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## QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING:

### Asking, listening and interpreting

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In qualitative research, interviews are usually taken to involve some form of 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1984: 102). The style is conversational, flexible and fluid, and the purpose is achieved through active engagement by interviewer and interviewee around relevant issues, topics and experiences during the interview itself. This interactive, situational and generative approach to the acquisition of data is usually contrasted with the more structured composition and uniform style of a survey interview. It has its roots in a range of theoretical and epistemological traditions, all of which give some privilege to the accounts of social actors, agents, individuals, or subjects, as data sources, and which assume or emphasize the centrality of talk and text in our ways of knowing about the social world. There is less consensus about what kinds of data such accounts, talk and text constitute, or which layers or elements of 'the social' they illuminate, and perhaps most importantly about how well (or badly) they do what they say they do. Yet the popularity of interview methods among qualitative researchers is striking, to the point where they are commonly taken to be 'the gold standard of qualitative research' (Silverman 2000: 291–292). But the elevation of just one humble research method to such heights, as Silverman has warned, is not without its costs. In this chapter I shall examine some of the issues and challenges raised by the use of interview methods in qualitative research.

Interview methodology begins from the assumption that it is possible to investigate elements of the social by asking people to talk, and to gather or construct knowledge by listening to and interpreting what they say and to how they say it. Good interviewing is clearly in no small part about an interviewer's skills in asking, listening and interpretation (Mason 1996), but these are more than skills which can simply be acquired and deployed. Asking, listening and interpretation are *theoretical projects* in the sense that how we ask questions, what we assume is possible from asking questions and from listening to answers, and what kind of knowledge we hear answers to be, are all ways in which we express, pursue and satisfy our theoretical orientations in our research. It is these issues, rather than questions about skill and technique in interviewing, which I want to focus on here. I shall discuss some of the key questions with which researchers have to deal in the process

of asking, listening and interpretation, and illustrate how decisions which are made about each of these constitute the theoretical project. Finally, I shall consider some of the limitations of the interview method's reliance on talk and text.

### EXCAVATION OR CONSTRUCTION?

Interviews involve dialogue between two or more people, but how should a researcher direct or drive the conversation to ensure that the interview generates data appropriate to their research questions or their 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason 1996)? Two key issues to work out here are first, where is the social phenomenon or process which is being investigated thought to be located (the location question)? And second, on what basis can the interviewee and the interview illuminate it? Is the interviewee a straightforward informant, and the interview an information-gathering exercise? Or is the relationship of interviewee and interview to knowledge construction more complex than this?

Let us take an example to help establish some of the possibilities here. Suppose a researcher is interested in questions about contemporary parenting, and specifically in ideas about how parenting should be done, what is good parenting and what is bad.<sup>1</sup> One possible orientation to the 'location question' is that ideas and values about parenting exist 'out there' – in the social world in the form perhaps of ideologies – or 'in there' – in people's attitudes and beliefs. In this version, ideas and values have a tangible and static existence on particular planes of the social. This orientation to the location question casts the interviewee as informant – on the social world, or on themselves – and the job of the interview is to unearth the relevant information. Thus interviewing becomes the art of knowledge excavation and the task is to enable the interviewee to give the relevant information in as accurate and complete a manner as possible. Kvale describes something similar and uses the metaphor of 'interviewer as miner' (Kvale 1996: 3). This is one type of theoretical project, but it is clearly based on a fairly simplistic ontology (theory of what the social is) and epistemology (theory of how the social can be known).

Alternatively, the researcher may suspect that values and moralities of parenting are less like tangible things existing out there or in there whose nature and shape can be charted, and instead they are processes of social construction and practices which are fluid, negotiated and contextual. Thus, instead of moralities of good parenting existing in clear and discoverable attitudes, morality might be a form of practice such as for example where people try to do, feel or say what seems best or the 'right thing' through the way they parent in specific circumstances. If moralities take shape, or operate, only through practices, negotiations and people's contextual reasoning processes – in other words if they *are* the processes – then asking about 'good parenting' in a decontextual way is unlikely to produce meaningful data.

This means that the interview method is up against some major challenges. It cannot *unearth* the relevant data, using the interviewee as informant, because the phenomenon under research does not have a static decontextual and therefore uncoverable existence. Yet the interview, or the interviewer cannot be in all of the relevant contexts to witness the operation of practices and processes, which in any case may not be observable in the conventional sense. One way to attempt to resolve this dilemma is to treat the interview as a site of knowledge construction, and the interviewee and interviewer as co-participants in the process. This, then, is a different type of theoretical project and one which I would argue is based on a more sophisticated, and more satisfactory, ontology and epistemology.

### GENERALITIES OR SPECIFICS?

If interviewing – and asking, listening and interpretation as theoretical projects – is the art of construction rather than excavation, then the task is to work out how to organize the asking and the listening so as to create the best conditions for the construction of meaningful knowledge (about moralities of parenting, or whatever). One way is to ask the interviewee to recount or narrate relevant situations, contexts and events so they can effectively construct or reconstruct (to continue with the same example) moralities of parenting in the interview setting. The assumption here is that by grounding the interview dialogue in relevant contexts, knowledge about moralities practised outside the interview setting can be constructed on the basis of interactions within it because the operation of morality as process or practice becomes more possible to articulate through the specifics of the narrative. Knowledge gained in this way is a co-production since it is dependent upon the combined efforts of interviewer and interviewee in conjuring up the relevant contexts from which they think, talk, act and interpret (see also Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

In practical terms, this means that instead of starting from interview questions which invite generalities or abstractions like 'What is good parenting?', the researcher needs to devise questions and modes of asking which both anticipate and discover the range of contexts in which moralities of parenting get done by or in relation to their interviewee. Questions, therefore, might focus upon the detail of how they 'do parenting' on an everyday basis or at 'definitive moments' by asking, for example, how they organize various aspects of their relationships with their children and *what matters* to them (and conversely what does not) in the different contexts raised. Questions may have a biographical or life story orientation, particularly if the researcher suspects that moralities of parenting are processual over time and lifetimes.

In this type of theoretical project, then, questions should be couched in specifics rather than generalities. The practice of asking about the everyday has a long established pedigree in qualitative research, and is based on the idea

that the way people make sense of the social is grounded in their everyday – even routine – experiences. Similarly, the practice of focusing on definitive moments or points of renegotiation or change is well established. But does this mean that it is never useful or productive to ask interviewees for generalities or abstractions?

It may of course be interesting to see whether people are prepared to answer these kinds of questions. If, for example, an interviewee is prepared to say, in response to the ‘What is a good parent?’ question, that ‘A good parent is one who is caring but also exercises discipline’, then surely the very fact that they dealt with the question and devised an answer must mean something? The difficulty lies in working out what it does mean, that is in the interpretation. If we assume that moralities are processes and practices, then an abstracted or generalized answer cannot make any sense without some knowledge of how it relates to the individual’s practices and experiences, since individuals do not inhabit abstract and generalized social worlds (even when they are being interviewed). That an interviewee would make a statement like this in an interview context *might* tell us something about the sense of a moral self which they were creating in that setting, but we would not have the tools or materials to fashion this into a generalization of our own about how that related to other contexts.

In fact, my own research into family and kinship suggests that interviewees often ask for clarification of abstract and generalized questions because these kinds of questions do not make immediate sense and people find it difficult to formulate an answer (see especially Finch and Mason 1993, 2000; Mason 2000). Where they do, the answers often appear very clichéd and empty of any grounded meaning. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) report similar difficulties in their research into fear of crime. This is a problem, because if further clarification and possibly contextualization is required for the question to make sense and for an answer to seem possible, then it seems likely that there is no level of the social which corresponds to the abstract version of the question, and that the theoretical project is flawed. It may, however, be useful to track the kinds of clarifications that interviewees seek – what kinds of contextual or other information do people require in order to formulate a response? Or, if they answer the question by relating it to their own or someone else’s circumstances, how are these connections between the abstract and the situated made? This might yield knowledge about relevant contexts and forms of morality. However, this way of situating interviewees’ responses is likely to be a rather hit-and-miss affair, and is much inferior to the strategy of beginning with contexts relevant to the interviewee, given that it is ultimately based on the same assumption that moralities are contextual.

Of course this raises the question of whether *everything* about moralities of parenting is contextual. Do people never look outside the parochial boundaries of their own situation to more abstract notions of right and wrong and, if they do, can specific rather than abstract questions really illuminate this? One response to this question is to ask whether interviews can ever tell us

everything we want to know about our research problem – in this case moralities of parenting – and that is an issue to which I shall return shortly. But the other response is that yes, specific questions about people's own experiences can make a much better job of enabling us to analyse whether and how people *use* abstractions (in this case abstract moral principles of right and wrong) in their practices, than can abstract questions themselves. Take the following example of an excerpt from one of my recent research projects on the topic of how families handle inheritance.<sup>2</sup> This interviewee, like many others, is conveying a great deal about moralities of parenting, but what he says is a response to questions about his specific circumstances – in this case as a member of the first generation in his own family to be a homeowner – and about his own bequeathing intentions.

I still think that it would be good for my children to make their own way. They shouldn't be helped too much, shouldn't expect too much. ... It sounds a bit reactionary, this. But it does build your character. I think that they shouldn't have things too easily ... I don't really assume that I've got to hand on the wealth that we will have to the children ... it's probably better for me if I use some of it before I go, and probably better for them in some way that they should make their own way. (Finch and Mason 2000: 125–126)

For this interviewee, good parenting involves not passing on too much in a material sense to one's children. He articulates that very clearly, using a moral discourse, without being asked 'What is good parenting?' His account blends the general (they shouldn't have things too easily) with the particular ('good for my children to make their own way', 'I don't really assume that I've got to hand on the wealth that we will have to the children') and is articulated through – because it is located within – a particular context or set of circumstances. In analysing the very many moral accounts which that research project generated from its specific and contextual questions, we are able to get a better sense of how moralities of parenting are used or operate, in their abstract and their particular guises, than had we simply asked about the rights and wrongs of inheritance and parenting in abstract ways. In writing our analysis from that particular project, Janet Finch and I developed the analytical and methodological device of 'the narrative' in a rather specific way to help us to engage with these relationships between the general and the particular. We derived 'composite' moral narratives from our interviewees' many personal stories, and from what they told us of their hopes and fears about inheritance. We explain the logic of this as follows:

We have used the concept of narrative as a methodological and analytical device to illustrate some of the consistencies in our interview data but, more than that, to communicate accounts and scenarios which people recognise and, most notably, which they fear. In this sense, the narrative is an expression of people's attempts to connect up their own experiences and reasoning with something which they perceive to be more generalised, and the significant point is that many people do this. The narratives we have used tend to be expressions of what people think should

*not* happen, or what they do *not* want for their own families, and are scenarios which they actively try to avoid. This means that the stories which the narratives contain do not in and of themselves represent an empirical and generalisable reality of kinship. They do not describe what people generally do, nor do they represent moral rules about what they should do. However, we learn about people's practices and moral reasoning through them because many people use narratives like those we have sketched out to locate and make sense of their own (usually oppositional) practices. This means that the construction of generalising narratives, as a way of contextualising their own practice, is an important element in the way in which people *do* kinship and inheritance. (Finch and Mason 2000: 165, original emphasis)

One way to try to shortcut this process is to ask about generalities and abstractions in the first place rather than to derive them from interviewees' accounts, but to do it in a situated way through the use of vignettes – hypothetical scenarios concocted by the researcher in advance of the interviews, possible on the basis of existing interview data (for example, it would be possible to use composite narratives of the kind discussed above). The vignette is presented to the interviewee, who then is asked to say what the people involved in the scenario should do, or what they themselves would do in that situation (Finch 1987). This may be a particularly useful way of asking questions in ethically and morally sensitive situations, because in theory in word it allows the interviewee to discuss their own moral reasoning without having to (publicly) locate what they say in the detail of what may be difficult or private experiences. The logic is that interviewees are asked to do moral reasoning on the spot, but are given contextual information – albeit hypothetical – with which to do this. Also, if used flexibly in qualitative interviews, vignettes can allow the researcher to track in a much more contextual and sensitive way any further clarifications which interviewees require, and hence what contextual knowledge is relevant to the reasoning process (for examples of this see Finch and Mason 1993; Smart and Neale 1999).

This seems a more satisfactory way of asking abstract questions because although not directly situated in the interviewees' own experiences, it does use notions of situatedness and context in strategic ways as part of a theoretical project. We are left, however, with the question of what the data might mean. Their connection to contexts other than the interview itself may be tangential at best, and they could not therefore be used as knowledge about the interviewee's own situated moral practices, or their own situated moral reasoning, unless the vignettes had been used as vehicles to get the interview to produce dialogue about these directly.

To sum up, one good reason to avoid questions which seek or encourage generalities and abstractions is that the knowledge which we produce from these may not be quite what we think it is, and what it is may be quite limited when seen in the context of the overall theoretical project we are pursuing. Another more practical reason is that once an interview takes on that kind of abstract discursive style it may be difficult to regain the contextuality so central to the construction of situated knowledge. In part, this is because

the construction and reconstruction of relevant contexts in an interview is probably only possible in a sustained way – it is not an activity which can be dipped into and out of. I shall expand on this point in the next section. It seems sensible, therefore, to avoid abstractions and generalities in qualitative interviews unless we are very sure we have a use for them.

### STRUCTURED OR 'STRUCTURE-FREE'?

The types of questions an interviewer asks, and the way they listen to and interpret the answers they are given, undoubtedly help to shape the nature of the knowledge produced. However, interviews are not just about the asking of questions and the proffering of answers to those questions, and to argue that they are would be to cast the role of the researcher too deterministically, among other things. Indeed, in interpreting data, it is very important for researchers to see that sometimes what an interviewee says is not the straightforward answer to the interviewer's question that it is presumed to be. For example, if an interviewer asks whether an interviewee's father treats her and her sister equally and she answers that yes, he loves them both, we cannot assume on the basis of this answer that the concept of *equality* itself figures in that interviewee's family practices, experiences and reasoning.

The idea that interviewees may be 'answering' questions other than those we are asking them, and making sense of the social world in ways we had not thought of, lies behind many qualitative interview strategies. The logic that we should be receptive to what interviewees say, and to *their* ways of understanding, underpins much of the 'qualitative' critique of structured survey interview methods. The problem is not only about how questions are asked (for example in abstract or specific terms), but also about the structure or framework for the dialogue. A structure or sequence of questions which is rigid, and which is devised in advance by the interviewer, by definition lacks the flexibility and sensitivity to context and particularity required if we are to listen to our interviewees' ways of interpreting and experiencing the social world.

However, this raises a problem, because despite the use of the term 'unstructured interview' in some methodological discourses, it is not possible to conduct a structure-free interview not least because the agendas and assumptions of both interviewer and interviewee will inevitably impose frameworks for meaningful interaction. The question to be addressed by the researcher is instead how to, and how far to, structure an interview, and the answers once again depend upon their theoretical orientations. Most qualitative researchers try to structure interviews in ways which are meaningful to interviewees (and relevant to the research), and many try to minimize their own role in the process of structuring and in the sequencing of the dialogue.

One example of this is life history or biographical interviewing. Here, the structuring principle – interviewees' own life story – is considered to be

meaningful to them, and the sequence is taken from that story, rather than from a pre-devised list of questions. Many life history interviewers will try to facilitate the telling of the story more than to direct it. This approach is based on the logic that the significance of social experience will be revealed through contextual data, and that the way to achieve this is to ask interviewees to structure their own life story narrative, sometimes according to specified principles (for example, family biography, work biography, educational biography) and to follow their own cues.

The point is that the structure offered – the telling of a life – allows interviewees to craft their own narrative around their own concerns, experience and perspectives (Miller 2000). Even so, it is important to appreciate that the narrative itself is a cultural form or genre with its own structural conventions, rather than a neutral medium for the simple excavation of facts (Chamberlain and Thompson 1997). Thus although this approach may feel more ‘hands off’ from the interviewer’s point of view, the imperative toward a particular kind of structuring on the interviewee’s part may nevertheless be quite strong. The narrative form shapes what is being told in certain ways, providing coherence, sequentiality, a sense of progression, a purpose or a plot, and an author. Narratives encourage the construction of a beginning, a middle and an end.

For some, like Chamberlain and Thompson (1997), the analysis of narrative and discursive conventions and their relationship to social practices and experiences *is* the theoretical project, the object of study, and finding ways to elicit narratives from interviewees is a crucial part of that. From this perspective, the structural tendencies imposed by the narrative form are of interest in themselves and thus are far from being a problem. For others, however, they are a problem, because they tidy up and sanitize what are often messy social processes and experiences, yet these – in all their messiness – are the objects of study.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000), for example, argue that a preoccupation with the biographical or other coherence of the narrative, and the emphasis this places on the capacity of the narrator to know and tell their story, leads the researcher to miss highly significant and less formally structured elements of social experience. Instead, they advocate the ‘free association narrative’. This method is based on psychoanalytic principles, and in particular on the idea that an interview should find ways to tap those elements of the subject’s experience which are not recountable or explainable by themselves – elements which are not authored. They argue that:

by asking the patient to say whatever comes to mind, the psychoanalyst is eliciting the kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic; that is, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions. According to psychoanalysis, unconscious dynamics are a product of attempts to avoid or master anxiety. This suggests that anxieties and attempts to defend against them, including the identity investments these give rise to, provide the key to a person’s Gestalt. By eliciting a



narrative structured according to the principles of free association, therefore, we secure access to a person's concerns which would probably not be visible using a more traditional method. While a common concern of both approaches is to elicit detail, narrative analysis has a preoccupation with coherence which we do not share. Free associations defy narrative conventions and enable the analyst to pick up on incoherences (for example, contradictions, elisions, avoidances) and accord them due significance. (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 37)

Allowing interviewees to 'free associate', for Hollway and Jefferson (2000), gives researchers using psychoanalytic principles a way into the unconscious because it allows them to spot and make sense of connections, schisms and defence mechanisms within the narrative, whether or not the interviewee is aware of them. Hollway and Jefferson achieved this by training themselves to be the 'almost invisible, facilitating catalyst to their [interviewees'] stories. Being "almost invisible" ... means not imposing a structure on the narrative' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 36). The *Gestalt* in which Hollway and Jefferson are interested is not a consciously constructed life narrative, nor is it an understanding of the place and use of narratives in social practice. Instead, it is a psychosocial subject, which is not consciously authored and cannot be articulated in conventional narrative form.

This kind of theoretical project demands that the interview 'structure' allows spaces for free association, for example through allowing interviewees to develop points and stories in depth and return to them at will even though their relevance to the substantive concerns of the research may not be evident, and certainly through not enforcing a particular sequence of questions. The irony, of course, is that even free-association narratives require some kind of structure to make the telling of them possible; indeed Hollway and Jefferson developed seven standard starter questions around which they encouraged the development of the narratives. It demands an act of faith (in psychoanalytic principles) to believe that it is the unconscious rather than something more social or cultural which consequently does the structuring of free association. Nevertheless Hollway and Jefferson's work demonstrates par excellence, as does that of Chamberlain and Thompson (1997), what is more often unrecognized: that how a researcher deals with issues of interview structure and sequence is always part of their theoretical project, whether or not they acknowledge it.

## CHALLENGING OUR THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS?

My argument so far – that how we ask and listen are theoretical enactments of our assumptions around where the phenomena we are interested in are located, and how the interviewee and interview can illuminate the issues – has rested on the assumption that we know what it is we are looking for, be that contextual moral practices, a psychosocial subject, or the use and operation of narratives. My critique of general and abstract interview questions is based on the argument not only that these direct attention to wrong or

'non-existent' locations (for example, abstract attitudes and values), but also that they miss the point about morality in that they assume it is a thing rather than a process or practice. I take the view that all research has some kind of theoretical orientation, as do all forms of asking, listening and interpretation, whether or not this is articulated, and therefore there is always some sense in which researchers know what they are looking for, ontologically speaking. But how far should we use our interviews to view the social world in different ways, and to see things we are *not* looking for, as well as those we are?

Let us continue to explore this question in relation to my moralities of parenting example. The version of morality which I have set out has its own set of theoretical underpinnings. Could they, should they, be challenged or tested through interview methodology? My answer is a qualified yes, but we need to explore what is involved to work out how this might feasibly be done. First, we need to establish the social-theoretical context which makes possible the formulation I have offered that moralities of parenting are contextual.

The 'postmodern turn' in social theory has helped to throw issues about morality into the limelight because it questions the degree to which moral absolutes, created by higher-order experts and institutions, continue to hold any sway in what is seen as the new, fragmented and fluid social order. The apparent lack of a coherent and uniform moral order or clear sets of rules about what is right and what is wrong are seen as part of far-reaching social changes involving the demise of social structures, traditions and institutions as organizing principles of the social world. For some, this means that the capacities for individual action, agency, choice and reflexivity are increased while simultaneously people develop a lack of trust in familiar institutions and universal truths (see e.g. Giddens 1991). For others, the retheorization and exploration of morality and ethics, as forms of agency practised by individuals and in relationships and interactions (rather than as truths dictated from on high) take centre stage (Bauman 1993; Finch and Mason 1993, 2000; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Smart and Neale 1999). A form of ethics derived from the 'concrete' rather than the 'generalized other' underpins this (Benhabib 1992: 9–10). Perhaps for the first time in the history of sociology, the intimate relationships people have with one another are therefore no longer seen as side issues in social science, but are considered absolutely central to these new forms of agency and practice, and as a lens for understanding social change and the social world more generally (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

As a consequence of these changes in the way we theorize the social world, and the changes we consider to be taking place in that world, the question of how morality works in personal relationships has begun to occupy the imaginations of many researchers. If it cannot be said simply that people follow the rules created for them by religious and other institutions, then how do people work out what is right and what is wrong in their relationships with others (if they do not simply follow moral rules and codes)?

Have people dispensed with morality altogether? Are questions of right and wrong, or 'the proper thing to do' of any concern or consequence in personal relationships? What forms do they take? How are they expressed or practised? How and when do they change?

The language used to frame these kinds of questions – moral practices, moral agency – itself stands in marked contrast to earlier (even interactionist) social scientific concerns with moral rules, norms and codes. It also seems highly consistent with an actor/agent-centred form of social inquiry such as the qualitative interview.

But there are other ways of looking at these issues. One has already been alluded to throughout, and is the antithesis, namely that morality is a framework, or a set of rules, norms and traditions. According to this approach, detraditionalization and fragmentation plus the potential for human agency and interaction have been overstated. Another sees human agency not so much as overstated, but as missing the point altogether, and proposes a project of 'decentering the subject'.

The 'discursive turn' in social theory has claimed the death of the subject, and especially of the rational, unitary, self-governing subject who can account for their practices and reveal the logic of those practices in a research interview. Instead, the concern is with multiple subject positions created through, for example, moral discourses, and the centrality of text, language and practice in those discursive processes. Agency, and a concern with the agent, are not part of the epistemological vocabulary here, yet how morality works or, more accurately, how morality is constructed discursively, might very well be.

To return to the point about seeing what we are *not* looking for, the key question is, then: if we are looking for moral practices and agency, could we see moral *norms, rules, traditions* or *discourses*? Does the orientation to moralities of parenting and to the process of construction in the interview setting overemphasize the individual, and human agency? Does an emphasis on interviewees' narratives produce an oversanitized, overcoherent story which again has the effect of overplaying agency and rationality? As well as questioning the form which morality takes, we might also question the idea of morality itself. Is the concept of morality the right one? Does morality have anything to do with parenting? Or is parenting more about practical (and impractical) actions, power relations and so on? Similarly, what theoretical baggage does the concept of 'parenting' carry – with its implication that this is a skill or a project practised on or 'done-to' children, rather than a two (or more) directional relationship extending beyond childhood?

Clearly, it is possible to generate a long list of alternative conceptual and theoretical orientations and, in and of itself, that might feel like rather a meaningless task. The point here is, however, to advocate that researchers develop enough of a sense of alternative conceptualizations of their research problem, and the different types of theoretical project that they might involve, in the ways I have suggested, to enable them to devise ways of testing their own approach both within and beyond interview methodology.

So, for example, to try to avoid an overemphasis on the individual and on agency, we might consider gaining other forms of data which are less reliant on the mechanism of self-report, and which reflect on other levels or dimensions of the social (such as observation, demographic data analysis). We might seek out inconsistencies just as much as consistencies in our interview questions to try to avoid oversanitizing our data. We might focus less on our key concepts and more on wider or looser ones – even oppositional ones – which give us the possibility of seeing other things as well. In the example I have been using that might involve seeking out ‘what matters’ in parent–child relationships rather than the narrower concept of morality specifically. Finally, we might focus on relationships between people, without presupposing anything directional about these, rather than treating ‘parenting’ as a practice done to children, or a set of skills possessed by parents. This inevitably raises the question of *who* has the knowledge, the experience, the defended self, or whatever, that we are interested in. If we see our focus as *relationships* (parent–child) rather than individualized practices or skills possessed (parenting), then parents’ perspectives can provide data on only part of this. We need to interview children too, at the very least.

In the process of challenging our theoretical orientations, we need also to ask a more fundamental question about interview methodology, and that is, are talk and text enough? Do interviews give too much epistemological privilege to the idea of the individual, articulate, rational actor? Can interviews, whether with carefully selected ranges of individuals, or with groups, ever tell us about those elements of the social which appear to go beyond or operate outside individuals – whether these be discourses, or institutions, or systems? Can they tell us about elements of the social which are not accessible through talk? While we cannot expect interviews to be able to do everything for us, I want to conclude with a consideration of some of the limitations imposed by an emphasis on talk and text.

#### CONCLUSION: BEYOND TALK AND TEXT?

So far in my discussion I have argued that the way we ask questions, listen to and interpret talk, all constitute theoretical projects. Underpinning the kind of theoretical project I have outlined is the assumption that talk and text are central in our ways of knowing the social world. In qualitative interviewing, ‘talk’ means interactive talk, and some of the enthusiasm for the method which has emerged in recent years is undoubtedly a reaction against the asking of questions in less interactive ways, for example through postal questionnaires and structured questionnaire surveys. Many qualitative researchers would probably agree with Fontana and Frey (1998) that

as long as many researchers continue to treat respondents as unimportant, faceless individuals whose only contribution is to fill one more boxed response, the answers we, as researchers will get will be commensurable with the questions we

ask and with the way we ask them. ... The question must be asked person-to-person if we want it to be answered fully. (Fontana and Frey 1998: 73)

Even Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) psychosocial subject and intersubjectivity, which operate in part through the unconscious and through feelings (as well as through talk and conscious interaction, discourses and so on) can best be known according to them through interview talk, albeit they propose a focus on the spaces and schisms within dialogue. Although what they are interested in operates at a level or in ways which cannot be reasoned or explained (they argue that people are not 'their own best explainers'), they nevertheless argue that we can construct knowledge of it by listening to people's free associations, connected and disconnected narratives, and interpreting them through a psychoanalytic frame. This does of course raise some political problems around the issue of claims to truth.

The privileging of talk is understandable in the climate described by Fontana and Frey (1998), yet we should not allow our enthusiasm for the rich and fascinating data which can be generated in interviews to stop us seeing some of the limitations of using talk and text to construct knowledge, and to contemplate ways of overcoming these.

Criticisms of interview and biographical methods have for a long time pointed to the vagaries of memory, selectivity and deception in interviewees' accounts (see Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000 for a useful review) and also to issues around fluency and divergent linguistic codes. Furthermore, it is important to engage with the 'politics of talk', and to recognize that what counts as language, who uses it, what is its nature, what it can mean and do, are not merely part of a neutral and given reality, but are products of power relations and struggles (O'Brien and Harris 1999). All of these factors indicate, with different implications, that we should not read interviewees' accounts as straightforward descriptions of social experience.

But the points I want to make move beyond the question of whether or not we can take interviewees' accounts at face value, towards questions about those elements of the social which cannot be expressed through talk, and which are not situated in talk. Of course the idea that individuals cannot express everything in which we might be interested in words has long underpinned observational methods, but there may be elements of social experience which cannot readily be observed either.

I am referring to processes of thought, feeling, emotion, sentiment and so on. These may be rather significant and, certainly, one can readily see that my example of moralities of parenting may be closely bound up with these or, to put it another way, such moralities may be played out or practised in those unspoken social locations. There is a danger first that an emphasis on what can be articulated verbally obscures these and, second, that the 'discursive turn' in social science, with its emphasis on text and the discursive construction of subject positions, rules these out of the frame altogether.

Yet researching these elements of the unspoken is inherently problematic, and we may need to find ways of encouraging non-verbal expression to

explore dimensions which people find difficult or impossible to express in words because, to reiterate an earlier point, we need to create the best contextual conditions for the construction of meaningful knowledge. Methods which encourage non-verbal expression are increasingly deployed in research with children. For example, play and drawing are now commonly used as research tools with children, because it is recognized that they may find certain ideas and experiences difficult to express in words, and also because key elements of their social experiences, practices and relations may not occur or be manifest in dialogic form in their everyday lives in the first place. Yet it is strange, as well as patronizing to children, that such considerations are so rarely applied to adults also (see Solberg 1996). Furthermore, even in research with children there is probably some way to go in working out how non-verbal products and processes should be interpreted and expressed.

It is of course possible to treat non-verbal products and processes as *texts* which represent unspoken dimensions of the social world or through which those dimensions are constituted. This involves a generous definition of 'text' but as Devine and Heath point out in their discussion of postmodernism and empirical research, 'a text can be anything from a literary text, an official document, or an interview transcript through to a photograph, a movie or a building' (Devine and Heath 1999: 207). Yet constituting non-verbal products and processes as texts may miss the point about what they are and what they are meant to be, and may obscure their processual, agentic and non-discursive nature.

That suggestion is supported by experience of family and kinship research, where fairly frequent use is made of various different ways of diagrammatically mapping and charting the 'closeness' or the 'supportiveness' of people's relationships, but where what seems most important is not the chart or family tree which is produced – the 'text' – so much as the sometimes agonized processes which people are observed to go through in trying to decide which relative or friend goes where in it (Finch and Mason 1993; Flowerdew 1999). It is interesting that the act of placing a relative in a chart often is treated by the person doing it as highly significant in itself: something is being done more than said, and something non-verbal is being expressed. Incorporating this kind of activity into an interview thus helps to create a rather different context for the construction of a more non-verbal kind of knowledge.

Using non- (or semi-) verbal techniques such as these, or photography or video recording, which consciously and conscientiously move beyond a pre-occupation with talk or with text, is clearly an important way in which we might explore non-verbal elements of the social. Although they are often accompanied by talk, and sometimes used within an interview context, these methods draw heavily on observational techniques developed by social anthropologists and ethnographers. We must, however, be mindful of the epistemological assumptions we make when we employ this kind of methodology, and when we attempt to interpret our data. In particular, we should not assume that visual methods, for example, produce knowledge which is

somehow less constructed or more directly representational than verbal interview methods. The critique of the idea of excavation of data which I outlined earlier applies with equal force in relation to visual artefacts and products. Instead the point is to evoke or construct knowledge about non-discursive experience, and the argument is that using non-verbal methods should help to create conditions appropriate for the generation of such knowledge.

Examining the role of non-verbal elements in social relations, and of objects and artefacts – again not just as texts or representations – is important here. To explore moralities of parenting, for example, one might use people's personal photographs, objects and possessions as starting points for discussion and observation, as well as for analysis in their own right. In a recent study of inheritance, my colleagues and I looked at (often literally) objects people had inherited and investigated what kinds of objects they were, where people kept them, considered what their role was in kin relationships, what they symbolized or expressed, what was their 'lifespan' and the changing nature of their ownership, and so on (see Finch and Mason 2000).

Methods which seek to explore the non-verbal *non-verbally* can of course be complemented by more traditional approaches, such as making inferences about, for example, emotions and feelings on the basis of what people say, how they say it, and what they do not say. We can sometimes discern whether someone is used to thinking in a particular way by what they say, and we can infer that something is taken for granted if they do not see it necessary to mention it. We can sometimes infer how emotionally engaged they are with a particular issue by how they talk about it, and we can get a sense of what matters emotionally by observing their demeanour as they speak. We can ask people to try to articulate elements of the non-verbal, to tell us how they feel, and what makes them angry or sad.

It is clear that there is a great deal of scope for developing methods which loosen the grip of talk and text on our research imaginations, and this might be done under the auspices of a range of different types of theoretical project, within and outside of interview methods. At the very least, researchers using interview methodology should consider carefully whether strategies which prioritize talk and text can deliver the required goods.

## NOTES

- 1 Investigation into 'moralities of parenting' is one of the key interests of the ESRC Research Group for the study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) at Leeds University, of which I am a member. Further information is available from the website: [www.leeds.ac.uk/cava](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava)
- 2 This project, 'Inheritance, Property and Family Relationships', was funded by ESRC, grant no. R000232035. It was directed by Janet Finch, Jennifer Mason and Judith Masson, and the research officers were Lynn Hayes and Lorraine Wallis.

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