argue, the kinds of biographical work Peter invokes are embedded within broader social frames; the discrete features we have explored when taken together, form an accepted, common, socially ingrained and pervasive form of telling. The interview society argued that the glorification of the interview as form and the primacy placed on revelatory interiority reflect a cultural preoccupation with the confessional mode of telling. Here, placing back together the discrete elements we have analysed for the work they do, it is also suggestive of a further trend within the interview society itself and speaks to our concern with the methodography or ‘social life’ of the interview.

Peter’s account is comprised by moments of revelation and confession, but also is peppered with tales of suffering, quest, overcoming, moral worth, redemption and tragedy. In his lengthy responses to questions around policy, organisation and practice he reverts into his own biography – centring the demonstration of the self – the authentic self. The changes in practice he is leading are not the product, in his account, of statistical evidence or bureaucratic objectivity, nor of policy imposition or perhaps even client-led demand. Memory work is crucial to his account. Tales of his past experiences are presented as an inherent part of his current, ‘whole’ self, as a continuation of a struggle. He seeks to persuade the author of a continuity of purpose over decades, underscoring the importance of history (‘locked wards’) and steadfastness (‘a lifer’). His biographical account presents these changes as a long-standing quest for moral righteousness and his account spliced with themes of redemption, suffering and overcoming speak of something related to, but different from, the confessional. We tentatively refer to this related yet different tenor, or perhaps genre, for the current ‘social life’ of the interview as being one deeply inflected by therapy – its tropes and prevalence within contemporary social life. Peter’s account speaks to the therapeutic, not because the interview itself is or can be a therapeutic encounter for the participant which others have attested to (Birch & Miller, 2000), but rather because of the form it takes.

To attest to a turn to therapy within dominant modes of interview telling requires a number of features. Here we draw upon the contributions of Eva Illouz who in a number of substantive works plumbs the therapeutic ethos by analysing and mapping its spectre, development and impact across consumer culture, work environments, class and gender relations, and prevailing ideals of well-being and ‘authentic’ selfhood (Illouz, 2007, 2008). In drawing on her work we can identify key features of therapy telling within interview accounts. One, they centre tales of perpetual quest for the inner self, a struggle with obstacles to this realisation, and an adoption of pain, difficulty and suffering as an integral part to becoming ones ‘true’ self. Two, they are also likely to refer to earlier experiences as foundational for becoming who one ‘is’ in the present, with extensive memory work read back from the present becoming talismanic for explanation. Indeed memory and past experiences are central performative elements – they reorganise experience as they tell it. Past experiences thus provide a symbolic framework for the present. This is also in line with predilection for authentic interiority which runs across contemporary social life. Considering Peter’s account, the questions asked were largely about the present or near-past, yet much of his reply consists of tales, anecdotes and examples from a much longer time frame – one which he sought to inject into the encounter. He is after all ‘a lifer.’

Thirdly, therapeutic tropes also render the teller responsible for their wellbeing but do so without moral judgement, so broader cultural themes of moral individualism, of change, self-direction and self improvement can be mustered. The utility of memory work enables the teller to transpose backwards in time – so any ‘blame’ can be laid at the feet of earlier experiences or time. This can be seen in Peter’s account when he refers to ‘bringing themselves to work’ and casts out practitioners who do not engage in this. Rather than overtly criticise these individuals, they have simply not done the ‘work’ – emotional and otherwise – that he has. It is not their ‘fault’, rather they do not ‘know thyselves’ as he puts it. In moments of othering in his account, Peter presents his intellectual fluency in therapeutic narratives as a form of symbolic capital – ones which others within his organisation do not possess. In this regard, “the therapeutic” is ubiquitous in Peter’s account and speaks to broader turns in organisational culture through the celebration of ‘emotional intelligence’, ‘authenticity’ and a drive to feel work as well as undertake it. It is in the experience of self-development, reflection, excavation, re-writing of difficulty into ‘the self’ and its construction within a widely accepted (therapeutic) frame which enables the expressing of oneself as socially and

morally competent. To suffer, to absorb that suffering, to overcome difficulty (‘locked wards’) and to express it is a powerful way of articulating an ‘authentic’ life.

These tropes of therapy are widespread. Confessional culture places primacy on suffering and overcoming, of quests for authenticity through pain which is democratised through its multi-media outlets. From television interviews to twitter exchanges, between written biographies and vlogs the cultural specificity of therapeutic tropes are well ingrained. The fact that Peter when posed with questions about organisational decision making, policy and practice presents an account replete with biographical and affective tales, speaks to the readiness and power of therapeutic tropes as cultural scripts. Indeed taken as a whole, Peter’s account attests to the potency of therapeutic telling circulating as it does in spheres where one perhaps would least expect it.

Conclusion

We return to Silverman’s observations (Silverman 2017). We need to recognise that the interview is not simply a method of social research, but is a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Part of the original critique enunciated by Atkinson and Silverman (1997) was that social researchers too often reproduced the implicit assumptions of everyday interview culture. It is not simply that the interview report is no substitute for observed action (true though that is in many cases). Rather, we need to examine further the implicit assumptions of the wider interview culture. In seeking ‘experience’ and ‘feelings’, the contemporary interview assumes a distinctive kind of social actor. The ideal interview candidate, therefore – whether for a ‘celebrity’ interview, a vox pop exchange or a social-science encounter – is a distinctive speaking subject. S/he is capable of articulating her or his ‘private’, ‘personal’ feelings, memories and experiences. This is the ideal, garrulous and expressive subject that is implied in much narrative research. As we have noted, some advocates of a ‘narrative’ perspective portray Narrative as a fundamental human quality, and as the main resource in the expression of personal identity. The philosopher Galen Strawson has made a significant intervention in the now vast literature on narrative and identity (Strawson 2004). He was responding to what he saw as a powerful and pervasive emphasis on narrative in social and psychological disciplines. He identifies what he calls the ‘psychological Narrativity thesis’ (the capitalisation is Strawson’s). Its fundamental thesis is, however, constant across them:

humans are inherently narrative beings. This is, Strawson suggests, often linked to a normative thesis: that a narrative understanding or construction of one's life is a good thing.

We have addressed some possible, and positive, responses to the radical critique of interviewing. Our suggestions are by no means exhaustive. There are multiple analytic perspectives that can be brought to bear on the content of research interviews, thought of as performative speech events. Such a view does not entirely negate the possibility that interviews have referential value. In other words, it does not mean that interviews can tell us nothing of value. All language-use is referential and conventional, and attention to the conventions does not render the language itself nugatory. Rather, as social scientists, it is incumbent to analyse the conventions that structure such language events, and that mediate informants' accounts, expressions of self, emotional and biographical work.

This response to the so-called radical critique does not necessarily result in a sterile negativity. In essence, the radical critique is addressed to the failure adequately to *analyse* interviews for what they are. So far from advocating the abandonment of interviewing, we suggest that interview-derived materials present rich opportunities for sustained analysis. Based on a single case, we have demonstrated some of the strategies that inform a detailed analysis of the concrete ways in which biographical work and authenticity work may be accomplished.

Finally, the issue remains: What broader inferences can be drawn from interview materials? As we have acknowledged, any critique of interviewing does not mean that interviews should be denied any referential value. We do not take a behaviourist approach: we are not arguing that, say, memory can only be equated with what is observably, audibly said. Equally, however, we have no access to 'memories' except through actors' memorialisations, and they include spoken accounts of recollected events. And they are always mediated by culturally available modes of expression. Equally, whatever private and unspoken experiences social actors may harbour, we affirm that our sociological or anthropological attention should be focused on the culturally shared conventions and resources whereby they are rendered reportable. Biographical work is a social phenomenon. So too is the value attached to authenticity. We can, therefore, study - analytically - actors' methods for accomplishing such biographical work, and hence the interview as a site for such work.

The radical critique, therefore, does not have to imply a complete abandonment of interviews and conversations with participants. We stress the performative aspects of interview talk, which is no different from any other form of social action. As Atkinson and Coffey (2001) pointed out, the long-standing debate concerning the appropriate relationship between participant observation and interviewing becomes less problematic and the contrast less stark if one recognises that talk and interaction are both performative: that what is spoken and what is observable are enacted and open to analysis. The analytic task is not to trade off one form of action for another, or to make ironic contrasts between what is said and what is done: it is to examine how such enactments are performed in whatever context they occur.

Interviews need not be the only research strategy, and clearly they should not be used unreflectingly. Exaggerated – and sociologically ill-informed – claims for them should not be entertained. Equally, however, we do not envisage field research in which the ethnographer is a silent witness or a passive recorder of spoken activity. Conversation is itself a ‘natural’ aspect of encounters; it can and should be part of any engagement with a given social world. Conversational interviews should, however, be examined for what they are, and their significance should not be exaggerated.

There are other constructive approaches towards interview talk that we have not explored. It is possible to treat interview talk as discourse like any other, and to undertake sustained analysis informed by conversation- and discourse-analysis (e.g. Rapley 2001, 2012). We have not explicitly addressed that response to interviews as data, although several key analysts have. Equally, we are conscious of Hammersley’s strictures on the ethics of using interview materials for secondary analysis – such as discourse analysis – when the overt purpose of the original interview was different. But if we are to treat interview talk analytically, such as examining the rhetoric of biographical work – then we need always to examine not just the ‘what’ of the content, but also the ‘how’ of narrative and rhetorical devices. Consequently, there is always not merely opportunity but a necessity to examine more than the surface of such spoken activity. As we have pointed out, the interview is unavoidably social. Not just an interpersonal encounter or speech event, it inscribes the socially shared conventions of narrative and rhetoric. It is, moreover, a social phenomenon in its own right. The interview reflexively incorporates an implicit model of the speaking actor and of her/his interiority. Speaking subjects in turn can use the interview as an opportunity to construct selves,

identities and narratives. Confession- and therapy-talk inform the social life of the interview, as cultural phenomenon and as research method.

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