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Treating Resistance as Data in Qualitative Interviews

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Abstract

Scientific interviews provide a useful resource for qualitative researchers studying people's perceptions on contemporary phenomena. This article contributes to the large body of literature on qualitative interviews by investigating a rather common but under-reported pattern in interviews, that of resistance. Resistance is a form of power that the participant maintains and can exercise at any moment. The phenomenon knows various expressions from a refusal on the side of the participant to sign the consent form to question dodging or embellished accounts. Two case studies are used to underpin the basic argument that resistance in interviews may be a valuable finding in itself if contextualized properly.

Keywords

Qualitative Interviews, Reflexivity, Resistance, Dominance

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Treating Resistance as Data in Qualitative Interviews

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Scientific interviews provide a useful resource for qualitative researchers studying people's perceptions on contemporary phenomena. This article contributes to the large body of literature on qualitative interviews by investigating a rather common but under-reported pattern in interviews, that of resistance. Resistance is a form of power that the participant maintains and can exercise at any moment. The phenomenon knows various expressions from a refusal on the side of the participant to sign the consent form to question dodging or embellished accounts. Two case studies are used to underpin the basic argument that resistance in interviews may be a valuable finding in itself if contextualized properly. Keywords: Qualitative Interviews, Reflexivity, Resistance, Dominance

Introduction

Resistance as an aspect of communication in scientific interviews has been explored only reflectively through the exploration of two other power-related concepts: the concept of dominance and the notion of reflexivity. While these important ideas turn the attention to the interviewer as the source of power, the concept of resistance helps us bring to the centre of attention the participant identifying them as a focal point of power. Ethical considerations in the conduct of qualitative interviews have always underpinned the importance of being mindful (or, post-interview, reflective) of the interviewer's authority. Hence the inclusion of this data collection method to the list of methods that require ethical approval by research ethics committees. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note, ethics committees were formed initially to monitor bio-medical research projects, usually of quantitative nature, before researchers realized that qualitative projects called for the same treatment, since they too were dealing with sensitive issues. Dominance proved to be a substantial problem in qualitative interviews and reflexivity was proposed as an antidote capable of moderating the interviewer's authority. As Kvale (2006, p. 483) has underlined, researchers often even describe the interview process as a "dialogue," among other "misnomers." This is a misleading term in that it erases, or more accurately conceals, power asymmetries while denying the need to critically reflect on the practice.

Interestingly, a wave of contributions on the concepts of dominance and reflexivity have focused on the role of gender in the interview process (Olliffe & Mroz, 2005; Pini, 2005; Reinharz & Chase, 2002). Del Busso (2007, p. 309) has argued that the interview is an "embodied experience" which copies power imbalances found in society making the need to empower participants pressing. Next to gender, Berger (2015) notes that a range of personal attributes like race, age, sexual orientation, class, linguistic tradition and political stance among others affect the circumstances of the interview and, thereby, the relationship between the researcher and the participant. The aforementioned parameters have an impact on the interviewer's attitude (a concept called positionality in sociology) which, in its turn, influences the participant's behaviour raising the levels of their self-awareness. In this context, as evident, identity issues are highly likely to arise, making the participant question their personal integrity and conduct.

Post-structuralist accounts offer a way out of this problem by the smart reconfiguration of the concept of positionality. The post-structuralist school of thought argues that identities are performed rather than constructed, they are fluid rather than fixed, giving rise to the concept of “performativity” (Butler, 1993). Performativity is both the product and the producer of a given social order; for example, looking at gender, Butler argued that women experience and construct their gender through the repetitive performance of it. Gendered behaviour reaffirms and establishes as real the idea of womanhood. Gender is, therefore, not a biological inheritance, but an experience authored by the subject. Performativity, through this lens, has been much celebrated in post-structuralist tradition as it recognizes agency in those social actors who were traditionally not seen as authors of their own condition.

Resistance, as a subject in its own right, rose as a topic of interest first in police interviews, and it is in the field of Criminal Psychology that we find the keyword *per se* to be most often in use (Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Kronkvist, 2006; Holmberg & Christianson, 2002; Leander, 2010; Shepard, 1993). Resistance in this context is defined as refusal to admit misconduct. The nature of such interviews is entirely different to the aims and rules of conduct of scientific interviews, so literature from this field was excluded entirely. In police interviews, the investigator’s power (physical and psychological) over the interviewee is the main mechanism for the elicitation of information, while in scientific interviews, it is exactly this imbalance that researchers are concerned with (Mann, 2016).

Resistance, according to our perspective, may take various forms. Surprisingly, few publications consider it when investigating issues of performance in qualitative interviews. One of the most ingenious approaches belongs to Beaunae, Wu, and Koro-Ljungberg (2011), who creatively constructed a play in which some of the legendary connoisseurs of power and performativity, among them Bourdieu, Foucault and Butler, meet with doctoral students to discuss and reflect on their interview experiences. Resistance here is both identified as a problem and as a source of insight, nevertheless, the authors do not address the issue further. Nunkoosing (2005), in his work with patients, talks about participants that are concealing the truth only incidentally, and Conti and O’Neil (2007), in their study of global elites, report their struggle with tight-lipped participants who displayed authoritative behaviour citing strategies to battle with resistance. However, we have found that the issue of resistance has not received sufficient scholarly attention and has not been placed at the centre of scientific analyses yet.

In this paper, we argue that resistance in qualitative scientific interviews is a form of power that the interviewee maintains and can exercise at any moment. We recognize, nevertheless, Hoffman’s remark (1999, p. 672) who observed that the theme of resistance is in general “sanitized, idealized and even romanticized” and call for a departure from this unsophisticated predisposition. The phenomenon knows various expressions from a refusal on the side of the participant to sign the consent form to question dodging or embellished accounts. The following section encapsulates the various expressions that resistance may take in the field. A collection of like behaviors is then examined through the use of two case studies to underpin the basic argument that resistance in interviews may be a valuable finding in itself if contextualized properly. Last, the article concludes that resistance can be treated as data only if a “thick description” of the explored case study precedes, which will provide the researcher with the necessary context (Geertz, 1973).

Unpacking the Notion of Resistance as Power

Nunkoosing (2005, p. 700) accurately observed that the interview has a transactional dynamic “where the exercise of power is a characteristic of both the interviewee and the interviewer.” Resistance should be seen as a form of communication on the side of the participant that is manifest through various behaviors and can reveal a lot about the object of

study. To help the readers understand our interpretation of resistance, we will draw an analogy from the arts borrowing the ideas of positive and negative space. Positive space is the object of focus in a picture, one may say the subject itself; by contrast, negative space describes the background: all that surrounds the subject. Most of the time this negative space just sets the backdrop, but without it the subject would appear entirely different. Similarly, in qualitative interviews, dominance is the key theme that usually captures our analytical attention (positive space) while resistance may describe the circumstances within which the interview takes place (negative space).

Beaunae et al. (2011) made a point in passing when they distinguished between overt and covert forms of resistance in interviews; however, they did not delve deeper into these two different expressions of resistance. In their words:

...there are many kinds of resistance that can be experienced during research processes and interviewing. I have experienced both the overt and covert forms of resistance. One of the participants hesitated to answer my questions and asked, "Who is going to read this?" like she was afraid to talk. You know, kind of like she thought her boss might read it. Then I had a participant who covertly resisted my interview. (Beaunae et al., 2011, p. 413)

We expand on this observation to offer examples of behaviour that can be classified as either active (overt) resistance or latent (covert) resistance. In active forms of resistance, the participant may refuse to sign the consent form, decline some of the interview questions or interrupt the recording process. Latent resistance is not so apparent but is equally interesting. The participant here may refuse to participate to the project canonically as all other participants do. In this case, the "dissident" participant tries to alter the rules that the researcher has laid down and suggests alternatives appropriating the project. This may involve a change in the format of the interview, for instance by asking for a sample of questions prior to the interview although this has not been the intention of the researcher. The participant may also avoid answering specific questions, not so much by calling them out openly, but by skilfully turning the focus away. Common strategies for this can be either expanding on previously mentioned stories or offering a fresh account without raising a new argument. The "dissident" participant may repeat some points that the researcher showed particular interest for trying to turn the focus away or may give a very vague answer that does not exactly match the context of the question.

Latent resistance takes its ultimate form when the participant presents a "polished" narrative. This is indeed the most complex situation and the reasons that make the researcher suspect that the participant is not being entirely truthful cannot be pinpointed in absolute terms. Frequently, it appears as if an instinct (admittedly a very subjective approach to science) drives the researcher to identify overstatements and understatement that do not tune in with the wider picture the researcher has acquired through other primary and secondary sources. This misalignment can be corroborated in projects where the triangulation of evidence is possible, however this is not always possible. For many interview projects, the goal is to elicit information that cannot be obtained through other means and, therefore, the collected material cannot be cross-validated.

Talking to colleagues about the anomaly of "polished" interviews, we realized that this is a familiar problem for qualitative researchers. Astonishingly, the strategies they followed to tackle it varied from not seeing it as a problem but rather as an occurrence whose frequency testifies for its normality to leaving these "polished" interviews out of the analysis without a rational explanation to back up this decision. We would like to see these interviews properly analyzed in the overall context of the interview project for we believe they act as "signifiers"

denotative of the participants' perceptions. We believe that structured and semi-structured interviews run a higher risk of being "polished" than in-depth interviews where the interviewer has spent more time with the participant and has ideally gained their trust (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Nevertheless, this is a hypothesis that needs to be investigated and validated by further research. All these latent resistance techniques may be employed consciously or sub-consciously by the participant.

We acknowledge that many of the cases we present as forms of resistance can be interpreted differently and sometimes their explanation should be situated outside the framework of resistance. Simply put, it would be preposterous to argue, for example, that every time a candidate asks for a rearrangement in the time and place of the interview, they are showing some form of resistance that can be interpreted under a specific theoretical framework. We have brought forward the idea of resistance because it applies to certain research projects, but alas it is not a panacea. Unfortunately, as we mentioned earlier, Kvale (2006) showed that researchers tend to think of the interview as a non-invasive method and, by so calling it a dialogue or a conversation, they escape the responsibility to critically reflect on the experience. While we do not hold evidence that this escapism is a phenomenon in rise, we believe that resistance will be misused by novice researchers. For example, researchers who face difficulties in securing written consent for a Skype interview they conducted, because their participants may have been busy or forgetful or both, may find comfort in arguing that their participants exhibited resistance. Resistance provides an easy excuse for many of the adversities researchers face, but as a conceptual framework it should not be taken superficially. It is the context of the interview project that will allow any assumptions to be made that resistance is taking place and that it carries particular meanings.

A list that brings together the above scenarios of active and latent resistance is offered below. It is important to note that the list we provide here is not exhaustive and researchers are welcome to enrich this emergent strand of literature with their experiences and perspectives. The following list builds on personal experiences drawn from a large pool of interviews (<1000 interviews) which collectively the two authors have conducted over the course of their academic careers. The case study analysis that will later follow is, however, based on a smaller-scale project.

Active resistance examples:

- Interviewee refuses to sign the consent form, nevertheless, wishes to proceed with the interview
- Interviewee refuses openly to answer specific questions
- Interviewee refuses on the spot to get recorded although it has been clear that the nature of the research project requires documentation
- Interviewee does not allow the researcher to take notes and downplays the significance of the interview

Latent resistance examples:

- Potential candidate tries to alter the commonly agreed circumstances of the project
- Interviewee evades questions by turning the focus elsewhere
- Interviewee gives a "polished" version of the story

Meeting with Resistance in the Field

In this section, we will try to put into context the aforementioned examples using as case studies two interview projects (project A and project B as they will be called thereafter), that the primary author conducted as part of her doctoral project. This chapter will therefore be written in the first person to serve the narrative flow. The interviews were designed to elicit data from policymakers on management practices in the public sector. Project A featured semi-structured personal interviews with 12 public servants of mixed gender from Greece conducted in their work space. Project B involved 11 mixed gender semi-structured interviews with public servants from the UK, France, Spain, Sweden, and Germany.

I started project A with a mix of excitement and fear as I knew little about interviewing public servants or interviewing anyone at all. The problem was that I did not know whether I should treat my target group as “policy makers,” “elites,” or “experts” (Littig, 2009). For all the above categories, one can find a plethora of sources to satisfy their bibliographic hunger (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Ostrander, 1993; Richards, 1996). The public servants I targeted presented the following intricacy: they all held prestigious institutional posts in ministries or non-departmental public bodies, so in a sense they belonged to the elite of the bureaucratic world. They also had a high level of education with their academic accomplishments varying from multiple master’s degrees to doctorates and, on top of these, many had successfully completed vocational training in the National School of Public Administration and Local Government. In addition, they had other sorts of hard skills such as knowledge of foreign languages and extensive work experience. Their solid educational background could place them in the group “experts.” Last, due to the nature of their work with policy and their position as heads of their departments, they could also be seen as “policy-makers.”

I found that no strand of literature was more relevant than the other and decided to proceed keeping in mind that if they defined themselves as even one of the above categories, that was enough for a complete shift in the power balance of our interview. Although the question was never put out into the open, the participants in project A clearly thought highly of themselves as evident through the welcome ritual they would perform when I met them. They had carefully selected the “locus” of the interview which could be either in their office or in a neutral space away from their secretaries or colleagues. I would be shown where to sit and usually there would be a desk acting as a natural, and perhaps emotional, barrier between me and my interviewee. I would be told when to start the interview and there would always be a clock around either on the wall or a wrist watch which would be placed strategically on the desk between us. The message was that space and time during the interview were not entirely in my control. I would often be told by my participants that they were extremely busy, and they may have had to take calls during our interview. One time I was even asked to shorten the interview and one other the interviewee had arranged a meeting to take place within our interview time. The participant left amidst our discussion abandoning me with his assistants.

I soon realised that the majority of Greek candidates did not feel comfortable with the interview and that was the reason why they were trying to define its conditions in an effort to convince themselves that they were at least partly in charge. On top of that, there was the angst of the recorder. My informants would often throw examining looks to the recorder asking: “Is this recording now?” It was definitely putting pressure on them and one explicitly forbade me to use it while one other rushed to reassure me (and probably himself) that he had no problem whatsoever being recorded. In his words: “I really don’t care if the things I say are recorded and what impact they will have. This is the truth.” Yet a few minutes later, he signed for me to turn off the device. In at least 4 interviews out of 12 in project A, I was waved at to turn off the recorder, so my participants could disclose confidential information. One candidate, who eventually dropped out of the project before the interview, had written to me in our initial

communication: “I would be happy to give you an interview provided that this will be solely for the purpose of your thesis and that the interview will not be featured in the media.” For unknown reasons, scientific research and media inquiry were confused to the detriment of the first. Another candidate with whom I repeatedly tried to establish communication decided to take it upon herself and answered the small sample of questions I had sent to her only as a point of reference and neglected altogether my request for a face-to-face interview. She also asked for a copy of my results after I concluded the study.

As a young researcher who was just starting to use interviews as a data collection method, I often felt that I was not managing the situation. “Had I been more assertive, what impact would that have on the interview?” I often wondered. Ultimately, I found solace reading similar experiences reported by other researchers (Conti & O’Neil, 2007). Naturally, not all the interview experiences I had were removing or lessening my authority as an interviewer. However, I must say that issues of gender, age and status started soon echoing in my mind as possible explanations of what was happening (Harvey, 2011). In literature, ample advice was given on how to build rapport, on the dos and don’ts when phrasing the questions, checklists were available to help me prepare for the day, but no analyses shifted the attention from the interviewer to the participant focusing on oppositional behaviour and what this meant other than the apparent. It was as if researchers, while making a case for reciprocity, neglected to analyse the participant’s agency. And what was this agency telling me for my research? Could I use participants’ behaviour as data?

In project A, I tried to make contact with 21 public servants and managed to establish communication with 19 but ended up having interviews with 12. I was warned by people who had worked in similar projects that the Greek Public Administration was notoriously remote and self-absorbed, so my chances in securing positive answers were in any case low. At the time, I did not take the warning at face value, but the high percentage of failure to engage my candidates forced me to attribute the problem to the aforementioned isolation of the sector. It took me two years and the completion of project B to start putting the puzzle together.

In project B the interviews were conducted, in their majority, via telephone or Skype, which eventually proved to be a crucial element affecting the interview power dynamics. Due to the use of different media to conduct the interview here, I did not witness the performative elements described earlier. Geographical distance, albeit accused of sabotaging rapport, solved partly the problem of authoritative participant behaviour. The interviews would still get interrupted, however, unwillingly and my participants would appear apologetic as their assistants tended to barge into their offices not knowing that they were on the phone. The percentage of engagement this time was much higher. Out of the 12 candidates I had sampled and established communication with, I had interviews with 11. Interestingly that one person, who refused to give me an interview, but instead, insisted in answering a questionnaire, was key for me to understand what was happening.

The nature of my research which looked into foreign cultural policy practices meant that I was sampling, in both projects, people mainly working in the Foreign Ministries and Culture Ministries of the above countries or in organizations sitting at the intersection of these policy areas. And as regulations dictate high-ranked public servants are always nationals. All with the exception of the Foreign Ministry, which may allow the employment of non-nationals to staff missions in low-priority countries. So, that one person who tried to turn around the situation and did not partake in the series of interviews was a Greek national working for the British government in Greece. This development was crucial for me to understand and compare the nature of different bureaucracies. At first, I hypothesized that the Greek Public Administration was more confining and forced people working for the system to be secretive and restrained. However, I was being simplistic and partial in my judgement to infer that foreign bureaucracies were more extroverted and confident. The theory did not explain why

the Greek participant, who was working for a foreign government after all, was acting nervous. On this account, Weber's reflections on the nature of bureaucracy provided the solution:

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organisation has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation...Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, *discretion*, unity, strict subordination, redirection of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration. (Weber as quoted in Longhurst et al., 2016, p. 157)

Weber's description portrays the ideal public servant and delineates the aim that all must reach. I have underlined in the excerpt the word "discretion" and it is around this skill that I make the case that resistance in interviews with public servants stems not from a culture of intimidation rooted in the vertical hierarchies of the bureaucratic system, but from the very perception of the profession. We demonstrated how the Greeks showed higher levels of resistance compared to their foreign colleagues. This is exactly because they perceive and define their job on different terms than their European counterparts. While it is true that nearly half of them accepted my invitation for an interview, they made sure that I realized that the boundaries were not flexible. The Greek candidate who worked for the British government was not necessarily afraid of her superiors, but instead she was being typically cautious following an unwritten protocol that she thought was the canon. We argue here that the public servants of project B have engaged in a post-bureaucratic understanding of their profession (Alvesson & Thompson, 2006). Vertical hierarchies here are flattened to give room to multi-axial relationships and the classic chain of command is replaced by a commitment to shared values. Discretion is not anymore the expected professional behaviour symbolizing competence. By contrast, there is an emphasis in features like openness, flexibility and agility. It is not an issue of whether the bureaucracies are extroverted or introverted anymore, but more a matter of how public servants perceive their work environment and adjust accordingly.

The emergence of different ideologies about the nature of bureaucracy was a theme that was originally outside the scope of my research. However, it proved to be a significant finding to which I would not have reached, had I not studied the complex dynamics of the interview settings and had I not compared the explicit and implicit behaviours of my participants. Although comparing the two sets of interviews did not fall within my research objectives, shifting focus from the main research question was crucial to re-imagine a different "assemblage" of information (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). I need to emphasize the fact that the first level of theorization that I described earlier, theorizing that one bureaucracy was more introverted than the others, still falls under the umbrella of interpreting resistance as data. I used participants' behaviours to draw causal links across my data, however, at the end I used a different theoretical framework to interpret the behaviours of my participants and re-drew new links which I believe represent with greater clarity the conditions I met. At first, resistance to collaborate with the researcher in the context of scientific interviews could be interpreted as fear. Using this information, I could build on Adler and Borys's (1996, p. 61) theory and argue that the Greek bureaucracy was being "coercive" not only in the sense of "stifl[ing] creativity and . . . demotivating employees," but also by instilling a sense of fear towards the system, a feeling which is essential to ensure compliance. By contrast, the rest of the organizational structures under study could be said to be "enabling" allowing individuals to feel more comfortable in their positions making them considerably more cooperative in the interview. A second read of the transcriptions and my interview notes allowed me to think of new connections across the data points and, thus, I came up with a Weberian interpretation of resistance in interviews with public servants.

The realization that more could be found at the deepest core of my transcriptions allowed me to scrutinize further the types of performances I came across whilst interviewing. I recognized that, regardless of nationality, informants who belonged to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a few bright exceptions, had difficulty in levying criticism to the organization's policies and tactics compared to informants from the Ministry of Culture who were far more likely to admit mistakes and oversights. While the first group presented well-rehearsed narratives, the latter were willing to share fragmented stories that responded to the actual questions I had posed without weaving histories (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). All this information surfaced after I studied the general patterns that arose in my interviews. The main limitation in the equal treatment of the two projects laid in the fact that I only conducted part of the second set of interviews via face-to-face interviews. This is a parameter whose exact impact we cannot accurately assess, however, the mode of the interview should not have a profound effect on this type of data. If it did, we feel that it is logical to argue that it would work the other way around and that participants who were interviewed in person would be much more likely to cooperate than those who were interviewed on the phone or through Skype as the interviewer appears more remote, hence, less reliable. Nonetheless, our data supports otherwise. Keeping in mind that the absence of information is still information, I was able to elicit useful data from the non-verbal. I see now that my general approach in research is situated on stable ground after I took into consideration the micro-politics of each organisation and the cultural context of my participants. At the same time, I accept what Casper (1997, p. 234) put eloquently that "my own commitments, politics, and mapping strategies were in part responsible for where I ended up" because I, too, displayed some form of power.

We acknowledge that the binary "dominance-resistance" is only one way to view the relationship between the interviewer and the participant. There can be more analytical categories able to describe their interaction which move away from this somewhat Marxist explanation of power. Lévi-Strauss (1955) was the first to observe that our worlds are constructed on binary oppositions, however, structuralism is one path to interpret interview conditions. We have indeed seen thoughtful efforts to analyse power relations not only in interview settings, but also in data inspired by the post-structuralist tradition (Anyan, 2013; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). In this respect, current developments in the sociological field may have a lot to teach us.

Conclusion

Interviews are dynamic and often the circumstances under which they are performed may resemble a tug-of-war. Both researcher and participant exercise different forms of power which are interesting to study and sometimes expose and explain part of the problem. We have demonstrated through the use of two case studies how resistance in interviews may be a valuable finding in itself if contextualized properly. Evidently, a "thick description" of the case study is needed to shed light to the subtlest contextual elements of the project. We acknowledge that we have not provided a framework that solves all problems related to resistance, but that we have merely pointed to a possibility. Although we used a Marxist lens to analyse the interview conditions in our projects which centered around the binary "dominance-resistance," we adopted a rather Foucauldian interpretation of what was happening, which focused on the production of governmental rationalities. With this in mind, we would like to conclude this article by turning the readers' attention to the liminal space between these philosophical traditions arguing that there is no need for researchers to join axiomatically one school of thought or the other in their methodology but realise that our practices so far have successfully combined concepts and expanded on ideas across theories.

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