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**Researchers’ Reflections on Interviewing Policy Makers and Practitioners:   
Feeling Conflicted in Critical Research**

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**Introduction**

The idea of a ‘good’ interview has spawned a wealth of literature on the need to close the gap between researcher and participant by building rapport, with the aim of ‘agenda setting’: corralling interviewees’ talk into the interviewer’s terms. In a recent study, however, the authors found their participants’ pre-existing agendas, based on their strong views of the topic under study, were conducive to a ‘good’ interview, in that they exposed a clear link to the roots of the policy discourse we were trying to trace. Yet we experienced feelings of being ‘conflicted’ as the distance between our critical agenda and participants’ support for the discourse became apparent. This conflict is reminiscent of Duncombe and Jessop’s observation that ‘even feminist interviewing [contains] the instrumental purpose of persuading interviewees to provide us with data’ (Duncombe and Jessop 2012:108); an experience familiar to many qualitative researchers engaged in ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983). Indeed, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) point out that feminist debates about ethical practice in the research process have developed from consideration of vulnerable female participants to a broader concern for research relationships in general and all who are affected by them. This article explores the knowledge, and thus power, relations that are characterised by an unspoken discord between the stance of the critical interviewer and the uncritical interviewee. It discusses how these relations can lead to conflicted feelings for researchers, who may be pleased with a pleasant research experience that has provided data but unable to relate to (nor contest) participants’ support for or acquiescence with the discourse.

This article provides a reflective account of these complex power dynamics in a UK-based study, exploring the emotional labour of conflicting agendas in fieldwork for the [project name]. It argues that, while important to reflect on, these experiences were congruent with the project’s critical aims. The core concern of this research was to critically investigate the extent of the power of biologised claims about social disadvantage among practitioners and policy proponents, whose enthusiastic support for the contribution they saw these claims as making to practice resulted in ‘good’ interviews. This article addresses the researchers’ reflections on interviewing participants who were deeply committed to a biologised model that researchers sought to critically interrogate. Building on accounts like Jessop’s – of feeling compromised by appearing to ‘collude with [participants’] views she strongly opposed’ (Duncombe and Jessop 2012:115) – the authors explore their own roles and reflect on the emotional labour of knowledge relations. We begin with an introduction to the aims of the [project name], followed by a review of how issues of knowledge relations and researchers feeling conflicted have been treated in critical research, before discussing our two groups of participants: sincerely committed practitioners and policy proponents who were critically prepared for opposition to the discourse. Ultimately, we argue that the contribution to the broader discourse that arises from such discomfiting research is vital, and our unsettling experiences are a reminder of the value of research that reveals that which is not settled.

**Critiquing Policy Discourse**

Ideas that biological mechanisms underlie personal and societal dysfunctions, and that the quality of parental nurturing and attachment in the first years of a child’s life are formative, are reflected in reports calling for early intervention from across the political spectrum in the UK. This discourse calls for intervention in this supposed window of opportunity early in a child’s life, when synapses are connecting, before it is too late and their brains are hard-wired for anti-social behaviour and failure through poor parenting. Public money is invested in intervention programmes that link the quality of parenting with the architecture of children’s brains (author refs). The argument is that these interventions are a positive step towards social mobility for poor children, breaking cycles of deprived brains and deprived circumstances in families, and indeed generally neuroscience has been associated with a transcendent ‘hopeful ethos’ that challenges neo-liberal rationality (Rose and Abi-Rached 2013).

In our research, we sought to critically assess the ramifications and implications of such claims. We reviewed policy reports championing early intervention programmes, with their assertions of the foundational nature of early experiences. We looked at how such assertions chime with progressive accounts of how neuroscience offers a view of biology as opportunity rather than destiny, where people can optimise their brains for the betterment of society, as well as warnings about over-claiming and misrepresenting brain claims. We interviewed key proponents of early intervention policies and practitioners working in the early years field to interrogate the way that, rather than a progressive initiative, early intervention using brain science claims essentialises mother-child relations, biologises ideas about cycles of deprivation and reproduces classed value judgments about the means of achieving the ‘right sort’ of brain development.

As critical researchers, we were in a position of tension in preparing to critique the foundations of this policy whilst seeking to engage our participants, who were working to implement and/or advocate it. Critical research has been observed to raise dilemmas for feminist researchers who have embraced the ‘participant turn’, with its goal of involving participants more actively (Harding 1987). Of particular note is Harding’s (1987) thesis that ‘studying up’ – researching members of powerful elites – presents challenges to the ideal of maximising participants’ participation in the research process, which is based on a feminist tradition of studying the disempowered. This is most obviously significant when we consider our approach to interviewing high profile proponents of brain-based early intervention but ‘empowering’ research methods were also not appropriate for the practitioners we studied as their roles as healthcare professionals led them to identify more as ‘experts’ whom we were consulting than precariously positioned subjects of the discourse. When presenting our early findings, we were often asked by colleagues if we had interviewed the young mothers targeted by the interventions; implicit in this question is a general concern about practitioners’ power to tell their story of their practice without fear of being contradicted.

The methods used by critical researchers, however, do not necessarily deviate from those of other researchers. For example, critical research may involve qualitative interviewing and therefore require a researcher to be skilled in conducting a ‘good’ interview, including the building of rapport. The added complexity for the critical researcher, as Duncombe and Jessop (2002:107), recalling Hochschild, comment, is that, as with the work of many women who are ‘paid to simulate empathy’, this ‘represents the ‘commercialisation’ of human feeling, and those who do such work run the risk of feeling, and indeed actually becoming, ‘phoney’ and ‘inauthentic’’.It has been argued (Holland 2009; Hubbard et al. 2001) that too little attention has been paid to the emotional effects of the research process on researchers.

Qualitative methods can therefore expose those moments when power dynamics come to the surface. Luff (1999) comments that ‘multi-layered’ power balancing may be revealed where interviewees have a social background or status in common with the interviewer. In critical research, these dynamics produce relations that can be challenging for the researcher. As Luff (1999:696) reflects on her interviews with members of the ‘moral right’ whose ideology she did not agree with, ‘internal dilemmas’ are inevitable when such interviewees treat the interviewer with kindness – giving up their time, engaging with the research with enthusiasm and seeming to enjoy the ‘conversation’.

**Knowledge Relations and feeling Conflicted in Critical Research**

The researcher-participant relationship has, of course, hardly gone untheorised (see Stanley and Wise 1993; Kleinman & Copp 1993; Phoenix 1994; Alldred 1998; Hubbard et al. 2001; Birch and Miller 2012). Feminist researchers in particular have sought to reconcile the values underpinning social research with the flows of power that characterise this relationship and to explore how the ‘participant turn’ is inhabited in the research interview. The concept of participation has therefore become imbued with understandings of both its instrumental purpose as enabling the representation of heterogeneous (or homogeneous) ‘voices’, and its promise of an active collaboration between researcher and researched in the production of knowledge.

A sociological canon of the theory of ethical practice has therefore been established, the tenets of which are upheld by critical sociologists keen to leave no power dynamic uncritiqued as part of a broader ‘emotional turn’ (Lemmings and Brooks 2014). Much of this work has revolved around greater reflexivity in the research process. Stanley and Wise (1993) describe reflexivity as making the position of the researcher explicit. There is a tension, however, between this ‘emotional turn’ and the day-to-day job of conducting research. In particular, turning the spotlight towards the researcher does not sit easily with the methodological ideal of the ‘good’ interview. Furthermore, vital research continues to be conducted with populations for whom researchers should not be expected to feel empathy (Scully and Morolla 1984), let alone engage in co-production. By highlighting the contribution of the researcher’s emotions to the research process, however, we illuminate a broader view of the knowledge relations produced by critical research, and how they might result in conflicted feelings as we appear to compromise or collude with the positions of the researched.

Collins (1998) considers the messy, unpredictable nature of interviews, wherein interviewees are apt to construct their own narrative that has little obvious bearing on interviewer’s questions. Such 'meta-narratives' may then be used to counter or undermine the supposedly unbalanced power relations that are said to come with the territory of interviewing practice. Collins remarks that the

… relationship between interviewer and interviewee is fluid and changing, but is always jointly constructed. It is rarely obvious where the balance of power lies, between the selves precipitated during this relationship. That is, we have (as interviewers) a limited control not only over what is being said but also over who we are during an interview.

Thus the onus is on the interviewer to ensure their performance adequately asserts a level of control that is conducive to their goal of generating knowledge.

In a ‘good’ interview, a sense of understanding between interviewer and interviewee is reached through rapport. Stanley and Wise (1993) describe the research experience as not being ‘special’ and the widespread recognition of rapport exemplifies this. Rapport is perhaps the most popularly understood element of the qualitative interview. Interviewees who are otherwise unfamiliar with sociological research methods will be aware of the presence or absence of rapport between themselves and their interviewer through reference to everyday interactions with other people with whom they feel they have more or less in common. The distinctive nature of rapport as a methodological strategy in the research interview is that it is (partly) the product of conscious *building* by the interviewer with the aim of ‘agenda setting’. Interviewers are therefore skilled creators of this feeling and, as Takhar (2009:35) comments, drawing on Kleinmann and Copp (1993), ‘it is precisely the ‘emotional labour’ of the researcher that goes unnoticed’.

Arguably then, ‘professional’ interviewers are assured of a successful data collection exercise once an interviewee has been corralled to talk in their terms, with the assumption that ending the interview with an audio recorder full of usable quotes is evidence that the interviewee has submitted to the interviewer’s agenda. A focus on the power of the interviewer to set an agenda shields from view those agendas that interviewees might hold and assume their interviewer, with whom they have developed rapport, shares. Such tacit agendas pose a further problem for researchers grappling with Duncombe and Jessop’s (2012:108) reflection that ‘even feminist interviewing [contains] the instrumental purpose of persuading interviewees to provide us with data’; as they demonstrate that this implied power dynamic is more opaque than at first glance. Our analysis further troubles the concept of the power ‘balance’ between interviewer and interviewee by examining the challenge presented by participants whose critical reflection is neutered by their commitment to a particular agenda, leading to misrecognition of, and mis-identification with, the researcher’s stance. Tacit agendas’ tendency to obfuscate the researcher’s power of interpretation illustrates the need to consider carefully even those elements of knowledge relations that appear ‘comfortable’ and free from persuasion. Furthermore, where researchers’ interpretive power is appreciated, and their critical stance understood, powerful interviewees may seek to subvert the interview encounter in various ways.

A focus on the impact of research on a population that the project may not be studying directly, rather than on the immediate effects of fieldwork, is a significant blind spot in research into power dynamics. In particular, preoccupation with interviewees’ general feelings of comfort undermines the nuances of those challenging and revealing moments of which the interview is comprised. As [author ref’s] found, ‘we can use our experience of discomfort in interviews to reveal our expectations and assumptions and to generate an understanding of how they differ from those of the participants’. Stepping back from the conventions of the ‘good’ interview helps us to glimpse interviewees’ ‘room for manoeuvre’ more clearly (Ribbens 1989; Jordan et al. 1994). Affording participants respect as contributors to a dialogue in this way is a step away from the assumption of vulnerability of an approach to power based on a medical model; and it seems especially appropriate when considering research with policy makers and practitioners.

Practitioners who work with the marginalised groups whose lives we, as sociologists, wish to improve, might be seen as having power over their clients. This is acknowledged in their own ethical codes of practice. For our purpose of constructing a critique of the discourse, however, they are objects of the discourse whose actions reveal the extent of hegemony, rather than channel some disconnected personal motivation. Critical research on the effects of social policy often includes work with practitioners and policy makers and yet contemporary concern for ‘empowering’ participants tends to position them simultaneously as the common-sense beneficiaries of research and at risk of exploitation by ruthless researchers. This positioning of participants has tended to eclipse consideration of researchers’ experiences. As [author ref’s] highlight, interviewers’ feelings of discomfort can reveal our assumptions about the ‘good’ interview, our investments in the research and our perceptions of the power relations we are studying. Alldred (1998:162) describes how:

Researchers’ power can be conceptualized as operating through multiple levels: through the hegemonic cultural perspective contained within the language we (must) use; through the subject positions we take up and are positioned within (including our deliberate claims to researcher positions); and through our particular relationships with participants and to our field of enquiry.

Critical researchers have therefore expressed their scepticism of a simplistic approach to power relations that revolves around immediate harm to participants, instead advocating ongoing reflexivity that takes into account the nuances of how both parties are affected by research.

Central to efforts to deconstruct the research relationship, along with a desire not to dominate or misrepresent participants that transcends methodological trends and is associated with ‘integrity’ and ‘rigour’, is the idea that participants’ labour should be acknowledged and rewarded in kind. Rather than merely guarding against harm to participants then, their involvement should ideally include ‘what’s in it for them’ or at least be off-set by a gesture of labour from the researcher. The difficulties of escaping ‘outsider’ status in order to promote this exchange of labour have been reflected upon by Birch and Miller (2012) and the use of a reward to entice participation presents an ethical problem of coercion and risks devaluing the research. As critical researchers considering ‘what’s in it for them’, however, we have acknowledged the question of why people participate in research at all and begun to admit that, despite thorough methodological planning, this is not entirely within the control of the researcher. Perhaps the most obvious barrier to the synchronisation of researchers’ and participants’ objectives is the much-discussed idea of informed consent. Informed consent is one of the bedrocks of the formal ethical approval process and yet there is little agreement about how the concept of research participants’ voluntarism might be defined, let alone recorded and legislated for (Mamotte and Wassenaar 2015). Whatever efforts are made to ‘inform’ their motivations to volunteer into alignment with researchers’ expectations, participants will interpret the consent form and accompanying information based on their particular experiences and insert their own common-sense ideas about why the research is being done and why their involvement is important. They may even comprehend the research agenda as one they disagree with but agree to participate in order to subvert or challenge this agenda directly.

Despite researchers’ best efforts to explain their interpretive role at the stage of data analysis, participants’ appreciation of a critical motivation may be stymied by their commitment to an uncritical agenda. If they are told that the research is to benefit their field then they should reasonably expect this to be the case, otherwise one of the fundamental principles of research ethics would not have been observed: they would have been deceived. They may not consider, however, that the researcher’s view of outcomes that will ultimately benefit the field may not be commensurate with their own. Researchers who seek to critically analyse the effects of policy through enquiry into practice are, of course, aware of this and engage in approaches that are not wholly transparent but include elements of ‘holding back’ that Ahmed (2010) concedes may be construed as ‘deception’.

Ahmed’s reasons for ‘not telling it like it is’ through ‘silences and secrecy’ (2010:97) included what she described as a need to down-play her position as part of an establishment (academic psychology) that was seen to contribute to the problems she sought to research (stereotypes about the mental health of South Asian women). As a critical psychologist, Ahmed experienced difficulty in distancing her own stance from the discourse she sought to critique, as well as in explaining the positive impact she hoped to achieve through being ‘critical’, which was seen simply as negative. In line with fundamental precursors to rapport and ‘good’ practice of securing access to participants, Ahmed found herself ‘talking about my research and my approach to it in very simplistic terms, not fully disclosing what I actually did in terms of the ‘critical’ approach I was taking’ (2010:99).

This is a conflict Phoenix (1994:57) identifies as resulting from feminist tendencies to view interviewing as assuming a ‘cosiness’ as the agendas of the researcher and the researched are shared. Phoenix argues that interviewees’ disclosure of views that counter those of the interviewer is generally in line with the goals of research and therefore ‘manageable’ rather than ‘upsetting’ for the researcher – but this manageability depends on a balance between good rapport and becoming too deeply ‘involved’ in the research relationship. In Luff’s research on the ‘moral right’, she sympathised with Klatch’s (1987:18) ‘delicate balancing act between building trust and gaining acceptance while not misrepresenting my own position’. Luff (1999:698) relates her experiences of being attentive to her interviewees, ‘nodding’ and receiving views she strongly disagreed with with ‘ums’ or saying ‘I see’. While she testifies to the methodological validity of this practice as part of research that seeks to engage seriously with the view it critiques, Luff speaks of her ‘discomfort’ and the ‘difficult’ feelings researchers are confronted with on a personal level.

Weller (2009) reflects on feeling her emotions were ‘silenced’ during fieldwork and Takhar (2009:35) speaks of feeling ‘suffocated’ as she ‘covered up’ her reactions to conservative Muslim women’s attitudes to western women ‘provoking’ rape. Takhar found her identity as a South Asian woman had led her interviewees to feel comfortable making such disclosures, which again alerts the critical researcher to the role of assumed common ground in setting the scene of interview rapport and how the knowledge relations this rapport produces can take its toll on researchers’ emotions.

Furthermore, David (2001) highlights the threat to the integrity of research when agendas are at risk of being ‘hijacked’. Her research on sex education in schools highlighted overlapping agendas seeking to promote the topic and the danger of becoming assimilated into a narrow discourse of (unequivocally problematic) teenage pregnancy, with its attendant need to focus on (and police) heterosexual behaviour. [author ref’s] also reflect on the hazard of inadvertently reinforcing a dominant policy agenda when questioning discourse around parental involvement in education. Teachers’ appropriation of the study to augment dominant messages about the need to increase involvement demonstrates an inherent risk in all research that attempts to challenge a discourse by engaging with it. Thus, researchers are faced with a very real need to protect their work from a form of ethical abuse. Such tacit agendas threaten to latch on to even expressly critical research as researchers must simultaneously navigate, resist and use the discourse they critique.

Tensions between researchers’ ‘success’ in navigating their relationships with research participants to produce findings that are recognisable as desired outcomes, and their ability to protect themselves from uncomfortable emotional responses, have therefore been considered in a variety of contexts. Such tensions might even be seen as characterising the emotional labour of feminist interviewing. In the following sections we reflect on our experiences of feeling conflicted in our research with the two different types of interviewee. We have anonymised practitioners but we name the high profile advocates of using brain science in early intervention policy and practice as their positions make them reasonably identifiable and they consented to ‘on the record’ interviews. We interviewed 17 practitioners between December 2012 and August 2013, and 5 advocates between January and May 2013.

**Researching the Sincerely Committed**

We began the research process for the [project name] by contacting the gatekeepers for our potential interviewees. For the practitioners, there were several layers of authority that approved engagement with the research in turn. We first approached the national office of the parenting programme, which provided its assent and the contact details of some of the practices. We then contacted with second layer of gatekeepers, the managers of the parenting programmes, at the same time as the aides of key policy proponents. The managers also gave interviews and in one case a policy maker’s adviser also contributed to his interview.

The programme managers were very helpful and responsive, considering their busy workload, as we communicated by telephone and email to arrange our preliminary visits to their practices. As approval from the central office had already been granted, they expressed no reservations and without much delay, we visited the first practice, to be greeted by the team of practitioners who had extended their weekly meeting to accommodate us. We gave them a brief introduction to the project and distributed leaflets that outlined what their participation would involve, thus stating our agenda without explicitly referring to our critical stance. All agreed to be interviewed and one, who was working her notice period, immediately initiated arrangements for her interview so that we would be able to include her before she left for a new job. The others were asked to contact us if they wished to participate and, with co-ordination from the manager, we scheduled the majority of interviews for two days that would be most convenient for us to visit the location of the practice. On returning to interview the participants, a suitably private room had been booked and tea and biscuits were laid on for our refreshment. We felt welcomed and all the staff at the practice were friendly and forthcoming.

We were aware that the questions we were going to ask might puncture this convivial atmosphere. We had approached these interviews with the hope that our planning, methodological tools and interviewing skills would produce ‘good’ interviews in which we developed rapport with participants and effectively set the agenda so that participants knew what we wanted them to talk about and obliged us with candid answers. In particular, we hoped that we judged the tone of the interview well enough that the later questions that encouraged participants to reflect critically on the foundations of their practice were received as a genuine opportunity to consider the effect of a biological turn from their position of insight into past and future practice. We had crafted these questions carefully so that they would not unsettle the comfortable rapport that would give participants confidence in their contribution to the project, which would allow them to express any reservations they had about the assumptions guiding their practice. Our goal was to open up a critical space for them to explore their experiences and views of their practice, which would inform our critique of policy.

We entered into the interviews well-versed in the policy context at the time, which was one of cross-party support for the rolling out of intensive parenting programmes in areas of disadvantage. This was to tackle a supposed spectrum of parenting deficit, running from severe neglect to sub-optimal levels of attachment and stimulation, which was said to lay the foundations for numerous social ills. We knew that the neurological evidence bases for these programmes were a key selling point for their political advocates but they were more deeply embedded in their approaches than we had been aware before talking to practitioners. We asked the practitioners about their day-to-day work, the knowledge base that informed it and specifically the emergence of training on the significance of brain science to children’s early years development. We were typically offered examples of the influence of brain science on practice unprompted. We then asked practitioners to consider the implications of adopting a biological perspective and whether they thought there were any limitations to, or concerns about, its use.

In the event, we found participants were so forthcoming about the ways in which early intervention brain science ‘evidence’ informed their practice that our preparations for ‘agenda setting’ were redundant. Examples of elements of the brain science narrative that until now we had seen only in policy documents were being overtly woven in to their everyday work with young mothers and featured heavily in their accounts: ‘[There’s the] worry about leaving the babies to cry because of all this stuff about cortisol damaging the brain, so that does also influence. You want to give out safe evidence-based practice’ (Health Visitor 1, 22.7.13). When we asked them to reflect on how brain science had changed their working approach, few were completely clear what this knowledge contributed beyond a broad validation of already existing ideas, but neuroscience was seen as offering clarity and removing doubt as well making a convincing case for continued funding: ‘We have to be clear that what we’re doing *works* and there’s a reason for what we’re doing so we have to justify it hugely so it’s [got to be] absolutely clear that this early period makes a huge impact to people’s whole lives’ (Family Nurse Partnership Supervisor). Its transformative potential was chiefly regarded as being realised through the confirmation of instincts and the strengthening of resolve to make more robust interventions. There was then little incentive to critically interrogate a policy agenda that shored up their professional status and helped them succeed in relating key messages to the clients they sought to help. Our experience at the second parenting programme we visited was almost identical. These participants were confident that they were speaking not from an isolated personal perspective but were bolstered by the overwhelming support their programme had shown for the dominant policy discourse.

Their training included regular nationwide events where new brain-based ‘evidence’ was shared. The important role practitioners were given in contributing to national consultations and their regular briefing on the latest scientific evidence were emphasised to us. It is possible this style of practice even provided a common-sense rationale for participants’ ‘sharing’ of their experiences with us as a way to promote the programme. ‘Good’ interviews were easily achieved as they were eager to provide examples of the impact of policy on their practice, often conveyed with evangelical enthusiasm. As one practitioner explained:

I knew physical violence was dangerous, but I hadn’t thought of stress as being dangerous prior to that training. And when I realised what … the mother’s cortisol levels would do to the baby, specifically the baby’s brain, [it] made me think no actually it’s not about keeping a baby once their born safe, it’s how do we antenatally keep this baby safe.

It was clear that the practitioners were committed individuals with a sincere belief in the capacity of their work to transform families’ lives. Most of the practitioners we spoke to had experience of a similar but less well-resourced role and deliberately sought out a job with the programme because of the intensive support it enabled them to provide. We were impressed by our participants’ commitment to their clients and to the general cause of helping struggling families but we were keenly aware that the cost of the service was subscription to ideas of biological determinism that could ultimately be profoundly damaging for families.

For the next stage of our fieldwork, in which we interviewed other key practitioners at children’s centres, we were relieved to be able easily to generate a snowball sample as the parenting programme managers spontaneously suggested contacts and provided phone numbers and email addresses, which would have been difficult to obtain otherwise. These practitioners, less closely entangled in the strong brain science discourse of early intervention policy, were nevertheless enthusiastic about the explanatory potential of brain science and felt they should learn more about its possible applications to their work. We found their support for the rhetoric they had thus far come into contact with to be in line with the responses of the parenting practitioners to the suggestion that all professionals working with children should receive specialist neuroscience training: they agreed that they were missing out on important knowledge without this training. Certainly, there was no greater inclination to take a critical view of the discourse from these practitioners who were positioned more towards the edge of it and so our conflicted feelings continued.

Being confronted with participants who were so comfortable relating their support for a discourse we aimed to critique made us uncomfortable. We found ourselves offering increasing prompts after questions about limitations of and concerns about the discourse. We were aware of the power we held to interpret the data they were providing and felt compelled to encourage their consideration of a more critical agenda. We reflected on our interviewing styles and became increasingly wary of offering any cues that might be construed as a specific endorsement of *the talk* as ‘what we want to hear’, rather than a general encouragement *to talk*, as ‘wanting to hear’ their views. We considered whether the interviews’ explicit opportunities for critique were undermined by their position towards the end of the interview, which might suggest those questions were less important or could be abandoned if time ran out.

However, our heightened awareness of participants’ reluctance to criticise the evidence base did not result in more critical interviews. It seemed to be the case that interviewees were not supplying us with ‘what we wanted to hear’ effected by some faulty methodological device, they were telling us how they genuinely felt based on their knowledge and experience. We had opened up a critical space but they could not step into it. A biologised approach to parenting was seen to serve both their needs as practitioners and those of their clients as struggling parents. This belief was strongly held and expressed to us not because we had unwittingly colluded in this agenda and underplayed the critical but because our participants rejected the idea of critique. It is nonetheless insightful to reflect on the knowledge relations common to critical research, which present researchers with conflicted feelings.

Despite one of us often being asked by participants if she had experience of social work and if she had children of her own (no on both counts), there were many aspects of commonality on which rapport was built. As Phoenix (1994) has suggested, the effects on interview power dynamics of gender, ethnicity, class, age and assumptions about sexuality may be impossible to attribute to these separate variables, as they are all acting upon the relationship at the same time. Although some of these effects may be glimpsed in moments of tacit identification – as in Takhar’s (2009) participants’ disclosures that would not be shared with a ‘western’ woman or the ‘covering up’ of a sexual identity that a participant is discussing in the abstract – the mix of identities that mark the researcher as more or less different from the researched allows the participant to make an unspoken judgement on whether a *critical mass* of commonality exists to cultivate a level of trust that will allow for the sharing of their views on a variety of topics. In this way, the general ‘warmth’ of the interview, as analysed by Luff (1999), renders invisible what we, as critical researchers, consider an insurmountable difference of views. This may be uncomfortable for the researcher aware of her role in the ‘political’ activity of interpretation (Maynard and Purvis 1994) but if we have facilitated a comfortable journey towards a critical space for our participants and they have demonstrated their lack of desire to go any further, we should value the significance of this finding.

**Researching the Critically Prepared**

The second set of interviews we conducted were with politicians/policy makers and the head of an influential charity, who were all high profile advocates of the use of brain science in early intervention policy. These interviews took on a different tone from those with practitioners and each was characterised by the particular relationship produced by the interviewee’s attitude to the research. The interview with Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA and former Downing Street advisor, was conducted by phone. Interviews with Members of Parliament Frank Field and Andrea Leadsom were conducted in Portcullis House and the interview with the Chief Executive of Kids Company children’s charity, Camila Batmanghelidjh, was conducted in her office at the charity’s head office.

The phone interview with Taylor, while affording quite a different relationship from the face-to-face interviews with practitioners who had cleared time in their schedules to accommodate our visits to their practice, demonstrated a form of engagement with our critical agenda. From the start of the interview, he declared his intention to contest the ‘hypothesis’ that neuroscience had driven forward the early intervention policy agenda. He set the scene for his engagement with the research by not meeting in person and making it clear that he could only afford us a brief time slot for the call, and went on diminish the importance of our area of policy research as not a priority for him, beginning the interview by saying he was only talking to us ‘because you wanted to talk to me’. He then launched into a forceful monologue based on his impressions of the project. Towards the end of the interview he said:

... it’s up to you. You know you’re doing this piece of work. You can go down the kind of Institute of Ideas route which is to pore over speeches, government documents, politicians and find plenty of insolicitous quotes, little bits of not very well written research, boosterism by Americans who write books which kind of, umm, you know, rather wide-eyed, oh, you know, “brain research proves”. You can find plenty of that stuff. But you can find plenty of that stuff in any discipline. And if you are seriously examining the degree to which neuroscience qua neuroscience drives major policy decisions in and of itself and is a kind of trump card which people can play in policy choices, my genuine – and I’ve got no axe to grind here – my genuine assertion to you is that there isn’t a great deal to support that hypothesis (24.1.13).

Here, the interviewee makes clear his agenda of undermining his notion of the study’s aims by demonstrating his understanding of what he supposed were our plans for the research and asserting that they were not worthwhile. Aware of his direct style of contesting what he described as our ‘hypothesis’, he ended the interview with:

I’m sorry to have been kind of hectoring but I kind of – I don’t want you to go down a route that I think has been well-trodden by other people and it hasn’t really added a great deal (24.1.13).

This quote suggests he was cognisant of disrupting the harmony of expected rapport and the convention of the interviewer’s agenda setting, but doing so had of course been his intention in agreeing to the interview in the first place.

Another instance of our agenda being subverted was in the interview with the head of Kids Company, Camila Batmanghelidjh. After a providing a brief explanation of the project, an interview was swiftly granted and an appointment was made for one of us, Val, to attend the Head Office of Kids Company. She arrived promptly and as she waited for some considerable time in the reception she began to wonder if the charity CEO was reconsidering her participation in the research. A simple internet search would have revealed the critical focus of the project through the biographies and previous publications of the researchers. Eventually a friendly, smiling Kids Company worker appeared to offer Val a tour of the building to fill the time until Batmanghelidjh was available. The worker was a passionate and articulate advocate of the work done by the charity and carefully detailed the work that was co-ordinated from the building. Val was introduced to young people who had been helped by Kids Company and shown art work produced by children in need of their services. After another long wait in an adjoining room Val was shown into the CEOs office and greeted warmly by Batmanghelidjh, who asked to be reminded what the project was about. Upon hearing the aim was to explore the influence of brain science on early years policy and practice she commented that such ideas should be ‘taken with a pinch of salt’. This was an unexpected start to an interview with a vocal proponent of using neuroscience to inform the service needs of disadvantaged children. Although Batmanghelidjh was reflexive and generous with her time the interview was marked by an unsettling tension between an assertion of the empirical veracity of particular brain science claims in relation to early years development and an emphasis placed on the strategic, persuasive function of scientific rhetoric. Towards the end of the interview Batmanghelidjh asked ‘So you’re all writing the anti-neuroscience paper, are you?’ In response to Val’s flustered attempts to clarify our concerns she replied ‘yes, you have to be so careful about that. I argue that all the time. I argue with politicians about that all the time. I’m actually one of those people that says don’t do that’. While this shared scepticism smoothed a path to consensus it was experienced as a defensive unbalancing of the interview agenda.

The two interviews with members of Parliament both took place at Portcullis House, Westminster and on both occasions the politicians were accompanied by their researchers, who also contributed to the interviews. They therefore represented a fundamental change from the two-person relationship as the familiar dynamic, through which an interviewee is encouraged to engage with the agenda, is broken by the presence of an observer. The issue of the interview setting was obviously brought about by a pragmatic need to accommodate the MPs’ busy schedules. Unlike the interviews with practitioners, it was not a setting that comfortably accommodated the interviewer. In particular, the meeting with Andrea Leadsom brought up specific challenges, as fieldwork notes show:

*There are some difficult conditions for this interview. First, A wanted to sit in the café at Portcullis House for the interview, which is in a large, noisy atrium and made hearing the recording hard work. Second, she was wary of being recorded and wanted to know why. I explained that I wouldn’t remember all she said. She agreed that I could record the interview on the basis that any quotes would be run past her* (27.5.13).

These rather more demanding conditions show how the policy proponents were more cautious of our agenda – and how they used tools to protect their agenda from conflict – than the practitioners. In the case of Frank Field, his researcher was drawn on as a resource in the interview, to provide a buffer for questions he seemed to want to avoid providing absolute answers to. It has been documented that politicians are wont to subvert researchers’ agendas (Kogan 1994). Ross’ (2010) research on Australian politicians also found that the ‘placing’ of the researcher in a setting where she had to compete for the interviewee’s attention was a literal and figurative attempt to ‘put her in her place’. Ross then experienced subtle enquiries into her agenda and planned ‘use’ of the data. On more than one occasion, her participants used their own devices to record interviews. For Ross, each of these acts chipped away at her ‘sense of self as a professional’ (Ross 2010:162), a finding echoed by Hubbard et al. (2001). Such experiences reveal something of a paradox for the professional interviewer. Placing our own feelings in the background in order to focus on the words, thoughts and feelings of the interviewee is the fundamental base from which we must conduct interviews in order to be sure that it is the *interviewee’s* contribution that we will later analyse. If we appreciate this basic tenet then we must concede that we participate in the practice of collusion with the discourses we critique, rather than a practice of challenging the discourse within the interview context. This is what defines the research interview as an entirely separate endeavour from lobbying or activism, which we might do in other contexts but which are not contained within the role of researcher.

Researching those with a high degree of critical literacy makes for a more bounded, less fluid interview experience. Their assured commitment to their agenda and knowledge of alternative positions allows them to acknowledge and confront the agenda of the researcher, either directly or indirectly through putting up ‘defences’ to deflect probing questions. This is an interesting contrast to research with participants who did not step outside of their sincere commitment to the discourse. That all these interviews were part of the same project, with the same agenda of critiquing the evidence base of the policy itself, helps to put our feelings of guilt and collusion in accepting the kindness of the practitioners in perspective. Indeed, far from representing a ‘warning’ that research has strayed into an ethical grey area, Holland (2009) cites an increased awareness of emotions in the research process as one of feminism’s key contributions to qualitative methods. It is then inevitable that greater emotional vigilance and reflexivity will lead to keener feelings of discomfort for researchers studying areas of complex power relations. It for this reason that Pillow (2003:177) advocates that reflexivity should not be situated as ‘a confessional act, a cure for what ails us, or a practice that renders familiarity, but rather to situate practices of reflexivity as critical to exposing the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar’. Similarly, Josselson (1996) advocates an acceptance that some worthwhile research must be carried out ‘in anguish’. Indeed, we would argue that the strength of our feelings of unfamiliarity and discomfort in our relations with our participants is what compels us to maintain that our critique of this discourse is valuable. The absence of the ‘cosiness’ that Phoenix (1994) describes should reassure researchers that their work is making a valid contribution to the practice of critical research, which, by its very nature, looks to disrupt adherence to an idea that has previously gone comfortably unchallenged.

**Conclusion**

Both sets of interviews discussed above were carried out in order to further knowledge of the dominance of a hegemonic discourse in a particular policy field and to examine how it is constituted, negotiated and (potentially at least) challenged by those advocating and delivering early intervention. Through this research we uncovered both sincere commitment to, and critical preparedness to defend, the discourse at different levels of policy delivery. Both these positions made us feel conflicted as our commitment to a critique of the discourse jarred with the realisation that this critique would necessitate the narration of a policy story in which the characters of our participants would feature. Critical research appears especially hazardous in this analysis but really it underscores a risk inherent in all social research. Personal experience is compelling and we must be wary of going beyond sympathetic treatment to valorise participants as a ‘payment in kind’ for their participation; rather we should respect their position by accepting it as valid and worthy of informing our critique and ongoing debate. As Gill (2007:78) advocates, we adopt a position of *critical respect* involving ‘attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate’. Of course, conducting interviews is one small part the research process, which in turn is one small piece of the puzzle of the work of sociological thought to improve our understanding of the social world. Whatever our work outside the role of interviewer, there is good reason to isolate these brief relationships from our feelings of obligation to ‘speak truth to power’, challenge misinformation or just air our own stifled views. We should – paradoxically – take comfort from our conflicted feelings, which indicate that our work has located some of the disputed territory of sociological debate and is working to map out its contours.

Reflecting on this study gives a sense of perspective from which to appreciate our position as researchers in relation to the forms of power with which we must engage at each stage of the research process. This more nuanced view can help us to avoid the temptation to over-compensate when we feel we have ‘too much’ power. Shifting our focus from the effect we have on participants – towards a broader view of the ongoing discourse in which we and our participants are entangled, were before we made contact and will remain – helps to guard against the risk of losing our balance in power relations, a fear that might paralyse vital research.

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