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What is This?

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Unreliable narrators? 'Inconsistency' (and some inconstancy) in interviews

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ABSTRACT A potentially problematic aspect of the qualitative interview is the propensity towards tensions that emerge – ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions etc. – especially when transcripts are analysed. In this article, I draw on material from an interview in which the presence of contradictory data had surprising results, initially producing shock, but subsequently causing me to reflect on the 'meaning' inherent in these lapses of coherence. In so doing, I present a framework for analysis, based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, and suggest that narratives serve to construct the relational process of 'identification with' that links individuals to discourses. This framework enables a kind of situated reliability to emerge from the very aspects of the interview that may be held to be problematic in terms of our being 'unreliable narrators'.

KEYWORDS: *ambiguity, discourse theory, identity, qualitative interview, narrative, reliability, transcription*

Introduction

'Given the indeterminacies of language and the workings of power in the will to know' we are all – researchers and researched – unreliable narrators (Lather, 2000). This article explores some kinds of this unreliability in the qualitative interview as these arose in my research into teacher professional identities – tensions that might be variously termed inconsistency, contradiction, ambiguity (and inconstancy) that make up the 'wild profusion...at the heart of the interview interaction' (Scheurich, 1995: 249). In the context of 'traditional' research, these instances might call into question the validity of my data; however, I have drawn on an analytical framework which suggests that such tensions can yield insights into the research process and provide conceptual tools for use in data analysis. In this framework, in which I sketch a relationship between discourse, identity and narrative, I suggest that a kind

of situated reliability is present in these ambiguities as they relate to shifts and gaps in the narratives people construct about their lives. In doing this, I also reflect on the nature of the qualitative interview and especially on the role of transcription in the interview process.

The constructivist interview

Interviewing is ubiquitous in our society and we have become familiar with its various guises whether by being stopped in the street and asked about our political preferences or by watching others reveal intimate details of their lives on day-time television. There seems to be a ready acceptance, eagerness even, both to be interviewed and to watch others' selves unfolding – witness the growth of interest in 'reality TV'. As Foucault remarks, we have become a 'singularly confessing society' (Foucault, 1999[1976]: 59). Although in some situations the interview may be seen as cathartic, providing a therapeutic and liberating experience, another way of looking at this 'confessional urge' within our society is to see it as an effect of 'disciplinary power' that opens us up to scrutiny, so that even our most private spaces become subject to examination (Fairclough, 1992). In qualitative research, this confessional urge is well-established among interviewers too with what might be termed the reflexive turn in research accounts providing a response to the so-called crisis of representation. Confession, Jensen and Lauritsen (2005) argue, has become seen as a way for researchers to 'save' objectivity.

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

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

This perhaps implies that the interview is an 'unnatural' situation, as if, in another situation, the 'real' self would emerge (with all the consequences for validity that this entails). Gubrium and Holstein (2003: 6) reject this view, suggesting that 'natural' situations are not necessarily more realistic but are merely what takes place in 'indigenous settings'. The qualitative interview thus becomes an indigenous setting for qualitative interviews in which the 'researcher's procedural vocabulary ... constitutes interview subjects' i.e. in Wittgensteinian terms, the rules of the interview as a language game serve to construct the 'reality under consideration' (2003: 6).

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

research has been concerned with interviewers not 'contaminating' data by interpolating their own selves into the process. Many texts warn about interviewer bias with its concomitant dangers to reliability and validity. Novice interviewers are therefore told that, for example, '[Q]uestions should be asked, and answers received, in a neutral, straightforward way. Any verbal, or non-verbal, feedback should be as non-committal as possible' (Powney and Watts, 1987: 137). A different conception of the interview recognizes (to misuse one of Derrida's [1998] evocative portmanteau words) the 'incompossibility' of neutrality. So Rapley (2001: 316) suggests that when interviewers are 'doing neutrality' (in the way suggested by Powney and Watts) 'this does not mean that they are "being neutral" in any conventional sense' – the construction of self as 'neutral' is a very studied performance. However, by the same token it could be questioned whether 'doing interactivity' in the interview situation is necessarily the same thing as being interactive in any conventional sense. Neutrality and interactivity may therefore be considered to constitute an unsustainable binary since both involve decisions about how to act in a particular situation in order to elicit information.

The idea of a 'real self' permeates much of the work associated with the 'traditional' qualitative interview leading to a conceptualization of the respondent as a 'vessel of answers' to be tapped into by the interviewer. Similarly, Kvale (1996) draws on the metaphor of the interviewer as 'prospector' hoping to strike a rich seam of data. McLure (2003: 122) takes this further – she analyses texts that 'invoke a world of nineteenth century applied science and technology: mining, refining, surveying, distilling', and which imply that reality is out there but somehow obscured. The subtext of this is that the job of the researcher is to 'remove these impediments by applying specialist treatments or procedures to the interview.'

Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 30) reject the 'vessel of answers' model, referring instead to the 'stock of knowledge' that the respondent draws on in the interview situation. This knowledge is 'simultaneously substantive, reflexive and emergent'. The authors suggest that, as the interview proceeds, the respondent selectively accesses, reflects on and constructs this knowledge in a way that is dependent on the self-assigned role adopted by the narrator in response to the question asked, i.e. in response to the self invoked by the interviewer at that point. From this perspective, the interview can be thought of as a collaborative construction in which the meanings and the way they are constructed depend on both the interviewer and the interviewee as 'active agents' in the interview. The aim of the interviewer is then to activate these different ways of knowing. Scheurich (1995: 243), however, warns against seeing the interview as being necessarily capable of producing shared meanings: 'Interview interactions do not have some essential, teleological tendency toward an ideal of "joint construction of meaning"… Instead, interactions and meanings are a shifting carnival of ambiguous complexity, a moving feast of differences interrupting differences.'

Tensions in interview data

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

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

How is this rather unsettling notion of the ambiguity of the 'Other' in the research setting to be understood? What can terms such as 'ambiguity', 'inconsistency' or 'contradiction' mean within a constructivist concept of the interview? In narrative terms, they can perhaps be thought of as aporia, moments of undecidability or disjuncture that introduce tension into the text. McLure makes the point (after Derrida) that 'text' and 'textile' have the same derivation so tensions can be thought of as slubs or ruckles in the text being woven in the interview and disrupting the surface.

These tensions can be apparent at different levels within the text and have been analysed within different theoretical frameworks. Thus, Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) idea of the respondent drawing on 'stocks of knowledge' dependent on the self being addressed at that point in the interview perhaps provides an explanation of how individuals can hold apparently contradictory views simultaneously – I might give a very different response to a question about 'antisocial behaviour' depending on whether I am speaking as a teacher of children with special needs or as someone living next door to the neighbours from hell.

Power (2004: 860) draws on Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' to provide an explanation of why a young woman she interviewed as part of research into how single mothers manage to feed their families on social assistance gave interview responses about apparently 'unsensitive' issues (in connection with the rental of her flat) that directly contradicted what Power subsequently found out about her. Power draws on Bourdieu's idea of 'practical logic', i.e. logic oriented towards the situation encountered in daily life, to explain this. In this case, Power's initial anger and annoyance at the young woman's responses are tempered as she tries to understand why her interviewee had apparently 'lied':

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

Gardner (2001) also discusses the 'problematic' nature of biographical interview data. He presents research into 'rural spaces', part of which shows

that an interviewee very clearly misrepresented her involvement in village life, claiming to be no longer involved in the 'formal and informal local social and political institutions' (2001: 188) when this was, according to the perceptions of other villagers, evidently not the case. In explaining this, Gardner draws on Goffman's idea of 'frontstage presentation', i.e. the interviewer 'is being given the identity, the persona, which a particular respondent is presenting or staging' in a given situation. In both Power's and Gardner's analyses then, there is a suggestion that the interviewee is telling it not like it is but how they might want it to be, or how they might want us to think it is. However, Gardner goes on to suggest that there is a distinction between deliberate lying and 'the act of creative, retrospective self-invention', which may not be very clear. Commenting on the autobiography of a woman with epilepsy who filled the fit-induced gaps in her memory with invented accounts, he remarks, 'everyone to a greater to lesser extent (re)constructs their life in this way' (Gardner, 2001: 193).

In addition, in linguistic terms, personal experience narratives often need to be told as a 'good story' with certain aesthetic requirements. Tannen (1989) suggests that the way in which stories are constructed and the rhetorical strategies used are significant (though these may remain largely invisible to the teller). The story-teller has to do 'work' producing a story that engages and performatively involves the listener in the telling. It is an accepted element of the story-telling genre that a 'good story' may play fast and loose with what might be recognized in folk terms as 'the facts' of the matter.

The 'restructuring' of narratives of personal experience is perhaps an instance of what Ricoeur (1981: 179) refers to as creating a chronology in reverse. He says, 'By reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end, we learn to read time backward, as the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences.' Events may be altered, marginalized or forgotten if they do not fit the overall plot – 'Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions' (Ricoeur, 1981: 170). The idea that people reconstruct their lives through narrative, that they tell and re-tell stories of personal experience (whether to present a particular persona to themselves or others) is an explanation of what they are doing, but this still leaves open to question the wider socio-cultural contexts within which this happens and which serve to shape these narrations and reconstructions.

My research context

My research is centred on notions of teacher 'identity' and the relationship between identity and discourse in the area of 'discipline' and 'behaviour management'. The traditional notion of identity is of something well defined about oneself, fixed and unchanging, something inside of us 'like the kernel of a nut'

(Currie, 1998: 2). But an alternative view argues that identity can never be something that is just interior because identity is necessarily relational, to do with recognition of sameness and difference between ourselves and others. In my research, I take the view that identity emerges in and through narrative (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001: viii), but also that identity and narratives are bound up within discourses conceived not only in linguistic terms but also as material practices (Kondo, 1990). As Currie (1998: 17) remarks, we learn how to narrate from the outside and this, he argues, 'gives narratives at large the potential to teach us how to conceive of ourselves, what to make of our inner life and how to organize it.' In this view, identity construction is not seen as a one-off event but, instead, as an ongoing process that is never finally and fully accomplished. Derrida (1998: 28) captures something of the contingent and fleeting nature of identity when he says, 'Identity is never given, received or attained. Only the interminable, indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures.' Using this conceptual framework, I analyse teachers' narratives of practice both in terms of their content ('what' questions) and their construction ('how' questions) in order to show simultaneously the understandings teachers have of their identities and the ways in which these are shaped by political, institutional and other discourses (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

The interview context

I approached 'Derek' to be a participant in my research because he was a teacher I knew to reflect on his practice. I had met him as a participant on a post-graduate diploma course on which I tutored.

I intended to follow up an in-depth interview with an equally in-depth email correspondence. However, in this I was somewhat disappointed. Although Derek did respond to emails, he seemed to lose some interest in the project following the interview and did not wish to engage in the way that I had envisaged. (This apparent lack of interest in your interpretation of their life has also been noted by other researchers, see, for example, McCormack, 2004.) The aim was to explore Derek's personal and professional development in relation to his ideas about discipline and management of pupils. Derek was very keen to be interviewed and suggested a date in two weeks' time. With hindsight, I should perhaps have explored the reasons for this keenness. As it is, I can only speculate on his motives, one of which was, I suspect, merely to tell his unusual story. At his suggestion, the interview was carried out in my office even though this meant a round trip for him of over 300 miles. Derek is in his 50s and has been teaching in a rural secondary school for about 20 years. I am in my 40s and, until taking up my current post, was a teacher of children with 'behaviour problems' in a special school. Thus, my expectation was that we would have some degree of shared 'professional identity', and I already knew there were similarities between Derek's experience of schooling and my own (we were both disaffected, saw ourselves as school failures and left at 15), but

clearly the previous relationship of tutor and student and difference in gender and cultural identity (Derek is a Scot while I am English) were likely influencing factors in the interview.

Having completed my initial analysis (which I shared with Derek and which he accepted and was indeed very pleased with), I wrote:

> The interview with Derek is strongly characterized by a tendency for him to position himself by drawing attention to the way in which he differs from other teachers. His sense of himself as a teacher is defined by a simultaneous inclusion within the system and exclusion from the organization he perceives of that system. In doing this he highlights a tension between educational values and the structure of the educational system. Thus in the interview Derek takes care to show that he is not like the other teachers with whom he works and that this is reflected in his practice which is centred on a strong sense of educational values. This derives from his sense that his own route into the teaching profession was different from that of most other teachers – his background is one of poverty and educational failure:

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

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

Inconsistency within the interview

Note on transcription: I transcribed the interview myself. Hearing and re-hearing the speech enables me to recreate the sounds in my head as I read the transcript. I played around with different formats. In the end, I have tried to render the speech into as 'fluid' a format as possible trying to capture something of the rhythm and 'performativity' (Denzin, 2001), but inserting grammar where it seems appropriate to aid understanding and readability. For example, I have put dialogue in inverted commas because reported dialogue is clearly understood as such in conversation. In any case, this is a translation and the conventions of written speech have to be followed to a certain extent. The aim is to produce something that is readable and appears to be 'natural', while at

the same time suggesting that this is not written dialogue. In fact, Derek seemed to me to speak in a rhythmic way like poetry (especially when recounting the 'stories' that were embedded within his overall narrative) and the layout is an attempt to convey this. Using this format, I can simultaneously 're-play' the sounds of Derek's voice and see the written word, and my analysis is assisted by the dual positioning I am able to adopt through this process of recall of the interview and reflection on it.

Metaphors of transcription tend to emphasize a process by which a fluid and dynamic interaction is made static and thus necessarily reduced. In this way, Scott (1985) talks of a 'reification of data'; a neat double metaphor suggesting both a setting of the data in the transcript and a simultaneous raising of the transcript to a 'king-like' status in which the transcript comes to stand in metonymic relationship to the data. Kvale (1996) likens the transcript to 'dried flowers' that have lost their life and vibrancy. The interview is contextual but transcription is largely decontextualized data. The transcript needs to be reconstituted through analysis and bears much the same relationship to the original data as a prune, when rehydrated, does to a plum. But prunes are not necessarily inferior to plums; rather, they do 'being fruit' in different ways. Whereas the interview is the immediate immersed research context, the transcription serves to relocate the researcher enabling a different relationship to the data to be developed.

An ironic feature of transcription is that the greater the attempt to convey nuance through transcription conventions the less natural the transcription appears. Here, lines are an indication of continuous speech or flow, pauses have been indicated as full stops (length of pause denoted by number of full stops), emphasis with underlining. I have taken out all my 'ums', 'rights' etc. unless they seem to me to be important. Speech in brackets was said quickly. Words in square brackets are best guesses.

What might be termed 'inconsistency' – an aspect that introduces tension into 'meaning' – arises at several points in the transcript. For example, early on in the interview when Derek is talking about how, when he entered the profession, he said to himself:

Derek: 'I'm going to make it my business never to dislike a pupil' and I was told that that was impossible I'm 21 years down the line and I haven't taken a dislike to any pupil

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

Derek: … one or two of them – can see that they resent y'know they would like me to be sitting in the staffroom criticising this kid criticising that one
Me: Does that happen a lot?
Derek: All the time all the time and I don't like it I just sit quietly in [?] that's a cowardly way to do it I should stick up for them I should turn round and say 'shut up – don't talk about the kids like that'

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

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

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

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

Other parts of the transcript also reveal tensions and Derek himself was evidently unsettled by this. He wrote in an email, 'Reading the transcript I was struck by the inaccuracy of many of the things I had to say. If I had been writing, this would not have happened.' This perhaps presents an ethical dilemma. To what extent is the sharing of a transcript an act of reciprocity rather than an action that may result in 'exposing failures' and 'unsettling accommodations' (Sinding and Aronson, 2003)?

'The belt'

The example of 'inconsistency' I want to focus on occurs in the story I have called 'The belt'. This is actually two stories that took place at the start of Derek's teaching career. The first part happened while Derek was a student on teaching practice in the late 1970s, and this is followed by an incident at the school he went to shortly after qualifying as a teacher and where he has taught for the past 20 years or so. These two stories reveal something of the way in which individuals are positioned by the institutions they are part of and of the roles they are able to play within these institutions.

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

> Yeah yeah – the very last placement they put me to [name of school] and …
> while I was there

(I was only there three days)
one of the teachers ...
decided ... to provoke a ... dispute
with one of the pupils
and I realised right away that the teacher was deliberately provoking this pupil
and she just <u>pushed</u>
(I can't remember exactly what it was about)
<u>pushed and pushed</u> and she kept picking on this pupil
and eventually the pupil reacted to it
'I'm going to belt you' she said
...
and it was a demonstration for my benefit.
So I went home that night and I didn't go back
and I was prepared at that point ...
to give up the whole career the whole thing
that was it as far as I was concerned.
I thought that
'No'
I was not going back there..
so I phoned the university told them that I'm sorry I can't complete my training
told them what had happened..
and they were delighted and they put me to [different school]
the other one
and I had a brilliant time there
great school...
But I remember that y'know
it was the same feeling watching that girl getting <u>provoked</u> like that (and bullied)
that I used to have when I was at [school]
the same ...
the same atmosphere.

I was surprised that the belt was still in use at this time[1] and said,

Me: so then even while you were training the belt was still in use though it
must have been – must have been coming to an end at that stage?
Derek: Just about ... I used the belt.
Me: [excitedly]: Did you?

Derek then carries on...

Yes I did um ...
I have to use foul language here to describe this one
but it was my first year um ...
as I told you I was a labourer
a window cleaner
and I kept my window cleaning round on while I was at university
so I was pretty strong and
{*laughs*}
there was a guy called
(well never mind his name right)

this guy in the class and I saw his shoulders going like that
{*imitates movement*}
and what was happening
he had a penknife and he dug a great big hole in the wall with his penknife
just sitting there like that y'see
and so I thought 'right'
(why I thought this I don't know)
'I'm going to belt you' I said
he says 'I'm not taking it off you',
at which point one of the other boys turned round and said
'he's not taking it off of you'.
I says '..OK..I'm going to belt you as well – outside' y'see.
So I had to go and borrow the belt from my boss
{*slight laugh*}
so I take them to another class (as I'd been told I had to do)
not do it in front of the class y'see
and I says 'right' (ach we'll do it I'll only mention his first name)
'right Ronnie' I says 'hold out your hand'
'No'
I says 'OK ...'
I says 'we'll go down and see Mr [X] – depute rector – 'and..
you can tell him'
'Oh' he said
so he held out his hand
well I'd no idea how hard to hit someone so I just hit him as hard as I could..
well {*laughs*}
he looked [?] he went down onto his knees his head went down he looked up {*laughs*}.
the tears started coming down his face
he's holding onto his hand all this time ...
he jumps to his feet and rushes through to my room screaming at the top of his voice,
shouting
'jesus f***** Christ he just about [cuts] your f***** hand off' {*laughs*}
At which the other boy says
'I'm not taking it offa you' 'I'm not taking it offa you'
{*both of us laugh*}
So I take him down to the depute rector and says
'there ye are Mr X he thinks you're the soft option'.
And that was that.

After a brief pause Derek carries on:

Um ach it was a waste of time he was just as bad the next day.
It had had no effect on him whatsoever, so I mean I just never used the belt.

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

Oh no – I had used it a couple of times <u>lightly</u> y'know
but very quickly came to the conclusion, this is a waste of time -

> all that's happening is I'm getting myself upset for no reason at all.
> So I just stuck it in a drawer and it's lain there ever since.

A little later he adds:

> Before we were forced to stop I did stop because it was such a waste of time
> and it creates.. it created tensions in the class.

This story illustrates inconsistency/contradiction at a number of levels (and not just in relation to the interviewee). First, there is the interesting inconsistency in Derek's stance as a student teacher and as a teacher. I tentatively interpreted this as being due to the different positions occupied by students and teachers in institutions. As a student, Derek empathizes with the girl being picked on. As a teacher in a school in which the belt is used, he adopts this role. In a telephone conversation Derek told me he agreed with this interpretation.

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

The significance of this remark escaped me during the course of the interview. It was only when I came to transcribe it that I noticed it and found it puzzling. So puzzling, in fact, that I initially decided to leave the word 'had' out of the transcript, rationalizing that this is what he must have meant, and fearing that otherwise the credibility of my interviewee might be called into question (while ignoring the potential damage to my own credibility – an unreliable narrator indeed). It worried me because I was still at that stage thinking of the stories in the interview as corresponding to some real objective reality that could be verified as 'fact'. On returning to the transcript some time later, and re-instating the offending word, I began to reflect on the word 'had' as a word that was there that should not be there in terms of the meaning being constructed in the interview. Sands and Krumer-Nevo (2005) refer to the 'shock-waves' that can be experienced by interviewers during interviews, suggesting that these can be a stimulus to reflection. For me, the shockwaves reverberated during the transcription phase. I had not, during the course of the interview, noticed the inconsistency. In the fluid, dynamic speech, the significance of this one little word had escaped me. Although not referring explicitly to this particular part of the transcript, Derek himself would perhaps favour this explanation. He wrote in an email:

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

When transcribed, the sequential nature of speech is disrupted. Things become fixed that would otherwise be lost. What is apparently inconsequential becomes visible. The transcript thus serves to draw attention to an aspect of the data that was not apparent in the immersed situation of the interview. However, these 'slips' perhaps provide analytical handles for thinking about meaning.

In aesthetic terms, the story constructed is an engaging one and has probably been performed many times. It creates a vivid scene in the listener's imagination, using alliteration, repetition and pupil dialogue to enhance this (Tannen, 1989). It is a risky story, however, for both of us. It is risky to tell because it uses 'foul language' and Derek cannot be sure if this is acceptable or not within the interview context, and it is risky for me, as an education professional, to respond to as a 'funny story'. I do laugh and this may have been a means to 'overcome' a 'problematic moment' (Grønnerød, 2004: 37) since my response to the story did make me uneasy and I may perhaps have signalled something of my ambivalence.

So, the contradiction may be explained simply as a 'good story' that doesn't actually fit the 'facts' followed by an evaluation that is responsive to my uncertainty as to the acceptability of the story. In a telephone conversation, Derek likened the process of story-telling to the way a computer works – when it searches, files can get fragmented. If this is too severe, the computer goes haywire. In story-telling, you access different fragments – the way the story turns out depends on the fragments drawn on and how they are used (from notes taken during/after telephone conversation). However, this still leaves the question of why Derek constructed this narrative like this, i.e. what identity work is being done here and how was this unexpectedly undermined within the emergent context of the interview?

An explanation I want to put forward is in terms of the relationship between identity, narrative and discourse, and how narrative works to create the 'identification with' that relates the individual to the discourse and locates them in it. Rather than affecting the 'validity' of the account, the 'slip' provides an analytic purchase on the process. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse (defined as 'a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is negotiated' [Torfing, 1999: 85]), 'identity' can be viewed as a more or less mobile subject position within a discursive field. Within any discursive field, certain elements become partially fixed creating nodal points that have the effect of transiently organizing the discursive field, and this may lead to the creation of dominant or hegemonic discourses. Althusser's (1971) metaphor of 'hailing' or 'interpellation' provides a means of understanding how individuals

are constituted as subjects within the discourse. The act of being 'hailed' creates the relational quality of 'identification with' that positions the subject within the discourse. Drawing on Lacan, Althusser talks about the 'speculary' nature of this process of interpellation by which the individual recognizes themselves, or identifies with a particular position within the discourse, as they are hailed. Althusser draws attention to the strange ambivalence in the term 'subject' as one is subjected and as one who, as a subject, is a free agent: 'the individual is interpellated as a (free subject) in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject i.e. in order that he shall freely accept his subjection'. In other words, the process is a transparent one in which we think of ourselves as free subjects. Althusser regards this transparency as an effect of ideology (for him conceived not in the Marxist sense of false consciousness but rather as 'a social practice whose function is to turn individuals into subjects' [Howarth, 2000: 92]).

Althusser's ideas concerning interpellation have, however, been criticized. For example, Howarth (2000: 98) suggests that 'there appears to be very little space for conflicting forms of interpellation and identification that challenge the existing "structure-in-dominance"', i.e. there seems to be little room for agency or resistance in this process. However, Butler et al. (2000: 1) argue that 'identification with' can never be reduced to 'identity', there is always a gap and this perhaps does provide the 'little space' within which resistance/agency can arise, i.e. interpellation can never succeed completely. In Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, individuals may take up subject positions within the discursive field other than the hegemonic position, but in this case their identity is negated. Thus, in educational terms, 'professionalism' is articulated within the discursive field in a particular way – to be a professional is to identify with the configuration operating at that time. At some point in the 1980s, the discourse of professionalism came to exclude the possibility of accepting corporal punishment as a legitimate form of discipline. To be a professional was, therefore, to adopt that stance.

The function of narrative in this process is to provide the link between the individual and the discourse. In other words, narrative is the substance of that link, what 'identification with' is. Configurations of the discursive field are specific to particular socio-historic contexts and are in a state of flux (as a result of the plurality of discourses and identities that make up the field and from which hegemonic strategies emerge) and, as these change, so identities shift and narratives must be re-written. Personal experience can then be viewed as a palimpsest on which narratives are inscribed and re-inscribed. (It is perhaps this re-writing and over-writing that gives rise to a certain 'incoherence' in interview data – after all, the qualitative interview is a rather specialized kind of interaction, whenever else are individuals asked about their experiences in such a concerted and concentrated way, i.e. a certain amount of ambiguity/ inconsistency/contradiction may be due to the way in which narratives are produced in interviews.) This change in the nature of the relationship between

the individual and the discourse may also be the source of 'insights' that interviewees report during interviews. Thus, Mills (2001: 291), interviewing bilingual mothers and children, reports that one mother commented, 'I didn't know I knew that until I started talking'. Derek himself in an email after being interviewed said, 'It was interesting, I discovered new things about myself.' Arguably these 'new things' or 'insights' are novel ways of relating to discourses that provide a stimulus for the re-writing of narratives.

Returning to Derek's story, a relationship between discourse and identity in the narrative can be proposed. First, how he is so disgusted with what he saw as a student (having suffered similar treatment himself as a schoolboy) that he was prepared to give up the idea of becoming a teacher and, later, how he himself having been hailed into the prevailing educational discourse used the belt.[2] Later again, as this discourse changes and the belt is outlawed, Derek re-writes his narrative constructing it as an epiphany or turning point. That this may not be in strict accord with 'the facts' is not important for this analysis and, indeed, it is irreducible to the level of 'fact'. The ambiguity in Derek's text would not be removed by asking him how many times he used the belt and in what order. The contradiction can be interpreted as pointing to shifts in prevailing discourses and, more tentatively perhaps, as revealing 'gaps' between identity positions in discourses and the process of 'identification with' that the individual enters into. In the story of 'The belt', moments of undecidability or aporia are apparent. The contradiction at the level of coherence in the story ('Oh no I had used it...*lightly*') perhaps points to a shift in the discourse and, hence, results in a change in the relational nature of identification. Another kind of contradiction is suggested by the use of the word 'forced', i.e. Derek stopped using the belt before he was 'forced to'. This suggests a lack of willingness to give up the belt at odds with the notion that he gave it up because it was ineffective (in itself a rather contradictory idea given his earlier response to seeing the belt used which gave rise to disgust). This incompatibility within the narrative perhaps points to a gap between the identity position within the discourse and Derek's identification with it.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed some problematic aspects of interview data – at least aspects that were problematic for me as I tried to make sense of the text, reconstituting Derek after the interview. I was initially horrified at the potential implications of the contradictions and Derek's admission that what he had said was full of 'inaccuracies'. In Sands and Krumer-Nevo's (2005) work on shock, they say that we need to listen out for complexities, incoherence and ambiguity in interviews, but shock may prevent us from doing this. In my case here, the feelings of shock emerged afterwards, as I transcribed the interview. But there is perhaps a trade-off, or at least a tension, between immersion in the interview context and reflexive monitoring of what is going on. The

construction of meaning that goes on in interviews needs to be experienced at the time but reflected on afterwards. The production of the transcript creates a temporal dislocation within which a different relationship can be developed with the data, enabling a complementary dialogue to take place.

My analysis centres on the relationships between discourse, narrative and identity as these emerge in the analysis of data from interviews. In this framework, the unreliable narration gives rise to a kind of situated reliability. It is the very shifts and gaps in the narrative, the aspects that threaten the collapse of coherence, that hint at the changes in our identities. Irony, Haraway (cited in Strathearn, 2004: 35) suggests, 'is about the tension of holding incompatible things together'. This evokes Lather's (1995) concept of 'ironic validity'. Validity in these terms is not about 'representing the given'; truth does not inhere in representation. Rather, it is about 'participating in the construction of the new' (Jensen and Lauritsen, 2005).

In my initial analysis, I tried to smooth over the contradiction and to distill Derek's essence to a single explanation (albeit one he agreed with). Using the contradiction in interviews enables narratives to be seen as a process of writing and re-writing in which the 'interminable process of identification with' (Derrida, 1998) is played out within the shifting discourses in which we are immersed.

NOTES

1. The 'tawse', or belt as it was usually referred to, continued to be used in Scotland for some time after the cane had largely fallen out of use in English state schools, and was not formally abolished in Scottish state schools until 1987 (though most authorities had banned it before then following a ruling in the European Court of Human Rights in 1982 that gave parents the right to refuse corporal punishment for their children). In addition, whereas in England the cane tended to be administered by the Head Teacher, in Scotland any teacher had the right to use the belt (Duncan, n.d.).

2. Jonas Qvarsebo (2004) suggests that corporal punishment was a 'sedimented practice', i.e. the hegemonic position in the prevailing social discourse was that it was 'natural' to beat children. Indeed, this was part of the conceptual distinction between childhood and adulthood:

> To be an adult in modern Western societies is associated with privileges such as basic civil and political rights that formerly belonged only to certain strata in society. As children have been made part of this modern movement towards individuality and have become political subjects, they have slowly gained at least some of the adult privileges ... The movement towards children's individuality and autonomy was also furthered by emergent psychological discourses which excluded the practice of physical punishment ... In this way the discursive boundaries between children and adults have gradually been disbanded and new articulations of children and childhood have become possible.

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