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The art(fulness) of open-ended interviewing: some considerations on analysing interviews

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ABSTRACT Considerable analytic attention has focused on interviewees' talk as 'accounts', or 'versions', rather than as direct reports of attitudes or perceptions. However, despite recognition of the 'co-construction of accounts', little analytic attention has been given to the *interviewer* as central in the production of the talk. With this attention, we are left with an analysis of some *decontextualized*-features-of-talk (or discourse/identities/narrative/repertoires/ rhetoric). By contrast, this article argues that interviews are inherently social encounters, dependent on the *local interactional contingencies* in which the speakers draw from, and co-construct, broader social norms. Through a close reading of one published paper and extracts from an interview, I document how interviewees *and interviewers* work to construct themselves as certain types-of-people in relation to the topic of the interview and reflexively the interview itself. I then show how a prescription from some interview methods texts document an ideal about interview practices. The analysis of the interview extracts shows this *ideal-in-practice* (cf. Hester and Francis, 1994). I argue that whatever ideals are practised, no single practice will gain 'better data' than the other practices. The 'data' obtained are highly dependent on and emerge from the specific local interactional context which is produced in and through the talk (and concomitant identity work) of the interviewee *and interviewer*. An awareness of this local context of data production is central to analysing interview data *whatever analytic stance* is taken when analysing the data.

KEYWORDS: *conversation analysis, interview methodology, moral adequacy, recreational drug use*

We think in generalities but we live in detail.   (Alfred North Whitehead)

Introduction

Interviewing is *the* central resource through which contemporary social

science (and society) engages with issues that concern it (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Since the emergence of the 'classical' social survey interview, the interview has been 'deconstructed' and 'theorized' and consequently emerged in various guises. Symbolic interactionism sought to 'open' the talk and obtain 'authentic' accounts. Feminist accounts (notably Oakley, 1981) tried to 'unmask' and then 'de-centre' the power balance. Alongside this work emerged an interest in the interview itself as a topic of research (notably Cicourel, 1964) and, following 'the linguistic turn', the gaze fell to interviewees' moral (identity) work (Cuff, 1993), narratives (Riessman, 1990), multiple voices (Gubrium, 1993) and rheotoric and repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Seale (1998) identifies two major traditions: interview data as a *resource* and interview data as a *topic*. I am aware that such a divide glosses over the myriad of approaches that these terms encapsulate, but, put simply, the story goes something like this:

> *Interview-data-as-resource*: the interview data collected are seen as (more or less) reflecting the interviewees' reality outside the interview.

> *Interview-data-as-topic*: the interview data collected are seen as (more or less) reflecting a reality jointly constructed by the interviewee and interviewer.

The data-as-resource approach has undergone considerable critique from those working in the constructionist tradition. Much of this critique stems from highlighting that 'the interview is an artefact, a joint accomplishment of interviewer and respondent. As such, its relationship to any "real" experience is not merely unknown but in some senses unknowable' (Dingwall, 1997: 56).

This leads to considerable analytic attention to see interviewees' talk as 'accounts', or 'versions', which offer up a window through which to view the various possible ways that the topic of the interview can be talked about. However, despite a notion of the 'co-construction of accounts', little detailed *analytic* attention has been given to interviewers' talk. With a few notable exceptions outlined later, the analysis of interview data can become an analysis of some *decontextualized*-features-of-talk (or discourse/identities/narrative/repertoires/rhetoric). And, in this way, the local context of the talk – that these 'features' were produced in negotiation with an interviewer – becomes silenced.

This article aims to highlight three areas in relation to the current analysis of interview data.

1. That a sensitivity to the *accounting work* of interviewees should remain a central concern in the analysis of interview data.
2. That this accounting work should be understood in direct relation to the *context* of its production.
3. Most importantly, that an awareness *and analysis of interviewers' talk* in producing both the form and content of the interview should become a

central concern for *all researchers* when analysing interview data, whatever analytic stance they take on the data.

Now, I take it that for some readers much of this (at the very least, the first point) will not be 'news'. However, as Silverman (1998) notes, a considerable amount of research reports still rely 'unproblematically' on interview data as a transparent window on life beyond the interview.[1] This article seeks to both (re)sensitize those who analyse interview data as well as highlight some of the analytic ideas that seem to have been downplayed.

A BRIEF DEMONSTRATION

In order to demonstrate the sort of sensitivity I am advocating consider Extract 1a below which is taken from an interview with a teenager to evaluate some drug-education exercises. In the research report we may be told 'interviewees often talked about their drugs use unprompted'.

Extract 1a
Ben: There is a lot of people that actually do soft drugs.
        I don't actually do them at the moment, I did
        up to about a year ago.

'Traditionally' you often see this sort of transcription. Look again at the same extract.

This time it has been transcribed following some the conventions of conversation analysis detailing the 'majority' of the features of the talk (see Appendix for details of transcription notation).

Extract 1b
```
 1   IR:    °>so when you say the s:ofter drugs° °°what does
 2          that mean.<°°
 3   Ben:   Wel= ↑herm (2.0) °tch° I suppos:e. (1.0) if we-
 4          >talkin about< drink and smoking as well.
 5          (.) but er, (.) sort of cannabis:: lik:e.
 6          (1.4)                                      ←
 7   Ben:   there is:: a lot of people that actually do that. I,=>I
 8          don't actually do tha at the moment=I did,< °.hhh°
 9          up to about a year ago I think- (.) that was the sort
10          of >peak,< for (.) our age group °an[d  e v ]eryone°
11   IR:                                        [°(mm.)°]
12   Ben:   (who that) was into it.
13   IR:    and how often were you °using (it),°=
```

At this stage I am just going to note one thing: Ben *only* elaborates on his drug use after he receives no response from the interviewer (IR). The gap in the talk (arrowed) does a lot of work. The interviewer's silence is vital in producing both the content and form of Ben's 'answer'. Or, put differently, IR's non-action (his silence) *is an action* (cf. Poland and Pederson, 1998; Potter and Wetherell, 1995) that has important consequences for the trajectory of Ben's answer.

When interviews are transcribed in this way you begin to see them as spaces of *finely co-ordinated interactional work in which the talk of **both** speakers is central to producing the interview*. This kind of conversation analytic transcription offers a specific pair of academic spectacles to see the world through. I am not advocating that researchers from all areas adopt such 'detailed' transcription practices. However, an attempt should be made to include some degree of the interactional detail and *at the very least* interviewers' talk should *always* be included.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS ARTICLE

Later in this article I offer some examples of how such an approach that focuses on the interactional context may aid in an analysis of interview data. Initially, through data from one published paper, I focus on how an understanding of interviewees' identity work is central to understanding interview 'data'. I then outline the small amount of work that analyses interviews with reference to *both* interviewers' and interviewees' talk. Using data from my current work on interaction-in-interviews, I highlight the specific identity work in which interviewers routinely engage. It is argued that such an approach, which takes seriously *interviewers' talk and their related identity work*, has been relatively silent in the analysis of interview data.[2] An awareness of the local context of the data production is central to analysing interviews, *whatever analytic stance* is taken when analysing the data.

Example 1: Doing being morally adequate whilst talking about drugs Shiner and Newburn (1997) wanted to discover if recreational drug use is seen as 'normal' by young people. They conducted interviews with drug using and non-drug using 11–16-year-olds. They treated the interview data they gained as a *resource*, a source of information ('social fact') about activities and behaviour *outside* the interview setting. They offer quite a 'typical' methodological note: 'It is possible that the school setting may have encouraged respondents to give what they thought were socially desirable answers . . . thus reducing the validity of the interview data' (p. 520).

Their concept of validity is concerned with bias, establishing trust and therefore the truthfulness of their data, the approach Silverman names as 'interview-as-technique' (1993). For Shiner and Newburn (1997), using semi-structured interviews

> . . . minimised the extent to which respondents had to express themselves in terms defined by the interviewers and encouraged them to raise issues that were important to them. It was thus particularly well suited to attempt to discover respondents' own meanings and interpretations (p. 520).

They wish to gain access to what Holstein and Gubrium (1997) have called 'the subject beyond the respondent' in which subjects are conceived as 'passive *vessels of answers* for experimental questions . . . who, under ideal conditions, serve up authentic reports' (pp. 116–17, emphasis added). As

noted earlier, constructionist approaches have seriously undermined such a stance on the role of the interviewees' subjectivity, highlighting that the interviewee is *active* in meaning construction (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Potter and Mulkay, 1985) and that the interviewees' subjectivity is *locally produced* sequentially in and through talk (Baker, 1984, 1997; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995).

Shiner and Newburn (1997) are interested in establishing the 'meaning' of drug use, the way it is 'understood by the young' (p. 519) *beyond* the space of the interview. The constructionist critique denies that interview data can be used to report on a reality beyond the interview and treats the interview itself as the central *topic* of analysis; interviews merely report upon, or express, their own structures (Silverman, 1993). As the 'discursive turn' in the academy highlighted, language is *performative*, it is never merely a *neutral* means of communication. In interviews, language is *not* a neutral carrier for information. Rather interview-talk itself is a form of social action and should be studied as such (cf. Cicourel, 1964). Central to this analytic perspective is an awareness of the *accounting work* of interview talk, that speech-acts are *performative,* used to 'present the self' (cf. Goffman, 1959) in a morally adequate light.

While Shiner and Newburn (1997) *do* show a concern for the *accounting work* of the drug using interviewees, this focus is *only* on drug users and *not* non-drug users. They show that drug-using interviewees use, what they call, 'neutralisation techniques' to 'claim that there were no really serious consequences from the drug(s) being used, and, by implication, that the user was making responsible and rational choices' (p. 525). For non-users' talk, they offer no comment as to the same moral forces that shape this talk. When non-users offer talk that makes 'positive connections' (p. 521) between drug use and everyday activities they offer no detailed examples or commentary. Nor do they relate interviewees' answers to interviewers' questions and other actions.

Accounting for actions Baruch (1981), following Webb and Stimson (1976), shows us that interviews can be viewed as 'a vehicle for making the [respondents] appear rational and sensible . . . respondents attend to the issue of their appearance as moral persons' (pp. 275–6). If we understand that interview talk places *moral demands* on speakers, the 'fact' that the drug users in Shiner and Newburn's sample *construct* moral talk is of no surprise. So where does this leave their analysis?

If we understand that *accounting work* is central to interview-talk we should observe *how* this accounting work is accomplished. Shiner and Newburn do this, in part, pointing out that the only difference between non-users and users is that the latter generate 'neutralisation techniques'. *But* as they treat the interview-as-resource their analysis leads them to some conclusions that are not analytically tenable.[3] They conclude that 'young people do not view

drug use as an 'unproblematic' activity' (p. 526) as both users and non-users subscribe to a 'restrictive set of [anti-drugs] views' (Shiner and Newburn, 1997: 525). Their qualitative data only show us that *in interviews* young people do not *present* drug use as an 'unproblematic' activity. In other contexts, notably outside the interview, interviewees (and interviewers) can, and surely do, produce talk-about-drugs with *alternative* moral trajectories. We should view 'neutralisation' as a local-situational accomplishment and be aware that in other spaces of interaction, such as talk-between-friends, other (and Other) presentations of self are *equally possible*.[4]

This discussion highlights that an analysis of interview data should be sensitive to *how* the talk is produced. As Firth and Kitzinger (1998) note, echoing Schegloff's work (1997, 1998):

> . . . talk is always occasioned and produced in a context, in interaction with others – and that participants are orientating towards the questions, concerns, assumptions, interpretations and judgements of others in producing their talk. When social scientists make the methodological leap from what people 'say' to what they 'believe' or how they 'behave' they obscure the *social* function of talk and obscure its role *as talk-in-interaction*'(p. 317, emphasis added).

As the work above shows, one of those 'social functions of talk' is that research interviewees can be concerned to produce themselves, in and through talk, in a 'favourable light', a *morally adequate* light. They can work to produce themselves as morally adequate 'cannabis users', 'soft-drug users', 'non-drug users' . . . and other, multiple, possible identities.

Interviewees' talk should never just be seen as merely a reflection of life outside the interview, a 'reality report' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), rather the talk is a product of a specific interaction. At certain moments in that interaction speakers may be concerned to produce themselves as a certain type-of-person.

Interviews as interactions

There is another, related, strand of the constructionist critique of interviews. This stems from the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic research tradition and argues that interviews are inherently sites of social interaction and should be studied as such. Cicourel (1964) started the theoretical debate when he highlighted that, in interviewing 'we find that continuous situational imputations, strategies, and the like occur which influence how actors [interviewee/interviewer] treat each other and manage their presence before each other' (p. 87). He then goes on to note, possibly not without irony, 'Now, these are precisely the conditions found in everyday life' (p. 87). What Cicourel documents, through a reading of the methodological writings on interview practice, is how interviewing is *a specific form* of social interaction.

Cicourel highlights how the 'art of interviewing' is a product of *artful* social interaction; it relies on and attends to the skills and methods people

employ in doing everyday life. Such features are in tension with the institutional demands on the researcher. As Converse and Schuman succinctly put it a decade later, albeit in reference to standardized interviews:

> 'The interviewer is charged with the responsibility of conducting *inquiry* in something in the manner of a *conversation*. The product of the encounter is supposed to be good 'hard' data – the stuff of codes and numbers and computer analysis. The process is supposed to be at least somewhat 'soft' – the stuff of a pleasant conversation (1974: 22, cited in Suchman and Jordan, 1990, emphasis added).

Although this account is directed to the structured interview, and most practitioners of the open-ended interview would reject the idea of producing 'hard' quantifiable data, their argument still holds for other 'types' of interview. Replace the word 'hard' with 'deep mutual understanding – the stuff of real feelings and personal ideas and emotions'. Equally we could re-write this as 'discourse – the stuff of discursive repertoires, ideological dilemmas and identities'. With all these changes we arrive at the *essential tension* at the heart of interviewing (Mazeland and ten Have, 1996). Whatever we do with 'interview talk', *whether we analyse it through a 'realist' or 'constructionist' perspective*, we must be aware of *how* the talk is locally produced by *both* the interviewee and interviewer.

THE ARTFULNESS OF OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWING

With few exceptions, outlined later, little analytic attention has been given to the detailed ways that interview-talk is locally and collaboratively produced. Some approaches focus on the construction of accounts (Wetherell, 1998), others talk about the *co*-construction of accounts but with little of the actual analytic attention, or the level of transcription detail needed to document this, being given (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995,1997).

Over 30 years after Cicourel's work, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have started to engage with this debate, offering a distinctly local approach to answer the question 'how is it that the interview comes off?'. Baker (1984, 1997) has focused on how interviewers' questions – the categories they implicitly invoke in their questions – are central to producing interviewees' talk, the categories they invoke and identities they speak from. Watson and Weinberg (1982) show how interviewees and interviewers *collaborate in* producing the interviewees' identities and biographies as 'male homosexual'. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) continue this vein of work, studying semi-structured interviews with members of youth subcultures. They document how interviewers' opening questions – 'tell me something about yourself . . .' – are responded to by interviewees as 'invitations' to describe themselves as members of a specific subcultural category – 'I am a Goth'. They also show the methods interviewees draw on to resist categorizing themselves in terms of a subcultural identity – 'I dunno I hate those sort of questions.'

Mazeland and ten Have (1996) have shown how an interview is a negotiation between the extra-local research agenda and the local in situ interaction, documenting what they call 'the essential tension' in interviews. In a similar vein, Hester and Francis (1994) offer an insightful 'radically local' understanding of one interview. They document the mundane work in the interview, how it is locally managed and practically accomplished. They note that the 'talk is produced with minimum interactional involvement on the part of the interviewer . . . the only rule the interviewer seems to follow is one which could be characterised as "let the subject talk"' (p. 692).

While these sources make an important point, they often gloss over the relevance of the *interviewer's work* in producing the talk. Underlying all research interviews is the tension between an extra-local need to collect data on a topic and a here-and-now interactional event in which these data are collected in and through talk-in-interaction (Antaki and Rapley, 1996; Mazeland and ten Have, 1996; Suchman and Jordan, 1990). How interviewers manage this tension has outcomes both for the specific interaction and the broader research project to which it contributes data.

One 'solution' routinely employed by interviewers in my data-set is to locally produce themselves as specific type-of-speakers, *facilitative and neutral interviewers*. And this solution attends to the methodological prescriptions of the majority of interview methods textbooks – that interviewers should encourage talk in a non-leading way. However, as argued later, interviewers *doing being* facilitative and neutral does not mean that they are *being* facilitative and neutral in any traditional sense.

I now offer an example of such an approach – that takes seriously both interviewees' *and interviewers'* talk in the interaction and clearly highlights interviewers' identity work – using data from an interview with a teenager who has attended drug-education exercises. This extract is from a data-set of 30 (semi-)open interviews from two separate interview studies.

Following those studies outlined earlier, I briefly document how talk in interviews is always locally collaboratively produced. I also highlight, unlike the prior studies, how the interviewer works to locally produce himself as a specific type-of-person, as a *facilitative and neutral* interviewer. I show how a methodological 'ideal' about interview practice is locally produced by the interviewer.

Example 2: Doing being an open-ended interviewer Within the space of the open-ended interview, as Extracts 2 and 3 show, one speaker aligned as questioner and the other aligned as answerer, is *the* stable format, or home-base (cf. Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991) of the participants. This may appear as a relatively unremarkable feature to highlight, but it cannot be stressed enough that it is *the* foundational feature of the talk that makes it observable–reportable as an interview, for both participants and analyst.[5] I should note that in 'everyday talk' such a method, the chaining of questions

and answers, is a highly visible and regular phenomenon. However when *only* one speaker is *consistently* the questioner this *may* be treated as 'strange' and accountable by the speakers.[6]

   Let us now view this work in action.

Extract 2

```
 1  Ben:  caus:e er, (0.4) a lot of people have different
 2         views, >and things=I think,<discuss:ion, is
 3         the best way rather then, (1.1) wo:rk sheets
 4         °and things like that, <I don't think there>°
 5         (0.2)
 6  IR:    °(s- >coming back to the cards then< what
 7         did you think of the exercise, with the° °°cards,°°=
 8  Ben:   =I though that was good, (0.2) cause erm,
 9         (1.4) (tt) I- did find a few things out
10         tha-°t°, (0.3) I didn't know before, (0.4)
11         but erm, (1.0) °sort of like, (0.9) some of
12         the effects: and er,° (0.4)
13  IR:    °>(could) y- tell me,< can you tell me what sort of things,°
```

Note that there are two 'types' of question that IR produces. The first question (lines 6–7) is topic initiating, in that it introduces a topic of talk not discussed in the immediately prior talk. IR's second question (line 13) is a follow-up question that is contingent on some part of Ben's immediately prior talk. This follow-up question is clearly *not* pre-figured or scripted, unlike questions in survey interviews, rather it is produced in reaction to the here-and-now talk.

   IR could have asked something like 'Was the exercise with the cards good (bad/useful/helpful/boring . . .)?', thereby offering a question that would make relevant agreement or disagreement as part of Ben's answer. Instead, IR's question (lines 6–7), enables Ben to produce his own understanding of the cards exercise without any direction as to the *specific* descriptives that Ben should work with. In this sense, IR produces a non-leading, neutral question. However, Ben *is directed*, in and through the lexical formulation 'what did you think' (lines 6–7), to produce an answer that is embedded with references to his *personal thoughts* on this topic.

   IR's 'what did you think' works to hearably produce IR as *facilitating* Ben to produce a detailed and comprehensive answer *with specific reference to his personal thoughts*. IR's directive for detail is not to be heard as a product of him interrogating Ben or that Ben's prior talk was in some way unsatisfactory. The question is a product of IR being an interviewer who is *interested in promoting Ben's personal thoughts* on the topic.

   This lexical formulation – 'what did you think' – is centred on explicitly marking that IR is interested in the interviewee *as an individual*. Ben's personal, individual thoughts are 'valuable' to IR. This feature is implicit throughout the interaction but in and through 'what did you think' this is explicitly orientated to. Although the pronoun 'you' is ambiguous (cf.

Watson, 1987; Sacks, 1992) as to whether it refers to Ben-as-an-individual or Ben-as-a-member-of-a-collective (i.e. all the students at the drug-education exercise) it is orientated to by Ben as referring to me-personally. Ben orientates to IR's directive, both explicitly – through his optional, or pragmatic, preface 'I thought' (line 8) – and implicitly – through his answer being a description that references his personal thoughts and experience.

Also, note that Ben offers an *elaborated* answer to IR's initial question (lines 6–7). Ben's elaborated talk is, in part, produced *in response to IR's question*. It is also produced through *Ben working to hold the floor*: the rising intonation on the utterance 'goo<u>d</u>', (line 8) forecasts that further-talk-is-coming holding the floor over the 0.2 second gap in the talk. As was noted in reference to Extract 1b, *IR's silence can work to promote an elaborated answer*.

In providing the 'answer' Ben makes relevant a range of non-inclusive, and thus competing, identities in relation to the topic of drugs. Ben says he only found 'a few things out tha-°t°, (0.3) I didn't know before', (lines 9–10) from the cards exercise. The 'exercise with the cards' refers to a game that those in the drug-education exercise had to play: you are given cards with different drug effects (and dangers) and have to match them to specific drugs. As Ben says he found out a few things that he didn't know before, about 'some of the <u>e</u>ffects:' (lines 11–12), he *must* have *some* knowledge of the effects of *some* drugs. Various questions emerge: Where did he gain this knowledge? Has he used drugs? Does he know drug users? Is he interested in gaining drugs knowledge?

When IR follows-up Ben's talk, IR does not explicitly ask about how he gained this knowledge. IR's question (line 13) is relatively 'open'. The exact topic which IR asks Ben to talk on is ambiguous; is his question asking 'what sorts of things *did you find good*', 'what sort of things *didn't you know about before*' or 'what sort of *effects didn't you know about before*'? Because IR does not specify the precise area of talk, Ben is relatively 'free' to topicalize any part of his prior talk.

Interestingly, IR *does not* use the word 'drugs'. If IR had produced a question like 'what sorts of *drugs* didn't you know about before?', this would explicitly draw attention to the possible identities made relevant within Ben's talk. So, again IR produces an *open*, and *non-inquisitorial*, hence *neutral* question and as such works to deny the identity 'interrogator'.

IR's question is also prefaced with the utterance '°>(could) y- tell me,<can you tell me'(line 13). The question could have been produced, and been understandable, as a follow-up question, without the preface. The 'could y- tell me can you tell me' preface is optional or pragmatic. It explicitly produces IR's request for detail *in the form of an invitation* to Ben to offer a detailed account. IR's pursuit of detail (line 13) is *not* to be heard as marking explicitly that something was 'missing from' the prior talk, that Ben's prior answer was 'inadequate'. IR is not holding Ben accountable, rather the question and the prefacing work to say '*I'm interested in what you said and can we now focus on*

this in detail'. Again, he is facilitating Ben to talk about his experiences. This preface clearly works to compound the non-interrogational nature of the question.

Let us view how the talk continues:

Extract 3

```
13   IR:    ᵒᵒ>(could) y- tell me,< can you tell me what sort of things,ᵒ
14   Ben:   er::ᵒ(h)ᵒm. (1.9) I can't actu(huh)ally re(heh)me(hh)mber
15          at the ᵒmo(h)men-ᵒ=but er, (1.7) >I think it was to do
16          with< er, (0.3) h:eroin=and >things like that cause,<
17          (0.2) I think a- at our age the (.) harder drugs: (.)
18          erm (0.2) the things that we don't know about,=
19   IR:    =ᵒm[m.]ᵒ
20   Ben:   [ a n]d >most of us,< don't wana to know about.
21          .hh andt (0.4) it's it=is:: interesting <knowing a
22          bit more about it ᵒand everything,ᵒ>
23          (0.3)
24   Ben:   erm
25          (1.2)
26   Ben:   .hh I mean a lot of people have sort of experienced
27          the <s:ofter drugs:.>
28          (.)
29   Ben:   ᵒand things like that,ᵒ (.) so they do know a fair
30          bit about them.
31   IR:    ᵒ>so when you say the s:ofter drugsᵒ ᵒᵒwhat does
32          that mean.<ᵒᵒ
33   Ben:   Well=↑herm (2.0) ᵒtchᵒ I suppos:e, (1.0) if we-
```

After considerable hesitation, Ben claims forgetfulness (lines 14–15). Note how this claim is scattered with laughter 'I can't actu(*huh*)ally re(*heh*)me(*hh*)mber at the ᵒmo(*h*)men-ᵒ' which works to produce this as a 'laughable situation' as compared to a 'serious error'. IR does *not* offer-up laughter and so does not collude in producing this as a 'laughable situation' but he does *not* hold Ben accountable through any verbal action, rather he remains 'a neutral monitor'.[7] Ben then works to hold the floor via a rush through (see Schegloff, 1981). He latches the last utterance of his initial answer to an utterance that forecasts that more-talk-will-follow, 'ᵒmo(h)men-ᵒ=*but* er,' (line 15). IR does not offer any talk, despite a considerable silence, the 1.7-second pause. IR could have said something like 'don't worry' or attended to Ben's trouble, but again he remains 'a neutral monitor'.

Ben then offers an answer that is *marked as* tentative '>*I think* it was to do with< er, (0.3) h:eroin=and >things like that' (lines 15–16). Note how he does not use a slang term like 'h', 'skag' or 'brown', rather he uses the freely available, everyday term 'h:eroin'. He then goes on to mark that the knowledge he gained with the cards exercise, knowledge of 'h:eroin and >things like that', is the sort of knowledge that '*most-people-of-his-age*-just-don't-have'. Through the pronoun 'our' (line 17), Ben produces himself as a member of a collective, not just any collective *but a large and diverse group*:

'people-of-my-age'. His knowledge of drugs is just the same as others of his age, he only has an everyday, normal, ordinary and routine relationship to it.

Ben works to mark that his knowledge and relationship to harder drugs should be seen as the-same-as others of his age, it is *not* extra-ordinary (or extraordinary). Note that IR produces a response token '=°m̲[m.]°' (line 19). As Gardner (1997) notes, such a '=°m̲[m.]°' (line 19) with a flat, slightly falling intonation can work to say ' "I have heard what you have said, I have no problems understanding what you have said as part of the emerging sequence of actions, and I have nothing substantial to add to what you have just said" ' (p. 133). It works to shift the topic, which is what Ben does at line 21. It also works to *acknowledge* Ben's talk, but it does not claim *agreement with* his identity work; compare it to a token such as 'yeah', 'right' or 'oh right'. IR again produces himself as 'a neutral monitor' of the talk.

At line 21 Ben topic-shifts (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) to a related but differently focused topic. Note how this elaboration is marked as a 'natural' *continuation-of* the prior talk through the optional, and pragmatic, preface 'an̲d̲t' (line 21, cf. Heritage and Sorjonen, 1994). But remember this talk is not a '*natural*' continuation-of the prior talk, in the sense that IR's response token (line 19) promoted this topic-shift.

Ben's identity work 'comes off' through him doing detailed elaboration. In this extract, this elaboration and its related identity work, comes-off through both IR's question (line 13) *and* Ben working to hold the floor by rushing through possible turn-transitional relevant places (lines 15 and 16) *and* IR's response token (line 19). In Extract 1b we saw how Ben's talk can also 'come off through' IR's silence. This feature returns. At lines 23, 25 and 28, gaps, or silences, in the talk promote more talk from Ben. At line 26 Ben topic-shifts and again this elaboration is marked as a 'natural' *continuation-of* the prior talk, although this time through the preface 'I mean' (line 26). Again, this talk is not a '*natural*' continuation-of the prior talk, in the sense that IR's *silence* promoted this follow-up talk.

Due to issues of space I'm only going to briefly comment on IR's question at lines 31–2. IR's follow-up question (lines 31–2) asks Ben to unpack some of his prior talk. This question does not *directly* ask Ben about his 'personal' relationship to drugs although in answering the question (see Extract 1b) Ben does offer-up this information. Note, again that this question is prefaced with optional utterances 'so when you say', which in this case works to say '*I'm not responsible for the topic of this follow-up question, in fact you are, as you introduced this issue*'. The so-preface indicates that the question is *just* a 'natural continuation' of the Ben's prior talk, that it is *just* a product of the 'here-and-now' contingencies of the interaction (Rapley, 2000). Again, IR works to be a 'neutral' participant who is facilitating Ben to provide a detailed account of his personal thoughts.

Discussion

This brief analysis was, in part, undertaken in order to document the finely co-ordinated interactional work that *both* participants in interviews engage in. Now compare the interview transcript and analysis above with some 'typical' guidelines on interviewing (for other examples, see Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992; Berg, 1998; Burgess, 1984):

> . . . the interviewer starts with the most general possible question and hopes that this will be sufficient to enable the respondent to talk about the subject. If the respondent has difficulty . . . then the interviewers can move to the prompt which is more specific. Hopefully this will be enough to get the participant talking. . . . It is likely that a successful interview will include questions and answers at both general and specific levels and will move between the two fairly seemlessly (Smith, 1995: 15).

I should note that Smith's 'pointers' and 'tips' (pp. 13 and 17) are written in connection to semi-structured interviewing but they equally hold for open-ended interviews. Similarly, Mason (1996) advocates that 'qualitative' interviewers' 'social task is to orchestrate an interaction which moves easily and painlessly between topics and questions' (p. 45).

We saw how IR produced both topic-initiating and follow-up questions, echoing Smith's 'general' and 'specific' typology of questions and Mason's 'easy' and 'painless' movement. And what routinely occurs in actual practice is that an interviewer asks a topic-initiating question, an interviewee answers the question and then a follow-up question is produced. This is answered and then *another* follow-up question is produced, this is answered and then *another* follow-up question is produced . . . until finally a further topic-initiating question is asked and the pattern repeats itself.

This combination of producing a topic-initiating question and following up the interviewee's answer with a follow-up question is *the* central way in which (semi-)open-ended interviews come off. Put simply, the topic-initiating questions introduce topics of talk on which the interviewer would like the interviewee to focus; the follow-up questions provide the possibility to gain *very detailed and comprehensive talk* on those specific topics. They constantly seek 'to unpack' the prior talk, and allow a multiple number of issues, or 'mentionables', that the interviewee raises to be explored and/or followed up.

The methodological rationale of (semi-)open-ended interviews – that they allow a rich, deep and textured picture – is locally produced in and through the 'simple' method of producing topic-initiating and follow-up questions. Those large numbers of 'mentionables' produced through this method then become *resources* for the research project. What remains relevant is that those 'mentionables' are produced *in and through* interaction.

However, interviewers have overarching topical control; they guide the talk, they promote it through questions, silence and response tokens and chiefly *they decide which particular part of the 'answer' to follow-up* (cf. Watson

and Weinberg, 1982). These actions always come off through an intimate negotiation with the interviewees' talk. As we saw, interviewees can work to hold the floor, either through forecasting that more talk is to come or through rush-throughs (and by producing stories, although these were not analysed in the work in this article) and this allows them the space to construct a specific, and often '*morally adequate*', identity in relation to the topic of the talk.

Smith (1995) informs us that:

> Questions should be neutral rather than value-laden or leading. . . . A strategy often employed . . . is to try to encourage a person to speak about the topic with as little prompting from the interviewer as possible. This point can be seen as a development of the requirement to ask neutral rather than leading questions. One might say that you are attempting to get as close as possible to what your respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by your questions (pp. 13–15).

IR, through the open, non-inquisitorial questions, the question-prefaces ('can you tell me' and 'so when you say') and the response token, does work to locally produce himself as a 'neutral' yet 'encouraging' participant who is interested in Ben's 'thoughts'. However, IR never attains this neutral facilitation in the course of this interaction as he controls the trajectory of the talk (and the interaction as a whole – IR opens and closes the interview).

This paradox highlights an important issue: that there is a difference between '*doing* facilitative and neutral' and '*being* facilitative and neutral'. Heritage and Greatbatch (1991) highlight this in reference to the news interview when they say that interviewers engage in 'neutral*istic*' conduct. Interviewers (in *both* news and [semi-]open-ended interviews) locally produce themselves as neutral in and through '(1) avoid[ing] the assertion of opinions on their own behalf, and (2) refrain[ing] from direct or overt affiliation with (or disaffiliation from) the expressed statements of [interviewees]' (p. 114).

If they do not maintain this neutralistic *stance* they are routinely held accountable by either the present speakers or the overhearing audience. What is important to note is that when interviewers are 'doing neutrality' in such a manner, in both news and open-ended interviews, this does not in any way mean that they are 'being neutral' in any conventional sense.

This discussion of the prescriptions of interview methods texts documents an ideal about interview practices: the 'passive' interviewer. The discussion of the extracts has shown this *ideal-in-practice* (cf. Hester and Francis, 1994). Interviewers may choose to locally produce themselves through their talk and other actions as 'passive' (facilitative and neutral) or, following feminist (Oakley, 1981) and emotionalist (Douglas, 1985) critiques of interviewing, more 'active' (co-operative and self-disclosing) or another identity. Whatever ideals are practised, no single practice will gain 'better data' than the other practices. The 'data' obtained are *highly dependent on and emerge from the*

specific local interactional context and this local interactional context is produced in and through the talk and concomitant identity work of the interviewer and *interviewee.*

Conclusion

Although I have drawn on the insights and transcription practices of conversation analysis, I am not advocating that such an approach 'has to be' adopted when analysing interviews. *Whatever the chosen analytic stance* on interview data, an awareness and sensitivity to *how* interviewees and interviewers collaboratively produce the talk will open up *alternative, often silent, trajectories* of thinking through and analysing the interview data 'we' gather. These new, alternative trajectories will be centred on the work in which the interviewees *and interviewers* engage (cf. Firth and Kitzinger, 1998; Schegloff, 1997).

In seriously considering 'how the interview comes off', we should focus on the actual lived practice of the interview. Seeing an interview as a specific type of interaction highlights the interactional, or social, nature of the interview. *And the interviewer is a central and active participant in the interaction.* Despite the insistence in the constructionist tradition (e.g. discourse and narrative analysis) in taking seriously the 'function or goal' of interviewees' talk, such talk should *not* be viewed as decontextual: it is always produced in negotiation with the interviewer. Following the work of Baker (1984), Hester and Francis (1994), Mazeland and ten Have (1996), Watson and Weinberg (1982), and Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995), interviews should be viewed as 'spaces of interaction'. Whatever analytic stance is adopted in relation to interviews, the interviewers' identity work should be viewed as central to the interaction. As such, it should be central in the *analysis* and the related *presentation* of the data. Interview-talk is produced in a specific context and an awareness of that context is vital in understanding the talk, and therefore the 'data', itself.

So where does this leave us? What does this mean for analytic and interviewer practice? Should we abandon the interview?

To answer the last question first (a thing we routinely do in talk), put simply: *no.* The interview is an economical means, in the sense of time and money, of getting access to a 'topic'. It may also be an economical means of getting access to topics that are not routinely available for analysis, to get people to 'think-out-loud' about certain topics. However, saying this, most topics are 'freely available' for analysis. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note, to understand the topic 'family' we do not *need* to interview people or enter people's homes, we can see people 'doing family' on the bus, in supermarkets, in newspapers, etc. But again we should be sensitive that these are actions-occurring-in-a-specific-context.

In respect to interviewer practices, despite my critique of the impossibility

of interviewers '*being* facilitative and neutral' in any traditional sense, unlike some feminist and emotionalist critiques (see Douglas, 1985; Oakley, 1981), I am *not* advocating that interviewers should practise alternative interactional norms or ideals. Whatever methodological ideal about interviewer practices that are locally produced (if they are at all) – be it neutral facilitation or co-operative self-disclosure – no single ideal gains 'better data' than the others. Whatever analytic stance is adopted, you cannot escape from the interactional nature of interviews, that the 'data' are collaboratively produced. Whatever ideal the interviewer practices, their talk is central to the trajectory of the interviewee's talk. As such, the 'data' gained in the specific interview begin to emerge *as just one possible version,* a version that is contingent on the specific local interactional context. Had IR in the extracts studied here locally produced himself as 'co-operative and self-disclosing' through talking about his own experience of soft-drug use, a radically different topical trajectory may have been produced. Equally, if he had 'interrogated' Ben about his use of soft-drugs, alternative (moral) versions of his 'thoughts about drugs' may have been produced.

The interview offers a site to view how people locally produce talk-about-a-topic-*in-interviews*. As Mazeland and ten Have (1996) note, interviewees'

> . . . statements can be seen as *part of an overall stance* that the interviewee is trying to bring across. But one should also take the details of the local interactional context – the 'sequential environment' – into account. *It is in response to that* environment, which is continuously rebuilt during the interview, that interview statements have been designed and should be analyzed (p. 32, emphasis added).

So, with my interviews with drug and non-drug users, their answers offer us access to how-people-talk-about-drugs-*in-facilitative-and-neutralisitic-interviews*.

Moving beyond the methodological commitments of conversation analysis, we *could then* also gain a textured picture of how the topic of 'drugs' gets understood and spoken about, some of the discourses, identities, narratives, repertoires or rhetorics *that are available to people* to talk about this specific topic. For example, Ben produces a distinction between softer drugs and harder drugs, and for him softer drugs include both 'cannabis-like' *illegal* drugs and *legal* drugs 'drink and smoking'. This begins to highlight both the possible ways that drugs are categorized-in-practice, and how such categorization work is central to talk-about-drugs-in-interviews. In the context of my 'facilitative and neutral' interview-talk, 'softer drugs' refers to 'drugs I take' and 'harder drugs' 'drugs I don't take'. This can be contrasted with the *other possible ways* that drug-categorization is produced, be it in the context of government reports, newspapers, friend-friend talk or post-interview talk.[8]

Interviewees' talk speaks to *and* emerges from the wider strategies and repertoires available to, and used by, *all* people. A focus on interview-talk as locally accomplished does not deny that interviewees' talk is reflexively

situated in the wider cultural arena (Silverman, 1993). The ways of speaking that are available to talk (and texts) that are engaged in talk about drugs, or other topics, can be highlighted as well as both speakers' negotiations with the broader (moral) social context.

Whatever analytic stance is adopted, extracts from interviews should always be presented in the context in which they occurred, with the question that prompted the talk as well as the talk that follows being offered. In this way, readers can view how the talk is co-constructed in the course of the research and, thereby, judge the reliability of the analysis.

NOTES

1. As one reviewer noted, one of the reasons for this could be that the case has not been made directly and strongly in the sorts of arenas that this work is done in.
2. The theoretical, and hence methodological, perspective advocated in this article stems from a reading of the work of Harvey Sacks (1992). He asked analysts to 'Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. . . . Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they do produce' (Fall 1964: 11). No order of detail should be overlooked. Sacks' work has been developed into the now (separate) fields of conversation analysis (see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999) and membership categorization analysis (see Eglin and Hester, 1992). This article uses the analytic sensitivities advocated in both these fields to think through the question '*how is it that the open-ended interview comes off*' by focusing on the detailed interactional work of *both* speakers. By so doing, we can 'unsettle' some current methodological and theoretical assumptions.
3. They initially treat their data as a *resource*, then switch to *topic*-led concerns, then construct their conclusions from a *resource* perspective. They move from topic and resource concerns and make no concessions, written or analytic, to this movement.
4. Readers may feel that using 'talk-about-drugs' is quite an extreme example, and that 'of course' people will work to account for such a topic, as it is inherently delicate. But we should note that topics of talk are never delicate or sensitive *per se* (Baruch, 1981; Silverman, 1997).
5. Yet this understanding of the interview glosses over a myriad of work that gets done when the speakers produce talk hearable as 'questions' and 'answers'. For example in my data-set, interviewees routinely work to produce themselves as *ordinary, everyday, hence morally-adequate* drug-users and interviewers routinely work to produce themselves as both *neutral* and *facilitatory* types-of-questioners. This identity-work comes off in and through their answers and questions, as well as other actions, such as response tokens ('yeah', 'mm hm') and silence. Also as one reviewer noted, such a gloss only refers to 'traditional' versions of open-ended interviewing. Some types of active interviewing, for example Douglas's (1985) 'Creative Interviewing', or Ellis's (1991) interviews carried out under the rubric of an 'emotional sociology', advocate mutual self-disclosure by interviewer and interviewee. In these cases, interviewers routinely produce talk that is not even minimally a question.
6. Garfinkel's (1967) classic 'demonstrations' exemplify this point. In producing the 'taken-for-granted-as-strange' through repeated requests for specification the 'requester' is held accountable. I also have a personal experience that 'nicely'

demonstrates the point I am raising. On my way to an appointment, for which I was late, I walked past a shop and noticed a friend I had not seen for a long period of time. I entered the shop and started to talk to him, this involved a series of 'rapid fire' questions *from me* on what he 'had been up to'. Partway through the conversation the shop assistant interrupted and said to me (something like) 'easy mate, this ain't an interrogation room/police station'. Whatever the exact words were this example shows how another speaker, in this case the 'overhearing audience', may make someone solely adopting the role of *questioner* accountable.

7. As these interviews were audiotaped I have no available evidence of any 'body' work.

8. When interviews end and, importantly, the tape-recorder is turned off, it is remarkable how different and *often contrasting* 'versions' or 'accounts' get produced. Such post-interview talk is not somehow more 'authentic', it does different work, it emerges from *and* reflexively creates a different context. It can often construct them as a different type of person, 'well *personally* I feel . . .', that with prior talk 'I-was-speaking-in-my-official-capacity'. Importantly it documents that the prior talk was, at some points, *interview-talk,* it was the product of a *specific interactional context.*

APPENDIX

The data have been transcribed according to conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (see 'Transcript Notation' in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

(0.6)	Length of pause measured in tenths of a second.
(.)	Micro-pause, less than two-tenths of a second.
why.	Full stop: falling intonation.
why,	Comma: slightly rising or 'continuing' intonation.
why?	Question mark: rising intonation.
↑why	Arrow: very rapid rise in intonation.
°why°	Degree signs: the volume of talk is less than the surrounding talk.
WHY	Capitals: marked rise in volume.
<u>why</u>	Underlining: speaker's emphasis or stress.
>;why<	Word in > < indicates faster pace than surrounding talk.
<why>	Word in < >indicates slower pace than surrounding talk.
why=because	Equals sign: words are latched, that there is no hearable gap.
w[h y] [bec]ause	Square brackets: onset and offset of overlapping talk.
(why)	Word in brackets: the best possible hearing.
.hh	This indicates an in-breath, without dot, an outbreath.
huh/heh	Laughter.
wh:::y	Colons: sound-stretching.

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