The Craft of Interviewing

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In this chapter we draw on our experience of doing and advising others to explore the craft of interviewing in qualitative research. We avoid providing a technical guide and instead favour examining the foundations and practical complexities of the method. Our argument moves beyond the notion of an interview being a 'conversation with a purpose', and instead frames it as a nuanced social activity involving emergent dialogue, embodied interactions, and material-discursive elements. One of our goals is to challenge the assumption that interviews can provide transparent insights into participants' inner selves or experiences. Instead, we provide various examples that can help understand them as mutually constructed social encounters that enact contextual realities. We consider notions of reliability and truth in qualitative interviewing, arguing for a shift from positivistic ideals towards cautiously and critically embracing interviewer and interviewee positionality and reflexivity. Our 'theory of interviewing' is grounded in ontological, epistemological, and axiological considerations – terms we define quite clearly. When understood in such ways we hope to provide a broad scaffold which you can use to develop your own skills and style. Our aim is to equip both developing and experienced researchers alike with the conceptual tools to produce robust, ethically-sound qualitative research and defend their methodological choices.

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We've conducted hundreds of interviews and supported numerus postgraduate students and colleagues through their own process of developing the skills of a good interviewer. The training we provide, which is based in part on the training we were provided by our PhD supervisors and other senior academics, doesn't lend itself easily to recreation in text. This is because while there are some key technical, procedural and ethical issues about how to design and conduct interviews that suit a written format, to think of an interview as a method with a clearly defined procedure that people follow in a recipe like, or step-by-step fashion, misses the point that *interviewing is a craft*[3].

And like any craft, we must develop it through a dedicated and practical process – you wouldn't expect to buy a tattoo gun, read an instruction manual and instantly become a skilled tattooist. With that in mind, the way we lead scholars through their 'apprenticeship' in interviewing relies on two main things, 1) a broad scaffold within which to work and 2) the act of doing. We can't be with you when you do the doing, but what we would like to give you, in this chapter, are some key elements of the broad scaffold we develop for others who work closely with us. In doing this we're trying to connect you to a community of experienced interviewers and social scientist who taught us, and those who taught them.

In what follows, we'll provide you with a clear way of understanding the craft of interviewing. If you're new to this topic, and qualitative research more broadly, you may find some of the ideas challenging at first, but once you have processed them, you'll be well placed to get on with doing interviews. And in that 'doing', as long as you keep thinking and reflecting on the ideas we present here, you will be on the path to becoming a great interviewer.[4]

Before we develop our main thesis, a note on 'technical texts' about interviewing – by technical we mean a description, or how-to guide. Books and book chapters will talk about structured, semi and un-structured interviews, designing an interview guide, sampling and recruitment, types of follow up or 'probing' questions, and how to transcribe your data (for an example, see Brinkmann, 2020). Such texts might outline elements of ethical considerations – including issues like confidentiality, researcher and participant safety, and so on – that must be passed before doing interviews. All these ideas, especially discussions around the ongoing nature of ethics, are of importance and you should spend time learning and

[3] This notion of science as a craft has a long history. Scholars such a C. Wright Mills (*The Sociological Imagination*) and Robert Alford (*The Craft of Inquiry*) have detailed how they envision such craftpersonship and authors have made similar arguments around the notion of science as a vocation (Weber, *Science as a Vocation*; Elias, *What is Sociology*).

[4] We're sorry this chapter is so long; we know it will be a bit of a grind to read. We've tried to keep it as accessible as possible, but if you're newish to academic reading you might wanna break it up into sections rather than try to plough through the whole thing in one. Take your time!

understanding them (see Tina Miller and colleagues *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, which covers this topic in broad and insightful ways). But they don't necessarily help you understand what an interview is, what knowledge we might generate using them and the values that are associated with such an approach. In other words, in their focus on technical issues they don't provide a *theory of interviewing* – such a theory can provide the scaffold within which you develop your craft as an interviewer.

Our way of scaffolding – of providing solid platforms and parameters for you to work within – draws on the philosophical foundations of (social) scientific knowledge. We will largely, but not completely, deliver this philosophy in a stealthy way by avoiding overly challenging language and ideas where possible – but it's important you're aware that you're developing such knowledge as it will give you confidence to tackle such philosophical issues in the future. Along the way you'll learn about the ontology, epistemology and axiology that sits at the foundation of the craft of interviewing. James outlined some of these ideas in the introduction, but we'll briefly discuss them in relation to our topic:

> Ontology can be understood as the study of existence and being – *what is and is not*. In relation to interviewing this means thinking about what an interview is, how we might understand the beings that talk to each other and the 'nature' of the ideas which are the content of such a process. When considered superficially such questions can seem to have common-sense answers and addressing them can feel unproductive, but we know from experience that not to be the case. This is because it's likely for people think about the nature of interviewing, and the human conditions that enable them, in ways that are quite misinformed, and this undermines the knowledge that can be produced using such a method.
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> Epistemology is the study of knowledge – *what we can know and how we can know it*. In relation to your development of the craft of interviewing, this means examining what knowledge we can produce when speaking with people and reflecting on the strengths and limitations that accompany that process. Doing this encourages us to (re)consider what we're trying to know and how logical, appropriate and useful that might be. Such concerns are fundamentally tied to how we understand the ontology of interviews, and the people doing them.
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> Axiology is about trying to understand values – *what matters to us, and how we assign worth*. When we think about this side of interviewing, we consider what might draw us to speak with someone about their life, thoughts and behaviours. Perhaps, for example, we are seeking to centre human beings, as *humans being* – that is, living the mundane and sometimes dramatic realities they share with others – within our science. This means that we would place emphasis on someone's emotional experiences of being injured, or how they

> identify with a sports team that always loses, or the excitement that accompanies rock climbing. In so doing, we're valuing certain dimensions of the human condition, and the social arrangement of life, above other approaches to understanding – think, for example, of how a biomedical approach might place different values on such topics, if any such value was placed on them at all.

At various points in what follows you'll read us referring to the language of ontology, epistemology and axiology in implicit ways when we talk about what interviews are, what we can know from doing them and what we might value in this process. We'll start by considering a quite fundamental question, which some might think has a quite simple answer.

What's an interview?

To get at this question, it's worth thinking firstly about what other connected things might be – so, what's communication, what's a chat and what's a conversation? These are things that most of us take part in daily without much consideration. And, in fact, even people who feel awkward in conversations, and sometimes struggle to communicate, usually have quite well-developed skills in this regard. Think, for example, of all the ideas, words, grammar and fine muscle control you need to learn, to speak. And what about your ability to subconsciously pick up on body language and emotional tone just by being with someone?

What we're pointing to is that for most people (even awkward, nerdy academics) communicating, chatting and conversing is something we've been doing, developing and practicing for years. In this regard, we already have much of the 'hardware' and 'software' needed to hear and understand something about our interlocutors using meaningful vocalisations arranged in various logical orders – speaking and listening. And, this often taken-for-granted process is one of the main ways we interact with, learn about and understand the world around us.

Now, this is a strength because it means we can jump right in to using 'talk' as a method in our scientific projects, and a weakness, because much of how we do interviews can remain outside of our conscious reflection – it's rare, for example, that you'll think in detail about the words you say nor why you say them, you'll usually just do the 'saying'. In that regard, while many scholars will, at one time or another, assume they can 'turn their hand' to interviewing as a method, many will also not realise they need to put energy into developing their craft as an interviewer.

Such an uncritical way of (not) thinking about communication, is a reality of our existence as people who have built societies and communities using words and ideas, and it bares considering, especially to those who think they can simply adopt

such an approach to developing refined scientific analysis. Just like skills in the lab, or skills with theory, the skills of an interviewer, although in some form already embedded in how we interact with people, must be sharpened, refined and reflected upon.

To that end, when thinking about interviews more critically, they are often described as 'conversations with a purpose'. They are designed and delivered with something in mind, perhaps to explore a topical area or produce information that can answer research questions. When we first teach undergrad students about this, we ask them to frame such a purposeful conversation by developing an interview guide around key ideas drawn from academic literature. That is fine to get them going, but if scholars continue to work with such limited ways in mind, as can often be done, they miss important opportunities for their intellectual development.

One key point here is that a researcher with an interview guide, might think of themselves like a conductor – guiding the conversation through a set of replanned questions that flow in a certain order until the last one is asked. The 'conductor interviewer' then leaves with knowledge that has come out of the conversation. In this metaphor, the researcher can easily think of themselves as 'picking' knowledge out of the interviewee's head, when human communication, and life more broadly, doesn't much work in such ways. Rather, such ways of understanding each other are essentially interactional, and rely on our interdependence and shared systems of knowledge (see Matthews, forthcoming, especially Chapters 17 and 19).

A better way grasping an interview is by considering the idea of falling into conversations. Here it is useful to draw on the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) who notes that such a falling is useful as both a normative and descriptive assessment – for a conversation to be genuine, we should fall into it and we often do.

> We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation (1989, 383).

Have you ever found yourself saying something to a friend, advisor or close colleague that you didn't know you thought, or speaking about your research project in a way which neither of you had done before? This is an example of what Gadamer is trying to capture; that moment where the conversation between people takes on a 'life of its own'.

Of course, a conversation doesn't literally exist in this 'living' way, but such a way of thinking captures something of its emergent nature – that is, while the conversation depends on the two speaking, and the ideas they have learned over time by being immersed in various cultures and knowledge about the world that existed before they were born, it is not determined by those important start points. Rather, it has emergent properties that are unpredictable, and perhaps even unknowable, as they are produced in and through the process of speaking and listening together.

Now, 'falling' sounds quite careless, even clumsy perhaps, and, of course, Gadamer wouldn't want us to understand the craft of interviewing using that sense of the term. Here, Alfred Schutz' *Phenomenology of the Social World* can help us, because in it, he describes the social interactions at the core of 'mutual tuning in'. This is a process whereby people, especially those who are familiar or from similar cultural backgrounds, begin to develop a shared understanding of each other – a term Schutz and others use to describe this is intersubjectivity.[5]

The process of 'tuning in' often happens in ways which feel quite easy and natural. Thinking too much about an interview can get in the way of this, because instead of *falling in* to the conversation, you might be *in* your thoughts about how the interview is going or thinking what to ask next. This 'in-ness' denotes something of where you, your attention, and consciousness, are, and you'll probably have experienced this when you talk with someone who's really interesting – this is often when time flies, when you stop caring about distractions like social media, and simply enjoy discussing for discussing's sake. Here, you have 'fallen' but also 'tuned in' to the conversation you're having with that person.

Learning the craft of interviewing is thus about appreciating and approaching the interview as a conversation that you and the participant fall into. This doesn't mean we abandon interview guides or our topic of interest. It does, though, mean we no longer think of the interviewer as a conductor of conversations who follows a procedure in a rigid way. It also means we embrace flexibility, curiosity, and perhaps stumbling into new ideas, as these are key ingredients for letting conversations flow as we and our participants tune in to each other.

The craft in this part of the process is not to be found, then, in an unfailing dedication to one's interview guide, but in the ability to develop balance between an unconsidered falling into conversations that drift and meander meaninglessly, and the necessity of lifting oneself briefly out of such freefall in order to productively

[5] Intersubjectivity is a useful idea for those who want to get good at interviewing. Nick Crossley's (1996) book on the topic is an excellent, although sometimes challenging, read. Chris' forthcoming book *Doing Good Social Science* discusses how we might develop intersubjective understanding with our participants by spending considerable amounts of time chatting and doing things with them.

guide yourself, and the person you're speaking with, back towards important topics. And as we expect you know already, finding balance in any area of life can be very challenging, and it certainly is in interviewing.

A second point about describing interviews simply as a conversation with a purpose is that this can lead to scholars thinking about the process in a material, cultural and relational vacuum[6]. For example, interviews are conducted in physical spaces like a café, a quiet corner of a gym, in a work office, or by a canal. And such spaces are meaningful – that is, they are full of meaning and don't exist as a 'blank geographical slate' for conversation.

Speaking with a young boxer, for example, near the promotional material, gloves, and assorted training gear that litters gyms, even if out of earshot of coaches and other boxers, might well act to guide them towards recreating normative ideas that dominate such a space, and therefore, take them away from ideas that might be more important at school, home, or elsewhere. This is not to say that such a location is a poor choice, but to highlight that as a choice we might make as researchers, it can influence the knowledge that is produced during an interview.

We may also use photographs, clothing, sounds, objects like trophies, and other materials to help us fall into conversations and get to know people a little better. When this is done on purpose, such materials are often called 'elicitation devices', and they're employed to help generate richer conversations (see Sophie Woodward's *Material Methods*, for an excellent and more broad discussion around such methods). But we might also think of them as 'matter that matters' – they are more than 'just' physical matter, they're also meaningful in that they matter to us. Such devices can act on us, and for us, by moving us into a different time, place, and feeling – perhaps a picture can take us to a memory of childhood, or a piece of music makes us think of a rave we once found ourselves in.

In other words, rather than thinking of the things around us, and what we might bring to interviews as inert and passive, they are material-discursive devices that will have various effects on the interviewer and interviewee. And now, when we fall into our conversations, we're doing so in a way we should understand as quite clearly shaped by the material and symbolic world in which we do so.

Here, we could delve into what is known as New Materialism and/or Post Qualitative

[6] In what follows we focus on the social significance of spaces and bodies, but this is also a fundamentally historical and structural process. Feminist scholarship has been important for encouraging academics to value such an understanding in various ways. We strongly recommend you engage with such literature no matter your area of academic focus. Joey Sprague's (2012) *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers* and Sandra Harding's (1991) *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* are excellent resources for anyone wanting to develop critical thinking about a whole host of ethical, political and theoretical approaches to re-considering research methods.

Inquiry given that we are theorizing interviews as practices between humans and involving various other objects, but we will let you jump into that reading if you like the sound of it.[7] Our point is that interviews are not just about conversations between humans. They also involve material and cultural things which are meaningful and matter in that they can animate, direct, and engender conversations, help construct knowledge, and, in this way, shape the data that is produced via interviews.

And if we follow this point about 'matter that matters' a little further we might find ourselves considering our bodily selves. That is, we're made of flesh which is biological matter that acts in certain ways to shape our experiences, which also has important and powerful symbolic meanings. So, Chris' tattooed body, which is a body that has been developed and simultaneously worn down by years of boxing, with his shaved head and big beard, can quite obviously carry forth with it the potential to act on interviewees in various ways. In addition, then, interviews are multisensory, they are not simply about a verbal conversation that one hears.

When interviewing we rely on and can productively use other senses like sight, taste, touch, and pain to construct what we know and the realities that are produced through conversations.[8] In relation to Chris' boxing body, which has felt the pain of sparring and competition in his ribs, hands, head, and various other places, and can sense the movements of opponents as they try to land punches on him, the years of being inside and around the ring give him some access to a sensory world that more usually remains hidden from 'outsiders'. In drawing on those bodily experiences and sensations in interviews, he's helped boxers articulate painful, emotional, and sometimes exhilarating accounts of life (Matthews, 2016, 2018, 2020).

And all of this sensing fleshyness is inherently emotional; as all humans exist in various ways as emotional beings. These emotions, and even the feelings associated with calmness that might enable rational discussions to flow more easily, are carried with us as we approach the process of falling into conversation. There is then a very clear embodied nature to interviews which we can try to interrogate by turning our critical gaze back upon ourselves as objects of our own study. When this is done, we can become more, but never fully, aware of how our bodies, senses and emotions, and the bodies, senses and emotions of our participants, might act upon each other and the knowledge that is produced as we fall into our conversations together.

The following conversation between Chris and a boxer who he'd trained and

[7] Nick Fox and Pam Alldred's (2015) paper on this topic is a great start point, it also contains many references for you to follow up on.

[8] For broad discussions and many interesting chapters which revolve around this point see Ian Wellard's (2015) *Researching Embodied Sport: Exploring Movement Cultures* and Andrew Sparkes' (2017) *Seeking the Senses in Physical Culture: Sensuous Scholarship in Action.*

sparred with for years provides a useful illustration of the ideas were developing:

> Chris: What was it you loved?
> Nick: I loved fightin'.
> Chris: What about it?
> Nick: It's the edge you get, you know when someone's after you and you're after them.
> Chris: Gimme an example.
> Nick: Fucking 'ell, you ask stupid questions, right, you're 'ere [moves Chris into range] so you know you can punch me, but you know if you're gonna try I'm gonna slip and come back, so you don't, but you could, so I'm trying to make you punch by twitching to make you think I'm gonna punch [Both laugh], but neither of us do. That's edgy right? And we ain't even fucking thrown down yet.
> Chris: Yeah, but what about if I throw and land?
> Nick: Well you ain't gonna land on me are ya? [Both laugh] But then when you're in the mixer it's even better 'cus then its tactics but also a fight as well, ya still thinking, ya still usin' good tech[nique] but also na [now] ya fightin', we're swinging and the best man will come out on top. (Matthews and Maguire, 2019, 122)[9]

This extract provides an important glimpse of a conversation between two men with similar backgrounds, accents and bodies, who shared hours of time together in cooperative combat, exploring ideas with a clear sensory and emotional dimension. The 'edgyness' of such action is often challenging to capture in academic research, and more usually such representations of emotional and physical significance are the preserve of photography, cinema and other artforms. But when we allow ourselves to fall into conversations and we work diligently to 'tune in' to the lives of others, we can grasp important elements of this side of life. And as we place value on intimate moments of humanity such as this, the craft of the interviewer can begin to shine through.

Considering the above, we might offer a definition of interviews beyond 'a conversation with a purpose' toward an understanding that positions interviewing as a social activity where two (or sometimes more) persons fall into conversation, 'tune in' to each other, in spaces, and surrounded by objects and things, that might shape and act on the process via their material presence and symbolic meanings,

[9] Note from Chris – One way I know Nick and I had fallen into conversation here is that after the interview I didn't remember this happening. I was totally in it, as was Nick. He'd moved me around like that a bunch of times as he taught me to punch, defend and the like. All the men I train, sparred and competed with struggled to articulate why we loved punching and getting punched so much, so I had to work hard to get them to speak like this. I do remember some elements of this interview and chats like it vividly – the noise of the gym, the smell, the sweat running down us. These interviews often took place in the social spaces that we existed in together and this helped captured key elements of our lives.

and that this process requires fleshy, emotional, sensing bodies, that draw on past experiences and relationships, to produce something with emergent properties – a 'life' of its own. This definition is not perfect and doesn't have the reductive clarity that's perhaps the goal within methodological how-to guides, but it does provide important ways of considering an interview – that is, how an interview can be thought to exist and take form in an ontological sense.[10]

The craft of interviewing is then transformed from something seemingly straightforward to a complex process involving emergent conversations, emotional, contextual and relational beings, materiality, the sensorial, and more. And when this happens, a series of logical outcomes should follow in terms of how we design, do, and analyse interviews, as well as how we think about and make certain claims about experiences and the self, reliability, truth, bias, and objectivity. We pick up on several of these matters in what follows, but we also encourage you to think about what impact such an understanding of an interview has on your qualitative research or how you might judge the work of others?

Interviews, Experiences and the 'Inner Self'

Some scholars assume, and even in previous eras out right claimed, that interviews can provide transparent insights into people's experiences and are clear windows into participants' inner self.[11] For example, a researcher might write that the aim of their qualitative study is to reveal through interviews people's experiences of a sporting injury and any changes to their self (we'll return to this example of injury a number of times in this section). However, when we consider such assumptions or claims critically, they can highlight ways of thinking about the world that get a bit wonky. And when we capture elements of this, we're better able to help people make informed choices about using interviews or not. It will also shape how

[10] Please see Smith and Sparkes (2014) where these ideas are discussed in a similar but broader manner.

[11] This 'inner self' idea, although in some ways intuitive as we have conversations with ourselves, is often used in a way which is poorly conceived as something purely individual, asocial or denoting the essence of a person. There is an intellectual legacy here which can be traced to the idea of a soul and Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum' – the thinking self which is knowable to itself and god. But such ideas and connected intuitions are built upon an (ontological) overemphasis on the individual which acts to hide the historical, relational and processual nature of 'the self'. Consider for example of your 'inner conversations' – you can't think outside of the ideas you already have access to, and those ways of considering the world were passed to you by parents, teachers, reading books, the internet and so on. 'Your' thought, then, rather than being definitive yours, is inherently social in that it emerged out of pre-existing stocks of knowledge which you have learned during the course of your life interacting with others. Your self is the same in important ways as it is also socially produced though interactions with others, indeed, it is such others, and how they behaviour with you, that gives you the foundation from which you developed your understanding of yourself. Even the notion of 'a self', when considered historically, is a relatively recent idea, which actual enabled 'selves' to understand themselves as selves in the first place. See Ian Burkitt's (2008) book *Social Selves* and Marcel Mauss' classic lecture from 1946 *A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person*; *The Notion of Self* which is available various places online and in Carrithers, Collins and Lukes (1985), and Chapter 18 of Chris' forthcoming book, *Doing Good Social Science,* for more on this and connected ideas.

interviews are conceived, conducted, and what conclusions are drawn from the knowledge that is produced – epistemological and ontological claims all researchers make, knowingly or unknowingly.

First, to suggest that interviews can provide transparent insights into a person's inner self or experiences in the 'here and how', is problematic because any conversation is influenced by the audience, the context, interviewer-interviewee relationships, the temperament of the teller and listener, the levels of literacy and storytelling ability, memory, mood and so on (Randall & Phoenix, 2009). For example, it stands to reason that if an athlete's ongoing ankle problem re-emerges with vengeance the night before, or they lost a big race the previous week, or won Gold at the Olympics, such circumstances can impact their mood, and thus the answers they construct with the interviewer.

So, of course, if an interview is a 'window' through which we can see anything it would provide insight into a temporary moment within the ongoing process of life – a *potentially* constructive 'snapshot' or glimpse which *might* reveal something of how someone is feeling, in a *certain* context, at a *certain* moment, about a *certain* situation. This will fundamentally depend on their past experiences and hopes for the future, and in that respect the 'past' is exactly not the past – it lives in us, shapes us and is a key part of how we develop ideas about, and become, our future selves (Matthews, forthcoming).

Second, as emphasized in narrative theory (see Monforte and Smith, 2023), experience and the self are not simply personal since they are constituted and structured partly through the various narratives cultures provide. So, an interview can't tap into some inherent 'individualness' because if such a thing could be thought to exist, it would be inherently social in its formation – we live, imagine, and produce a story of ourselves using the discursive, cultural and narrative tools we have available to us. An interview can, then, give us insight into those stories, and how a person crafts them in emergent and unique ways.

Brett's work exploring men's experiences of suffering spinal cord injuries through playing rugby provides an emotional example of these two points:

> Brett: Did you ever think that you might one day become disabled through rugby?
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> Eamonn: No, never. I knew there was the possibility that it could happen, and I've heard of it happening to people. But I never thought it would happen to me. You don't, otherwise you'd never play. So becoming disabled was not what I expected, and when it happened I lost everything. It was, is, such a huge crisis and because of it I've lost my life. So, everyday I tell myself that I'll walk again. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning. I don't work and don't play sport anymore. So, what do I really have to look forward to? Well, I have hope. It's about every single day hoping that I'll walk again. Which might sound crazy to some people but at least in this miserable existence I have hope…I look forward to the day when I can get everything

> back that I had before the accident. Stand, and walk. So, really, the main thing that keeps me going is the hope that I'll recover. Hope that medicine will keep progressing and find a cure. Hope that there will be an end to all this (Smith and Sparkes, 2005, 1097).

It's possible to interpret this story of traumatic injury as a transparent reflection of the teller's actual subjective experiences or a clear window into their true self. But this would fail to take into account that people rely not just on their embodied experiences as fleshy beings of being physically injured, in some pure personal sense, but also on cultural narratives to mark out, grasp and make sense out of their lived experiences, and communicate them to others.

As the psychologist Dan McAdams puts it, "culture provides people with a menu of narrative forms and contents from which the person selectively draws in an effort to line up lived experience with the kinds of stories available to organise and express it. Indeed, the story menu goes so far as to shape lived experience itself" (2006, 16). We can, then, no longer justify using certain qualitative methods, such as interviewing, on the basis that they give us pristine access to reported events or a person's pure, subjective, inner world.

On the contrary, the person's experiences and subjectivity is constituted and rendered visible to themselves and to others through culturally specific resources. And a logical implication is that culture and social structures shape, enable and constrain our experiences and sense of self. This means that interview data should also be analysed for what they can tell us about the social processes that people live within, and in turn help to constitute and recreate. This is not an invite to turn everyone into sociologists, although clearly some reading in that direction will be useful for most scholars.

On the contrary, no matter which discipline(s) we're trained in and draw upon most readily, it is a call to appreciate that interviews are useful to help understand experiences and senses of self as emergent phenomena, and that thinking they provide transparent insights, or are a flawless window into a person, is problematic. To do so can leave the interviewee and the analysis of data floating in a social and cultural vacuum – *an impossible vacuum within which no one can live.*

Third, and very much related, through conversations the researcher doesn't so much discover but co-constructs with the interviewee a sense of self and experience. To borrow from Arthur Frank, what people understand of their lives and themselves "hitches a ride on the stories those people know; the stories shape what becomes experience" (2012, 22). This is a reversal of a common assumption in interviewing – that an event like a sporting injury happens, people experience it, and then when asked in an interview about the injury they provide a story that clearly reflects their inner experience of what happened.

What an interview provides instead are conversations that, within material, cultural and historical conditions, bring experience and a sense of self into being; they *enact*

realities. So, when interviewing we must remember that our conversations with participants play a part in shaping what we all come to know of our selves and our experiences.

Kvale and Brinkmann's conception of the interviewer as a *miner* or *traveller* is useful in expanding on these three points. As they argue, these contrasting metaphors can illustrate the interview as a process of knowledge discovery/collection or construction/making:

> In a miner metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. The knowledge is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions. The nuggets may be understood as objective real data or as subjective authentic meanings. A research interviewer strips the surface of conscious experience… The knowledge nuggets remain constant through the transcription from an oral conversation to a written transcript. By means of a variety of data-mining procedures, the researcher extracts the objective facts or the essential meanings, today preferably by computer programs (2009, 48).

This understanding of the 'interviewer as miner' is common, but we find the 'traveller' metaphor aligns more closely with how we understand the craft of interviewing. Here, the interviewer is on a journey to a distant country that leads to a story to be told upon returning home.

The interviewer-traveller wanders through the landscape and enters conversation with the people they encounter, inviting them to tell their own stories. Kvale and Brinkmann continue:

> …the potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through the traveller's interpretations of the narratives he or she brings back to home audiences. The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveller might change as well (2009, 48-49).

So, rather than the miner, with their 'pure' treasures, and pristine finds, the traveller's stories are inherently tied to that traveller. They can't be told, or understood, outside of the traveller's relationship to the journey and the people who were encountered.

This metaphor helps us think again about the inner world of self, and experience, which might be assumed to be the 'treasure' that a well-constructed interview can discover. And, when we think more appropriately about the process of interviewing – of gaining contingent glimpses into people's ongoing and developing stories, and our retelling of them via our interpretations of findings – we are better placed to understand what, exactly, is going on when we converse with others, but also what claims we can make based on such data. In grasping key elements of this we are

better prepared to appreciate the clear weaknesses of such knowledge as well as defend the associated strengths as part of our confident but considered conclusions.

Interviews and Reliability

In what's proceeded we've started to outline ways to think about the craft of interviewing which should help you produce robust and important qualitative research. More usually within quantitative methodologies, such conversations revolved around the reliability of data across time, contexts, and research instruments. This is because, by the logic of positivistic research, if a finding is reliably substantiated across these dimensions, it is more likely to accurately represent an object of study than be an artefact of the research process.

For example, one aspect of reliability is whether results can be reproduced. If a study is repeated using the same procedures, researchers should expect similar results with a small margin of error – if aspirin is taken in a certain dose, it can be shown using statistical probability tests, to reliably lower a person's high blood pressure, regardless of the doctor or 'experimenter' who proscribed the drug.

In qualitative research, especially that which is interview-based, something akin to this has historically been sought by using a procedure known as 'inter-rater reliability'. This process involves two or more capable researchers operating in isolation from each other while independently coding data. Sometimes this is conducted without negotiation while in other forms the researchers come together to compare codes and then reconcile whatever discrepancies they may have for the same unit of text. When a high level of agreement/consensus is demonstrated at the end of this process, the coding is deemed by those involved as relatively reliable.

The use of inter-rater reliability is typically written up in the methods section as follows: "To ensure reliability and avoid bias in interviews, three trained researchers analysed the data independently. Following a discussion over disagreements, there was 87% consensus on the codes (or themes)". Hopefully, given our previous discussions you're already seeing that there might be some wonkiness creeping into the foundations of this approach.

Such a way of working has been criticized for being ineffective when it comes to ensuring reliable qualitative research. One criticism is that there is no agreed upon threshold in the literature for what constitutes a numerically satisfactory level of agreement among coders to achieve reliability and more or less rigor. Is it 78%, 87%, or 90% agreement? An examination of papers will reveal that what passes for an acceptable level of intercoder reliability varies considerably according to the standards of different researchers as well as the method of calculation.

How, then, could we know what is acceptable for qualitative interview research to be deemed reliable? Is a study that has 90% intercoder agreement 'better' than one that has an 87% or 78% agreement? Or is it that simply reporting a 'high' figure is a marker of acceptability? Will that simply do? Our point is that without an objectively arrived at threshold for what constitutes a numerically satisfactory level of agreement such questions can't be answered with any certainty. Thus, we have no external foundation to independently assess reliability claims. With no agreed threshold obvious doubts are cast on inter-rater reliability. You see, what we have here is the legacy of a quantifiable approach to reliability which doesn't logically map onto the qualitative nature of social life.

Another criticism of inter-rater reliability is that it rests on the assumption that human beings – who are the coders – can produce theory-free knowledge. This means they can step outside their own history, cultures, background theoretical knowledge, prior relationships with other research team members and, as a result, produce knowledge that is free – separate – from the researcher. However, as we have argued in various ways above, such theory-free or concept-independent knowledge is a myth[12] – it can't be achieved no matter how hard we try or what methods we choose to employ.

As such, inter-rater reliability will always be influenced by people's theoretical proclivities, background, political motivations, and so on. These influences mean that different researchers with different theoretical backgrounds might code the same interview data differently. This doesn't mean, however, that it's the researcher or their theoretical backgrounds that's the problem – it means that for the method of inter-rater reliability to achieve positive results from interview data, theory-free knowledge must be possible, and it ain't.

So, whilst reliability is a valuable quality in quantitative based laboratory, medical, product safety research and so on, it seems to have a bit of a 'square peg round hole' feel to it when it comes to qualitative interview-based research. Where does this leave us? The short answer is that qualitative research can't produce reliability in such a sense. Does this mean, then, that qualitative research is inferior to quantitative research because the former fails to produce reliability? The next short answer is 'no'. Why? Reliability, when conceived in the way above, has no relevance in qualitative interview research because it is not an appropriate criteria for judging if it is good or not. And this is because such an approach sits in contradiction to the interpretative nature of social life and qualitative research.

In this regard, most qualitative epistemologies reject the notion of a single, objective, external reality that the scientific method can directly reveal. Instead, qualitative scholars, at least in theory, see their research field as composed of multiple perspectival realities that become manifest within the worlds we share

[12] For a discussion around the concept-dependent nature of life and how it relates to knowledge and science please see Matthews *Knowing Stuff - Myths, Science and Reality.*

with others, and are inherently constituted by, an individual's social context, interactions and personal history.

The role of a qualitative researcher is not to reveal universal objective facts but to apply their theoretical expertise to interpret both the *commensurability* and *diversity* of perspectives they witness in interviews on a given topic. That is, while there may be relatively stable, obdurate and similar thoughts and experiences within social groups, we also understand and can account for the details, differences and discontinuities, that are features of all social life. It is within such a framing that we begin to appreciate some of the fantastic opportunities for understanding life that interviewing can provide, while also seeing how reliability, in the traditional sense, simply doesn't make sense for us as a measure of quality.

If you interview people more than once, perhaps as a part of an ethnographic project or because you're conducting life history research which can often require many hours of discussions, you'll find its common for them to change their answers to questions and contradict previous responses. This is because, as you well know, it's normal for us to change our minds. And if you think back to our earlier discussions about falling into conversation, and the emergent 'life' that such shared talking can produce, this shouldn't be a surprise.

A recent example of this can be found in Reem AlHashmi's work on concussion in combat sport whereby Reem's participants initially had quite certain and confident views about brain injuries. However, following further questioning, the fighters started to reflect on their previous understandings and this resulted in various processes of self-discovery[13] and questioning of their choices to give and receive brain damage as part of their leisure time (AlHashmi and Matthews, 2022).

Rather than squashing the epistemological space which enabled such changes to be witnessed, by creating a rigid interview procedure to follow mechanistically, or thinking simply that something went wrong with the interviewing, these are possibilities to be expected, sometimes celebrated, and certainly analysed. People, after all, are not finalised (Bakhtin, 1984); we are always changing even while parts of our life might appear to be static. Given this, a methodological approach to reliability which is built on stability and recreation represents an empirically and theoretically inadequate description of the human condition.

To press this point one final time, qualitative researchers can never conduct the same interview twice in precisely the same way, as if they were programmed like an

[13] It's interesting to note here, that 'self-discovery', which some people, especially those selling and buying pop-psychology books, might think involves an 'inward journey' of reflection though perhaps meditation or other ways of producing 'enlightened' moments of introspection, often happen during or following conversations with others. This again shows exactly how 'inner' the self is – that we often 'discover' it in conversation, or on holidays, or though trials and tribulations, which are all examples of our interactions with others, in other places, in social situations that are often new to us. It is not then a finding of one's inner self, but a new or different experience of the world, life and self, that we're feeling when such a process happens.

obedient robot. Given this, worrying about whether interview data can be reproduced is silly. Indeed, as Harry Wolcott states, reliability remains 'beyond the pale' for qualitative research:

> In order to achieve reliability in that technical sense, a researcher has to manipulate conditions so that replicability can be assessed. Ordinarily, fieldworkers do not try to make things happen at all, but whatever the circumstances, we cannot make them happen twice. When something does happen more than once, we do not for a minute insist that this repetition is exact (Wolcott, 1995, 167).

In short, following the classic work of William James,[14] we can't step into the same stream twice. This being the case, qualitative researchers need to recognize the circumstances that render reliability, in the sense drawn from quantitative work, as irrelevant to our concerns. What, then, are the ways in which we do concern ourselves with developing the quality of our research while conducting interviews? How can we tell when someone has developed the craft of interviewing? And what is likely to distinguish research which gets favourable reviews, from that which struggles when submitted to key journals? Before our concluding comments, we'll briefly consider these questions by thinking about the qualities of the sort of research we've been discussing.

Truth and Quality in Qualitative Interviewing

When we teach undergrad students a favourite question we like them to consider is, "how do you know your participants are telling the truth?" This is because, as we all know, people can lie on purpose, and are regularly wrong (or even correct) without knowing it. So, if we're basing our research on human beings with the ability to lie and who are fallible in their ways of knowing the world, how is there something 'scientific' that can come forth from such an approach?

Our preceding comments should have provided you with important ways to (re)think about such questions, but to be explicit, what we need to consider here is the sort of truth we're after. One way to approach this search for the truth as it 'really is' would be to apply a set of scientific methods rigorously. Part of what holds together such a way of knowing the world, is the assumption that there is a reality 'out there' – the truth – that can be approximately or probabilistically discovered independently of researchers through the scientific method. However, whilst it is often accepted by qualitative researchers that there is a physical world

[14] James' work sits at the foundation of much social science. While the title of the work we're referring to here, *The Principles of Psychology* (2000 [1890]), fairly leads contemporary academics to think his work focuses on psychology, it is much more than this. In particular, James captures the 'flowing' nature of experience and thought, an idea that has become a truism within Western society, in phrases like a 'stream of consciousness'.

which is independent of us, it is also usually accepted that when dealing with social, historical and psychological issues we can't, no matter how hard we try, objectively get at the truth or discover it independent of our pre-existing ways knowing, understanding and interpreting.

One key reason for this is that our methods can't be objective in the sense of perfectly recreating an object of study – that's partly because it is humans who create methods and apply them, and all such methods are then as partially or fully flawed and imperfect as humans are.[15] For example, in the case of interviews, humans design the questions to be asked, enter into a temporary, or sometimes more long-term, relationship with participants, and then by doing the interviews become their own 'instrument of discovery'. We therefore shape and frame – and remember a 'frame' highlights an object to be focused upon and in so doing, also defines that which must reside outside of focus, attention and study, and is therefore left unknown – the method, and that influence is unescapable.

So to stand apart from methods or to operate outside one's own history – to remove oneself from your memories, cultural influences, theory training and so on – in order to produce an untouched interview and results isn't possible. We must, then, forgo the hope that the 'perfect method' or something else will come along and enable us to transcend our fallible humanity and enable us to objectively get at the truth as it really is.

It's useful to return to Wolcott on this point:

> Rather than dismiss bias as something we should guard against, I have come to think of it not only as something we must live with but as something we cannot do without… But covet your biases, display them openly, and ponder how they can help you formulate both the purposes of your investigation and how you can proceed with your inquiries. With biases firmly in place, you won't have to pretend to be completely objective either (1995, 164-165).

With this way of thinking about the process of conducting interviews, we're partially freed from some of the constraints of scientific thought that don't work particularly well for qualitative research. But this comes with an academic health warning, because such a way of approaching the world can lead us to forget the qualities that we might want to point towards as we develop our scholarly understandings.

In fact, Wolcott falls into such a trap when he describes the 'coveting' of bias. While we should certainly be honest about or in Wolcott's terms 'display' our biases, to covet them, implies an emotional attachment and celebration of bias that can lead to cherry picking data, the protection of theoretical ideas, and even potentially

[15] See Matthews (2015 and forthcoming) for broad discussions around this point especially in relation to how our bodies are a useful but fundamentally flawed dimension of the knowledge we produce when we conduct qualitative research.

fraudulent science – we will return to these ideas shortly. It also assumes that we can get to know such biases well, when they often lie, thinly veiled, outside of our own conscious reflection.

Does all this mean, then, that qualitative researchers abandon altogether the issue of 'truth'? One response is 'yes', if we insist that there is a truth that can be discovered apart from researchers – for the above reasons. Does that mean anything goes then? Does that mean researchers can make just anything up? Obviously, no. All researchers should build on the insights of those that have preceded them and make judgments based on this knowledge – so not anything goes, because we exist within the parameters of good scholarship. Researchers also don't make things up like interview transcripts, or interpret data 'willy-nilly', because that is unethical and there are important systems in place to stop this happening.

We have our interview transcripts, and these are our 'units of analysis' upon which we can interpret social life in creative, rigorous, and intellectually sophisticated ways. Here we might say, returning to Wolcott, that this calls for a disciplined subjectivity that is enabled partly through reflection. For him, 'good bias' in research is unavoidable and necessary. By providing us the ability to focus in on something, it is essential to the performance of any research. He notes, "in the total absence of bias, a researcher would be unable even to leave the office to set off in the direction of a potential research site" (1995 165). In contrast, 'bad bias' is a matter of excess.

In the case of qualitative research, bias becomes excessive to whatever extent it exerts undue influence on the consequences of the inquiry. In the extreme, conclusions may be foreordained without investigation of any kind and 'pet theories'[16] can be forced on to data when clear evidence to the contrary is present. To guard against this is not to deny bias or pretend to suppress it, but to recognize it, manage it and harness it. One's purposes and assumptions need to be made explicit and used judiciously to give meaning and focus to the study.

However, it is at this point that the term 'bias' with its value laden baggage begins to lose some utility, and we should instead reach for other ways of considering this. As Chris argues in *Doing Good Social Science,* this can usefully be done by trying to objectify the thinking we do when we approach our research in a disciplined and systematic manner. This means splitting the process of theorising up into three distinctive parts; our basic assumptions, foreshadowing problems and sensitising concepts. We'll briefly outline these in turn.

[16] A theory becomes 'pet like' when the person using it treats it as something that is in need of projecting and defending rather than as a tool to help faithfully understand data. In such cases, the scholars' commitment to a particular interpretation of events means they won't/can't see counter-evidence or they find ways of making data align with their pet theory. When this happens there is no way in which their ideas could be incorrect, they become unfalsifiable, and it is at this point that the scientific endeavour collapses and theory begets theory. See Matthews (forthcoming) for a broad discussion around this point.

When we try to objectify biases, we work to critically 'see' them as the basic assumptions upon which we make our way through the world and/or our research. These might have scientific origins, via our scholarly training, but they're also connected to ideas we develop based on what our parents, teachers and peer groups believed. So, for example, as Charles Taylor argues, "the average person needs to do very little thinking about the basis of universal respect, for instance, because just about everyone accepts this as an axiom today" (1989, 9). It's rare, then, that we question the need to be respectful, this is a basic assumption that we expect you'll carry with you.

There is here an "*obvious* rightness to our own worldview" which makes grasping elements of our assumptions quite difficult (Barnes, 1974, 2). However, we must try our best to reflect on these sometimes-unthinking elements of the way we see the worlds we share with others. This is one of the ways in which we can understand scientific theory as separate from, and in some ways better than, commonsense thought as a way of developing knowledge – this is because such theory is described, detailed and delineated in ways that should make the process of objectifying it, that is turning it into an symbolic object that we can try to conceptually grasp, more likely.

So we should be reflecting on the basic assumptions which are commonplace within the cultures we grew up, both in terms of our maturation into adulthood, and during our maturation into scholars who are attempting to make knowledgeable claims about social life. While we might have disciplinary and theoretical training that produced elements of this, we can also focus our attention on the specific topical literature and popular understandings that frame the problems we're exploring. For example, in Chris' work on boxing and sport violence, its common place for people to draw on masculinity as a key focus.

This can be considered as what Malinowski (1922) termed a 'foreshadowing problem', that is, the ideas from which we develop initial academic insights, research questions and focuses of study. So, in this regard, reading the most current research would help us develop our project outlines, interview questions and methodological strategies and justifications. But importantly, this way of approaching research is framed by the ethereal nature of a shadow – that is, fore*shadowing* problems are temporary, initial and passing, ways of considering the topic rather than definitive and solidified accounts of seeing social phenomena and the problems we might be researching.

With these initial, and very tentative, ways of approaching our interviews in hand, we begin the process of producing data with our participants. It's at this point that we're really doing the stuff of science, that is, we're relating data to theory to produce evidence (Becker, 2017). In recent years Chris has advised the postgraduate research students he works with refocus their work around this by drawing on Blumer's (1969) discussion of 'sensitising concepts'. Bob Prus (1996, 132) captures this idea neatly:

> Blumer uses the term sensitizing concepts to refer to these tentative, analytical notions. Sensitizing concepts suggest subsequent lines of inquiry and assessment, but in each case the researcher has the obligation of making the concept match up with the circumstances at hand rather than making the data fit the concept.

Such an understanding helps us to work towards a relentless interaction between theory and data. That is, our concepts are never removed from the process of sensitizing to data, for Blumer, there is an inherent relationship between the two. But importantly, can try to objectify the concepts we're using to help frame data, and grasp something of our foreshadowing problems and elements of our basic assumptions. Doing this helps us, and our scholarly colleagues, make assessments as to the appropriateness of how we have undertaken our research. And you should write about elements of how you've worked in such ways in your research methodology.

Concerns over bias, therefore, require researchers to seek to identify the assumptions, perspectives and ideas we bring to our studies, and to be reflective about how these may affect the ways we approach, analyse, interpret and report our findings. Through such attempts, the conclusions and claims we make based on our research can be considered as having a degree of 'explicit bias'.

For example, an interviewer who has honed their craft seeks to show how their data can be traced back to how it was developed, and that they have made informed, strategic and principled methodological decisions, along with fair and balanced interpretations. They might also invite another researcher or supervisors to act as critical friends. This could involve asking about how initial questions came about, the challenging of assumptions, seeking more compelling interpretations, and offering different ways of understanding data. This process of questioning can enable the researcher to be more considered about their prior theoretical and ideological dispositions and develop logical and empirically sound defences of their interpretations.

What we've tried to lay out here, in a limited way, are key parts of a long-term process that we develop with postgraduate students and colleagues that we support. This is how we develop quality in interviews and how we try to get to something we can call the truth, but with a very small 'T' – that is, things that we're confident we know in a contingent manner, based on the assumptions we carry into our work, the ideas we've read about and the data we've collected.

You see, truth means different things to different researchers and communities. So, given our preceding arguments, what might we mean by the truthful claims that can be based on qualitative interviews? Framed by a contextualist understanding, John Smith argues that "truth – or what we come to accept as true in terms of intentions, purposes, and meanings – is the result of socially conditioned agreement, arising from dialogue and reasoned discourse" (1989, 171). Or as Atkinson, Coffey and

Delamont put it, "truth, credibility, facticity, rationality – these are all achievements on the part of social actors. There are various contexts in which they are performed. The interview is one such site" (2003, 132). That is, we develop contingently truthful accounts of the world via our social encounters with our participants as we work to hone our craft as interviewers.

Now it's over to you

There are many books available that offer the traditional 'nuts and bolts' of interviewing, such as how to design an interview guide and what are the strengths of interviewing.[17] Instead of reproducing this approach, which does certainly have its place, we have sought to consider interviewing differently, through broad discussions of the scaffold we provide for those who work closely with us on their academic development.

Such discussions are seemingly absent from some academic texts about research methodologies, and we think they shouldn't be. Failure to appreciate topics that draw on insights from ontology, epistemology and axiology, will not only mean that misunderstandings are perpetuated but also that future scholars will miss key ingredients necessary for understanding, doing, and defending knowledge claims that come from interviews. The ideas we've discussed above may need to be revisited if they're new to you, but we know that they're the basis upon which you can become independent, free thinking scholars, who can produce coherent and justified methodological strategies to help explore the worlds we share with others.

This is then our *theory of interviewing*. To be honest, by reading about our thoughts, you've probably got more information than we expect our PhD students to fully digest before starting to speak with people. This is because when we do this 'in real life', we know that one of the best ways to begin developing your craft as an interviewer is to get stuck in by chatting with research participants about stuff. What you'll most likely find is you're not very good at first; you'll make obvious mistakes like talking too much yourself, not using simple and clear language, forgetting to press record on your Dictaphone and/or missing important comments that you'll later wish you'd followed up on.

It's in these and similar moments that lots of the best learning happens. So, while we hope you've grasped some important ideas from us here, we're well aware that there is only so much you can read before you need to get to the 'doing' of your first, probably pretty rubbish, interviews. And that's no sweat at all, because its exactly what happened when we first started out. So, get to it, *now it's over to you*, the craft of interviewing won't develop itself, you'll be working at it for a while (if

[17] We both often recommend Maykut and Morehouse; *Beginning Qualitative Research*.

not throughout your career), but you can be confident that in reading our thoughts here, you're going to be starting out your journey on the right path.

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