

Response to Hughes, Hughes, Sykes and Wright

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We are grateful to Hughes, Hughes, Sykes and Wright (hereafter HHSW) for their thorough attention to our work (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019), included in their review of ‘radical critiques’ of interview-based qualitative research. Their treatment of the issues is even-handed, and we have no desire to enter into petty disputes over small points of differing interpretation. Indeed, their paper is for the most part a sympathetic and sensitive rendering of our own and others’ position. As HHSW would, we assume agree, the real quarrel lies between those of us – including other contributors to the special section of the journal – who pay sustained attention to the formal properties of accounts and narratives, and qualitative researchers who use interview-derived material naively. There is, however, one aspect of their discussion that we wish to respond to. We do so because we think it epitomises one significant misinterpretation – or perhaps extreme interpretation – of our analyses of accounts. We do not write on behalf of the other authors included in the commentary by HHSW, and we shall not comment specifically on their invocation of Elias.

Methodological debates can often become polarised. ‘Positions’ are expressed in polemical terms for the sake of argument. Extreme formulations can gloss over nuance, while repeated summaries can fix positions in place in ways that exaggerate differences. We think that HHSW attribute one extreme position to us, and in doing so risk misrepresenting an important issue. Indeed, we do not actually think that our approach is especially ‘radical’ or ‘negative’ (*pace* Hammersley). On the contrary, we think that our approach should be regarded as a ‘mainstream’ one, given that it does nothing more extreme than urge proper, methodologically-informed analytic attention to the interview as a speech-event and a social encounter. That perspective, we suggest, is not dependent on an ethnomethodological perspective. Clearly Silverman’s is an ethnomethodological stance. Ours derives from a longer and broader tradition: the analysis of accounts; vocabularies of motive; studies of performance; narrative studies. An interest in actors’ descriptions of events, emotions, and actions, or selves and others, derives from multiple sources and is not dependent on a narrowly doctrinaire stance of any stripe (Atkinson and Delamont 2006).

Our interest in interviews – especially those eliciting personal and biographical accounts – relates directly to the more fundamental issues raised by the reflexivity of social research methods (Whitaker and Atkinson forthcoming). That is, the methods we use to record or measure inescapably frame the phenomena that are observed or discovered. For instance, life-history interviewing presupposes the narrative reconstruction of a life, and indeed, what ‘counts’ as an (auto)biography. Methodological perspectives on lives and identities reflect not just disciplinary assumptions but even national research traditions (Atkinson, Sewerin and Tirini 2011). Interview questions that invite expressions of ‘feelings’ imply distinctive kinds of introspective and expressive responses. Interviewers and respondents alike draw on socially shared repertoires of narrative forms, story-types, descriptive and emotional vocabularies, and so on.

Now this brings us to our main point of departure from HHSW. They suggest that advocates of the ‘radical critique’ focus too much on ‘how’ things are expressed, too little on the ‘what’. In other words, formal analysis of interview discourse and narratives, they suggest, leads to a neglect of the content of interview talk. But we do not think that a sustained analysis of forms of interview talk robs that talk of any referential value. The fact that linguists can study language as formal systems does not empty language of all communicative function. No, our approach does not imply that. In seeking their third way HHSW make a false distinction. There is no ‘what’ without the ‘how’. There is no content without form. Without a repertoire of speech acts there are no justifications or blames; without narrative forms there is no memory; there is no life-story without narratives either. Careers, lives, and aspirations are shaped and conveyed through narrative means; ethics and values are discursively formulated. Advocates of a sustained analysis of narrative forms and functions do not have to deny the possibility of referential value. Equally – and admittedly this is not part of HHSW – we do not have to imply that informants are untrustworthy or mendacious in order to draw attention to their discursive enactments. As contributors to this and other journals of methodology make clear, there is a wide range of approaches to the analysis of interviews and narratives. What we think that we and they agree on is the need for precisely that – analysis.

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- Whitaker, E.M. and Atkinson, P. (2019) Authenticity and the interview: a positive response to a radical critique, *Qualitative Research*, 19, 6: 619-634.