REVIEWING CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Abstract

In this article, we consider challenges for the existence and practice of qualitative research interviews. We review key features of qualitative interviewing, in particular the debate over the radical critique of interviewing and the nature of the data it generates, to set the scene for our main arguments about the current standing and future prognosis for the method of generating data and the technologies that enable this. We look at qualitative interviewing in the context of the political project of neo-liberalism and the regime of austerity associated with it, and the linked turn to what is known as ‘big data’, a feature of digital technological developments in garnering data. Qualitative researchers using interview methods have been creative in working with and resisting features of neoliberal austerity pragmatically and politically, and we provide some examples. We also consider an epistemological challenge and resistance from outside of the dominant framework – interviewing in indigenous methodologies. The article argues that it is the relationship between the interview as a method of data generation for research and the ways of knowing about the world, that is the epistemology that the interview-based research proceeds from. that is crucial in considering the potentials for the method’s practice.

KEYWORDS; epistemology; neo-liberal context; qualitative interviews; radical critique; resistors

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Introduction

Our stepping off point for this discussion is our book on *What is Qualitative Interviewing?* (Edwards and Holland 2013). The book is part of a ‘what is’ and ‘how to’ research methods series. As well as covering enduring issues around asking and listening, and power dynamics in undertaking qualitative interviews, we were also tasked by the series editor to think about challenges for the future. A relatively short time ago and we could confidently conclude:

This book is based on an understanding of the value and importance of qualitative interviews to social scientific understanding of social events and interactions in context in the social world … We hope to have brought encouragement to the aspiring qualitative interviewer that the method still has considerable mileage and much to offer social research but that we must, as in our interviews, be flexible and responsive to the increasing challenges that confront us in the changing social and research environment. (Edwards and Holland 2013: 89/97)

This was our positive take on the future of qualitative interview research.

Here we reconsider our assessment for a more nuanced view. Indeed, dark clouds loomed even a decade back. Mike Savage and Roger Burrows warned about the implications of ‘knowing capitalism’ – where a proliferation of social transactional data was being collected, processed and analysed by public and private institutions way beyond the resources and reach of academic researchers:

… a world inundated with complex processes of social and cultural digitization; a world in which commercial forces predominate; a world in which we, as sociologists, are losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of ‘the social’ as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous. (2009: 763)

In a pair of pieces (2007; 2009), Savage and Burrows suggested that the in-depth interview and other basic methods of sociological research, were becoming increasingly dated and unlikely to serve social research well in the future. They called for social researchers to take up the transactional and technological challenge posed.

In this article, we consider this and related challenges for the existence and practice of qualitative interviews. We review key features of qualitative interviewing, in particular the debate over the radical critique of interviewing and the nature of the data it generates, to set the scene for our main arguments about the current standing and future prognosis for the method of generating data and the technologies that enable this. We look at qualitative interviewing in the context of the political project of neo-liberalism and the regime of austerity associated with it, and the linked turn to what is known as ‘big data’, a feature of digital technological developments in garnering data. Qualitative researchers using interview methods have been creative in working with and resisting features of neoliberal austerity pragmatically and politically, and we provide some examples. We also consider an epistemological challenge and resistance from outside of the dominant framework – interviewing in indigenous methodologies. The article argues that it is the relationship between the interview as a method of data generation for research and the ways of knowing about the world, that is the epistemology that the interview-based research proceeds from, that is crucial in considering the potentials for the method’s practice.

Qualitative interviewing – the nature of the data

The interview is probably the most widely used methodological and research tool in social science; it is a staple of qualitative research. It is a central data generating resource used across the whole range of disciplinary fields. For some the interview has become a method that now is relied upon excessively by qualitative researchers. Indeed, several commentators have argued that interviewing is feature of an ‘interview society’, not simply a method of social research but a pervasive cultural phenomenon in its own right, evident in all forms of media and psy professions (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Whitaker and Atkinson 2019; Silverman 2017). They pose this ubiquity as a danger for social research robustness, where researchers deploying interviews merely reiterate the cultural preoccupations of the wider milieu in which they operate.

There are variations in style and tradition of qualitative interviews, and Uwe Flick (2019) states that talking to people now is based on diversifying forms of research interviews, including semi-structured, narrative, reflective, episodic, and expert. Within this diversity, Jennifer Mason (2018) has argued that all qualitative interviewing has several main features. There is an interactional exchange of dialogue, between two or more participants, in face-to-face or remote contexts, which is likely to have a relatively informal tone. There is a thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach, with topics or starting points for discussion covered flexibly in a fluid structure that allows for unexpected issues to emerge. And finally, qualitative interviewing involves an understanding of knowledge as situated in its particular context; the knowledge produced through interviews is situated within and founded upon the meanings and understandings that are constructed or reconstructed in the interview interaction (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015).

Mason’s last point, that interviews are a social encounter, is a feature of what has been referred to as ‘the radical critique’ of interviews as a social research method and the nature of the data they produce. Notably Paul Atkinson and David Silverman (together, separately and with others: Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Silverman 2017; Whitaker and Atkinson 2019) have argued that interviews have become the dominant and unthinking method of choice in qualitative studies, with an assumption that these data generating encounters somehow give access to the authentic interior of social actors’ motivations, experiences, perceptions, attitudes and feelings. Rather, they argue, interviews are performed constructions. Interviewees are accounting for, constructing and warranting, in social research interviews, and thus, for robustness, the content of interviews should be analysed as such.

In response, Martyn Hammersley (2017) argues that a constructionist stance towards the social world that treats reality as variable meaning developed in interaction, underpins this critique and that it is excessive. He proposes that a naturalistic framework that understands social phenomena as having a distinct existence, can both take account of interviews as performance and treat interview testimony as knowledge from which researchers can draw inferences about research participants’ beliefs and experiences, and make causal claims in the broad sense. Arguably one reason why qualitative interviewing is valued and has not (yet) been thrown into the dustbin of history is aligned with the naturalistic framework. Alongside her stance that interviews are constructed interactions, Mason (2002: 1) has also suggested that they enable researchers to explore:

… the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate.

The method can provide depth and detail to the more general picture/viewpoint offered by quantitative social data, and can provide a way into uncovering complex processes of causality. On this basis, there is recognition of the value and relevance of a method that can give ‘authentic’ insight into the meanings that individuals and groups attach to experiences, social processes, practices, and events, for example by policy and practice decision makers in various areas, including welfare, health and education.

The debate around the radical critique of interviews points to the importance for any social research, including interview-based, of the philosophical and epistemological approach taken. Different epistemologies offer different specifications on what constitutes legitimate knowledge and what criteria can be used to establish that knowledge as valid. So for the researcher, their approach provides an understanding of what counts as knowledge and rules that specify how to go about producing acceptable knowledge. As we have seen in the radical critique debate, for constructionists knowledge cannot be taken out of its context, as situated in the interview interaction between the researcher and interviewee. For those adopting a more naturalistic framework, however, it is acceptable to view knowledge as separate from the context of its production through an interview; as directly related to the interviewee’s experiences and understandings.

We return to other challenges around the dominant epistemological framework within which interviewing is undertaken at various points in the rest of this article, in particular when we consider Indigenous approaches. Initially we address changing technologies and how these shape how we understand, conduct and analyse interviews, another facet of the background world of digitisation that Savage and Burrows consider in relation to the challenge of social transactional data generation.

Changing technologies and interviews

As several commentators have noted, technological advances are often catalysts for changes in qualitative methodology generally (Markle et al. 2011; Wiles et al. 2011). The practice of qualitative interviews has always been shaped by available technology. Ray Lee (2004: 49) comments that as technologies develop, so do the means of recording qualitative interviews – from pen and paper notes and as close to verbatim as possible quotes written up from memory after the interview (for an example see Edwards and Gillies, 2013: 26), the development of bulky reel-to-reel tape recorders that were just about portable in the 1950s, to the portable cassette recorders of the 1970s, followed by digital audio and video recorders that have become progressively lighter and smaller.

Stimulated by the ‘death’ of his own device, when his tape recorder irretrievably stopped functioning, Les Back has mused on the pros and cons of the audio recorder as the main tool of qualitative data capture, and the recording of interviews as both enabling and limiting:

Enabling in the sense that it allowed for the voices of people to be faithfully transcribed with accuracy. Paradoxically, the fact that the recorder captured the voice and the precise detail of what informants said meant that social researchers have become less attentive as observers. (2010: 23/24)

The issue that Back raises then is whether a tool that registers interview participants’ spoken words verbatim and allows them to be listened to again and again after the actual interview event confines the researcher through confusing socially shaped accounts with authentic truth. Similarly there are some tensions about what CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) means for conceptions of the nature of interviews as they become ‘fixed’ as fact in electronic files, and exist as a reality outside of the situated temporal and spatial context of their production, potentially available as a product independent of the people and their interaction (e.g. Séror 2005). For others, technologies of recording allow for the production of an audit trail, sharing textual and visual interview data with others so that they can audit the accuracy and authenticity of the original researchers’ analysis and findings (Markle et al. 2011). Such views return us to the radical critique of interviews and debates about constructionist or naturalistic frameworks that we discussed above.

The technology of computer-mediated communication also reshapes the practice of interviewing and understanding of the nature of interviews. Online interviewing, either synchronously (speaking together in the same moment of time) or asynchronously (with time lags in the conversation as in email exchanges) enables researchers to transcend the boundaries of time and space, and reach beyond the physical constraints of face-to-face contact. On the one hand, this method is seen as providing access to those who are in hard to reach locations or otherwise difficult contexts, while on the other, it is subject to inequalities of computer and internet access and expertise. Nonetheless, the use of online communication has grown to be seen as an integral part of the social science methods toolbox (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Lo Iacono et al. 2016; Weller, 2017).

As with face to face and telephone interviews, constantly developing communication software can provide access to potential participants and enable conversations amongst individuals and groups. Assessments of computer-mediated communication in social research have emphasised the technical and cost efficiency advantages. Nonetheless, potential disadvantages and issues have also been highlighted, which have resonance with the critique of interviewing debate. There are concerns about the way that interviewing online can cut across the visual cues and emotional signals between researchers and subjects that are picked up on in face-to-face interview interactions, the lack of contextualising data of the participants’ location, the authenticity of experiences and identity claims, issues about the basis for and flows of power, and challenges for research ethics and governance (Hine 2001; James and Busher 2006; Weller 2017).

Consideration of the pros and cons of the technologies and substance of different forms of interviewing in discussions of empirical projects tend to show the complexity of this issue, dependent on context. While face-to-face interviews may still be considered the ‘gold standard’, said to afford ‘thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency’, Ruth Rettie argues that mediated exchanges are not technologically determined but shaped by interactional norms (2009: 422). Susie Weller agrees, though notes the importance of efficiently functioning technology to the playing out of interactional norms. In a qualitative longitudinal study that followed 50-odd young people for a decade, documenting their individual and family biographies over time, Weller was initially co-present, but towards the end of the period used Skype or FaceTime to interview her participants. She focused on the effect of her lack of presence on comparative rapport with this group of known young people and suggested that:

Rather than physical, it was visible co-presence, or the feeling of temporal and emotional connection brought about the use of (good quality) video telephony, that was salient in determining the richness of interaction. (Weller, 2017: 623)

Weller noted that physical separation can facilitate a greater (emotional) connection through participants’ increased sense of ease with the setting and mode.

Graham Gibbs and colleagues (2002) assert that, while the use of technology to record interview sessions makes it easier for researchers to keep a record of the encounter, there are other consequences. Effort shifts to the transcribers who turn the audio recording into text, which then has implications for the researchers’ closeness to or distance from the data. It also reshapes the relationship between the data and the researchers’ emerging analytic ideas, with new possibilities for thinking about how analysis develops out of and is supported by data. Forms of analysis that can only be undertaken on accurate records of talk are enabled, with a focus on small scale and minute content and characteristics of speech. Larger scale qualitative interview studies become feasible as does the involvement of multiple researchers to analyse the data.

Building on our discussion we turn now to examine the wider contemporary context for the interview method and for qualitative research generally, which can create some critical tensions into the future. We address three interlinked challenges: neo-liberalism, austerity and big data. Together these can amount to a marginalising of research based on qualitative interviews, despite arguments about the strengths and insights for policy and practice.

Neoliberalism and austerity

Neo-liberalism is a highly diversified set of features, impacts and outcomes that reflect the specific variations but connected, versions of scholarship, ideology, policy and practice underpinning its discussion (Fine and Saad-Filho 2017). The broad feature worked with here refers to a particular economic and social view of what is useful, with financialisation as rationale and value being prevalent in contemporary capitalism. Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho (2017) note that the economic and social reproduction of neoliberalism is attached to material cultures of everyday life – in the case of our discussion here, the everyday context of social research interviews. The techniques and values of accountancy are a central organising principle of neoliberal conceptualisation of human conduct and corporate life, and are transported into the language and conduct of research (Denzin and Gardina 2017).

As a system of thought, neoliberalism permeates and connects to all aspects of research life (Cheek 2017; Koro-Ljunberg et al. 2017). The neoliberal proposal that human well-being is advanced through strong individualism, competition and efficiency has extended into the academic world. Research of whatever data-form paradigm (qualitative, quantitative, mixed, visual, etc.) becomes conceptualised as a market-driven activity and embedded within the contemporary research marketplace. The data collected for social research is regarded as serving the interests of systematic accountability and political governance. The concept of a value for research becomes infiltrated by these criteria.

Neoliberalism, however, generates an especial emphasis on quantitative research, and thus creates critical tensions for qualitative research and interviews as a qualitative method. It promotes a linear quantitative deductive type of research that disadvantages other forms of data. The neoliberalised assumption is that statistical generalisability enables policymakers to judge ‘what works’ and make better informed decisions about policy changes. Neoliberalism promotes a number and representativeness oriented understanding of research, with specific expectations about its utility and results (Davies 2010; Flick 2019). In this context, qualitative interview data is seen somehow as second rate or trivialised as neoliberal values influence what stands as credible data as well as how to obtain it (Davies 2010). As Kathy Charmaz and Linda Belgrave comment:

The neoliberal focus on technical solutions for policy questions, focus on technical proficiency, and reliance on rationalist assumption … have clear implications for the conduct of social research … It is visible in social research that relies on individual measures … qualitative researchers may find their work to be marginalised. (Charmaz and Belgrave 2018: 2-3)

Charmaz and Belgrave go on to discuss the way that social research is being fitted to bureaucratic imperatives, and surveillance of the research process, which undermine the conduct of qualitative research. Institutional Review Boards or University ethics committees can often be based on a quantitative paradigm, while review panels, committees and agencies measure qualitative interview research against the standards of quantitative methods. Qualitative interviews can become difficult to defend, or at least the method has to be defended within the demands of the research marketplace. Indeed, certain forms of qualitative research become normalised and market-friendly to the detriment of others. For example, qualitative interviews as a method and the data they generate are limited by expectations of compatibility with evidence-based and mixed methods, meta analyses, and so on, subordinated or incorporated into more conventional approaches that are attuned to a neoliberal ethos (Flick 2019; Jordan and Wood 2017). Juliette Cheek (2017) asks qualitative researchers to consider how far they are going, and are prepared to go, in conforming their qualitative inquiry to research market demands. Marketised values can mean that interview methods that are located within critical approaches – such as social justice and the Indigenous methodologies discussed further below – are positioned on the margins of the research endeavor, rendered second rate or invisible (Buber and Martinez 2017; Cheek 2017; Kerrigan and Johnson 2019).

Uwe Flick is one of several authors who have argued that:

Neo-liberalism contributes to austerity and … promotes numbers and representativeness-oriented understandings of research and leads in many areas to datafication … and very specific expectations about utility of research and results. (Flick 2018: 1)

Austerity is an integral aspect of neoliberalism, comprising a difficult economic situation caused by government cutting back on public spending (with gendered effects, as noted by Hesse-Biber 2019). Relevant to our discussion here, neoliberalism and austerity combine not only in relation to the value that is or is not placed on qualitative interview research, but also to the funding available to pursue it.

Austerity has meant constrained resources for social research across a range of research funders. The result is an instrumental focus on policy-driven priority research areas and particular sorts of evidence knowledge on the part of funding bodies and services – that is, quantitative and verifiable empirical research, and less funding available for qualitative research using interviews. Bronwyn Davies (2010) argues that where researchers are funded directly, or indirectly through research funding bodies, by government, the research community generally is positioned collectively as incapable of making their own analysis of what research questions are and how they might best be answered. It is only empirical findings with immediate benefit to business and industry that are seen as acceptable. In this way, research funding may be regarded as a mechanism of neoliberal control over the generation of knowledge and its value (Jordan and Wood 2017; Kerrigan and Johnson 2019).

A further challenge of neoliberalism that confronts qualitative researchers is a linked trend of ‘exploding data’ (Flick 2019), through social media, transactional information, etc., as we now discuss.

Big data

Technological developments have enabled the availability of extremely large sets of digital information referred to as ‘big data’, available at an unprecedented scale, speed and variety in real time (as they are generated) that we have not seen before, from social media such as Twitter and the social transactional data of ‘knowing capitalism’ (Savage and Burrows 2007). Digital knowledge is far more powerful in a neoliberal knowledge economy, and in the context of austerity the idea of big data takes on a particular attraction. The potential (and seduction) of big data is the availability of massive amounts of information that can be analysed using computational techniques. And it offers policymakers the promise of access to real time information that will mean that they can have more efficient, targeted public services based on predicting and pre-empting social problems (e.g. Dencik et al. 2018). The sheer, voluminous quantity of big data seemingly, ‘has rendered individual [interview] testimonies inconsequential to greater humanistic and scientific understanding (Lanford et al. 2018: 1).

Big data has been described by dana boyd and Kate Crawford as a gaze from 30,000 feet (2011). This is in contrast to the ground-level in-depth explorations of social understandings that qualitative interviews provide. But virtual and digital big data gives the illusion of being superior to qualitative interviews, bringing the interview method into question for relevance to understanding contemporary social life. They impress because a large range of human behaviours are captured digitally (business data, locational data, social network data, streaming data, sensory data). This ubiquity makes it seem as if big data provides direct and immediate access to people’s beliefs and experiences – the notion that Facebook knows you better than you know yourself. Further, while interviews are ‘data elicitation’, big data is often posed as ‘naturally occurring’. Thus the challenge to interviews from big data is that researchers should work with and analyse data that occurs independent of their practices, constructions and methods. In other words, transaction and social media are regarded as ‘naturalistic’ rather than constructed. But big data are best regarded as digital traces of people rather than a direct line to them, and from a constructionist stance in particular big data is just as socially mediated and constrained as any other form of data; they are still based on researchers’ interpretations and decisions. Researchers assemble and interpret phenomena in a specific way so that they can be used as data in social research, whether the data they construct is big or small scale, and comprised of e.g. transactional information or interviews (Flick 2018).

Despite uncertain times for qualitative researchers in a research landscape saturated by a neoliberal austerity and big data mentality, qualitative researchers are creative people, and so they have thought about resistor ways of conducting interviews in what is an austere climate for the value of research and for its funding.

Creative and resistory responses

Some creative interview method responses may work with and resist from within an austerity-framed neoliberalism, while other strategies attempt to work outside and against it, especially where undertaking research in a critical vein.

Within an austerity framework, qualitative research is not cheap to do, especially where face to face interviews are involved. There is staff time, travel to and from the interview locations, the purchase of recording equipment, and maybe overnight stays will be necessary, and so on. Nikki Hayfield and colleagues (2014) have reflected on the need for shifts towards less resource intensive qualitative methods in an age of austerity. They review methods that place less financial and time demands on researchers than traditional face-to-face interview methods, such as the online chat room style focus groups and skype interviews that we referred to above:

… we have concluded that using ‘resource-lite’ methods … can be novel, accessible and fun. They can also generate data as rich as that produced in more traditional face-to-face methods (such as interviews and focus groups) with much less researcher or participant resource … (2014: 8)

Also falling within the austerity framework, Emma Keightley and colleagues (2012) have developed the self-interview method, which involves asking people to record themselves talking about the topic of the research, with a guidance sheet on the questions they might want to think about, and then to send the recording to the researchers. For Keightley and colleagues, however, this interview method is less about creative resistance to neoliberal austerity and more about overcoming some of the limitations of face-to-face interviews in the case of researching everyday memories. While face-to-face interviews require flow of talk and prohibit lapses into not speaking, self-interviews enable thoughtful reflection,

The sorts of resource-lite interviewing methods such as the online and self- interviews discussed above mean that social researchers can conduct their research without much if anything in the way of funding. One estimate is that more than half of social science research conducted in the UK is unfunded (Kernohan 2015). Cheek (2018) has even concluded that funding can constrain researchers in a neo-liberal climate given the demands of marketised research, and that using interview methods in unfunded research gives them more freedom to pursue topics outside of a narrow set of policy-relevant preoccupations.

Steven Jordan and Elizabeth Wood point to what they call ‘boutique methodologies’ as one means of resisting the neoliberal turn that qualitative researchers have adopted, notably arts-informed methods, including narratives and autoethnography: ‘we call these “boutique methodologies” as they are approaches that are primarily concerned with the social construction of the self, albeit within particular social contexts’ (2017: 152). Ultimately though, Jordan and Wood feel that such methodologies are flawed and still operate within neoliberal framework because they tend not to acknowledge the neoliberal context in which they were forged:

… this is not a call to jettison the advances made by boutique methodologies. Rather it is an assertion that their reluctance to acknowledge and incorporate the reality of how neoliberal globalisation continues to re-shape the social fabric of twenty-first century everyday life is a mistake that may infiltrate their knowledge-producing practices or, even more seriously, render these methodologies susceptible to colonisation by neoliberal epistemologies. (ibid: 153)

A similar point is made by Mirka Koro-Ljunberg and colleagues (2017), warning researchers struggling against neo-liberalism about using means of generating data that were provided for them by the very methodologies and philosophies that have now been drawn under the neoliberal umbrella. For our own position, as we elaborate below, it is philosophy/epistemology that is the issue, not the method.

Both sets of authors, indicate ways forward for qualitative interview researcher resistance. Koro-Ljunberg and colleagues (2017) argue for the importance of ‘small form’ qualitative research that focuses on the mundane and minor, attending to small details, smaller nuances and the smallest differences. The enabling of complex engagements with participants that can be accomplished by an interview method fit well within this call, undertaken from a critical perspective, creatively challenging the taken-for-granted. Jordan and Woods (2017) pose engagement with an historical sensibility, social movements outside the academy in activist research, and Indigenous methodologies as a way forward for qualitative interview researcher resistance because they are not rooted in and weighed down by taken-for granted academic conventions and dominant paradigms, and are informed by struggle. We discuss how interviewing fits within the latter, Indigenous world views, below.

Creative interview methods may attempt to side-step, resist or move beyond neoliberalism. But they may remain within another form of governing framework, that of the dominant academic research methodologies. As Jordan and Woods note, Indigenous approaches are a challenge to that as well as to the neoliberal mentality. We now turn to consider the interviewing method as part of this distinct set of world views.

Indigenous methodologies and interviews

All research methodologies are grounded in the specificities of people’s world views, research as an activity occurs in a set of historical, political and social contexts, as do data generating methods such as interviews. Where interviewing as a research method takes place within Euro-Western dominant modes of research, then it is part of an epistemology (whether constructionist or naturalistic) that assumes a set of rules about what counts as legitimate research and knowledge that apply universally. The imperial cultural paradigms and power processes from which such claims of abstracted universality spring are rendered invisible. In contrast, Indigenous methodologies are rooted in the world views of Indigenous societies and peoples. They acknowledge diverse intellectual traditions and evolving sets of knowledges, with methodologies that are contextualised and non-extractive ways about finding out about the world. These methodologies are in the service of transformative research, with the aim of understanding the constellation of oppressions and injustices stemming from colonialism, to identify struggles and resistances to them, and to address social and environmental processes, relations and transformations (e.g. Chilisa 2012; Smith 2012). As such they are said to be a pathway to political resistance of neoliberalism in the research Euro-Western and neoliberal paradigm (Bubar and Martinez 2017).

Interviews conducted within western modes of research then, are a different endeavour from what seems to be the same process of data creation enacted within an Indigenous methodological approach, such as yarning or talking circles. In an Indigenous knowledges paradigm one-to-one and group methods flow from a conversational method based on an oral story telling tradition. Margaret Kovach explains:

Thus it is not the method, *per se*, that is the determining characteristic of Indigenous methodologies, but rather *the interplay (the relationship) between the method and paradigm* and the extent to which the method, itself, is congruent with an Indigenous worldview ... when used in an Indigenous framework, a conversational method invokes several distinctive characteristics: a) it is linked to a particular tribal epistemology (or knowledge) and situated within an Indigenous paradigm; b) it is relational; c) it is purposeful (most often involving a decolonizing aim); d) it involves particular protocol as determined by the epistemology and/or place; e) it involves an informality and flexibility; f) it is collaborative and dialogic; and g) it is reflexive. (2010: 40/43 – our emphasis)

Bagele Chilisa (2012) critiques the dominant, conventional interview method as founded in asymmetrical interviewer-interviewee relations, and the dominance of standard academic disciplinary theories, terms and concepts in shaping interview questions. She argues that the ‘established rules and codes drawn from the Western archive of knowledge systems and values’ (p. 206) frame the very idea of interviews in dominant research approaches, and shape interview practices that are individualist, outside of relationality and devoid of context. Kovach (2010) positions the connection of a conversational method within an Indigenous approach to a deep purpose of sharing stories as a means of transmitting knowledge between individuals and groups, and to assisting and being accountable to others. She notes how preparation for research using what the dominant paradigms refer to as interviews may include western-based ideas about literature review, design of study etc., but that with Indigenous approaches there would also be preparations that were relational, such as participating in ceremonies, and clear planning for how the research and researcher will give back to the community. In this vein, Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu (2010) identify four types of research ‘yarning’ processes, a particular Indigenous conversational method – social (before the research yarn), research topic (semi- or unstructured interview/yarning), therapeutic (emotional disclosure during the research topic/yarning) and collaborative (yarning about the research and research findings at various points). It is the latter that enables the method and research to become a transformative process, and potentially resist and challenge the Euro-Western neoliberalised framework in which interviews can take place in mainstream qualitative research. While Euro-Western researchers as non-Indigenous people cannot practice Indigenous methods, they may be in alliance with them, and these approaches can at least serve as models of alternatives for the framing of research and interviews.

Conclusion

So, how do we reassess the future of qualitative interviews after our review of the challenges to and for this social research method in this article?

For us, interviewing *per se* is not really the main issue in considering its future as a research method. Rather, our discussion here has drawn out the underpinning epistemological challenges and contestations that are the point in question in debates about whether or not the qualitative interview method retains any mileage for social researchers. At root, the radical critique of interviews, and the push back to it, are about the nature of interviews and whether the associated social data are performed constructions and/or naturalistic testimonies. Much of the discussion about the changing technologies of interviewing, recording and analysing echoes this debate about socially shaped accounts or authentic truth. Similarly for ideas about the standing of the ‘knowing capitalism’ that some fear or predict will spell the end of interviews as a contemporary research method; does big data provide access to real time natural occurrences, or to socially mediated constructions? Analyses of the implications of neoliberalism and its associated austere climate for interviews show that, as a research method, it is not free-standing but can be pulled into the service of marketised systems of thought, or resisted either pragmatically or more radically, including transformative Indigenous methodologies.

There remains the question of the consequences of these debates and epistemological positions for the method in posing it as a valuable approach to research funders, policymakers and business. This is easier done within the dominant Euro-Western knowledge framework of direct access to authentic experiences, understandings and feelings. There may even be some potential there from a constructionist point of view within the dominant framework, enabling understanding of how meanings are shaped in interaction. An Indigenous paradigm involves a far more radical step outside of conventional parameters, in quite different knowledge systems where ‘research’, ’research methods’ and ‘interviews’ are not the starting point of understanding. Interviews can have a resistory potential because it is the epistemology in which they are embedded that is resistory. They are neutral tools in terms of being a talking method – a conversation between people.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is the motive that makes interviews resistory.

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1. A position that also has been argued in relation to feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)