'One participant said …': the implications of quotations from biographical talk
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‘One participant said …’: the implications of quotations from biographical talk

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Abstract
Quotations from biographical talk are widely used in the presentation and writing up of qualitative research. This article discusses the unintended implications that such quotations can carry, partly as a result of the conventions for introducing them and because the basis for their selection is often unclear. These implications are discussed in terms of consistency. An assumption of consistency as an aspect of the talk or the person speaking is problematic because it disregards the situated and variable nature of talk, including talk about memory, and can invoke an over-simple model of the speaker. The article proposes that consistency should not be assumed but become a focus for analysis. An example is presented of an analysis of biographical talk about creative work, following an approach derived from social and discursive psychology. Consistencies in a speaker’s repeated accounts of the same job are interpreted in terms of both discursive resources around contemporary creative working, and ‘local resources’, which are derived from the speaker’s ‘discursive apprenticeship’ with his own family.

Keywords
biographical talk data, consistency, creative work, discursive resources, quotation

Introduction
Quotations from participants are often included in presentations of qualitative research for an academic audience, such as conference papers, theses and articles, and also in documents, like reports, which address a broader readership. Such quotations may be presented to illustrate significant features of the larger body of data, support claims and, more impressionistically, give the reader a ‘flavour’ of the research. In this article, I discuss some problems related to their use. I refer particularly to quotations from ‘biographical talk’, taken as an umbrella term for participants’ talk about themselves, their lives and their personal experience. This talk includes both the kind of extended chronological account
that is elicited with a question about a participant’s life history, and the shorter and more fragmentary references and accounts that may occur in ongoing talk collected through interviews and focus groups and, less formally, as part of ethnographic or participant observation studies.

Biographical talk is central to the well-established tradition of oral history and to the expanding fields of narrative research, psychosocial research and qualitative longitudinal research. It is a form of data used in social research on a wide range of topics, including social relationships, subjectivity and affect, and, in an example I discuss, work experience and careers. However, quotations from biographical talk often carry unacknowledged implications, about the speaker, the status of the talk, and the overall research project. In this article, I discuss these implications in terms of consistency, as an aspect of the talk or the person speaking. I suggest that the assumption of consistency is often problematic. In particular, the use of quotations can evoke a model of an uncomplicated, authoritative and representative speaker, which many social scientists would challenge if it were presented explicitly as the theoretical underpinning of the research.

I begin the article with a discussion of the problems that derive from the standard presentation of quotations and their often unacknowledged basis for selection or relationship to a larger dataset and analysis. I focus on how a single quotation may appear to represent a speaker or category of speakers and even the findings of the research project as a whole, as if the researcher’s claims are fully understood and endorsed by the person whose talk was part of the data. I discuss the situated and variable nature of biographical talk and argue for a fuller acknowledgement of its inconsistencies, both in the writing up of research and in the process of analysis. I suggest that consistencies within talk, for example, in what is recounted or how it is told, including the words or images that are used and the ways an account shaped, can be a feature for the analysis to explore.

I then outline a research approach (Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2006) from narrative social psychology (e.g. Bruner, 1990, 1994; Gergen, 1994) and critical discursive psychology (e.g. Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998), which, I suggest, specifically addresses some of the problems I have discussed. As an example of this approach, I present an analysis of biographical talk that takes as its focus of analysis points of consistency in the talk, within extracts referring to the same experience (of a job), and within the larger dataset from which the quoted accounts are taken. The article is not necessarily an argument for this way of doing research, which to some extent overlaps with other qualitative research traditions and empirical approaches. Rather, the approach and analysis are presented to draw attention to the issues around quotations from biographical talk that I have explored and, which, I suggest, are too frequently not taken account of in the writing up of qualitative research.

Connecting quotations and speakers within the research text

When a quotation or extract from biographical talk is presented in an academic text, it is usually preceded by a short description of the speaker. This is likely to include a (pseudonymous) name together with gender, age and a few other details that locate the speaker in terms of major social categories considered relevant to the research, such as nationality,
‘race’, occupation, class or family role. This form of introduction is now sufficiently established as a convention for journal reviewers and editors to criticize any departure from it. Nonetheless, it raises a number of issues, which I discuss in this section.

First, the introduction implies a connection between the talk that is quoted and the speaker as a representative of the given categories, inviting the reader to ‘hear’ what is said as a collective voice, for example, of white British women of a certain age and family situation. A pseudonymous first name (‘Amina’, ‘Annie’) tends to reinforce categorizations of the speaker because it almost inevitably carries additional markers of age group, ethnicity and class, as Michael Billig (1999) has discussed. Pseudonyms do avoid the reductive implications of role descriptions (‘mother’, ‘doctor’) but the use of a first name is subtly informal and intimate, inviting a different reading of the extract than a less personalized reference. However, this is not to advocate the substitution of title and family name (‘Dr Brown’, ‘Miss Patel’) as an alternative since these tend to mark differences of status. The standard titles for women carry the additional problematic associations of either marital status (‘Miss’, ‘Mrs’) or a defiance of conventions (‘Ms’). In short, the standard introductory description of a quotation from biographical talk tends to reify the speaker as a mouthpiece for an over-simplified, consistent collective identity. This model of a speaker has been problematized in many theoretical traditions in the social sciences (e.g. Elliott, 2007) and is rejected by many academic authors but it is, I suggest, often invoked in the way that quotations from biographical talk are presented.

A second and somewhat different problem around the inclusion of an age or age category is that it tends to locate the speaker within the kind of normative and staged life course that is associated with developmental psychology models and has been criticized by qualitative psychology researchers (see Mishler, 1999; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). The speaker may be implicitly positioned within a sequence of stages, perhaps as behind or ahead, for example, in getting married, having children or achieving career success (Taylor, 2009). Again, there is an assumption of consistency, here in the trajectories in people’s lives.

These conventions for introducing quotations may have been influenced by journalism, by the presentation of biographical talk in the kind of witness accounts that are commonly included in written and broadcast news reports. Yet many academics would criticize the assumptions underlying this journalistic use. Journalists quote biographical talk because it supposedly carries the unique authority of the speaker’s knowledge of the details of her own life and experience (what she saw and heard, for example). This implication can be reinforced by short quotations that have a summary quality, implying coherence and consistency between the speaker’s talk on this and other occasions. However, many academics would understand the speaker as a more complex and fragmented subject, and possibly one whose self-knowledge is in question. As just one example, in psychoanalytically-informed qualitative research (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) the stories the speaker tells about herself may be interpreted as ‘superficial covers for something that is much more deep, complex and threatening’ (Sclater, 2003: 318), so that the talk may be assumed to be concealing rather than revealing the speaker. In such an approach, the researcher claims an understanding that goes beyond the speaker’s own knowledge of herself: the authority on the biographical talk therefore becomes the (psycho)analyst rather than the participant who is the speaker.

The issues around authority are less obvious for academic researchers who follow different theoretical traditions. Nonetheless, the researcher is still likely to be presenting
interpretations and claims that the participant would not agree with, or even understand, because the research is framed in theoretical terms that the participant would not recognize. In addition, the interpretation of data, and the construction of an argument based on that interpretation, are processes that are accomplished by the researcher without the involvement or awareness of the participants. Because the analytic approach is interpretive (as, I would argue, is any qualitative research), the claims made on the basis of the data are not necessarily represented in the talk of any particular speaker. There is an obvious difference between a participant’s talk as part of the data to be interpreted and built into an argument, as evidence, and any claims made by the researcher and author on the basis of that argument. Yet that difference is blurred in the common practice of presenting short quotations from talk data, selected for their succinctness, as if the speaker, a participant, confirms and agrees with the researcher’s larger interpretations and claims.

As the discussion in this section has indicated, issues around the introduction and presentation of quotations raise further questions about the assumptions that underlie the original analysis of biographical talk and the basis on which particular quoted extracts have been selected. I address these points in the next section.

The status of biographical talk

Lengthy or detailed extracts from biographical talk are sometimes presented as data to be analysed within the research text, as in some narrative and conversation analyses. However, in most forms of qualitative research, the analytic process remains unseen, conducted ‘offstage’ because of the large quantities of data involved and the complexity of an iterative, interpretive analytic process. The research text is, therefore, a selective description and summary of findings. It is always possible, of course, that a rigorous data analysis has not taken place at all, or that research participants have been quoted selectively, perhaps in order to illustrate theory or the writer’s argument, or that the selection of extracts is biased towards a minority of participants, such as those whose talk was more colourful or articulate. However, these examples of faulty research practice are not my concern in this article. Nor will I consider the inclusion of data extracts as an issue of writing style, to give writing the ‘look’ of academic work. As indicated in the previous section, my interest is the implications that quotations can carry, particularly in relation to the nature of the person cited as the speaker, and to consistency and inconsistency in biographical talk. In this section, I discuss memory, its relation to biographical talk and the commonsense assumption that our memories and accounts of what we remember will be consistent.

Biographical talk about the speaker’s life before the occasion of the talk refers explicitly or implicitly to what is remembered. There is a ‘commonsense’ model of memory as a kind of video replay or other retrieval of stored experience: Jens Brockmeier (2002) has summarized it using the metaphor of ‘a warehouse of the past’ (p. 17) from which specific recollections can be pulled out intact. The implication of such a model is that biographical talk will be consistent from one telling to another because the same memory is being retrieved. However, this assumption is problematic. First, the commonsense model implies that nothing is forgotten; yet, as Brockmeier notes, being able to recall all of life’s experience would be as unfeasible a notion as being able to draw a one-to-one scale map. He argues that memory must inevitably involve selection and therefore also forgetting. This
is particularly relevant for its implications for a longitudinal study, since it suggests that a speaker’s accounts of the same experience or circumstance in successive interviews may differ partly as a result of selective forgetting.

A second problem with the assumption or expectation that memories will be consistent relates to the impossibility, in most cases, of distinguishing the memory from the talk in which it is presented. As discursive psychologists have noted, most details of biographical talk cannot be checked by researchers except through more talk from the same participant. The qualitative researcher must therefore be aware of the constructed and functional nature of talk and the ‘variation’ that occurs in what is said at different points because of its different functions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). One example of how the function can shape talk and produce both consistency (in the talk of different speakers) and inconsistency (in the same speaker’s multiple accounts of a memory) is given by the convention of ‘second stories’, noted by the sociologist Harvey Sacks (1992). He describes how one speaker’s account of an experience prompts other speakers to produce accounts shaped in a similar way, usually with themselves in a similar ‘role’ to the first speaker. He gives the example of the story told by ‘someone who saw an automobile accident’: listeners will respond with ‘a story about an automobile accident that they saw’ (p. 769: emphasis added). The function of this kind of matching in the interaction is to signal that the listeners have understood the point of the original story (in this example, the first speaker’s experience of seeing the accident). The relevant point for my discussion is that it indicates one way in which the surrounding conversation will shape the telling of a memory. The speakers within the conversation shape their accounts of their memories as Sacks has described, suggesting that one particular speaker will recount the ‘same’ memory differently in the context of different conversations, possibly with quite a considerable variation of detail and focus.

Differences and inconsistencies in the talk of a single speaker will also result from the speaker’s orientation, or who she is speaking ‘to’, which may extend beyond the obvious audience of any physically present listener(s). Orientation has been the focus of the work of conversation analysts who are particularly interested in the orientations of speakers within an interaction, as part of the turn-by-turn construction of meaning (e.g. Speer, 2002a, 2002b, 2008). My own research considers orientations within a wider context, following the work of Michael Billig (1987) who discusses the ‘rhetorical’ aspect of talk through which reference or address is made to a broader argument or ongoing contest. A classic example is indicated by the preface ‘I’m not a racist but … ’: the speaker is acknowledging the possibility that what is about to be said may be heard as racist, and is therefore referring to known political and social debates and addressing anticipated or previously encountered critics. This rhetorical work, I suggest, also indicates that a speaker can be simultaneously oriented to multiple contexts, from listeners present to (potential) listeners absent. This aspect of multiple orientation indicates the complex conceptualization of the person that underpins this kind of analysis, in contrast, again, to a simplistic model of a speaker as a mouthpiece of social categories.

What are the implications of these points for the qualitative researcher and author? It might seem obvious that each quotation from biographical talk needs to be contextualized, but there will obviously be practical limits to how much of the additional surrounding talk can be included, or how many details of the location, time, sociohistorical context and so on can be presented and discussed, even if these have been taken into account as
part of the analytic process. What is possible, but is often not done, is to make clear the basis on which the quotations have been selected. This, in turn, requires a clarification of the theory or premises of the research. I have suggested that an analysis of biographical talk data cannot rest on an over simple model of memory or talk about what is remembered. An alternative is offered by the work of social and discursive psychologists who do not approach talk as a direct report of its ostensible subject (in biographical talk, the events and experience of the speaker’s life) but as a version that is shaped in the telling. They explore consistency, in the talk of different speakers and in the talk of the same speaker at different points, in terms of culture, common sense and discursive resources. In the next section I discuss these concepts in more detail as part of a research approach that I employ in my own analyses of biographical talk.

A narrative-discursive approach to biographical talk

The research approach that I employ (Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2006), from social and discursive psychology, centres on the investigation of consistencies within talk, including biographical talk, which appear as patterns or repeated features identifiable across a larger dataset of multiple interviews, and also within successive interviews with the one participant. As noted, this is informed by previous work in social and discursive psychology that centres on the concepts of culture, common sense and discursive resources.

I use the term ‘culture’ as presented in the work of the social psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990). Bruner has discussed how talk is shaped by the ‘culture’ of a family, suggesting this includes accepted ‘annals’ or happenings that can be referred to, with the references recognized, by family members, and also shared meanings, for example, of what counts as ‘home’ for a particular family, and also learned styles of talk common to family members (p. 136). I would suggest that such styles will include similarities within a family and differences from one family to another, of formality, courtesy conventions and taboo subjects (what cannot be said) from one family to another. Culture as Bruner defines it can be expected to operate similarly in other contexts to the family, including the different places, collectives and roles associated with work, study, peer groups and leisure activities, like sport.

Critical discursive psychologists (e.g. Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) employ a similar conception of culture, which they discuss and analyse in terms of the ‘discursive resources’ or shared meanings that make up ‘common sense’ (Edley and Wetherell, 1995), and shape talk and speakers’ self-making and their identity constructions within that talk. In later sections of this article I will discuss a research project on creative work for which some of the relevant discursive resources included the familiar and taken-for-granted Romantic images of an artist and the artist’s life, including the unrecognized genius starving in a garret. Elliot G Mishler (1999) has criticized analysts who assume that there is a consistency in life courses, and in accounts of them. In the terms of critical discursive psychology, such consistencies might be produced by the cultural or common sense conventions around the telling of a life story, and also the expected or normal structures or trajectories that become discursive resources for speakers; however, it is important to be aware that such resources may influence what can be said but will not absolutely determine it. As just one example, a study of single women showed how some of them spoke against a ‘normal’ trajectory of a life progressing through courtship, coupling and parenting (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005), shaping their accounts of their own life courses as not following such a trajectory.
Although discursive resources are generally related to the larger sociohistorical context, like the ‘discourses’ discussed in Foucauldian research (see Edley, 2001: 137 for a discussion of the two terms), discursive resources can also be tied to a narrower context, like Bruner’s culture of the family. Such ‘local’ resources may also be associated with particular environments like workplaces or schools (see Taylor, 2006, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2006). They may also include a speaker’s own accounts of herself and her life, the well-rehearsed tellings, special memories and stories that can be re-versioned for the purposes of subsequent conversations and also create continuity across the different occasions of a speaker’s biographical talk. Local resources can therefore give rise to consistencies within a single speaker’s talk, a kind of internal pattern that can be understood as part of what Margaret Wetherell (2003) has called a ‘personal order’, taken up by a speaker over time as part of a ‘discursive apprenticeship’. This is part of a theory of the person as discursively constituted but also exhibiting the kind of continuity (Taylor, 2009) that other writers explain in psychoanalytic terms (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

In the next sections, I will present research that analyses talk data using an approach underpinned by the theories I have discussed and taking consistencies in biographical talk data as a central focus (Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2006). The research therefore offers a further clarification of issues discussed covered in previous sections.

A research project

The research project I will refer to investigated creative work and its meanings for novice creative workers. In the last two decades, creative work has gained a new significance through the so-called ‘cultural’ and ‘creative industries’. These became a focus of attention for policy-makers because of their novel character, current economic success and apparent potential for further growth. Policy definitions of the industries include the conventional territory of the creative arts and also sectors associated with new media and the knowledge economy (e.g. Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), 2001), although commentators have suggested that the association with the arts remains central (e.g. Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009: 416). The research project I refer to centered on this association, recruiting participants for whom postgraduate study in creative arts and design was a career entry point, and looking specifically at their interpretations and understandings of their creative work and their career prospects. They were postgraduate art college students in London who were studying a wide variety of courses, from those that might be regarded as ‘fine art’ to more ‘applied’ areas, although that division is blurred because, for many of them, postgraduate study elevated a conventionally applied area, such as photography or fashion, to the status of fine art.

In the first phase of the research, in 2005, 29 participants were interviewed about their creative work, their education, their careers to date and their plans and hopes for the future. The interviews therefore included a considerable amount of biographical talk, in the broad definition I am using, i.e. participants’ talk about themselves, their lives and their personal experience. In the second phase of the research, in 2006, 11 of the original participants were re-interviewed. At that point, they were either just completing their degrees or were a year ‘out’ into post-university life, working in their specialist areas in various employment arrangements. The participants were interviewed separately and the main data were the transcribed audio-recordings of these interviews. Although the second interview was
not intended to elicit repeated accounts, where these did occur they could be examined for consistencies and inconsistencies, for example, in what participants described or even the words they used (Taylor and Littleton, 2006).

As with most qualitative research, the analysis conducted for the project involved a slow, laborious and iterative process of working through these large quantities of data. My co-researcher and I initially considered the transcripts as a single dataset, looking for patterns or consistencies in the talk rather than comparing the participants as individuals. Out of this process, we identified a number of recurring features of description (for instance, in the terms or images used), explanation (for instance, with reference to cause-effect relationships or other connections) and positions taken up by speakers, some of which corresponded to points noted by other writers on the cultural and creative industries. For example, participants drew few boundaries between their work and their personal or leisure lives. They emphasized their ‘love’ of what they did, their commitment to it and the uncertainty of their futures. They marked themselves off as different to people in more conventional careers. Since our interest was in their interpretations and accounts, the relevant point here is not whether these distinctions were valid. The focus of the analysis was in the shared ideas or ‘discursive resources’ that underpinned these recurring features in the talk and provided the logic for repeated claims. One example was the selective way in which conventional Romantic images of the artist were taken up to characterize contemporary creative working. Participants positioned themselves outside conventional career trajectories of steady progress towards greater financial and employment security, but they did not particularly claim to be outside social conventions or living a ‘bohemian’ artistic lifestyle (cf. Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006: 240).

It is tempting to look for quotations from the biographical talk data to illustrate discursive resources, such as those around creative lives. However, such illustrations raise problems of the kind I have discussed. A single short quotation is not always sufficient to illustrate the breadth of the resource, with all the parallels and connections that were identified across multiple interviews. Nonetheless, in the next section I will present and discuss extracts from biographical talk, attempting to avoid the pitfalls I have discussed. The talk is from the research project on creative work. The first three extracts are not presented as identical but as having the kind of similarity I have referred to as a pattern, and I discuss this with reference to discursive resources. The fourth extract is presented with a different purpose, relevant to this specific speaker.

**An analysis of biographical talk data**

A qualitative analysis of multiple transcribed interviews cannot be presented in full detail in a research text, for reasons of length and also confidentiality. The quotations or extracts from biographical talk that I present below are therefore a selection made to exemplify features identified in the whole analysis, but also, as with any qualitative data, containing their own detail and features that will not be part of my focus or discussion here. I have discussed the problems of a standard introduction of the speaker (pseudonym, age, gender and a few other category descriptions). Such details are not relevant to my discussion of the talk, so I will omit most of them. In practice, it is very difficult to write about someone without referring to gender (Richard Jenkins, 1996, calls it a ‘primary identity’, p. 21).
so I will retain that information: the speaker is a man. He was interviewed twice and the first two extracts are from the first interview. It is also useful to know that although he was interviewed in London, where he was studying, then working, he had come to the UK from another country; his creative work was related to film, and he is describing a previous job, although most of this additional information can probably be understood from the extracts themselves. The first two extracts are taken from the same interview.

Extract 1 (from Interview 1, 2005)

A: I went to back to [Home country] and then (.) and I and I was working doing visual effects uh for (.) for film kind of post production um (.) and again I found that a bit too (.) um (.) too applied (INT: Right) yeah

INT: What do you mean by that sorry
A: Kind of not not creative enough (.) (INT: Uh hu) not free enough like to do what I want to do (.)

Extract 2 (from Interview 1, 2005)

A: I mean I just realized that you I think you have to do what you what you love (INT: Right) you have to (.) and there’s no point in kind of trying to be like (.) do-goody and if if you (.) you know if you’re not enjoying yourself uh or you know as me kind of I I kind of like I was ending up in a job which wasn’t particularly worthy but it’s just a bit boring

INT: What was that
A: I was doing post-production (INT: Right) visual effects
INT: In [Home country]
A: Yeah in [Home country]
INT: Right
A: It was sort of I was learning a lot and I’m using all that now but if I had stayed there I would have it was a bit of a dead end you can become really skilled you know technically but you just kind of you know how to like draw a line really well but it never goes beyond that (INT: Yeah) kind of you know

When the speaker was interviewed again a year later, he referred again to the same job.

Extract 3 (from Interview 2, 2006)

A: I had done my BA and I (.) I had (.). started working (.). in (.). post production like film visual effects work which (.) it’s kind of similar but like more applied (.) and (.) I just (.). like I did it for like a year and then realized that (.) I could very easily get stuck and (.). you know I felt all those (.) you know dangers that I could get (INT: Right) stuck into a job and (.) and I I you know wasn’t enjoying myself so much any more (.). erm (.). I was very worried that (.). you know like (.). four or five years down the line I would like go Ooh what (.). (INT: Yeah) you know what happened there
Following the focus of the research project, I am interested in these quoted accounts as talk about a job within the creative industries, and talk that characterizes the job negatively. These multiple accounts of the job also show the rehearsed nature of some talk and how previous tellings become resources for later versions, shaped to the new contexts of telling (Taylor, 2006). The interest for this article is in the consistencies and inconsistencies in the speaker’s accounts. As my earlier discussion would predict, there is variation in some details: how long he worked in the job; the technically skilled nature of the work; the worry about becoming ‘stuck’.

The relevance of these extracts to the project as a whole is given by connections within the larger body of data, across all the interviews. The talk is part of a pattern of references by participants to their love of their work, a point that has been noted also by other writers on the creative industries (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 1998). This ‘love’ becomes a compensation for more negative aspects of creative work, such as precarious employment. Taken together, the references in the interviews can be discussed as the kind of discursive resource sometimes referred to as an ‘interpretative repertoire’: a ‘relatively coherent way... of talking about objects and events in the world’ (Edley, 2001: 198). The repertoire of ‘love of the work’ is drawn on by this speaker to justify not persisting in this job. Specifically, the participant says that he wasn’t doing ‘what I want to do’ (Extract 1), ‘you have to do what you love’ (which in this job he was not) (Extract 2) and ‘I wasn’t enjoying myself so much any more’ (Extract 3). The absence of ‘love’ is still part of the repertoire. In these terms, the three quotations from this participant’s biographical talk are presented to illustrate a feature of the larger dataset (the interpretative repertoire, appearing as a pattern across multiple interviews) and a finding of the research.

However, there is a degree of consistency, even in the extracts from interviews a year apart, which can become a point for further analysis since I have argued that such consistency is not to be expected. The repeated story of the job seems to be a discursive resource that is internal to the talk of this participant, that is, a ‘local’ resource, in the terms that I am using (Taylor, 2006; Taylor and Littleton, 2006). It provides additional meanings concerning creative work. One function of the accounts in his talk is to illustrate what creative work should be, through contrast with this job. In the first extract, he says of the job that it was ‘too applied’, ‘not creative enough’ and ‘not free enough’; in the second extract, that it was ‘a bit boring’, it was confined to work that was technically skilled, which was not enough for him, and in the third that he could ‘very easily’ have got ‘stuck’ in the job that he wasn’t enjoying. The internal pattern in his talk is that doing what he loves is equated with being creative, not merely technical, and with being free. This local resource therefore makes a connection between love of the work and freedom.

Analytically, this local resource became a point for further investigation, following which I will quote another extract, from the second interview. At this point, the further information is required about the speaker that his father, referred to in this extract, is a musician.

Extract 4 (from Interview 2, 2006)

A: …his work I mean he’s totally he makes his he makes CDs and they sell you know they get sold in shops and he goes on tour and it’s like (.) every every year he’s like afraid whether you know it’s going to work or not and it’s worked so far
In this extract, the participant contrasts his father’s work as a professional musician with that of his friend’s father, a man who had a career working in a company. The two men’s working lives are cited as influences on their respective sons, both of whom are pursuing creative careers. For the participant, it has been ‘a valuable thing to grow up with’ the example of his father as someone who ‘every year is afraid whether it’s going to work or not’. However, the graphic designer friend, being ‘security conscious’, following the example of his father, the company man, ‘needs to get a job’ and this, ultimately, is limiting.

Taken together, the four extracts from biographical talk can be seen to comprise an argument around creative working. To be creative, you need to be free to do what you want to do; in a steady or secure job, you are not free, so such a job conflicts with being creative: uncertain employment is therefore a necessary condition for creative work. Considered as part of the whole analysis, this is part of patterns that correspond to findings of other researchers: creative workers love what they do, even though creative work is insecure. Taken separately, as part of one participant’s biographical talk, the extracts represent a more personal ‘logic of success’ that can be drawn on in decision making and the rationalization of life choices (Taylor and Littleton, 2008).

A further point, in the terms I am using, is that this logic of success can be understood as a consequence of the participant’s discursive apprenticeship of growing up within his own family, observing his father’s working life, contrasted with the very different apprenticeship of his friend; however, some of these talk data may of course be consistent with different theories of the person, including psychoanalytic psychosocial theories (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The point of interest for this article is that the consistency in the participant’s biographical talk is not taken for granted but made a point of analysis, and the interpretation explicitly follows from the complex theory of talk and the person that underpins the research, rather than implicitly resting on a simplistic model of the speaker.

Concluding comments

This article has discussed issues relating to quotations from biographical talk data. These issues are not new but they remain relevant, given the continuing widespread use of biographical talk data in social research, including focus group and interview data, and the almost universal inclusion of short quotations from these data in written outputs from the research. I have suggested that within research texts such quotations may carry unintended and unexplored implications, linked to a model of the speaker and assumptions about the status of talk that many social researchers would challenge. A single quotation can be
presented as if it represented the speaker’s entire and unchanging world view, and one speaker can appear to stand for a wider category or categories of people. These problems are exacerbated by the conventional introduction of quotations with a description of the speaker. Another problem is that there may be an implication of consistency between the participant and the researcher, as if the former supports the claims made by the latter on the basis of the whole research project.

As part of my discussion of these problems, I outlined social and discursive theories of talk and memory that suggest that speakers are likely to be inconsistent in what they say on different occasions and even at different points in the same interview, which is of course relevant for what quotations can purport to represent. In addition, I argued that the problems I identified have relevance for how biographical talk can be analysed. Elliot G Mishler (1999), criticizing researchers who expect life histories to follow universal, predictable trajectories, has called for the variability in participants’ life courses to become a focus of analysis (p. 11). Conversely, I have suggested in this article that instead of consistency being taken for granted, where it does occur in biographical talk (e.g. in what is recounted or how it is told and the account shaped) it may become a feature to be explored. I presented an illustrative example, from research on creative workers, in which a repeated story and points of consistency within it became the focus of analysis. This analysis employed a narrative-discursive approach (Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2006) that considers consistencies across the talk of multiple speakers and also within the talk of a single speaker.

Although the article has not been presented as a simple ‘good practice’ guide, it does indicate points that are relevant for other researchers. In addition to considering an appropriate analytic approach such as the one I have discussed (although this is not, of course, the only possibility) I would suggest that qualitative researchers who work with biographical talk data can take several steps to avoid the problems I have discussed. Within the research text, it will be important to present quotations with care and also to make clear the basis for selecting them. For example, there needs to be some account of whether a quotation is intended to illustrate a major finding from the analysis or claim from the project as a whole, or whether it is a singular example, perhaps presented as a contrast. In addition, I suggest that data extracts may currently be over-used. Some findings may best be presented in summary, without illustrative quotations, in recognition also of the points that there may not be any single succinct extract that summarizes the complexity of larger findings and patterns in the data, and that data are distinct from interpretations and claims. Finally, I would also suggest that the researcher needs to have some awareness of the theory of the person invoked in the research approach. The example I discussed, which originated in social discursive psychology, is only one alternative to the oversimplified model of the speaker that I have criticized. Although I would not argue that qualitative researchers must inevitably enter such theoretical debates, this article has shown how some understanding is required for an academic researcher and author to present quotations from biographical talk data without unintended implications.

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Notes

1. Relevant websites for researchers currently working in these areas include, for narrative research, http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/, for psychosocial research http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/psychosocial-cluster, and qualitative longitudinal research http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/

2. There are, of course, different kinds of patterns that can be identified. Wood and Kroger (2000), from a similar starting point to my own, discourse analysis in social psychology, consider some alternative patterns, for example, in relation to synchronous or diachronic discourse, but these are not a feature of my analysis.

3. The talk has been transcribed to maintain some of the irregularities of spoken language (i.e. it has not been ‘tidied’ into grammatical sentences) but without the level of detail associated with some analytic approaches (e.g. Conversation Analysis). Relevant features are

   INT: indicates the speaker is the interviewer
   A: indicates the speaker is the participant
   (INT: Right) indicates a brief comment while the other person is speaking
   [word in square brackets] replaces a real name or other information which has been omitted as part of the anonymisation of the participant
   (.) indicates a short pause (not timed)
   Underlining indicates the word is spoken with emphasis

4. Any discussion of methodology is to some extent a guide for good practice and some do present more explicit rules e.g. Antaki et al. (2003). My primary aim in this article has been to explore issues rather than present a simple statement of rules.

References


Biographical Note

Stephanie Taylor is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Social Sciences at the Open University, UK. Her long-term research interests concern the social formation of the person and the ways in which ongoing identifications, including gendered identifications, are shaped and constrained by available meanings and cultural associations. Her latest books are What is Discourse Analysis?, to be published by Bloomsbury Academic, and Contemporary Identities of Creativity and Creative Work, with Karen Littleton, to be published by Ashgate in 2012.