Foucault, the subject and the research interview: a critique of methods

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Research interviews are a widely used method in qualitative health research and have been adapted to suit a range of methodologies. Just as it is valuable that new approaches are explored, it is also important to continue to examine their appropriate use. In this article, we question the suitability of research interviews for 'history of the present' studies informed by the work of Michel Foucault – a form of qualitative research that is being increasingly employed in the analysis of healthcare systems and processes. We argue that several aspects of research interviewing produce philosophical and methodological complications that can interfere with achieving the aims of the analysis in this type of study. The article comprises an introduction to these tensions and examination of them in relation to key aspects of a Foucauldian philosophical position, and discussion of where this might position researchers when it comes to designing a study.

Key words: discourse, Foucault, philosophy, research methods.

SITUATING THE PROBLEM

The term 'research interview' refers to any conversation between two people undertaken for the purpose of generating original data for research (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). In the present-day context, this method is often employed in qualitative and mixed methods research. Research that includes research interviewing is frequently seen in nursing and other disciplines in which a humanistic, person-centred focus in research and practice is considered important. Interview research has also played a significant role in helping to legitimize person-centred practices and contest the privilege accorded to objectivity and value neutrality in biomedical approaches to health-care (Oakley 1981; Fontana and Frey 2005). However, although the research interview as a method is useful and suitable for many studies, it is not always an appropriate method, and the research question and purpose of conducting the research should always be considered in the selection of methods.

Nursing is often considered to be one of the pioneering sites for inquiry focusing on the experiences of everyday people, and interviewing as a research method has been key in this movement (Morse 1991; Streubert and Carpenter 2011). Thus, it is unsurprising that research interviews have become one of the most widely used methods in qualitative nursing inquiry. In recent years, postmodern and poststructural perspectives have been applied to nursing inquiry and have offered other ways of approaching questions about reality and experience (Cheek 2000). Postmodern and poststructural approaches emphasize the cultural and historical contingency of knowledge and offer different ways of viewing nursing practices and the locations they occupy, regarding what their effects are and possibilities for how they might be re-envisaged (Traynor 2007; Cheek 2008). However, despite increased utilization of postmodern and poststructural philosophical perspectives to inform approaches to inquiry, there

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is still a paucity of philosophically grounded discussion of the appropriateness of familiar data-gathering methods – such as interviewing – for these approaches. Our view is that careful consideration should be given to the congruence between methods used and the philosophical perspective in which the inquiry is situated. In this article, we seek to problematize the practice of using interviews as a research method in 'history of the present' studies that employ the work of Michel Foucault as a philosophical and methodological guide. We argue that in this context, interviews are philosophically and methodologically problematic and that these tensions could interfere with achieving the aims of the analysis. This article arose as a result of the difficulties encountered in dealing with this very issue from two researchers who used the work of Michel Foucault in their doctoral research. It is the product of extensive conversations and debates about the tensions between wanting to use methods that seemed to make sense to us as researchers with a professional background in person-centred health-care and a desire to staying true to the philosophical and methodological aims of a 'history of the present'.

THE INTERVIEW AS A RESEARCH METHOD

The interview as a research method is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the type of interview we know today as a cornerstone of qualitative inquiry is more historically and culturally situated than we usually acknowledge (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Fontana and Frey 2005). Interviews have become ubiquitous in contemporary Western society, and we have become very familiar with this mode of interaction. We have come to expect that we might be asked to articulate what we think and feel about any number of aspects of modern life and would probably do this without question in many circumstances. As a result, interviews, in all their forms, have become an obvious method for gathering information on the experiences of everyday living.

Led by moves in phenomenology, critical theory and feminism, and in health-care, particularly by nursing and the 'psy' disciplines of psychology and psychotherapy (Rose 1996), research interviews have become very widely used to help understand how people construct meaning around their lived experiences. Taking the example of health, hearing people express their unique world view in the form of experiences and perspectives of being a patient or a health professional has become an important way to resist the hegemonic tendencies of biomedicine with its preference for detached objectivity and value neutrality (Oakley 1981; Fontana and Frey 2005). It has also provided a vehicle to bring to the surface voices that had previously been marginalized.

Not surprisingly then, it would be almost unthinkable to find a general text on how to undertake qualitative research that does not talk about interviews and describe how they should be conducted. As people have became familiar with the many different forms of qualitative research, subtly different approaches to interviews have emerged, such that by 2001, a thousand-page 'handbook' of interview research was produced that attempted to bring together many of the emerging forms of practice in this area (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Over the last decade, numerous books specifically dealing with interviewing as a qualitative method have been published, and many have picked up on Gubrium and Holstein's assertion that it would not be unreasonable now to call ours an 'interview society' (Alvesson 2010).

Given the cultural significance of interviews, their extensive use throughout the full spectrum of qualitative methods, and the growing body of literature describing or using interviews in research studies, it might seem odd to question the use of interviews in studies that offer a 'history of the present'. This is compounded by evidence that proponents of newer qualitative methodologies, such as those informed by postmodernism, seem to have adapted the interview to suit different theoretical purposes without serious objection (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). From a Foucauldian perspective, we now have a number of guides to 'Foucauldian discourse analysis', many of which also promote research interviews in some form as a method of generating texts for analysis. The justification given often echoes the following quote from Willig's introduction to qualitative research in psychology:

> If we want to find out how contemporary discourses of pain and pain management position sufferers of chronic pain, and with what consequences, we may analyse literature that discusses biopsychosocial theories of pain, information and guidance given to chronic pain patients (e.g. leaflets, booklets, videotapes), and perhaps also doctor–patient consultations at a pain clinic (cf. Kugelmann, 1997). If, however, we want to find out how ordinary people construct meaning in relation to a particular topic (e.g. the menopause, divorce, national identity), we can work with transcripts of semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions alone. (Willig 2001)

In this article we argue for a more cautious approach to interviewing in Foucauldian studies. We raise some questions about the philosophical and methodological tensions caused by interviews for researchers engaged in 'histories of the present' and challenge the taken-for-granted obviousness of asking 'ordinary people to construct meaning in relation to particular topics'. We are not arguing that Foucault's work should never be applied to the task of examining *how* ordinary people construct meaning in relation to a particular topic. We are arguing, however, that the use of interviews for

this task is more problematic than we have hitherto recognized and that this should be carefully considered when engaging with Foucault's philosophical and methodological principles.

THE AIMS OF A 'HISTORY OF THE PRESENT'

Much of Foucault's work focused on systems of thought, and his writings challenge our faith in the seeming self-evidence of the truths that are presently valued. He showed that the knowledge that we currently hold dear is unstable and contingent, and he looked at the social conditions and problematizations that might have given rise to particular concepts and ways of thinking (Rabinow and Rose 2003). For Foucault, the value of history was not in its ability to construct a linear narrative that reveals our progressive drive towards enlightenment but, rather, to locate the historical conditions that allow us to think, speak and act as we do now. This has been termed 'history of the present' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983).

Foucault's work took the position that the present is just the current iteration – the 'effect' – of a set of discourses, subjects and knowledge that are all historically situated. Thus, to understand how the present has been made possible, it is important to examine the historical matrices that have enabled the emergence and continuation of these discourses, subjects and knowledge. History becomes an important tool in enabling us to see current discourses and, in the words of Nikolas Rose (1999, 20), make connections with the 'historical moments it connects up and deploys'. Work of this sort makes visible, through discursive analysis, how an aspect of our lives has come to take its present form.

As we have already alluded to, absolutely central to the notion of conducting a 'history of the present' is the Foucauldian assertion that discourse cannot be separated from material reality; that discourse is involved in the *production* of reality (Mills 2004). As Deleuze (1988) described it, discourse in Foucault's conception produces both the 'visible' and the 'articulable' in the human world – the things that we experience as real and the ways in which we can think, talk and act in relation to them. Thus, a 'history of the present' invokes an engagement with what Judith Butler has called 'performativity' (Butler 1997). In this, discourse is not just in people's reflective interpretation of 'events' but most significantly constitutive of the events themselves. According to Foucault, discourses do not reside, hidden from view, in some grand invisible structure, nor do they achieve their effects through people's interpretations of 'reality'. They *are* their lives. The point we are trying to make here is that when you consider Foucault's notion of discourse and the broad

aims of a 'history of the present', it would be reasonable to infer that to rely solely on research interviews can be problematic because description of and reflection on experience are not the focus on inquiry. We will now look at further aspects of interviews that can present difficulties.

THE FOUCAULDIAN SUBJECT

As Gubrium and Holstein (2003) point out, the interview as an accepted mode of inquiry relies on a societal model in which people understand themselves as individuals, with individual views and opinions carrying societal currency. In society, as we have become increasingly interested in garnering people's thoughts and opinions, we have accepted that interviews provide us with a meaningful and unique insight into the person's 'inner world'. This perspective is therefore contingent on shared understandings of what 'a person' or 'an individual' *is*. Phenomenology is possibly the most potent lens through which these ontological questions are exercised, and not surprisingly, this has become a powerful influence in healthcare research in recent years, as researchers have explored, with increasing interest, what it is to *be* someone with a particular disease, experiencing family violence or chronically breathless, to give a few examples. These approaches assume that the research subject, the interviewee in this instance, is a 'knowing' subject – the originator of unique insights that could not have been obtained otherwise. The purpose of the interview is to access these authentic understandings (Morse 2002; Miller and Glassner 2004; Alvesson 2010).

Foucault's conception of discourse offers a powerful critique of these phenomenological notions of the subject in which the subject acts as a source of originary meaning. Foucault argued that our experiences of selves and lives are discursive *effects*; in other words, they are the *result* of powerful discourses that structure our reality (Foucault 1972). Rather than accepting the idea that meaning emanated from a 'knowing' subject (e.g. an interview participant), Foucault argued that the subject, as we experience it, is a product of discourse. From Foucault's perspective, there is no 'essential' subject that can be identified outside of discursive construction. Even phenomena such as gender, race and personality are discursive constructs. From such a perspective, a person's account of themselves and their experiences cannot be seen as a point of *origin* for the construction of meaning, because the subject is constituted through discourse, and discourse provides the means of articulation and action (Foucault 2003).

It is worth mentioning here that Foucault's philosophical position on the subject has led to some influential debates from fields such as feminism, disability, race and queer

studies, which focus on marginalized groups. This links back to a range of movements from the 1960s variously termed 'standpoint theory' or 'voice research' that emphasized the importance of hearing the 'voice' of people struggling to overcome oppression (Rowbotham et al. 1979; Hartsock 1987). This perspective argued that 'those with power are simply unable to see the mechanisms that privilege their own viewpoint over others' (Parker 2005, 2) and that amplifying the voice of the marginalized individual acted as a counter to these hegemonic and institutional tendencies of powerful social elites. Although many of these theorists would consider Foucault's notion of discourse to be helpful for investigating these mechanisms of privilege, his critique of the 'knowing subject' strikes across the emancipatory intentions of much of this type of research, because it positions the subject as a part of discourse, rather than a key player in social change (cf. Strega 2005). Other authors offer a different perspective, arguing that in voice research, the authentic voice of marginalized and oppressed peoples has emerged as a reaction to the ideals associated with Enlightenment rationality such as value-free objectivity, prediction and control (Willig 2001). Some authors would go so far as to argue that emancipation projects might merely replace one hegemonic form of power with another, and so, as Traynor puts it; '... emancipation itself can be understood as an Enlightenment project with ever-present possibilities for domination' (Traynor 1997, 100). Although we consider these debates to be extremely important, we see this as relating to a slightly different question that the one we deal with in this article – one about the potential effects of different approaches to research. For the purposes of this article, this critique highlights that emancipatory approaches to effecting social change are crucially different from the approach associated with a Foucauldian 'history of the present'.

According to Foucault, discourse makes possible our current reality, and conversely to think, say or do anything outside of our current realm of discourse would appear as unreasonable, incomprehensible, insane or simply impossible (Foucault 1981; Hook 2001). Thus, a research interview is a participation in discourse in the same way that other current social and material practices are. We would argue that the practice of *privileging* research interviews as a means of gathering texts for analysis asserts the phenomenological or critical rather than the Foucauldian view of the subject. Indeed, Foucault's work raised questions about the 'confessional' nature of these types of interactions in modern society and the effects this can give rise to (Foucault 2008). From a Foucauldian perspective, the interview is a social practice, and the interviewer and interviewee are participating in the reproduction of discourse. As such, an interview is just another text, interwoven into the archive from which discourse and its effects can be studied. Looking at it in this way, a research interview might be a means of obtaining a text for analysis, but it is not a means of revelation (as in phenomenological, symbolic interactionist or similar approaches) or emancipation (as in feminism or critical race theory). This is an important departure from phenomenology and critical theory perspectives that have been influential in health research, and this distinction must be taken into account when considering the function of interviews for this type of research.

JUST ANOTHER TEXT? INTERROGATING THE INTERVIEW EVENT ITSELF

For those of us for whom interviewing is a familiar and seemingly invaluable tool, it is tempting to decide to simply view the interview text in a 'Foucauldian' way. In other words, to treat the interview not as something which is revealing the person and their experiences per se, but as a source just like any other text, from which discourse and its effects can be studied. However, on closer examination, an interview conducted by a researcher to generate original data for a research project is *not just another text*. Its production involves decisions and interactions that make it, from a Foucauldian point of view, philosophically and methodologically problematic over and above the issue of the treatment of the text that is its product.

Individualizing Power

One of the central notions of Foucault's thought was his view of power as a productive force, and as a relation, that comes into existence in each interaction, rather than an entity in itself (Foucault 1977). Foucault identified a particular type of power, which 'makes individuals subjects'

> This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him (sic) by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault 1983, 212)

In conducting a research interview, we are participating in this subjectification in a quite specific way. By creating sampling criteria for interview participants, and then by specifying the topic of conversation, the researcher along with the participant (rephrasing the quote above) attaches them to their own identity, imposing a law of truth on them which they must recognize and which others have to recognize in them. Thus, the research interview actively involves a form of subjec-

tification that is not present in other modes of research. There have been many writers who have used Foucault's work who have not engaged in research interviews within their work (see Nettleton 1992; Burchell 1996; Rose 1996, 1999; Dean 1999; Armstrong 2002). Many of these researchers prefer to work with the plethora of historical and present-day texts that are already available to us, for example, street art, bus tickets, policy documents, recorded sound, blogs and so on. When the text already exists, the researcher is not participating *directly* in the subjectification of the individual.

The research interview entails a type of power relation which is distinct from research using only existing texts and consequently a distinctive form of participation in the (re)production of discourse. This leads us to ask whether, in carrying out interviews, we are generating texts that reproduce precisely those discourses that captured our interest in the subject to begin with? In this, we might be playing an unintended role in proliferation of the discourses, and in turn exposing ourselves to a tendency to privilege the interview text over texts that were not generated in a research interview because the interviews so precisely fit our research criteria.

DO WE NEED RESEARCH INTERVIEWS?

Given the methodological and philosophical tensions outlined previously, should we be concluding that it is just not appropriate to use research interviews for a 'history of the present'? In conversations with other researchers, a common reaction to a proposal not to seek new texts through interviewing is that surely, something will be missing from the material that is available for discourse analysis. Surely, interviews generate texts for analysis that other methods do not – texts that would be inaccessible through other modes of inquiry? To respond to these questions we have returned to Foucault's methodological principles outlined in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, published in English as *The Order of Discourse* (Foucault 1981), and Hook's (2001) close reading and discussion of the implications for conducting a discourse analysis.

There are a few reasons we have encountered that it might be suggested that research interviews are needed, and we will address each of these in turn. First, there is the view that interviews would provide information that other texts cannot. This assumes that interviews are likely to produce statements that have not yet emerged in discourse, and we would propose that this is in contradiction with the Foucauldian perspective of discourse and 'the subject', as argued earlier in this article. Second, there is the view that interviews would provide a text containing statements that, while pres-

ent in discourse, were somehow hidden or unarticulated in otherwise available texts. In addressing this point, it is helpful to return to the meaning of 'text' for discourse analysis. From a Foucauldian point of view, the statement is the most basic element in discourse, and a 'text' is comprised of statements (Foucault 1972). Although statements are easiest to illustrate in the form of written or spoken language, this is not the only form they take, and the texts, which contain statements, can come in many forms and refer to any means by which statements are made. To provide a few examples, images, other material objects and the arrangement of spaces and material practices all communicate statements within a field of relations and therefore can be regarded as texts (Foucault 1972). Sometimes, though, when people consider methods for conducting a discourse analysis, there can be a tendency to focus on written and/or spoken material (Hook 2001). Hook (2001) notes that this can indeed limit the analysis and refers to Foucault's 'principle of exteriority', reminding us that discourse is productive and that it is not only what is articulated, but actual material practices that show us discourse. Thus, our position on this question is that we agree that including only documentary material in a discourse analysis would be problematic for the reasons suggested, but we would (drawing on Hook) argue that it is the inclusion of actual material practices in an analysis, rather research interviews, that is the most appropriate and philosophically consistent way to address this problem. One example would be that the arrangement of spaces, physical positioning of people and sorts of objects that are present in a hospital or rehabilitation facility communicate statements about what does and does not occur there, and how those activities relate, which might or might not be articulated in written or spoken material also available for analysis.

As a final point, there is the question of the researcher who is seeking not experiences or perspectives at all, but just information given verbally because that is the most convenient way of obtaining a usable text: for example, if a researcher is interested in finding out about a particular practice and so gets someone involved to provide a description of that practice, a variation on what we might sometimes come across in written form. From our perspective, this would not fit our definition of a research interview, and the people involved would not be research 'participants'. The sort of process is not about creating original data, but a particular way of accessing a material practice to include in analysis.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our exploration of the questions that surround the use of interviews in Foucauldian 'histories of the present' has led us

to conclude that research interviews are problematic and, we would propose, unwarranted for studies of this sort. There are two main reasons for this conclusion. First, conversations with research 'participants' for the purpose of generating original data for research become methodologically problematic when a Foucauldian view of the subject is employed. Second, for the aims of 'history of the present' studies, the issues that some researchers would argue necessitate research interviews can be overcome if Foucault's 'principle of exteriority' is incorporated into the design of the study by seeking to include material practices as well as documentary sources in the analysis.

It might appear to some that the line of argument we are offering takes research a step back from 'real lives', seemingly putting us at more of a distance from the possibilities that research offers to directly improve the position of marginalized individuals and groups. Some might even argue that this approach reinvigorates the detached, impersonal research narrative that so many theorists in critical and queer theory, feminism, race and disability scholarship have laboured so hard to oppose. We believe, however, that this approach to research is very much about 'real lives' and enabling change. One only needs to look at the influence of Foucault's own histories and of many other scholars who have used his work, to see the value in this type of analysis in helping to call 'into question self-evidences of the present... shatter certain stabilities and help us detach ourselves from our ''truths'' and seek alternative ways of existence' (Tamboukou 1999, 210). It is not only 'voice' research that can be used as a tool for resistance.

The article has been written for a number of different audiences: for readers and users of 'history of the present' studies who have an interest in critique and continuing discussion; for emerging researchers who are thinking about using Foucault's work in their studies and for Foucauldian scholars who, like us, have used interviews in their studies and questioned their suitability. There will be others who come to this article from entirely different positions and who will read our argument and come to different conclusions. We are happy if this article continues the debate around methodology in Foucauldian studies and the effects of this perspective on thought and practice, and particularly if it helps others who grapple with this question in a huge variety of contexts where Foucauldian 'history of the present' studies have influence.

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