

# How was it for you? The Interview Society and the irresistible rise of the (poorly analyzed) interview

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**David Silverman**

Goldsmiths University of London, UK

## Abstract

Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) depiction of the Interview Society analysed the dominance of interview studies that seek to elicit respondents 'experiences' and 'perceptions'. Their article showed that this vocabulary is deeply problematic, assuming an over-rationalistic account of behaviour and a direct link between the language of people's accounts and their past and present psychic states. In this article, using a Constructionist approach, I develop these ideas, by asking what sort of data are we trying to retrieve through interviews, i.e. what do interviews reveal? I go on to examine and discount the claimed intellectual auspices for most interview studies and the way in which interview data are usually analysed. I conclude by showing how the reliability of interview transcripts can be improved and the analysis of interview data made more robust.

## Keywords

analysis, Constructionist, interview, interview transcripts, narrative production

Interviewing has been too easy, too obvious, too little studied and too open to providing a convenient launch pad for poor research (Potter and Hepburn, 2012: 555).

Twenty years ago, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) noted the huge preponderance of interview studies within published qualitative research and speculated about the cultural imperatives which favour interview research. We commented:

For the qualitatively minded researcher, the open-ended interview offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue where researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support. The rhetoric of interviewing in depth repeatedly hints at such a collection of assumptions. Here, we see a stubbornly persistent

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## Corresponding author:

David Silverman, Goldsmiths University of London, Lewisham Way, London, SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: [d.silverman@gold.ac.uk](mailto:d.silverman@gold.ac.uk)

Romantic impulse in contemporary sociology: the elevation of the experiential as the authentic. Even when researchers and methodologists endorse more sophisticated versions of research interviewing, there is often an implicit appeal to the authenticity of narrated experience in the dialogic revelation of selves (1997: 305).

This article has been widely cited. Yet, two decades later, little seems to have changed. Mainstream qualitative journals publish around 80 to 90 percent of articles based upon interviews or other kinds of ‘manufactured’ data (Silverman, 2013a: Chapter Two). The elevation of interviews pursuing ‘experience’ as the Gold Standard of qualitative methods places researchers in an awkward competition not only with contemporary culture but also with other kinds of researchers.

With some justification, quantitative researchers tend to argue that, if you want to understand perceptions and motives, pre-tested, multiple choice interview questions are more likely to provide reliable data than apparently ‘open-ended’ questions administered to small, non-random samples. A recognition of such shaky foundations is seen in the way that many PhD students doing open-ended interviews regularly ask their supervisors: ‘what are the right questions to ask?’ and ‘how many interviews do I need?’. Rather than study how people behave (something inaccessible to quantitative researchers except through laboratory studies or crude counts of actions on the internet), most qualitative researchers choose to study perceptions and then inexorably find themselves in a losing battle with the real strengths of quantitative research.

But things are even worse than this. Qualitative interviewers who pursue ‘experience’ are in tacit competition with a host of non-scientific professionals. Journalists routinely report current affairs by asking ‘how was it for you?’ often in preference to conveying information about the underlying reasons for the events about which they are quizzing people (think of the reports of the 2015 Paris attacks on 24-hour news channels or the way in which the BBC website encourages ‘personal’ reports from people who were at the scene). Equally, talk show hosts expertly seek to probe behind surface appearances to get at the ‘real’ beliefs and lifestyles of show business celebrities. And the expanding psy professions demand that their clients speak and, even better, confess. In this way, The Interview Society, the unstated foundation for our choice of methods, comes back to bite us. As I ask PhD students who earnestly desire to understand how certain people ‘see’ their world: ‘do you really think you can do better than an expert counsellor or even Oprah Winfrey?’

Of course, this is not to suggest that qualitative researchers should abandon the interview. The truism that good data do not equal good research has a lot to be said for it. Ultimately, everything depends on the quality of data analysis. Later in this article, following Potter and Hepburn (2012) and Holstein and Gubrium (2016), I shall discuss how the reliability of interview transcripts can be improved and how the analysis of interview data made more credible – by seeing interviews as exhibiting behaviours rather than ‘experiences’ (the very topic presupposed by asking ‘how was it for you?’).

Unfortunately, however, the Interview Society and the preponderance of interview studies means that new generations of qualitative researchers often frame their research questions in a way that encourages them to use interviews in the same way as media and psy professionals (for example, by routinely asking how particular social groups ‘perceive’

reality and treating the interviewer's function in the interview as purely facilitatory). Most qualitative researchers still do not even consider using naturalistic data and/or rephrasing their research question to focus upon social processes rather than individual states of mind.

In order to understand this situation, I will try to answer three basic questions about the status of interview data within contemporary qualitative research:

- What sort of data are we trying to retrieve through interviews, i.e. what do interviews reveal?
- What intellectual auspices are claimed for the 'open-ended' interview?
- How can we improve the transcription and analysis of interview data?

## What do interviews reveal?

Most qualitative researchers start from the assumption that 'well conducted' interviews allow us to enter into our respondents' worlds and to understand their 'experiences' and 'perspectives'. While survey research is seen as an appropriate tool for getting at 'facts' (such as 'voting intentions'), the 'open-ended' interview is treated as the most effective tool to get a grip on 'experience'. As McCracken puts it:

The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armoury. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the life-world of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves (McCracken, 1988: 9).

Like McCracken, Byrne celebrates the use of interviews to read others' minds. As she argues:

'qualitative interviewing is particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals' attitudes and values – things that cannot necessarily be observed or accommodated in a formal questionnaire. Open-ended and flexible questions are likely to get a more considered response than closed questions and therefore provide better access to interviewees' views, interpretation of events, understandings, experiences and opinions ... (qualitative interviewing) *when done well* is able to achieve a level of depth and complexity that is not available to other, particularly survey-based, approaches' (Byrne, 2004: 182, my emphasis).

Although Byrne notes the limitations of quantitative interviews, she shares a common assumption with survey researchers. Like them, she emphasises the importance of interviewer skills in bringing off an effective interview (one 'done well'). By implication, in her view, interviewers need to be trained (so that the interview can be 'done well'). At the same time, she shows no interest in an interviewee's untrained ability to respond to the interviewer's questions, probes and response tokens (for example, 'mm') and to take account of when the interviewer might have intervened with a question or comment but did not (see Rapley, 2016). As Holstein and Gubrium explain:

'the circumstances of narrative production are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating the meanings that ostensibly reside within individual experience. Meaning is not merely directly elicited by skilful questioning, nor is it simply transported through truthful replies; it is strategically assembled in the interview process' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016: 69).

Moreover, to proceed on the basis that interviewees have 'states of mind' able to be revealed by the skilful interviewer is itself commonsensical. It depends upon the everyday assumption that each of our actions is linked to a mental process (for example, a 'perception' an 'intention' or a 'motive'). As Potter and Hepburn point out, in interviews:

People (are) asked about what they do and what they think, and they helpfully tell you about these things. However, looked at another way, what is going on here is that people are being treated as being (in) a special epistemic position with respect to their own conduct. And not just with respect to actions and events, but causal and developmental relationships, intra-psychic processes and so on. The interview is dependent on a range of ambitious cognitive judgements and feats of memory and analysis (2012: 567).

Contrary to most qualitative interviewers, this means that: 'we ... need to be cautious when treating (interview) talk as a way of referring to inner psychological objects of some kind' (Potter and Hepburn, 2012: 567). Or, as Atkinson and Delamont put it: 'We do not subscribe to the view that qualitative research is justified primarily by representing social affairs from the point of view of individual actors ...' (2005: 835).

## Intellectual auspices

How do mainstream qualitative interviewers resist such arguments? It turns out that they propose an impressive sounding list of intellectual supporters for their research. Unfortunately, as I attempt to show, this depends upon a highly problematic reading of such scholarship.

If you want to preserve a version of the pursuit of 'meaning' in the qualitative interview, one obvious port of call might be the work of Max Weber. After all, you might argue, isn't his sociology of *verstehen* about understanding 'meanings' and 'perceptions'? So, while Atkinson and Delamont's rejection of explaining social affairs through individual perceptions seems to resonate with Durkheim, surely Weber's attention to 'meaning', deriving from Dilthey's account of social science, will legitimate the conventional interview project? Here is one such attempt by interview researchers to go down this route:

'The investigative approaches of Dilthey (1833–1911) and Weber (1864–1920) focused on interpretive understanding (or *Verstehen*), to access the meanings of participants' experiences as opposed to explaining or predicting their behavior, which is the goal of empirico-analytical paradigm (or quantitative) research ... According to the interpretive paradigm, meanings are constructed by human beings in unique ways, depending on their context and personal frames of reference as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007: 613–4).

Unfortunately, this attempt to claim Weber as a student of 'experience' is deeply problematic. Certainly Weber argued for 'interpretive understanding'. But he did not see this as an alternative to explaining behaviour but as a complement to it. So his major work on

the origins of capitalism (Weber, 2001) contains both ‘experiential’ data (diaries and church sermons) and statistical tables correlating occupation and religion. Contrary to most qualitative interviewers, Weber also recognised that most behaviour is carried out with little consciousness of its subjective meaning and he worked with typologies of social action rather than psychological categories like ‘experience’ or ‘mind’. A quarter of a century after Weber, C. Wright Mills (1940) underlined this sociological orientation by pointing out that we should not treat ‘motives’ as mental states but as residing in social processes where unexpected or deviant acts are accounted for (in courts of law for example).

If social science won’t cut the mustard, what about the further reaches of continental philosophy? Take this example:

hermeneutical interpretive phenomenological methodology has been used in many nursing research studies ... based on Heideggerian philosophy ... (It) is a qualitative research methodology used when the research question asks for meanings of a phenomenon with the purpose of understanding the human experience (Crist and Tanner, 2003: 202).

Nursing research, where Crist and Tanner have their home, is sadly awash with crude, psychologistic studies of how patients and nurses ‘experience’ care (see Silverman, 2013b: Chapter Sixteen). I am very doubtful that Heidegger has a message for such qualitative researchers. But if he has, it is that meaning is always mediated through language. Moreover, his teacher Edmund Husserl, also sometimes cited by interview researchers, favoured putting aside commonsense notions like ‘perceptions’ or ‘experience’ through what he called the ‘phenomenological reduction’.

On the face of it, another phenomenologist, Alfred Schutz, is a more promising ancestor figure. Unlike both Husserl and Heidegger, Schutz saw his work as laying the foundation for a particular kind of social research that indeed stressed interpretation. Johnson and Rowlands draw on Schutz to support what they call ‘in-depth interviewing’ that ‘seeks deep information and understanding’ (2012: 101). But the ‘depth’ both sets of authors seek lies in the psyches of informants. For instance, Johnson and Rowlands quote Johnson’s study of stalking in which ‘he sought to learn how those who stalk others actually see or interpret their actions as well as to explore the nature of the (often conflicted) emotions that lie underneath these actions’ (2012: 102).

Yet when we talk about stalkers’ ‘conflicted emotions’ or assume that they have stable, audience-free ‘interpretations’ of their behaviour, we are using the everyday language and commonsense reasoning of counsellors or media reporters. By contrast, Schutz wanted to *study* commonsense reasoning as a *topic* rather than to rely upon it as a tacit *resource*. So Schutz’s proposals for social research fit much more readily with Atkinson and Delamont’s argument that ‘what people say is itself a form of action’ (2005: 835) and ethnomethodology’s distinction between the everyday world as a ‘topic’ to be studied rather than as an explanatory ‘resource’ (Garfinkel, 1967).

The intellectual source for much of this research seems to derive from what is called Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or IPA (see Smith and Osborne, 2008). Yet contrary to the topic/resource distinction, the research topics IPA proposes seem to be framed in commonsense or psychotherapeutic terms. For example, to ask ‘how do people

come to terms with the death of a partner?’ (cited by Smith and Osborne, 2008: 55) trades off the concerns of the therapist or counsellor. As a research question, it would be best addressed with surveys with large samples.

Why do conventional psychologicistic interviewers make such an effort to claim ancestors who turn out to be inappropriate and improbable? One glib explanation is that this kind of research is commonly conducted by researchers in disciplines related to practice (nursing, social work, management) with no one theoretical base. Being able to cite famous sociologists and philosophers as intellectual ancestors adds a theoretical varnish to pedestrian research studies that purport to use the interview as a method to report how particular groups of people ‘see’ things.

If there is a reliable intellectual basis for the use of the interview to peer into people’s souls it is nineteenth century romanticism. Kenneth Gergen has pointed out very clearly what such romanticism means for how we think about each other: ‘The chief contribution of the romanticists to the prevailing concept of the person was their creation of the *deep interior* ... the existence of a repository of capacities or characteristics lying deeply within human consciousness’. (1992: 208–209)

It is only a short leap from thinking about the ‘deep interior’ of the person to favouring ‘in-depth’ interviews. Indeed, once we assume that people have ‘deep interiors’, it is easy to see the contemporary appeal of a whole range of contemporary formats ranging from qualitative interviews to counselling and other ‘psy’ professions, to television chat shows and celebrity websites.

I have argued that much contemporary interview research pursues commonsensically derived phenomena (‘perceptions’, ‘motives’ or ‘experiences’) and that a common attempt to claim a credible philosophical or social science heritage for its work is misplaced and implausible. Outside of interviews, it is generally recognised that people recipient-design what they say for particular audiences (for example, in teaching a lesson or producing a document). Curiously, however, in interview research, a focus on supposed psychological states deflects attention from such social processes.

However, it does not follow that interviews should have no place in the array of qualitative methods. In the remainder of this article, I offer some suggestions about what needs to be done to improve the quality of interview research.

## Improving the quality of interview research

### *Transcription*

Regardless of how interviewers try to restrain their presence in the interview exchange, and no matter how forthright respondents are in offering their views, the resulting narratives are interactional accomplishments, not communicatively neutral artifacts (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016: 68).

Holstein and Gubrium’s argument that meaning is an interactional accomplishment implies that any robust analysis of interview data must begin with a transcript that preserves the basic features of interviewer-interviewee talk including ‘response tokens’ (‘mmm’), pauses and overlaps. The problem that the absence of such features can cause

is illustrated by the following extract from an interview that Tim Rapley (a researcher) carried out with a female manager in the UK construction industry.

Extract 1 (Rapley, 2004)

- 1 Tim I'm quite interested in this idea of the maleness of this context, how that's  
2 dealt with. What are the issues about that?
- 3 Helen One of the things that I should say is, whatever the external image is of the  
4 industry, I've been here nearly five years now, I'm very aware of these issues  
5 and I don't get any of the traditional overt sexual harassment, which is great.  
6 It's not an issue that comes up. We do sometimes get women feeling that men  
7 are not valuing them for their contribution. But I have to say there also, it tends  
8 to be the admin rather than the builders. If you asked 98% of my surveyors or  
9 women site managers, they would say they are treated the same as the men.  
10 Their experience is exactly – they don't actually experience sexism. Which a  
11 bit of me found really extraordinary, but on another level, to be absolutely  
12 honest, they're fairly exceptional women I've got here, they really are. You  
13 know, they're quite feisty, they're very confident, they're better, often, than  
14 the men.

Notice how Helen skilfully builds an answer that attends to the way it breaches the expectations built into Tim's question. Rather than simply saying 'It's not an issue that comes up' as she eventually does at line 6, she constitutes her response as unexpected by a preface in which she shows she understands why Tim might have assumed otherwise ('the external image of the industry', line 3) and offers two warrants for her unexpected answer (length of time in service and being 'aware of these issues', line 4).

But note that the transcription of this extract is tidied up, lacking any indication of pauses, overlaps or response tokens. So we can only speculate about the interactional basis for another feature of the talk. Having laid the groundwork for her unexpected answer, Helen backtracks twice in this extract. Here:

It's not an issue that comes up. We do sometimes get women feeling that men are not valuing them for their contribution (lines 6-7)

And here:

they don't actually experience sexism. Which a bit of me found really extraordinary (lines 10-11)

It is possible that this backtracking might have followed pauses that provided a space for Tim to offer some uptake of Helen's unexpected answers. Without even a response token from Tim to show some responsiveness to the unexpected way his interviewee was taking the topic, Helen backtracks. However, all this remains speculative without the additional transcription detail that we need.

The transcription in Extract 1 is par for the course in nearly all reported interview data. Indeed, in some respects it is better than most which routinely delete the interviewer's talk

from the extracts shown – as if interviewees’ responses were pure products of their minds, untouched by others’ inputs. This, of course, makes it entirely impossible to work out the interactional accomplishment of the account.

On the other hand, it is routine for interview researchers to *add* information that can seriously skew our analysis. I refer to the way in which an extract of interviewee talk is followed by this kind of information taken from two published interview studies:

- Marie, 47 years, cleaner
- Wayne, male, early 30s, married with two small children

There are, of course, endless ways in which we can describe our identity. Think of how, in Extract 1, Helen cited particular features of her identity to warrant her unexpected answer. When researchers choose particular identity-characteristics to offer to their readers (in these cases gender (through gender-specific naming), age, occupation, marital status and offspring), they neglect innumerable others (such as number of friends, siblings, leisure interests). In doing so, they favour particular ways of interpreting what people are saying.

My point is that the only identities that should matter in the qualitative analysis of interview data are those identities actually *invoked* by the participants. When researchers offer their own version of someone’s identity, they implicitly encourage the reader to accept *one* version while discouraging attention to the identity-work that is actually taking place.

A positive counter instance is provided by Jody Miller’s interviews with girls in adolescent gangs (Miller and Glassner 2016). Miller observes that, in her interviews, the girls resist longstanding cultural stereotypes of females in gangs as peripheral, serving mainly as sexual outlets for male members. By contrast, for the young women in Miller’s study ‘claiming a normative space of equality was an important means of rejecting this interpretation of their experiences’ (Miller and Glassner 2016: 57). Look at Extract 2:

Extract 2 (Miller and Glassner, 2016 :57)

- 1 JM: You said before that the gang was about half girls and half guys? Can you tell
- 2 me more about that? Like you said you don’t think there are any differences
- 3 in terms of what—
- 4 IE: There isn’t!
- 5 JM: Ok, can you tell me more—
- 6 IE: Like what? There isn’t, there isn’t like, there’s nothing—boy, girl, white,
- 7 black, Mexican, Chinese.

Miller and Glassner note how, at line 4, IE (the interviewee) interrupts the interviewer (JM). Rather than treat what interviewees say as a passive account of their experiences, Miller and Glassner show how we can understand interview interactions as a site for the production (and resistance) of cultural narratives. For the young women in Miller’s study, claiming a normative space of equality was an important means of rejecting the prevailing interpretation of their experiences.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 33–34) cite telltale phrases that respondents use to signal such identity-work for example, ‘speaking as a mother now’; ‘thinking like a woman’; ‘wearing my professional hat’; ‘if I were in his shoes’; and ‘now that you ask’.

The attempt to link pre-defined identities to what people say has its home in quantitative research. Survey researchers are in the business of correlating identity and behaviour (for example, (relating face-sheet data such as occupation and gender to voting behaviour). When qualitative researchers invoke apparently given identity features of their respondents, they inevitably set themselves up in competition with such researchers. And this is a competition that survey researchers are bound to win since their large, random samples of interviewees allow them to provide much more plausible correlations.

### Data analysis

Researchers should no longer be content simply to catalogue what respondents say in an interview. The challenge of framing the interview as a thoroughly active process is to carefully consider what is said in relation to how, where, when, and by whom narratives are conveyed, and to what end (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016: 79).

Holstein and Gubrium’s stress on the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of narratives is crucial. As I noted about the positioning of Helen’s ‘backtracking’, robust analysis of interview data must attend to the way in which interviewees *position* what they say in relation to the actions (or inactions) of the interviewer. So it is never enough just to note a particular element of an interviewee’s account without asking: ‘what is this doing *here*?’. Unfortunately, the vast majority of interview research seems quite content to *list* features of what interviewees say and ignore positioning. Often analysis seems to consist of going through an interview transcript looking for quotations that relate to your research topic and then grouping them together.

I only have space for one more example of this faulty method of selecting a list of leading quotations to link to pre-defined identities. Linstead and Thomas (2002) state in their abstract that their article ‘explores the process of identity construction of four male and female middle managers within one restructured organization’. Quite appropriately, they recognise that their sample is small (interviews with just four managers) and show some recognition of the consequences of their selective use of extracts from these interviews. Here is one such extract from an interview with Wayne:

#### Interview Extract 3

‘I’ve changed so much since I started here. A lot of my mates haven’t survived the changes ... they were good guys but they weren’t in control of what happened to them. I’ve been lucky, of course I have, but I’ve worked for it, I’ve never sat back, I’ve always tried to get more paper behind me ... you’ve always got to keep up, but it’s getting in front that gives you the insurance’ (Wayne, male, early 30s, married with two small children)

Here is how this extract is interpreted by the researchers:

(it) rests on a justification that working hard and getting ahead is demanded by both circumstance and by who you are, and being a “good guy” is not enough as you have to master the situation. Wayne sees this as achieved through qualifications, but these perhaps function as a sign for other activities that he does not mention. He also evinces a degree of paradoxical guilt that he is a survivor, that he is marked out as different from those men he was close to once, although this is precisely what his actions were intended to do. He is genuinely distressed that his friends lost their jobs, but has to remain hardened to this, to keep his sentiments masked, as he knows he could be next. (Linstead and Thomas, 2002:10).

What we have seen of this study raises three sets of questions laid out below:

- What are we to make of the authors’ commentary on this interview extract? What does it add to what any untrained reader could make of it? Is it merely the kind of thing that a journalist might add to a report of a celebrity interview? If it is any different from these things, what warrant do Linstead and Thomas have to suggest the significance of what Wayne ‘does not mention’, to talk about ‘paradoxical guilt’ and to assert that Wayne is ‘genuinely distressed ‘but has... to keep his sentiments masked’?
- Like many qualitative interview reports, no stretches of talk are provided that include both the interviewee’s answer and the previous, adjacent interviewer’s question, request for continuation or display of understanding (for example, ‘mm hmm’, ‘I see’).
- Why do Linstead and Thomas classify Wayne by these identities?

Part of my critique of the analysis of interview data is its use of selective quotation. A single study hardly proves anything but it is nonetheless curious that Linstead and Thomas cite my work in support of their approach, just as Atkinson and Silverman (1997) was cited but then largely ignored.

Of course, thematic coding can be done in a less naive manner than this study suggests. For instance, Kathy Charmaz (2014) has offered a more sophisticated take on coding where we do not code by ‘topic’ but by ‘actions’. Her suggestion that we identify and code ‘gerunds’ (for example, ‘gaining’, ‘getting’, ‘preferring’) nicely incorporates attention to the way that talk is not just a description but an action. However, when Charmaz lists the codes used in a particular stretch of talk, we see that they derive only from what interviewees say but not from where they are positioned or stand in relation to interviewer’s actions.

Many years ago, in a lecture course given in Switzerland, Saussure (1959) made the remarkable observation that no meaning resides in a single term. Judging by what counts as adequate interview analysis, very little attention has been paid to Saussure’s inspiring comment. Instead, selected extracts are isolated from their interactional home and listed as stand alone ‘themes’ that support a particular argument about how interviewees ‘perceive’ their world. This psychologistic perspective does not answer the question ‘what is this doing here?’ It fails to pay attention to the interview as a social process and ends up treating interviewees as ‘dopes’ (passive products of researcher-defined identities and repositories of vast collections of ‘motives’, ‘intentions’ and ‘perceptions’ ready to be voiced in response to the skilled, empathetic interviewer).

**Table 1.** More credible interview research.

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1. Improve the transparency of the interview set-up (for example, explaining what interviewees are told about the purposes of the study).
  2. Attend fully to the actions of the interviewer (including sequences of talk involving both interviewer and interviewee; improved transcription detail)
  3. Tie analytic observations to specific interview elements.
  4. Improve analysis of interview data by attending to how interviews are flooded with social science categories, assumptions and research agendas.
  5. Take account of the varying footing of interviewer and interviewee by showing how interviewees respond to the various activities and categories offered by the interviewer.
  6. Analyse the orientations to stake and interest on the part of the interviewer and interviewee (e.g. how the interviewer may be silent at certain turn-transition points but make other interviewee responses relevant and interesting).
  7. Do not presuppose cognitive, individualist assumptions about human actors.
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(Adapted from Potter and Hepburn, 2012: 556.)

## Where now?

Perhaps I need to stress that I am *not* arguing that qualitative researchers should abandon the interview nor that there is any inevitability about the tendency towards poorly analysed interview data. Researchers inspired by narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004; Holstein and Gubrium, 2012; Riessman, 2007) and discourse analysis (Potter, 2016; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Potter and Hepburn, 2012; Rapley 2016) offer beacons of light for interview researchers who take seriously the need for proper transcription in the aid of data analysis that goes beyond a list of telling quotations. More broadly, interview researchers would do well to stop name-dropping inappropriate philosophers and social scientists and derive inspiration from what the Constructionist model tells us about sense-making in social interaction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008).

What step by step changes might improve the quality of interview research? Table 1 offers a set of achievable goals.

Table 1 offers much food for thought for interview researchers. Let me add a few suggestions that also run against the grain of much contemporary interview research:

- Ignore what you know already about your interviewees. Instead, analyse the identities that they actually invoke (and when they invoke them and with what local consequences). ‘Once we reject a simple correlation between talk and essential meaning, we should then focus on how interviewees (and interviewers) construct or perform identities and subjectivities’ (Rapley, 2012: 551).
- Avoid a line-by-line interpretation of what is being said (this will usually lead into a psychologistic reading). Instead, find some *outcome* in the talk and work backwards to see how the parties might have reached this outcome.
- Look for when the speakers appeal to some *warrant* for what they have just said (e.g. appealing to ‘luck’ as a reason for their success or failure). Analyse what this is doing by asking what local function such a warrant serves in precisely this position (for example, downplaying the possibility that what they have just said could be heard to be ‘boastful’).

- Ask ‘how?’ and ‘what?’ questions: ‘The *hows* constitute the everyday work of practice, the process by which, in the case of interviews, the interview gets “done,” so to speak... The *whats* constitute the everyday substances of talk and interaction. The appropriate methodology on this front entails the ethnographic examination of available accounts, their circulation, stakes, negotiation, and likely consequences within pertinent narrative environments’. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016:73).
- One final tip from Jonathan Potter: ‘Don’t be afraid of focusing on what seems ordinary as well as what seems exceptional. Things that are regular, normative, taken for granted, and so on are often of great social scientific significance’ (Potter: personal correspondence).

## Conclusion: objections and rebuttals

Atkinson and Silverman’s (1997) depiction of the Interview Society was squarely aimed at undermining the claims of poor interview research. In this article, I have developed that project and sought to outline a programme for a more robust, better grounded version of interview research. Yet I can already hear ringing in my ears objections to my arguments. In these concluding remarks, I mention some objections (no doubt there are others) and my response to them.

### *Discounting experience?*

I have no illusion that identifying why ‘experience’ is such an important category in our cultural world will discourage researchers who remain fascinated by it. They might reasonably ask: am I suggesting that we drop any interest in studying experience? In response, I suggest that by all means study ‘experience’ but not as some unmediated mental category. Instead, look at how interviewees *warrant* an experience for example by appealing to particular identities (mother, expert etc.) or to an appropriate search procedure which allows them to discount another version of what happened (see Sacks, 1984). A useful exercise is to look at occasions where interviewees downplay their right to ‘own’ an experience for example when explaining why they have not much to say about a given topic. An extreme case of downplaying such ownership is seen in family therapy sessions where clients are often asked about the experience of another person (see Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991).

### *Just storytelling?*

A related objection is that, by appealing to narrative analysis, I want to reduce all interaction to storytelling. But do ‘experiences’ speak for themselves and so should what interviewees say be treated as a simple product of their psyches, unmediated by the dynamics of the interview? A simple answer was offered by Norman Denzin over twenty years ago. Denzin (1991) abandons the naturalist assumptions about ‘lived experience’ found in his earlier writings. As he puts it:

The subject is more than can be contained in a text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. What the subject tells us is itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings. Most important, language, which is our window into the subject’s world

(and our world), plays tricks. It displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent, so that what is always given is a trace of other things, not the thing – lived experience – itself (1991: 68).

Moreover, it is clearly mistaken to minimise the importance of storytelling in human affairs. Wars are fought and elections are won and lost in part on the basis of compelling narratives. The role of historians and social scientists is to unpick how stories are constructed whether in political speeches or qualitative interviews and, if we follow Gubrium (2005), to address the institutional contexts of narrative production (such as the Interview Society).

### *Irrelevant to practical concerns?*

Many interview researchers undertake their study because of lively practical concerns. For example, medical researchers want to study, say, the experience of women who miscarry or the concerns of the asthma sufferer in order to improve clinical services. They can and do object that the kind of constructionist analysis proposed in this article has an unclear relation to practice.

I take this objection very seriously. There are indeed examples of well conducted interview studies whose analytical interest seems to displace any practical concerns. Let me give one contrary example from one such study with which I was involved. Baruch (1982) notes that, when parents of children with congenital heart disease are first interviewed, they often offer 'atrocious' stories, usually about the late discovery or inadequate treatment of their child's condition. These stories reveal both local identity work and cultural tales.

It is tempting to compare what parents say with observations of what has happened and with medical workers' accounts. However, as Baruch suggests, such a comparison is based on the quantitative assumption that interview responses are to be valued primarily because of their accuracy as objective statements of sets of events. Conversely, we might address the moral forms that give force to 'atrocious' stories, whatever their accuracy. Right or wrong, biased or unbiased, such accounts display vividly cultural particulars about the moral accountability of parenthood.

This finding about moral accountability led to a direct intervention in the hospital where these children were being treated. At our suggestion, parents were invited to return around three months after their first consultation. At this meeting, a doctor was available to answer the questions that had occurred to them in the intervening period when they had time to reflect upon what they had been told and to respond to questions from anxious relatives and friends. Unlike the first consultation, there was no need to bring their child because no medical examination was involved. This clinic had a high rate of take-ups and was well rated by the families concerned (Silverman, 1987).

No doubt I have failed to identify several other objections to my argument. And maybe what I have said in this article is insufficiently forceful or convincing. But can we all agree about two things?

First, isn't the skewing of qualitative research towards interviews something odd and in need of explanation? Second, doesn't the robustness of much interview research leave a lot to be desired?

Let us hope that no more programmatic debates like this will be needed. Isn't it time that qualitative researchers stopped arguing with each other and got on with analysing the choreography of interactions (including interviews)?

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## Author biography

David Silverman is Emeritus Professor at Goldsmiths' College, Visiting Professor at King's College, London and the University of Technology, Sydney, as well as Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology. His areas of interest are qualitative methodologies and healthcare interactions. He is the author of *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (fifth edition, 2015); *Doing Qualitative Research* (fifth edition, forthcoming); *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting Book About Qualitative Research* (second edition, 2013) and editor of *Qualitative Research* (fourth edition, 2016).