

Unreliable witnesses? Accounting for 'contradiction' in interviews.

(Work in progress, please do not quote)

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Abstract

In recent times the qualitative interview has been problematised. The situated and contextual nature of the interview, in particular the relationship between interviewer and interviewee in the construction of meaning has been emphasised. Such views impact on notions of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ in interview data. This paper examines some problematic aspects of the qualitative interview, specifically the occurrence of ‘contradiction’ or ‘inconsistency’ in interview transcripts, which in ‘traditional’ terms might be seen as affecting the validity of that data. Examples of such ambiguity are explored and related to the production of narratives in interviews. The paper suggests an explanation for the occurrence of incoherence in the narrative of a participant which emerged during research into teacher identities, suggesting that re-writing of narratives occurs as a result of shifts in discourses.

Key words: contradiction, qualitative interview, discourse, transcription, identity, narrative.

Introduction

Interviews are highly contextual. What emerges on a particular day in a particular setting may be very specific and situated. Yet the interview forms the basis of much qualitative research. What are the implications of this for the 'validity' of research based on interviews – especially when 'contradictions' or 'inconsistencies' become apparent in that data? This paper sets out to examine some problematic aspects of the qualitative interview using as an example data from an interview carried out as part of research into teacher professional identities and how this influences notions of 'discipline' and 'behaviour management.' The aim of the paper is to explore some examples of ambiguity that arose in my interview data which, in the context of 'traditional' research, might call into question the validity of that data but which I have interpreted as yielding insights into the research process and providing conceptual tools for use in data analysis.

The qualitative interview

Interviewing is ubiquitous in our society and we have become familiar with its various guises whether being stopped in the street and asked about our political preferences or watching others reveal intimate details of their lives on day-time television. There seems to be a ready acceptance, eagerness even, both to be interviewed and to watch others' selves unfolding - witness the growth of interest in 'reality TV'. As Foucault remarks, we have become a

'singularly confessing society' (Foucault 1976/1999:59). Although in some situations the interview may be seen as cathartic, providing a therapeutic and liberating experience, another way of looking at this 'confessional urge' within our society is to see it as an effect of 'disciplinary power' which opens us up to scrutiny, so that even our most private places become subject to examination (Fairclough 1992). In qualitative research this confessional urge is well-established among interviewers too with what might be termed the 'reflexive' turn in research accounts providing a response to the 'crisis of representation.'

In the context of qualitative research the ready willingness of many individuals to be interviewed coupled with the deceptive simplicity of the interview can create a heady mix for the (inexperienced) qualitative researcher. But, as many research texts make clear, the interview is a minefield for the unwary. Thus, Wolfson (1997:117) warns,

'The fact that the interview is a speech event in our society makes it legitimate to ask questions of a personal nature of total strangers, but at the same time severely limits the kind of interaction which may take place within it, and therefore the kind of data which one can expect to collect.'

This perhaps implies that the interview is an 'unnatural' situation as if, in another situation, the 'real' self would emerge with all the consequences for validity that this entails. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:17) reject this view

suggesting that 'natural' situations are not necessarily more realistic but are merely what takes place in 'indigenous settings'. Denzin (2001:25) argues that the 'interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world, nor is it a window into the inner life of the person...The interview is a simulacrum, a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right.' The qualitative interview thus becomes an indigenous setting for qualitative interviews in which the 'researcher's procedural vocabulary...constitutes interview subjects' (Gubrium and Holstein 2003, p.6) i.e. in Wittgensteinian terms the rules of the interview as a language game serve to construct the 'reality under consideration.' Or, as Rapley (2001:311) says, the researcher is 'doing' being an interviewer while at the same time the participant is 'doing' being an interviewee. This holds good for whatever form of interviewing is being carried out. The post-modern trick it seems is to be reflexively aware of this.

Gubrium and Holstein (2002) contend that the idea of a 'real self' permeates much of the work associated with the 'traditional' qualitative interview. The authors argue that one of the most important consequences of the notion of the unitary self is that it leads to a conceptualisation of the respondent as a 'vessel of answers' to be tapped into by the interviewer. Similarly, Kvale (1996) draws on the metaphor of the interviewer as 'prospector' hoping to strike a rich seam of data. McClure (2003:122) takes this further - she analyses texts which 'invoke a world of nineteenth century applied science and technology: mining, refining, surveying, distilling' which imply that reality is out there but somehow obscured. The subtext of this is that the job of the

researcher is to 'remove these impediments by applying specialist treatments or procedures to the interview.'

Allied with the respondent as a passive vessel of answers is the 'not quite passive' interviewer whose function is to reveal what is already there in a manner such that the data are uncontaminated,

'In the vessel of answers model the image of the subject is not an agent engaged in the production of knowledge. If the interviewing process goes "by the book" and is non-directional and unbiased, respondents can validly proffer information that subjects presumably merely store within' (Gubrium and Holstein 2002:13).

Holstein and Gubrium (1995:30) reject the 'vessel of answers' model referring instead to the 'stock of knowledge' that the respondent draws on in the interview situation. This knowledge is 'simultaneously substantive, reflexive and emergent'. The authors suggest that as the interview proceeds the respondent selectively accesses, reflects on and constructs this knowledge in a way that is dependent on the self-assigned role adopted by the narrator in response to the question asked i.e. in response to the self invoked by the interviewer at that point. From this perspective, the interview can be thought of as a collaborative construction in which the meanings and the way they are constructed depend on both the interviewer and the interviewee as 'active agents' in the interview. The aim of the interviewer is then to activate these different ways of knowing. Scheurich (1995:243) however, warns against

seeing the interview as being necessarily capable of producing shared meanings: 'Interview interactions do not have some essential, teleological tendency toward an ideal of "joint construction of meaning"... Instead, interactions and meanings are a shifting carnival of ambiguous complexity, a moving feast of differences interrupting differences.'

The way in which the interviewee's 'stock of knowledge' is drawn upon and presented is therefore highly situated and contextual. Cameron (2001:148) points out that,

'the answers people produce to questions about their experiences, habits, affiliations, opinions and preferences are not just designed to convey relevant factual information, then, but also very often to address what the respondent rightly or wrongly believes to be the intentions and preconceptions behind the question.' (original emphasis).

In addition though, respondents pay attention to the forms of their responses, thus, Cameron (2001:152) goes on, 'researchers who elicit narrative material from informants should bear in mind that oral narrative is an "artful" speech genre, and choices about how to tell a story may be made for aesthetic as well as other reasons.'

This reframing of the interview process has significant implications for such issues as 'bias', 'validity' and 'reliability'. Traditional qualitative research has

been concerned with interviewers not 'contaminating' the data by interpolating their own selves into the process. Many texts warn about interviewer bias with its concomitant dangers to reliability and validity. Novice interviewers are therefore told that, for example, '[Q]uestions should be asked , and answers received, in a neutral, straightforward way. Any verbal, or non-verbal, feedback should be as non-committal as possible.' (Powney and Watts 1987:137). A different conception of the interview not only recognizes the impossibility of neutrality, it embraces this lack. Cameron et al (1994:23) argue that 'interaction enhances our understanding of what we observe, while the claims made for non-interaction as a guarantee of objectivity and validity are philosophically naïve.' Further, Rapley (2001:316) suggests that 'when interviewers are "doing neutrality"...this does not mean that they are "being neutral" in any conventional sense.'

Similarly, a post-modernist slant will approach the question of 'truth' and issues of reliability and validity in a different manner from the traditional interview: 'When the interview is viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion, however, different criteria apply, centred on how meaning is constructed, the circumstances of construction and the meaningful linkages that are assembled for the occasion.' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:9)

Reliability, in the sense of the same responses being evoked on different occasions, cannot be expected or even desired. Similarly, the concept of 'validity' in the sense of being the one 'true' representation of what the 'vessel of answers' actually contains is incommensurable with this understanding.

Transcription

As problematic as the actual interview, is what to do with the data produced – in many cases this will mean producing a transcript. A translation into written form of the already artful speech event. Again, much research tends to skip over this aspect, merely referring to the production of a ‘full’ or ‘verbatim’ transcript, glossing over the all-important detail, much in the manner of Jane Eyre’s ‘reader I married him.’ (Bronte 1847/1953:444). Mishler (1991) likens the process of transcription to photography. In both cases, he says, there is an assumption that what you get corresponds in some simple relation to reality and that the main issues concern technical aspects of the process, which allows progressively closer and more faithful representation. This, he argues, is misleading; all transcription ‘reflects theoretical assumptions about relations between language and meaning and between method and theory and are consequential for what we report as findings as well as how we interpret and generalize from those findings’ (Mishler 1991: 277).

Yet what is the relationship between speech and written text? For one thing seeing transcripts which record all the hesitations, incomplete sentences, ums, y’knows etc can be shocking to research participants. My own interviewee in this study on being shown the transcript responded in an email, ‘I was horrified when I read what I had said. It was worse than hearing your own voice.’ Metaphors of transcription tend to emphasise a process by which a fluid and dynamic interaction is made static. Thus Kvale (1996) likens the transcript to ‘dried flowers’ that have lost their life and vibrancy. The interview

is contextual but transcription is largely decontextualised data. The transcript needs to be reconstituted through analysis and bears much the same relationship to the original data as a prune, when rehydrated, does to a plum.

Scott (1985) talks of a 'reification of data' a neat double metaphor suggesting that as the data are fixed they are raised to a king-like status. Electron microscopy furnishes an alternative metaphor; this is a process in which a living cell is disrupted in some manner and fixed by chemical or other means, then sliced very thin, greatly magnified and the resulting image interpreted. Any aspect of the image that doesn't fit an existing theoretical structure is assumed to have arisen as a result of the treatment and referred to as an 'artefact of fixation' i.e. something that is there but shouldn't be according to the view of reality adopted. Sometimes there is a dispute over whether these are indeed 'artefacts' or whether the interpretive framework is itself inadequate. Transcription is also a process in which a dynamic and interactive situation is fixed, sliced up and minutely examined with the belief that there is an equivalence between this end product and the event you started with. Cells and personal narratives are both social constructions – this is not to say that they don't both have a real existence - but meaning only exists within a discursive context. In each case there is the danger of confusing the thing we have constructed as something that is objectively real – and that having constructed it we can take it apart to see how it works.

Contradiction in interview data

The propensity for interviewees to give inconsistent or contradictory accounts has been noted by many researchers. Thus McLure (2003:171) says,

'subjects sometimes act up, make self-conscious jokes, contradict themselves, adopt different masks (without necessarily knowing that they are masks; or that there are only masks), forge their own signatures, and deflect researchers' agendas. And that this is an entirely unexceptional (but not at all uninteresting) part of any person's repertoire of interactional strategies and, indeed, ways of 'Being'. It is not an error to be corrected by better interviewing techniques or a more relaxed setting, or filtered out in the analysis and reporting.'

How is this rather unsettling notion of the ambiguity of the 'Other' in the research setting to be accommodated? The idea of the respondent drawing on 'stocks of knowledge' dependent on the self being addressed at that point in the interview perhaps provides an explanation of how individuals can hold apparently contradictory views simultaneously – I might give a very different response to a question about 'antisocial behaviour' depending on whether I am speaking as a teacher of children with special needs or as 'the person in the street'.

Power (2004:860) draws on Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' to provide an explanation of why a young woman she interviewed as part of research into

how single mothers feed their families on social assistance gave interview responses about apparently 'unsensitive' issues (in connection with the rental of her flat) that directly contradicted what Power subsequently found out about her: 'Bourdieu has contended that an individual's practice always has an underlying logic, even if they do not obey the principles of "rational logic", and that this logic is always practical, oriented towards the situation encountered daily life,' In this case, Power's initial anger and annoyance at the young woman's responses are tempered as she tries to understand why her interviewee had apparently 'lied'.

'I came to understand that she probably told me, in some instances at least, what she thought a responsible mother should be saying rather than what she had done. I began to suspect that she had been repeating to me what others, likely her parents, had told her she should be doing.' (Power 2004:863).

Gardner (2001) discusses the 'problematic' nature of biographical interview data. He presents research into 'rural spaces' part of which shows that an interviewee very clearly misrepresented her involvement in village life, claiming to be no longer involved in the 'formal and informal local social and political institutions' (ibid:188) when this was, according to the perceptions of other villagers, evidently not the case. Gardner draws on Goffman's idea of 'frontstage presentation' to suggest why this may have occurred i.e. the interviewer 'is being given the identity, the persona, which a particular respondent is presenting or staging' in a given situation. However, Gardner goes on to suggest that the distinction between deliberate lying and 'the act of

creative, retrospective self-invention' may not be very clear. Commenting on the autobiography of a woman with epilepsy who filled the fit-induced gaps in her memory with invented accounts he remarks, 'everyone to a greater to lesser extent (re)constructs their life in this way.' (Gardner 2001:193).

This 'restructuring' of narratives of personal experience may be an instance of what Ricoeur (1981:179) refers to as creating a chronology in reverse. He says, 'by reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end, we learn to read time backward, as the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences.' Events may be altered, marginalised or forgotten if they don't fit the overall plot - 'looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions' (Ricoeur 1981:170). Thus, as Mulholland and Wallace (2003:6) note, 'arriving at a truth or reality, an exact replication of experience is not an object of narrative inquiry. Rather the object is the understanding of the evident perspectives of those who tell about their lived experience.'

In addition, in linguistic terms, personal experience narratives often need to be told as a 'good story' with certain aesthetic requirements. Tannen (1989) suggests that the way in which stories are constructed and the rhetorical strategies used are significant. The story-teller has to work at producing a story that not only engages the listener but performatively involves the listener in the telling. A 'good story' may play fast and loose with 'the facts'.

My research context

My research is centred on notions of teacher 'identity' and the relationship between identity and discourse in the area of 'discipline' and 'behaviour management'. The traditional notion of identity is of something well-defined about oneself, fixed and unchanging, something inside of us 'like the kernel of a nut' (Currie 1998:2). But an alternative view argues that identity can never be something that is just interior because identity is necessarily relational, to do with recognition of sameness and difference between ourselves and others. In my research I take the view that 'identity is what emerges in and through narrative.' (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001:viii). As Currie (1998: 6) remarks, we learn how to narrate from the outside and this, he argues gives narratives at large the potential to teach us how to conceive of ourselves, what to make of our inner life and how to organize it.' In this view identity construction is not seen as a one-off event, but instead as an ongoing process that is never finally and fully accomplished. Derrida (1998:28) captures something of the contingent and fleeting nature of identity when he says, 'identity is never given, received or attained. Only the interminable, indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures.' Using this conceptual framework I analyse teachers' narratives of practice both in terms of their content ('what' questions) and their construction ('how' questions) in order to show simultaneously the understandings teachers have of their identities and the ways in which these are shaped by political, institutional and other discourses (Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

The interview context

I approached 'Derek' to be a participant in my research because he was a teacher I knew to reflect on practice. I had met him as a participant on a post-graduate diploma course on which I tutored. I intended to follow up an in-depth interview with an email correspondence. The aim was to explore Derek's personal and professional development in relation to his management of pupils. Derek was very keen to be interviewed and suggested a date in two week's time. At his suggestion the interview was carried out in my office, lasted 3 hours and was recorded on audio-tape. Derek is in his fifties and has been teaching in a secondary school for over 20 years. I am in my forties, now a lecturer, but until four years ago a teacher of children with 'behaviour problems'.

Having completed my initial analysis (which I shared with Derek), I wrote,

'The interview with Derek is strongly characterised by a tendency for him to position himself by drawing attention to the way in which he differs from other teachers. His sense of himself as a teacher is defined by a simultaneous inclusion within the system and exclusion from the organisation he perceives of that system. In doing this he highlights a tension between educational values and the structure of the educational system. Thus in the interview Derek takes care to show that he is not like the other teachers with whom he works and that this is reflected in his practice which is centred on a strong

sense of educational values. This derives from his sense that his own route into the teaching profession was different from that of most other teachers – his background is one of poverty and educational failure :

‘Unlike most teachers, I did not have a prosperous school life. Later, as an adult, I did not look back and view schools and the teachers in them as being successful. At school, staff and pupils alike bullied me: I lived in perpetual fear every school day of my life. I played truant often. I ran away from home on numerous occasions, sometimes making it to places like London, and staying away for as long as three or four days at a time – my academic education was minimal. This though was the beginning of my good fortune, education and preparation for a teaching career.’

(Derek, personal written communication).

As with this written communication, Derek’s interview emphasises a deviation from the canonical and the appearance of the unexpected from which the narrative emerges. These unexpected features are often cast as ‘turning points’ within personal narratives (Mishler 1999; Ochs and Capps 2001). Teachers are assumed to have been successful at school. Yet Derek was not. A sense of Derek as ‘different’ permeates the interview and many of the stories of practice that he tells can be interpreted as him “doing being unorthodox”.’

'Contradiction' within the interview

Note on transcription: I transcribed the interview myself, working in small sections to first of all get the words down, then adding in more subtle aspects such as pauses, ums, my ums etc. Once I had done this I played around with different formats. In the end, I have tried to render the speech into as 'fluid' a format as possible trying to capture something of the rhythm and 'performativity' (Denzin 2001) but inserting grammar where it seems appropriate to aid understanding and readability e.g I have put dialogue in inverted commas because reported dialogue is clearly understood as such in conversation. In any case, this is a translation and the conventions of written speech have to be followed to a certain extent. The aim is to produce something that is readable and which appears to be 'natural' while at the same time suggesting that this is not written dialogue. An ironic feature of transcription is that the greater the attempt to convey nuance through transcription conventions the less natural the transcription appears, so there is a trade-off to be made. Here lines are an indication of continuous speech or flow, pauses have been indicated as full stops (length of pause denoted by number of full stops), emphasis with underlining. I have taken out my 'ums', 'rights' etc unless they seem to me to be important. Speech in brackets was said quickly. Words in square brackets are best guesses.

What might be termed 'inconsistency' arises at several points in the transcript.

For example, early on in the interview when Derek is talking about how, when he entered the profession, he said to himself, 'I'm going to make it my business never to dislike a pupil'.

Derek:

and I was told that that was impossible –

I'm 21 years down the line and I haven't taken a dislike to any pupil.

Shortly afterwards Derek returns to this theme and how this causes resentment with colleagues:

Derek:

...one or two of them - can see that they resent y'know
they would like me to be sitting in the staffroom
criticising this kid criticising that one

Me: Does that happen a lot?

Derek:

All the time all the time and I don't like it –

I just sit quietly in [?] that's a cowardly way to do it.

I should stick up for them –

I should turn round and say 'shut up - don't talk about the kids like that.'

Towards the end of the interview I ask Derek a question about school ethos.

Me: Right um so you've been in your current post about 20 years [Derek: yeah 21 years] we've talked a little bit about..not specifically about the school's ethos but these elements have cropped up - but if you were asked to describe the school's ethos what would you say?

Derek: [deleted section of transcript about school situation]

...pupils are not frightened to speak to you
and they'll speak to you in the streets –
wave to you as you drive past stuff like that..
so it's yeah it's quite a happy wee school really –
we all moan about them y'know and you'll find fault with any school.

This is one of the few occasions when Derek situates himself alongside the staff, referring in a collegial way to the staff as 'we'. The apparent inconsistency is perhaps an example of a different 'self' being addressed in each case, drawing on a different stock of knowledge. The first remark occurs at a point in the interview when Derek is considering how his route into teaching was not like other teachers, so he is distancing himself from the staff. The second question about ethos taps into a more collegial self which sees Derek allying himself with staff.

Other parts of the transcript also reveal tensions but to examine these out of their context would, I feel, reflect unfairly on Derek. Contradiction is an everyday occurrence of speech and the purpose of this paper is not to say that Derek is an unreliable witness but to point up precisely those characteristics of speech which render transcribed data problematic in traditional terms. However, it must be unsettling to participants to be confronted with this. Derek wrote in an email, 'reading the transcript I was struck by the inaccuracy of many of the things I had to say. If I had been writing, this would not have happened.' This presents an ethical dilemma. To what extent is the sharing of a transcript an act of reciprocity rather than an action which may result in 'exposing failures' and 'unsettling accommodations' (Sinding and Aronson 2004)?

'The Belt'

The example of 'contradiction' I want to focus on occurs in the story I have called 'The Belt'. This is actually two stories that took place at the start of Derek's teaching career. The first part happened while Derek was a student on teaching practice and this is followed by an incident at the school he went to shortly after qualifying as a teacher and where he has taught for the past 20 years or so. These two stories reveal something of the way in which individuals are positioned by the institutions they are part of and of the roles they are able to play within these institutions.

I start off by asking Derek about his teacher training and whether he recalls any experiences in relation to classroom discipline. This is his response:

'Yeah yeah - the very last placement, they put me to [name of school]

and ...

while I was there (I was only there three days)

one of the teachers..

decided..

to provoke a..

dispute

with one of the pupils –

and I realised right away that the teacher was deliberately provoking this pupil –

and she just pushed (I can't remember exactly what it was about)

pushed and pushed and she kept picking on this pupil

and eventually the pupil reacted to it –

'I'm going to belt you' she said...

and it was a demonstration for my benefit.

So I went home that night and I didn't go back

and I was prepared at that point..

to give up the whole career the whole thing

- that was it as far as I was concerned.

I thought that 'No' I was not going back there..

so I phoned the university told them that I'm sorry I can't complete my training –

told them what had happened..

and they were delighted and they put me to [different school] –

the other one –

and I had a brilliant time there - great school...

But I remember that y'know

it was the same feeling watching that girl getting provoked like that (and bullied)

that I used to have when I was at [school]

the same..

the same atmosphere.

I was surprised that the belt was still in use at this time and said

Me: so then even while you were training the belt was still in use though it must have been - must have been coming to an end at that stage?

Derek: Just about.. I used the belt.

Me: Did you?

Derek then carries on...

Yes I did um..

I have to use foul language here to describe this one

but it was my first year um..

as I told you I was a labourer

- a window cleaner –

and I kept my window cleaning round on while I was at university

so I was pretty strong and

{laughs}

there was a guy called

– (well never mind his name right) –

– this guy in the class and I saw his shoulders going like that *{imitates movement}*

– and what was happening

– he had a penknife and he dug a great big hole in the wall with his penknife –

– just sitting there like that y’see

and so I thought ‘right’

(why I thought this I don’t know)

‘I’m going to belt you’ I said

he says ‘I’m not taking it off you’,

at which point one of the other boys turned round and said

'he's not taking it off of you'.

I says '..OK ..I'm going to belt you as well – outside' y'see.

So I had to go and borrow the belt from my boss *{slight laugh}*

so I take them to another class (as I'd been told I had to do)

not do it in front of the class y'see

and I says 'right' (ach we'll do it I'll only mention his first name)

'right Roddy' I says 'hold out your hand'

'No'

I says 'OK..'

I says 'we'll go down and see Mr [X] – depute rector - 'and..

you can tell him'

'Oh' he said

so he held out his hand

well I'd no idea how hard to hit someone so I just hit him as hard as I could..

well *{laughs}*

he looked [?] he went down onto his knees his head went down he looked up *{laughs}*.

The tears started coming down his face –

he's holding onto his hand all this time..

he jumps to his feet and rushes through to my room screaming at the top of his voice, shouting

'jesus f***** Christ he just about [cuts] your f***** hand off' *{laughs}*

At which the other boy says

'I'm not taking it offa you' 'I'm not taking it offa you'

{both of us laugh}

So I take him down to the depute rector and says

'there ye are Mr X he thinks you're the soft option'.

And that was that.

After a brief pause Derek carries on:

Um ach it was a waste of time he was just as bad the next day.

It had had no effect on him whatsoever, so I mean I just never used the belt.

I then say, 'so that was the one and only time you ever used the belt?' and Derek replies,

Oh no - I had used it a couple of times lightly y'know

but very quickly came to the conclusion, this is a waste of time - all that's happening is I'm getting myself upset for no reason at all.

So I just stuck it in a drawer and it's lain there ever since.

A little later he adds,

'before we were forced to stop I did stop because it was such a waste of time

and it creates.. it created tensions in the class'.

This story illustrates inconsistency/contradiction at a number of levels (and not just in relation to the interviewee). Firstly, there is the interesting inconsistency in Derek's stance as a student teacher and as a teacher. I tentatively interpreted this as being due to the different positions occupied by students and teachers in institutions. As a student, Derek empathises with the girl being picked on. As a teacher in a school in which the belt is used he adopts this role. In a telephone conversation Derek told me he agreed with this interpretation. (I was a bit surprised that Derek accepted my interpretation without challenge or further qualification, however, Mulholland and Wallace (2003) also report this 'almost too ready' acceptance by one of their participants of the researchers' interpretations.)

Then there is contradiction at the level of telling the story. The way Derek tells it I assume that this is the first and only time he used the belt – the fact that he didn't actually own a belt but had to go and borrow it from his boss and that he had no idea how hard to hit someone certainly seemed to me to point to this. Except that when you look at the transcript his response to my question seems to undermine this view, 'oh no I had used it a couple of times lightly y'know'. So, the work that seems to have been done to carefully construct the notion of someone who had never used the belt, and indeed did not know how to use it, is apparently blown apart by this statement.

The significance of this remark escaped me during the course of the interview. It was only when I came to transcribe it that I noticed it and found it puzzling. So puzzling, in fact, that I initially decided to leave the word 'had' out of the transcript, rationalising that this is what he must have meant, and fearing that otherwise, the credibility of my interviewee might be called in to question (while ignoring the potential damage to my own credibility – an unreliable witness indeed). It worried me because I was still, at that stage thinking of the stories in the interview as corresponding to some real objective reality that could be verified as 'fact'. On returning to the transcript some time later, and re-instating the offending word, I began to think of the word 'had' as like an artefact of fixation – a word that was there that should not be there in terms of the meaning being constructed by the interviewee. I had not, during the course of the interview noticed the inconsistency. In the fluid, dynamic speech the significance of this one little word had escaped me. Although not referring explicitly to this particular part of the transcript, Derek himself would perhaps favour this explanation. He wrote in an email,

' Things can slip by in spoken language but/and the speaker is always in control. As a reader, one can go back and repeat anything they want by reading that part again thereby emphasising what the speaker would not normally lay any emphasis on.'

When transcribed the sequential nature of speech is disrupted. Things become fixed that would otherwise be lost. What is apparently

inconsequential becomes visible, leading to the creation of 'artefacts' of meaning. Artefacts in the sense that what was said was not meant, was not intended to be heard, and indeed in this case was not heard. However, these 'slips' perhaps provide analytical handles for thinking about meaning.

In aesthetic terms, the story constructed is an engaging one. The work the speaker does to create listener involvement in this story is managed skilfully creating a vivid scene in the listener's imagination, using alliteration, repetition and pupil dialogue to enhance this (Tannen 1989). It is a risky story, however, for both of us. It is risky to tell because it uses 'foul language' and Derek cannot be sure if this is acceptable or not within the interview context, and it is risky for me, as an education professional, to respond to as a 'funny story'. I do laugh - though not as much as Derek – a feature of mixed gender interviews noted by Grønnerød (2004:36) which she suggests is due to a need to control heterosexual tension. The fact of my laughter at all may be a means to 'overcome' a 'problematic moment' (ibid: 37) since my response to the story did make me uneasy and I may perhaps have signalled something of my ambivalence.

So, the contradiction may be explained simply as a good story that doesn't actually fit the 'facts' followed by an evaluation that is responsive to my uncertainty as to the acceptability of the story. In a telephone conversation, Derek likens the process of story-telling to the way a computer works. When it searches files can get fragmented. If this is too severe the computer goes haywire. In story-telling you access different fragments – the way the story

turns out depends on the fragments drawn on and how they are used (from notes taken during/after telephone conversation). However, this still leaves the question of why Derek constructed this narrative like this i.e what work is being done here?

An explanation I want to put forward is in terms of the relationship between identity, narrative and discourse and how narrative works to create the 'identification with' that relates the individual to the discourse and locates them in it. Rather than affecting the 'validity' of the account, the 'slip' provides an analytic purchase on the process. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse (defined as 'a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is negotiated' Torfing 1999:85) 'identity' can be viewed as a subject position within a discursive field. Within any discursive field certain elements become partially fixed creating nodal points that have the effect of transiently organising the discursive field, which may then form dominant or hegemonic discourses. Althusser's (1971) metaphor of 'hailing' or 'interpellation' provides a means of understanding how individuals are constituted as subjects within the discourse. The act of being 'hailed' creates the relational quality of 'identification with' that positions the subject within the discourse. Drawing on Lacan, Althusser talks about the 'specular' nature of this process of interpellation by which the individual recognizes themselves, or identifies with a particular position within the discourse, as they are hailed. Althusser draws attention to the strange ambivalence in the term 'subject' as one is subjected and as one who, as a subject, is a free agent, 'the individual is interpellated as a (free subject) in order that he shall submit freely to the

commandments of the Subject i.e. in order that he shall freely accept his subjection'. In other words, the process is a transparent one in which we think of ourselves as free subjects. This transparency, Althusser argues, is an effect of ideology.

Althusser's ideas concerning interpellation have, however, been criticised. For example, Howarth (2000:98) suggests that 'there appears to be very little space for conflicting forms of interpellation and identification that challenge the existing "structure-in-dominance"'. I.e. there seems to be little room for agency or resistance in this process and one is left with the feeling that individuals are mere cultural 'dopes' (Garfinkel 1967). But Butler et al (2000:1) argue that 'identification with' can never be reduced to 'identity', there is always a gap and this perhaps does provide the 'little space' within which resistance/agency can arise i.e interpellation can never succeed completely. As Goffman (1961:320) says, 'our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.'

I propose that the function of narrative in this process is to provide the link between the individual and the discourse. In other words, narrative is the substance of that link, what 'identification with' is. Discourses are specific to particular socio-historic contexts and as these change so narratives must be re-written. Narrative can be seen as a palimpsest on which personal experience is inscribed and re-inscribed. It is perhaps this re-writing and over-writing that gives rise to a certain 'incoherence' in interview data – after all, the qualitative interview is a rather specialised kind of interaction,

whenever else are individuals asked about their experiences in such a concerted and concentrated way i.e. a certain amount of ambiguity/inconsistency/contradiction may be due to the way in which narratives are produced in interviews.

Returning to Derek's story, a relationship between discourse and identity in the narrative can be proposed. Firstly, how he is so disgusted with what he saw as a student (having suffered similar treatment himself as a schoolboy) he was prepared to give up the idea of becoming a teacher, and later, how he himself having been hailed into the prevailing discourse of teaching used the belt. Later again, as this discourse changes and the belt is outlawed, Derek re-writes his narrative constructing it as an epiphany or turning point. That this may not be in strict accord with 'the facts' is not important for this analysis and indeed, it is irreducible to the level of 'fact'. The ambiguity in Derek's text would not be removed by asking him how many times he used the belt and in what order. The contradictions can be interpreted as pointing to shifts in prevailing discourses, and more tentatively perhaps as revealing 'gaps' between identity positions in discourses and the process of 'identification with' that the individual enters into. In the story of 'The Belt' what might be called, in narrative terms, 'aporia' (moments of undecidability or rupture in texts) are apparent. The contradiction at the level of coherence in the story ('oh no I had used it lightly') perhaps points to a shift in the discourse, and hence results in a change in the relational nature of identification. The second level of contradiction is suggested by the use of the word 'forced' i.e. Derek stopped using the belt before he was 'forced to'. This conveys a lack of willingness to

give up the belt at odds with the notion that he gave it up because it was ineffective (in itself a rather contradictory idea given his earlier opposition to the belt on apparently moral grounds). This incompatibility within the narrative perhaps points to a gap between the identity position within the discourse and Derek's identification with it.

As an illustration of this re-writing of narrative, I draw on my own experience. As part of my research I undertook (taking Scheurich's (1995) advice) to be interviewed by a number of different people with whom I had different relationships using the interview schedule I myself used to interview teachers (Watson, in preparation). This was an interesting experience. In the first interview with a colleague, I explored my first (disastrous) teaching post. I recalled how I had tried to put into practice strategies of behaviour management with my chaotic class and how these had never worked very well. My colleague then asked me about my approaches to teaching and learning at that time and I said we had done a number of interesting things including, as part of a project on the environment, painting a life-sized picture of a killer whale. I also recalled that these were the best times we had together. During the interview I made a connection that I hadn't before between the ineffective behaviour strategies and the enjoyable teaching/learning experiences:

Interviewer: I'm interested in seeing how your reflective practice, how your reflection made the class better behaved.

Me: Yeah, actually, y'know that's interesting. What I did was on the one hand I read books about positive behaviour management and I tried out all sorts of reward systems, charts, stickers, and none of those seemed to actually work, or they worked for about two days then they stopped working [Interviewer: yeah] and I think, and I hadn't thought about it until you asked just asked that question, that it was, it was, it was the learning, it was making the learning interesting I think which had by far the most impact on the behaviour. Um, these, the charts and things I don't think were very effective at all.

In my second interview with a post-graduate student in the department what had emerged as a new 'insight' in the first interview came out as a fully-fledged narrative in which I spoke about how I had realised the importance of learning/teaching to behaviour management, and moreover, I spoke of the ineffective behaviour strategies as being implemented on the advice of other teachers, whereas the understanding that effective behaviour management meant providing a stimulating learning environment came from me.

(The idea that being interviewed yields 'insights' has been noted by a number of researchers. Thus Mills (2001:291) interviewing bilingual mothers and children reports that one mother commented 'I didn't know I knew that until I started talking'. Derek himself in an email after being interviewed said, 'It was interesting, I discovered new things about myself.' Arguably these 'new things' or 'insights' are the stimuli for the re-writing of narratives.)

Me: [By the end of term] I had made some kind of headway and I had done it on my own terms. I had not become um the teacher that I didn't want to be. I had kind - although I was very keen that I should achieve some kind of control through providing stimulating and interesting material I didn't want to close them down, didn't want to just kind of concentrate on the basics and have them sat at their seats doing things as a way of instigating control. Um and we did, we did, I think we did lots of interesting things. In fact someone came in, a teacher came in after school one day and she was saying, and I was saying 'oh god' y'know 'terrible day' and all the rest of it, and she was saying 'yeah but look at your walls, look at what you've actually got out of them it's great'. So I thought, 'OK yeah it's true', and the the people gave me lots of advice like positive behaviour management like star charts and things like that and I never found that that really worked terribly well – would work in the short term, y'know um but I found I was constantly having to think up new things and nothing ever worked terribly well, but the the thing that worked the best was this providing them with um stimulating and interesting learning, so that was, in a way, that was a useful thing to have – well the whole thing was a useful learning, I mean it was horrible, but it was very very useful.'

Recent policy has emphasised the need for school policies in the area of behaviour and somewhat more recently in the area of learning and teaching. Currently, government policy emphasises the need to integrate behaviour policies and learning and teaching policies. It seems to me that I had, in response to the interviewer's question, re-written my narrative in line with current policy discourse.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed some problematic aspects of interview data – at least aspects that were problematic for me as I tried to make sense of the text, reconstituting Derek after the interview. My initial horror at the potential implications of the contradictions, and Derek’s admission that what he had said was full of ‘inaccuracies’ gave way to a recognition that this is what it is like to live a life – that contradiction is an aspect of authenticity, and that a perfectly coherent account would, rather, be something to be suspicious of. Moreover, this ambiguity is not to be removed by further quizzing in order to get at ‘the truth’. As Scheurich (1995:249) says, ‘techniques like prolonged interaction or joint construction (or even triangulation or collaboration) will not lead to a more correct interpretation, because, again, an indeterminate ambiguity, “a wild profusion” lies at the heart of the interview interaction.’

In my initial analysis I tried to smooth over the contradiction and to distill Derek’s essence to a single explanation (albeit one he agreed with). Using the contradiction in interviews enables narratives to be seen as a process of writing and re-writing in which the ‘interminable process of identification with’ is played out within the shifting discourses in which we are immersed.

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