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## **Interviewing in the ‘interview society’: making visible the biographical work of producing accounts for interviews**

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### **Abstract**

The contemporary period has seen the emergence of a society where interviews are pervasive: the ‘interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Undertaking qualitative research within this ‘interview society’ has methodological implications for our understanding of the significance of the technology of the interview itself and the analysis of interview data. To date little attention has been afforded to either participants’ accounts of interviews or ethnographic study of the significance of the practice of interviewing for participants. Drawing on data of this kind we develop the existing literature by evidencing the disruptiveness of interviewing and the biographical work that underpins the production of interview data. We provide a rare illustration of what isn’t always on display for the researcher conducting interviews. Namely, that while we live in an interview society and are familiar with its conventions and customs, interviews can breach the routine meaning making and situated action that characterises daily life.

### **Keywords**

accounts, biographical interviews, ethnography, interviews, interview society, moral presentation of self, narratives, welfare state

### **Introduction**

Historically, interviews were conducted for the most part by professional practitioners and were ‘fundamentally a mechanism for disclosing information, which would allow powerful agents to assess people’s right to claim – whether for medical treatment, welfare, or moral salvation.’ (Savage, 2010: 165). In the contemporary period the practice of interviewing stretches into almost every alcove of everyday life, enshrined in various hierarchies as *the* best way to garner knowledge of the transparent, self-revealing subject (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Atkinson et al., 2003; Foucault, 1979; Savage, 2010). This ‘interview society’

requires 'first, the emergence of the self as a proper object of narration. Second, the technology of the confessional – the friend not only of the policeman but of the priest, the teacher, and the "psy" professional. Third, mass media technologies give a new twist to the perennial polarities of the private and the public, the routine and the sensational' (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997: 315). In turn, the interview has become well established as the most pervasive method of qualitative research (Hughes, 1971), claimed by sociology 'as a means of generating distinctive kinds of "ordinary" knowledge' (Savage, 2010: 166). This ubiquity only heightens the necessity to critically engage with the interview as a method.

Critical appreciation of the 'interview society' demands problematizing the positioning of participants as 'knowing subjects', who privilege us with insights into their authentic selves, and attending to the features of the interview society itself (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Back, 2012; Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). Analysis of interview data must consider the conditions of their production, as well as their social distribution and any associations with social position and status (Atkinson, 2005). In this vein and moving away from understanding interviews as the means by which we can capture faithful, truth telling, biographies and towards a sociology of biographical work (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), we consider the extent to which interviewing can be seen as disruptive to the routine practices of day to day life. We argue that while we may live in an 'interview society' and are familiar with its conventions and customs, interviews often breach the mundane production of biographical work. Interviews can be understood to represent liminal moments (Turner, 1967), characterised by artificially produced and ritualistic forms of interaction that demand reflexive identity work by all of the participants.

Clearly, interview encounters in the contemporary period vary a great deal, not least in terms of the stakes at risk and the range of possible outcomes in play: each interview interaction is framed institutionally and the presentation of self for interview is contingent on, contextualized by and constructed through the assumptions and expectations of the participants (Rapley, 2001). Our argument relating to interview data for qualitative research is developed by focusing on another, quite different but nonetheless illuminating, form of interview practice: the *welfare eligibility interview*. This is an interview conducted by the welfare official to assess people's claims for the receipt of welfare aid. It is a particularly

intense form of interview practice, demanding from the interviewee the presentation of a highly moralised sense of self and a painstaking form of biographical work. The stakes at risk are far higher and the outcomes at play of far greater significance (the loss of welfare income) than for a research interview. Yet by attending to the biographical work produced through a *welfare eligibility interview* we can draw important parallels with the research interview, offering a rare insight into just how careful the managed narration of self can be in an interview encounter and specifically how people can be reflexively aware of the often disruptive form of biographical work involved in performing for interview. This has important methodological implications: approaching interviews in this way understands the performance of self for interview as a local, situated accomplishment, which is contingent: revised and amended, fluid and shifting.

### **Situating the field: Valleyside<sup>1</sup>**

The article is drawn from research, undertaken by Helen, which took place between 2007 and 2010 in the South Wales Valleys of the United Kingdom. Once a dynamic powerhouse of the industrial revolution, the Valleys cover some five hundred square miles and are home to approximately one million people. Amongst them are some of the most highly concentrated, deprived communities in the country. The study began with little more than a broad interest in women's experiences of deindustrialisation and the role of state sponsored community development initiatives in one Valleys housing estate, Valleyside. The creation of Valleyside was a piece of state social engineering dating back to the 1930s, designed to provide a better quality of life for working families living in what were then the town's slums. Today, while many families remain, Valleyside has fallen victim to wave after wave of economic contraction as work, along with capital, has moved elsewhere. In place of a world of wealth creation a 'hyphenated economy' (Beynon et al., 2002) has emerged based upon new forms of precarious employment and the increasing vulnerability of low-wage, short-term, part-time, non-unionised labour. For the most part, the story of Valleyside is one of unemployment and underemployment: of people anxiously just about coping with economic hardship. While a number of state interventions have been put in place to tackle poverty in the Valleys, most notably European Union initiatives targeting those regions experiencing deindustrialisation,

an era of hard work and dignity has passed for many and it is hard to see how any regeneration scheme can bring it back.

Early forays into the field were spent observing and participating in some of Valleyside's regeneration projects. At that time, successive Labour governments were endorsing a welfare contract that positioned paid work as the best route out of poverty and any claim to citizenship was becoming increasingly synonymous with participation in the labour market (see for example, Department of Work and Pensions, 2008). These changes in welfare governance were starting to have a bearing on the single mothers receiving welfare aid in the community of Valleyside: hitherto dependable strategies of 'getting by' founded on caring in the home were becoming increasingly both less legitimate symbolically and less tenable materially under the auspices of a reforming welfare state<sup>2</sup>. One regeneration project in Valleyside, Lifeline, was tasked with 'picking up the pieces' of welfare reform and ameliorating what were seen as its worst effects: the coercion of welfare reliant single mothers into precarious employment. This community project focused on re-engaging welfare reliant single mothers with education, supporting them to make the first steps towards future careers as professional carers (social workers, nurses, speech therapists and the like). The data presented in this article were generated through ethnographic fieldwork spanning six months that focused on the lives of ten of the Lifeline Girls, as they referred to themselves, and two of their Lifeline support workers.

### ***Welfare eligibility interview: ethnographic observations***

A welfare state can be conceptualised in two distinct ways: both as a redistributive mechanism of material rewards; and a symbolically interpretive apparatus constructed through knowledges, norms and identities (Clarke, 2004; Haney, 2000). Thus the welfare state not only provides economic relief for the poor by redistributing wealth, but also constructs historically contingent representations and interpretations of who the poor are and how best to regulate them. Any prevailing welfare contract has a clear moral dimension defining what it means to be a 'good' citizen and endorses assumptions pertaining to, for example, who should enter the workforce and who should care within the home, as well as how and why

this should happen. As such, welfare states deploy economic and cultural sanctions to secure the compliance of their targets – creating and reflecting material and symbolic structures, which determine entitlement to welfare relief and constrain and enable the strategies that people adopt to negotiate their world. (Clarke, 2004; Haney, 2000). In the UK, the increase in the conditionality of welfare aid for single mothers, and the concomitant introduction of their compulsory participation in *welfare eligibility interviews*, were a marker of a radically reforming welfare state, demarcating shifting fault-lines of compliance and contestation to shifting moral imperatives.

The Lifeline Girls took part in *interviews* with the state to put food on their table and a roof over their heads, yet there were numerous other interview encounters with the state beyond the bi-annual *welfare eligibility interview*. The state was likely to have a presence in an increasingly regulated home, in the guise of health visitors and child support investigators; or the schooling of their children, through speech therapists or educational psychologists. However, it was the significance of the *welfare eligibility interviews* that emerged ethnographically most notably over time, as the women anticipated, participated in and reflected on these interactions and their positions created in and through them. Designed to engender transformations in the behaviours, attitudes, values and beliefs of its targets, *welfare eligibility interviews* require claimants to produce testimony relating to their intention and capacity to undertake paid work. It was clear that stakes were extremely high: this interview was nervously anticipated and assiduously prepared for. The women were keen to become well versed in the ways of this interview, sharing their experiences and rehearsing their performances, predicting likely questions and preparing what were fast becoming collectively shared, stock answers. Any relevant evidence of on-going and future education was carefully collected and letters of support from well-placed sponsors gratefully received. Time was set aside for coaching with those peers who had been through the process as well as Lifeline's support workers, and there was an understanding amongst those support workers that 'if they are single parents getting called in for interviews, they can't deal with that sort of thing well, to stand up for themselves'. Above all it was imperative not to 'sell yourself short': secure permission to pursue further education and evade coercion into a precarious labour market. A very particular performance of a moral self, one of redemptive citizenship, was required: a self, capable of standing up to scrutiny. The aftermath of these

events was just as notable as the Girls dwelled on how well they acquitted themselves. The interviews were often cast as intrusive and intimidating: 'even with nothing to hide you still feel like you have something to hide'. The accounts of the Lifeline Girls, tempered by moments of indignation if not outrage throughout, were concluded with relief that it was done, at least for now.

Simply, the women needed to grasp *how to do interview*: well-mannered and respectful; but, crucially, assertive and tactful. The Girls understood their audience would need to be convinced by their testimony. They considered how best to deliver a smooth, coherent and ultimately persuasive performance and they were aware of what might constitute this and how they might achieve it. The welfare state then, like many 'going concerns' (Hughes, 1971), draws on the technology of the interview as customary practice: a practice which demands *in situ* biographical work of the participant (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). As a 'going concern' the welfare state is a moral environment that attempts to set the conditions of narrative possibility, providing particular narrations of self that reconfigure identities 'with the aim of re-storying ... lives' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012: 38). Encounters with the welfare state make the disruptive biographical work underpinning the presentation of self within interviews highly visible, and in this instance one that is very much reflexively known. While there were the necessary accoutrements and props to do self, such as clothing, letters and documents, equally significant was the appropriation of the correct cultural and social resources to be deployed in the interaction to appease the interview process and convincingly display a moral presentation of self.

### ***Welfare eligibility interview: interview accounts***

Towards the end of the fieldwork biographical interviews were conducted with the Girls either in their homes or in the Lifeline setting. (This method was chosen because many of the women spoke of their experience with Lifeline as 'life changing', affording them a 'second chance at life' – it was felt a biographical approach to interviewing might help contextualise these claims further). During these interviews some of the participants talked in depth about their encounters with the welfare state. At this stage in the research, Helen had been present

during the preparation and aftermath of a number of these welfare interviews. By this time, the Girls were familiar with her as she had worked in Valleyside for two years as a volunteer in various community projects and alongside them in Lifeline for six months. Helen also spent time outside the Lifeline setting with the Girls, for example, taking part in school holiday activities with the women and their children). This established relationship frames the accounts that were produced in the interviews; co-constructed and interactional, the women understood the research interview as a space they were being invited to speak in, to an interested researcher who wanted to hear their accounts of their encounters with the welfare state (among other things). The implications of this relationship can be seen clearly in the extracts below. Most notably, there is very limited probing by the interviewer: the order of the interview has been established through the ethnographic research encounters leading up to these interviews. There is an understanding that the researcher is interested in *their* explanations and so, they talk.

Our analysis of the accounts of two of the women illustrates the biographical *work* they undertake through storytelling in this context. The construction of the *welfare eligibility interview*, which casts doubt on the moral rectitude of the narrators, as disruptive to the routine meaning making and situated action that characterises the Girls' daily lives is of particular interest. But crucially, the research interview itself must also be seen as disruptive. The narratives prompted by the interview are attempts to justify the position of the Girls, repairing a 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 1963) and in turn reframing the public norms underpinning the practice of the *welfare eligibility interview* itself: attempts they need not make ordinarily. This analysis follows a vein of sociology that considers the moral presentation of self in relation to public norms (see for example Mills, 1940; Goffman, 1971; Scott and Lyman, 1968). Many studies have demonstrated how important it is to be able to present accounts of oneself as morally respectable or responsible (May, 2008; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). The Lifeline Girls are no exception, elevating a particular presentation of a moral self, which serves to justify and explain the decision to pursue further education and resist coercion into precarious employment. While there is great diversity within narrative research and analysis (see Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Heavey, 2015; Riessman, 2008), broadly we follow Riessman (2008) and select some of the hallmarks of storytelling within the accounts:



touching on the significance of the plot or structure of the narrative; the naming or descriptive choices deployed; and the performative dimensions of the story telling.

## **Teresa**

The first story is told by Teresa, who had been claiming welfare relief as a single parent for eight years and had two children when the interview took place. The interview was conducted in her home soon after Teresa had completed her time with Lifeline and as she was about to embark on her training as a social worker. At this point in the interview, Teresa had spent some time describing her life history, although she chose to focus a great deal on her time with Lifeline: she couldn't believe how well she was doing and how far she had come. In the extract below, in response to a question about going out to work, Teresa took the opportunity to tell a story about her recent *welfare eligibility interview*. Through a dramatic retelling of this interaction with the welfare official and later her Lifeline support worker, we see how Teresa attempts to sustain a moral presentation of self, even in light of the complicating event (Labov, 1972) that is the *welfare eligibility interview*.

### Extract 1

(1) *Helen*: So what about work?

*Teresa*: It's not just for the money, it's for your own dignity I think.

Cos you are treated differently when you haven't got a job in you?

Just another statistic for the Social<sup>3</sup>.

(5) Like when I go for my *Work Focused Interview*,

treat you like shit they do.

Last time I went I said I was doing humanities and all that.

She said then (she had a point, I have done quite a few courses)

and she said 'don't you think it is about time now you put your skills

(10) to use?'

And that was the attitude.

I am glad Jess have given me support and this and that,

because she showed us it is not like, it don't have to be like that.

She said 'in the long term they are benefiting from what you are doing  
(15) now because you are not going to be back and fore signing on the  
dole<sup>4</sup> and having money off them'.

She said 'your job will probably be long term'.

She said 'you won't have to go back there again'.

She said 'it's better cos if you listen to them you would go out and get  
(20) a job',  
probably last ten minutes.

She said 'few months, back in'.

*Helen:* Tell me more about the job centre?

*Teresa:* Well I said like before, when I used to go down there they used to  
(25) speak to me like that.

They used to put me on a downer.

Like I built all my confidence up going down there,  
done this and I done that,  
and they would knock it all back down like.

(30) So the last time I went, I told them.

I said 'well in the long run' I said,

I said 'I am gonna be better off'.

I said 'I am not gonna have to sign back on the social'.

I said 'I am gonna have a job for a long time'.

(35) I said 'I haven't got to rely on the government's funding or money  
then have I?'

I said 'so to me that is the right choice'.

Teresa begins her narrative by bluntly drawing attention to the stigmatised position she holds in the face of the shifting public norms relating to work and care. Teresa identifies her current lack of what Fraser (1999) terms the material rewards and symbolic recognition associated with having a job (II.2-3). There is evaluative quality to the narrative here, which serves as an abstract of sorts (Labov, 1972) and contextualises the story that follows: the deeply

troubling *welfare eligibility interview*. Teresa continues the plot of her story by juxtaposing her encounter with the welfare state with her time with Lifeline and in particular one conversation with her support worker, Jess. An implicit attempt to present a moral self then unfolds, as Teresa tells the story of two thematically linked, yet temporally and spatially distant, recent encounters: one with the official conducting her *welfare eligibility interview* (ll. 5-11; and again ll. 24-36) and another with her Lifeline support worker, Jess (ll. 12-22; and again ll. 30-37). These encounters are linked to debunk the ethos and conventions of the *welfare eligibility interview* and evidence Teresa's status as a redemptive citizen capable of reform. Together these two distinct and contrasting elements of her story, her interaction with the welfare official and later the support she receives from Lifeline, construct the *welfare eligibility interview* as a complicating action (Labov, 1972), in the face of which Teresa has to sustain her moral presentation of self. Teresa offers a far more detailed description of her encounter with her support worker than that with the welfare official, whose position is given short shrift: 'and that was the attitude' (l.11). This detail works to sustain Teresa's position (l.12-22) through a logical line of argument explicating her resistance to coercion into the labour market and her desire to secure fulfilling employment and pursue further education.

This stretch of talk is also rich in performative features and evocative language choices as several rhetorical devices are deployed to highlight the disruptive nature of the *welfare eligibility interview*. Teresa begins her story with a rhetorical question, 'Cos you are treated differently when you haven't got a job in you?' (l.3), as she seeks understanding on her terms. An aside allows Teresa to deal with the position of the welfare official as parenthetical, someone who is offering up only tangential knowledge: 'She said then, she had a point, I have done quite a few courses' (l.8). Most notably perhaps, in terms of its performative dimensions, the account is laden with reported speech as Teresa gives key lines to the welfare official, but also her support worker, as we see with the repetition of 'she said' (l. 14, l.17, l.18, l.19 and l.22.). This device urges the audience to listen, but crucially it also builds credibility, allowing Teresa to present her moral self with an authority she perceives her own voice to lack. Here Teresa chooses not to position herself as her story's protagonist. Instead she draws on a proxy as the narrator of her moral self: an authoritative advocate whose words hold symbolic power in the context of a troubling *welfare eligibility interview*, which casts

doubt on her moral rectitude. This is followed by the striking echo of the words of her advocate through the repetitive use of the pronoun 'I' (l.31, l.32, l.33, l.34 and l.35). Unlike her previous descriptions this denotes ownership of the narrative and invokes an authoritative moral presentation of her self, which explicitly resists the public norms endorsed by the welfare state. The switch to explicitly appropriating the voice of the advocate animates the story but also sees Teresa asserting her claim to redemptive citizenship. There is a sense of resolution to the troubling incident in this performance, as Teresa presents herself in the research interview as resourceful and adaptable, resilient and aspirational.

### **Laura**

When Laura took part in the research interview she had one son and had been claiming welfare aid as a single mother for eleven years. The interview was conducted in Lifeline, just before Laura was to begin her studies to become a nurse. Like Teresa, prior to her account of her encounters with welfare officials, Laura took the time to speak at length about her pride in her recent accomplishments with Lifeline. In this excerpt Laura is responding to an explicit question about her contact with the welfare state. She replies by telling a story, which accounts for her contestation of welfare state practice and her refusal to work in a precarious labour market. Again we pay attention to the plot of the narrative, its performative dimensions and the lexico-grammatical choices deployed.

(1) *Helen*: What are they like, the job centre?

*Laura*: Oh, they are terrible.

I hate them.

Do you know there was one woman?

(5) Just before I came up to Lifeline right.

(Cos they only recently started every six months.

Only recently started like that.

Cos you are up there every six months.

You have got to go).

(10) Oh this one woman, one time,

I came home nearly crying.

I said 'well I'll go and work'.

This is before I come to Lifeline and I met 'Want 2 Work'<sup>5</sup> Carol up here,

(15) and I said to her 'just get me a job, I am going' and Jess was like 'no you are not, no you are not'.

I said 'yeah I am going'.

Cos she, the woman in the job centre, made me feel like that.

She made me feel as if she was giving me the money every week (20) for Income<sup>6</sup>.

She made me feel so intimidated.

I was thinking does she realise like I got to pay the same bills as the woman next door who have got a husband and three kids out working?

(25) Cos she made me feel like that.

People think you are Income Support, oh yes, free this, free that.

It is hard.

Like I said I am so lucky that I have got family back up and family can (30) help me.

I couldn't have done it on my own without my mother and father behind me.

Laura's story, like Teresa's, produces a re-construction of the *welfare eligibility interview* as a troubling event that questions her claim to redemptive citizenship and disrupts her presentation of a moral self. Turning to the structure of Laura's story, like Teresa we see that she begins her story with an evaluative statement, which simultaneously acts as an abstract of sorts (Labov, 1972), letting the researcher know that this is a story focusing explicitly on how she *feels* about her encounter with the welfare official: 'Oh, they are terrible. I hate them' (1.2-3). Thus we learn from the outset that the *welfare eligibility interview* is a deeply distressing experience. The account moves on by following the conventions of storytelling: the encounter is given context as Laura explains these are mandatory, bi-annual interviews,

which have been introduced recently (ll.6-9). Again, the narrative presents the *welfare eligibility interview* as a complicating action (Labov, 1972), a moment of crisis, which might have led to a new and unwanted way of life but for the intervention of a well-placed advocate (l. 16). The story unfolds through two distinct scenes, each providing a sense of resolution and salvaging Laura's presentation of a moral self. The first (ll. 2-15), an account of *welfare eligibility interview*, is concerned only with its outcome. Crucially the detail of the conversation of this interaction with the welfare official is omitted entirely. Instead, again Laura favours foregrounding how the encounter made her feel (we learn she 'came home nearly crying' (l.11)); as well as her immediate desire was to take action and find employment (l.15). This detail, and indeed lack of detail, contribute to the story's plotting and Laura's attempt to persuade the researcher of the validity of her claim to redemptive citizenship. The narrative quickly moves on chronologically to another distinct but thematically linked episode, which allows Laura to contrast her *interview* with the welfare official with that of with her Lifeline support worker (l.16). Laura had already established in this research interview that she was intent on getting a job and now we learn it was only the intervention of her support worker that prevented her from doing so. The narrative then shifts back to the first scene and Laura's encounter with the welfare official as reflections turns again to the doubt the *welfare eligibility interview* casts on Laura's claim to citizenship (l.18-25). Having secured a resolution to this troubling event, by drawing on the authoritative figure of her support worker, Laura concludes her story by re-casting herself in light of the how 'hard' life is for her (l.28) and in turn attempts to re-frames the public norms that confer her 'spoiled identify' (Goffman, 1963) (ll.26-32).

Turning to the performative dimensions and the language choices deployed to craft the story, we see Laura begins her account with an unequivocal statement of strong emotion (l.2-3). As with Teresa's narrative, the drama of the *welfare eligibility interview* encounter is introduced through a rhetorical question (l.4) and series of asides (ll.6-9), designed to both draw the audience in and set the scene. Perhaps the most important moment of this story however is enacted through directly reported speech (ll.15-17). Here the attempt to retain Laura's moral presentation of self is most acute; at this point she wants to go out to work, as she says 'well I'll go and work' (l. 12) and goes on to reaffirm what she said twice more (l.15, l.17) but, her

support worker in turn replies 'no you are not, no you are not' (l.16). Laura, like Teresa, employs the reported speech of an authoritative advocate to persuade us of her status as a redemptive citizen. Later Laura uses repetition to further emphasise the affect the encounter has on her. The audience is left in no doubt as to how the welfare official has made her feel (l.18, l.19, l.20, l.21 and l.25) and these details present *welfare eligibility interviews* as moments of turmoil. Interwoven with this appeal for empathy is an appeal for logic, made vivid by rhetorical questioning and a change in verb tense: 'I was thinking does she realise like I got to pay the same bills as the woman next door who have got a husband and three kids out working?' (ll:22-24). When the object of Laura's narrative shifts from the welfare official to 'people' more generally, Laura attempts to convey the extent to which she is defined by a symbolic and economic category, a classification of welfare relief: 'People think you *are* Income Support' (l.26, our emphasis). Just as Teresa feels as if she is 'just another statistic for the Social', so Laura feels as though she somehow weighed, measured and found wanting by a set of criteria not of her choosing. In this vein, figures of speech are employed ('free this, free that' (l.27)) to contest public norms as Laura seeks to (dis)identify (Skeggs, 1997) with her 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 1963) and present herself as the authority on the subject of welfare relief and its challenges.

### **Reflections: interview accounts of *welfare eligibility interviews***

In the research interviews, Teresa and Laura are drawing on various accounting procedures (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Potter and Wetherall, 1987) to justify their position to the researcher in relation to the welfare state. The meaning making accomplished through the particularly rich performative features of these narratives, makes an appeal through pathos, as well as ethical and logical reasoning. Taken together, the array of rhetorical registers and devices deployed by the women above build a particular cadence, accomplishing a vivid performance for interview intent on sustaining the presentation of a moral self. The women are accomplishing the biographical identity work of the self (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000), constructing a performance that satisfies the expectations and registers of the interactional order of the research interview. These data also show that Laura and Teresa are aware of the situated and strategic presentations, in line with available and present institutional framings,

demanded by the *welfare eligibility interview*. There is an understanding of the intense, reflexive work of performance demanded by the *welfare eligibility interview*. No doubt they hold another, albeit different, set of assumptions and expectations around the research interview and the (disruptive) biographical work it demands.

The accounts that these women presented in the research interview are co-constructed; what they say in another time or place, or to another person, might be different, might require different resources to produce and inform it. As someone not claiming welfare aid, the interviewer here will be seen by these women as an 'outsider' or as Laura might say, as 'people', another audience to persuade of their moral rectitude. It seems likely that had the interviewer been claiming welfare aid then the narrative may well have been told in a different way. Perhaps, the appeals to reason and calls for empathy might have lost some of their intensity, some of their urgency. There is a sense in which this account of the *interview*, within a research interview, is a re-enactment of a strategic interaction with the state with an awful lot at stake: the risk of financial sanction and the related economic hardship of both themselves and those they hold dear but also the stigma of falling foul of a standard of citizenship. During the research interviews what can be termed a 'double interview' occurred, as the Girls were re-remembering and re-enacting their previous experience of the *welfare eligibility interview*: again they were asked to confront their 'spoiled identities' (Goffman, 1963) and sustain their moral selves.

## **Discussion**

What this article makes clear is the necessity to be alive to the biographical work that interviews require, and the ways in which this occurs within what could be conceptualised as a liminal moment; disruptive, requiring reflexive identity work and falling outside the mundane interactional orders of daily life. The interview is disruptive to the routine meaning making and situated action of daily life. The *welfare eligibility interview*, as we have demonstrated most clearly through ethnographic observations is *particularly* disruptive, requiring as it does the reparation of a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) with a great deal at stake. However, the interactional order of the research interview, which calls on participants to offer accounts and narrate their experience for the researcher, means in this instance at least the interviewees must again negotiate their position in relation to those public norms



they contest. Less distressing than their interaction with the welfare official one would hope, but a disruptive encounter all the same.

While the social world is increasingly 'generated and mediated by the interview' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012), we have shown that interviews and interviewing can be disruptive to day to day practices, breaching the routine and mundane and demanding a particular form of reflexive, biographical *work*. It is not at all unusual for people to prepare for research interviews. They may refer to documents they have brought along with them, which may be of use to the researcher, or casual conversations they had with family, friends or colleagues, where memories are re-remembered, anecdotes rehearsed and facts checked. We can see moments of this sense of the extra-ordinary in the incidental ethnographic encounters (Pinsky, 2015) that occur around research interviews: as participants check 'was that ok?'; or ask 'did you get what you need?' and 'do you want me to say anything else?'. These interactions illustrate the work involved in the presentation of self within interview and the negotiation around the collaborative production of biography that occurs (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The researcher also comes prepared with an interview schedule, a tape recorder, and a notebook and pen. Assurances are made regarding confidentiality, the careful storage of the conversation for safe keeping, and what will come of the data. A research interview will often require a simple family history as a matter of course, yet such 'straightforward' histories can be painful to recall for some. Similarly, the research interview can also seek to focus on times of trouble, the personal or professional crises, which punctuate our lives. Even discussing more trivial topics, when faced with a stranger with a prepared set of questions, intently listening for cues, taking notes, recording your words for scrutiny is something rare, something to give pause for thought. Each instance of any one of the above is illustrative of the way in which interviews breach the routine rhythms of social life.

While there is an implicit argument here for the value of ethnography in grasping the significance of interview interactions, it would be wrong to assume that interviews are inherently flawed as a method for generating understandings of the social world. Rather,

as Becker (2007: 3) reminds us, all representations, including 'the stories people tell one another, to explain who they are and what they are doing ... give us a picture that is only partial but nevertheless adequate for some purpose'. In this instance these narratives of *welfare eligibility interviews* within research interviews, together with ethnographic field notes, provide a rare opportunity to examine the biographical work of performance for interview. Of course, these interview data can be analysed with an entirely different set of questions in mind. When we come to analyse any interview data, we must be acutely aware of the expectations and assumptions that define and delineate the resources available to the participant to perform self. These purposive encounters are actively participated in and the performance is closely scrutinised by both participants. Performances are constantly being refined and redirected, strategically negotiated *in situ*, and, as we have shown, reflexively and artfully produced.

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## **Notes**

1. All names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.
2. Since 2008, the *New Deal for Lone Parents* has required lone parents, with school-aged children, in receipt of welfare aid to attend a *welfare eligibility interview* every six months, and in some cases on a quarterly basis. Increasing conditionality of social security for lone parents and specifically the introduction of these *interviews* were a significant marker of a radically reforming welfare state. During this *interview*, claimants are expected to actively participate: answering questions about qualifications, childcare responsibilities, work-related activity and their future intentions regarding employment.
3. 'Social' here refers to the now defunct Department of Social Security or (DSS), but this term is still widely used informally in the UK for the Department of Work and Pensions, which assumes responsibility for the governance of the welfare state.

4. The 'dole' is a term widely used informally in the UK for the social security benefit paid for by the state to the unemployed.
5. The 'Want 2 Work' project was a European Union and Welsh Government funded initiative to support unemployed people find work in Wales.
6. Income Support is a means-tested form of welfare aid claimed by lone parents in the UK and based on income, savings and other forms of capital for people on a low income.

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