

## *Ethical Issues in Interviewing as a Research Method in Human Geography*

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**ABSTRACT** *Interview methods are becoming increasingly popular in human geography. The establishment of ethics procedures in Australian universities forces most interview-based studies into an empirical–realist framework of scientific enquiry, usually as adjuncts to quantitative methods. Ethics procedures, while offering some safeguards, generally fail to cope with issues of power and gender relations in interviewing and with issues of representing others through language. Interviews with lone fathers are used to exemplify some of the ethical issues in the use of interviewing as a research method.*

**KEY WORDS** *Ethics; interviews; lone fathers; Newcastle (NSW); qualitative methods; representation.*

### **Introduction**

The growing interest in intensive qualitative research in geography (Eyles 1988; Eyles & Smith 1988) has fostered a proliferation of interview-based studies, especially in feminist geography, in new and sensitive areas of research (see, for example, Clark 1991; Valentine 1993a, b; McDowell & Court 1994; Gregson & Lowe 1995). The interview as a research method has also become the subject of renewed debate, particularly in the pages of *The Professional Geographer* (Schoenberger 1991, 1992; McDowell 1992; Herod 1993). This paper considers some further methodological aspects of interviews undertaken in a study of lone fathers, the substantive content of which is reported elsewhere (Winchester 1996). The particular focus of this paper is on the ethical issues involved in interview research which are intimately related to the issues of gender, power and social science already being aired in the methodological debate.

Recent developments in Australian universities have stressed the necessity for ethics clearance for any project by staff or students involving human subjects. Ethics procedures are not trivial matters, involving in my own University the completion of a substantial form and submission of the project design, consent form, and survey instrument (original with 17 copies). It is argued here that ethics procedures play an important gate-keeping role and raise a number of significant ethical issues. However, as they stand,<sup>1</sup> the procedures reflect an empirical–realist model of research derived from medicine and the ‘hard’ sciences which anticipates mass surveys, quantitative analysis and replicable results. In a number of respects this model is inappropriate for

intensive qualitative research and fails to address the significant ethical issues which arise from both using and interpreting the language of others.

This paper considers: firstly, the resurgence of qualitative techniques in human geography in relation to the issues of scientific method, analysis and validity outlined above; secondly, the issue of power and gender relations; and, thirdly, the problems of representation. Similar issues of language, power relations and representation are discussed by Dyck & Kearns (1995) in the context of health care in post-colonial Aotearoa/New Zealand where, however, issues of ethnicity override those of gender. The research methods considered in this paper were used in the final phase of a three-year project on the geography of one-parent families, a social group which suffers from economic and social disadvantage (see, for example, Sarvasy & Van Allen 1984; Rose & Le Bourdais 1986; Dyck 1989; Winchester 1990). Interviews with lone fathers were considered a suitable method to establish hypotheses for further research in an area of personal sensitivity which is poorly developed in geography.

### **The quantitative–qualitative debate in geography**

Concerns with the over-quantification of geography and social science are relatively long-standing (see, for example, in geography, Taylor 1976; Johnston 1980; and in social science, Glaser & Straus 1967). In the 1980s there was an increasing recognition of the lack of objectivity in much supposedly value-free research. The re-evaluation of objective social science was furthered by the development of humanist and phenomenological approaches within geography which entailed the growing use of literature, art and other non-traditional sources (a useful review of such work is contained in Cloke *et al.* 1991, pp 57–92). These qualitative sources have been used in an attempt to understand the subjective meaning of social action rather than to merely recount its superficial characteristics. The trend toward the resurgence of qualitative sources and methods in geography has been chronicled in, and stimulated by, the recent publication of a number of volumes on qualitative and mixed methods (Eyles 1988; Eyles & Smith 1988; Holland *et al.* 1991; Brannen 1992b).

Typically, the gulf between qualitative and quantitative methods has been presented as a series of dualisms; for example, Mostyn (1985) considered dualisms between qualitative and quantitative interviews, while Hammersley (1992) listed seven ‘polar opposites’ between qualitative and quantitative methods in general (Table 1). Brannen (1992a) characterised qualitative approaches as viewing the world through a wide lens and quantitative approaches as those using a narrow lens. A dualistic view of methods is highly problematic, as Hammersley (1992, p.51) recognised: it represents quantitative methods as focussed, objective, generalisable and, by implication, value-free. Brannen (1992a) exemplifies this realist approach in arguing that the wide lens is still a search for generality which uses and recounts, but is not solely interested in, the subjective experience of individuals. It is argued that non-quantifiable data, particularly experiences and attitudes, can be used in a holistic sense to derive meaning and causal explanations. Qualitative methods are presented as soft and subjective, an anecdotal supplement to the real science.

If qualitative methods are seen as anecdotal supplements, it is not surprising that researchers have been concerned for the reliability of analysis and its lack of statistical validity (Mostyn 1985, p.122; Schoenberger 1991). Such concerns are reflected in current ethics procedures in which researchers are asked to justify their sample size, sampling design and analytical methods. Such a justification is easiest for a mass-

TABLE 1. Dualisms identified between qualitative and quantitative methods (after Mostyn 1985; Hammersley 1992)

| Qualitative methods                 | Quantitative methods                  |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Qualitative data                    | Quantitative data                     |
| Natural settings                    | Experimental settings                 |
| Search for meaning                  | Identification of behaviour           |
| Rejection of natural science        | Adoption of natural science           |
| Inductive approaches                | Deductive approaches                  |
| Identification of cultural patterns | Pursuance of scientific laws          |
| Idealist perspective                | Realist perspective                   |
| Qualitative interviews              | Quantitative surveys (questionnaires) |
| Smaller sample size                 | Larger sample size                    |
| Longer interviews                   | Shorter surveys                       |
| Non-random samples                  | Random samples                        |

questionnaire-type survey which will be analysed quantitatively, as this fits in to the expectation and assumption of a reality based on empirical observation. Small sample sizes and non-random sampling, including the use of snowball methods and key informants (see, for example, Tremblay 1982; Wearing 1984; Donovan 1988; Miles & Crush 1993), are difficult to justify in this tradition of positivist methodology. Qualitative interviews, when used as the main research method, are impossible to justify in this framework because of the assumptions about the empirical–realist nature of social science with its accompanying methodology.

The validity of qualitative interviews cannot rest on their representativeness or whether they are capable of generalisation in an empirical way. Rather, their validity rests on whether they can help elucidate the structures and causal mechanisms which underpin observable behaviour. In other words, qualitative interviews may be merely an adjunct to an empirical–realist view of social science, but are absolutely essential to a critical–realist view. *Critical realism* looks beyond the empirical, recognising that underlying structures are complex and may be different from the observable events and discourses to which they give rise (Sayer & Morgan 1985; Allen & McDowell 1989; McDowell 1992).

Interview-based studies have generally been justified within the hegemonic empirical–realist framework by one of three strategies. Conceptually, the weakest of these is to argue that much qualitative research consists essentially of non-generalisable case studies (see, for example, Donovan 1988). Case studies may have a long and illustrious tradition in geography, but they take us little further along the path to explanation. A second strategy appropriate to some large-scale studies is to argue that they have generated sufficient data to allow general, and sometimes quantified, conclusions to be drawn from the research (see, for example, Wearing 1984; Oakley 1986). More usually, qualitative interviews are justified as a complementary technique, as an adjunct or precursor to quantitative studies from which generalisations can be drawn, and as explorations in greater depth as part of multiple methods or triangulation (Burgess 1982a). Different types of complementarity are exemplified below.

The *triangulation* approach sits firmly within the empirical–realist tradition and offers cross-checking of results and methods in order to provide fresh insights into a given social problem. It has, however, been argued that data generated by different methods cannot simply be aggregated as they can only be understood in relation to the purposes

for which they were created (Brannen 1992a, p.13). Nonetheless, both types of data will shed some light on the general problem under consideration. There is no doubt that the 'use of multiple methods and research techniques has proved both difficult and enlightening' (Laurie 1992, p.164). England (1993) combined structured interviews with questionnaires in a study of women's spatial entrapment in suburban clerical employment; in that study a specific effort was made to 'select women whose commutes were representative of the broader sample' (England 1993, p.234). A triangulation approach was adopted to provide a counterbalance between the general and the individual: to identify the particular circumstances and contingent conditions of the firms and women, which give specific empirical expression to wider socioeconomic factors that structure their practices' (England 1993, p.227). Similarly, interviews incorporating questionnaires were combined with focus group discussions in a study of the meanings of the English countryside constructed through the children's stories of Beatrix Potter (Squire 1993).

Interviews have been used as pilot studies for pre-testing and for the further analysis of questionnaire results (Brenner 1985, p.148). Pre-testing may provide a source of hunches and hypotheses to be used in the development and refinement of research instruments (Brannen 1992a, p.24). In a study of within-household resource allocation, preliminary interviews aided conceptual clarification of complex issues (Laurie 1992). Such issues included the 'pooling' of household resources and the role of the couple in households of multiple adults (Laurie 1992). These clarifications were then incorporated into subsequent questionnaires. Interviews have been used to develop the results of questionnaires, for example, when respondents have brought problems to light (Brenner 1985, p.148). They may also help elucidate anomalous findings from surveys: Brannen (1992a, p.26) cited a study of the migration of council tenants where post-questionnaire interviews were carried out with migrants who had moved exceptionally long distances.

All such approaches that emphasise complementarity, multiple methods and triangulation justify the interview component in the empirical–realist tradition as an adjunct to the 'real' measurable science. However, even studies which are entirely interview-based have often relied on observable phenomena for explanation of causal mechanisms and structures. In social science, interviews in their own right have been used as a primary technique in developing 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss 1967). In such techniques, the work 'is directed by what is discovered and by logistical difficulties' (Donovan 1988, p.186). Interview responses have been recorded and analysed in order to work out 'hypotheses and concepts in relation to the data being collected' (Donovan 1988, p.186).

However, the justification for new research projects should not have to be couched in terms of the empirical regularities and hypothesis testing of an empirical–realist social science when an intensive qualitative study set in a critical–realist framework may have, or at least searches for, deeper explanatory power. The requirements of ethics procedures at present force research projects into the hegemonic mould of empirical realism and pseudo-quantification.

#### *The lone father survey: pilot study or underlying structures?*

In the lone father project, the interviews were used in the empirical–realist tradition as a pilot or pre-test for the development of hypotheses and the clarification of an interview schedule. From the interviews, a number of hypotheses were suggested. For

non-custodial fathers, issues of access, custody and maintenance loomed as significant problems. Of itself, this was not surprising, but specific concerns arose from the interviews which had not been adequately considered, such as a perception of inequitable access to legal aid, and the vulnerability of all separated fathers to unsubstantiated allegations of child physical and sexual abuse:

*Joe<sup>2</sup>*: I can't get legal aid 'cos I'm working, but she ... she can just give up her job, go on the dole and get it just like that ...

*Joe*: Every time she takes me to court I'm a thousand dollars down—she can use the courts to get at me ...

*Larry*: She alleged sexual abuse—it's the fourteen year old I'm talking about—and never had to give a shred of evidence ... it's stopped my access ... I never visit alone now but always take my sister ... (from a father who was cleared by the court of abuse charges)

Questions concerning these extremely personal financial and emotional matters, and about the role of the legal profession and support services, were subsequently incorporated into the questionnaire to ascertain the generality of their occurrence.

It was also apparent that attitudes toward the fairness of maintenance depended on the men's own current marital status in relation to the current marital status of the ex-wife and employment status of her new partner (if any). It appeared that the men failed to distinguish between child support (provided by maintenance payments) and spousal support (provided by the state in the form of Supporting Parents' Benefit), and they often complained about the lack of accountability in the way that their support payments were spent. Lone fathers expected their ex-wives to be supported financially by their new partners. Many also expected these new partners to support the children from the previous marriage. Such views are indicative of a very traditional idea of the man as the breadwinner of the family.

Further traditional patriarchal views of the family also arose from the interviews. Questions on these attitudes were later incorporated into the interview schedule as open-ended questions and are discussed elsewhere (Winchester 1996). They included an assumption that the traditional family should be preserved:

*Gordon*: It should be harder to get a divorce than what it is ...

*Joe*: I lost my wife and children and everything I worked hard for, for ten years, and now I have the privilege of paying \$600 a month for it ...

*Brian*: (The destruction of the family) ... causes moral cancer in our society, recognition of *de facto* and homosexual relationships ... a man cannot be a substitute for a mother, the highest God-given calling for a woman ... (note that this was one of the most extreme statements)

Another general point that emerged commonly was a lowly evaluation of women's domestic role and a lack of understanding of its complexity:

*Patrick*: She doesn't do anything all day ... just sits around on her fat arse (of a mother with three school age children)

*Simon*: It doesn't cost eighty-five dollars a week to feed a six year old girl ...

*Gordon:* Women don't bother to get jobs. They don't have to because the government provides for them ...

The questions that were included as a consequence of such comments were general ones about the status of the family and the roles of both parents. The interviews generated hypotheses to be tested which were incorporated as questions in a structured questionnaire. As such, the use of interviews as a pilot study provided a fairly standard complementary procedure to the quantitative analysis of a representative group within an empirical–realist tradition. However, had the study been couched in a critical–realist framework, those interviews in fact would have provided vital clues to the underlying structures and causal mechanisms of family break-up. The adoption of hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity and traditional views of the family, home and work at variance with their lived experience produced inevitable tensions which are fought out over the contested terrain of the family court (Winchester 1996).

### **Power and gender relations**

The relations between interviewer and interviewee can be very unequal. It is generally assumed that an unequal power relationship exists with interviewers more powerful than their 'subjects'. This may be either because in social science the gaze has been often directed 'down' toward the poor and disadvantaged, or because, in the objective tradition, interviewers have treated their 'subjects' merely as sources for data-gathering in the furtherance of an academic career (Oakley 1981). A reversal of the inequality of the relationship, with the interviewer as supplicant to powerful people, usually men, has been clearly demonstrated in interviews with corporations, big business and the judiciary (Smart 1984; Schoenberger 1991, 1992; McDowell 1992; McDowell & Court 1994). Power relations influence both the access to target groups and the structure and conduct of the interview.

A preliminary practical and ethical problem in any interview-based study is gaining access to the target population. In circumstances of considerable inequality, whether involving interviews with street kids or corporate chiefs, random sampling of respondents is virtually impossible. The ethics procedures perform a significant gate-keeping function which has attempted to reduce the survey burden on potentially vulnerable groups, such as children and pregnant women. In Australia, access to potentially vulnerable groups through official records, such as those held by the Department of Education or other government departments, is increasingly difficult because of confidentiality concerns. Access to powerful groups commonly has to be channelled through formal networks as in Smart's (1984) study of the law and family. In such studies, researchers often have to demonstrate their competence continually and assert their status by careful choice of dress and language (Smart 1984; Schoenberger 1991; McDowell & Court 1994).

Gender is a significant issue in the interviewing procedure, especially given the sensitive nature of interviews on personal, divorce and family matters (Easterday *et al.* 1982). Gender issues in interviewing have been the subject of useful debate in *The Professional Geographer* (Schoenberger 1991, 1992; McDowell 1992; Herod 1993). Herod considered that interviews 'cannot be conceived as taking place in a gender vacuum' (1993, p.306) and discussed both the unequal power relations between women and men and also some of the problems of competitive masculinity when men interview men (Herod 1993, pp 308–9). Some women interviewers have found that

femaleness is perceived as being relatively powerless, which may assist women interviewers in getting in the door and being given sensitive information (Schoenberger 1992). Similarly, Smart found that femaleness could be used to advantage to disarm: 'I was perceived as less threatening and less "official" than a male counterpart would have been' (Smart 1984, p.154). She found that confidential documents were often made accessible or difficult issues broached relatively freely (Smart 1984, p.167).

Women interviewers interviewing men often reinforce patriarchal gender relations because of the gendered structure of language. The structure of interviewing tends to follow the usual pattern of female-male verbal interaction, with women facilitating the flow of men's conversations. Real difficulties may occur in interviews in which it is assumed that the interviewer shares a set of politics and beliefs. When Smart interviewed male lawyers she felt that 'the interview would have become impossible' without that assumption (Smart 1984, p.155). Interviews become a problem when interviewees make sexist and offensive remarks, and where the supportive non-argumentative stance of the interviewer provides tacit assent and reinforcement. The interviewer may experience this as doubly oppressive as:

she is unable to express alternative views and secondly she reconfirms the typical model of male/female verbal exchange. This can be an extremely frustrating experience. (Smart 1984, pp 155-6)

A way of attempting to resolve both the problem of unequal power relations and moving away from the objective empirical tradition is by adopting an empathetic approach to the interview. Early statements on social science emphasised that the interview 'is not to be an exchange of information, but the obtaining of information' (Goode & Hatt 1952, p.197). Even the 1976 edition of Selltitz *et al.* is virtually identical with the 1959 edition in advising:

he or she should assume an interested manner toward the respondent's opinions and never divulge his or her own. If the interviewer should be asked for personal views, he or she should laugh off the request with the remark that the job at the moment is to get opinions, not to have them.

The only change in wording between the two editions is the change in terminology to 'he or she' rather than 'he'. The traditional advice on interviewing for the interviewer to remain objective, uninvolved and non-responsive (Goode & Hatt 1952; Selltitz *et al.* 1959, 1976) has been replaced by an emphasis on empathy (Oakley 1986; Herod 1993, p.309). Brenner (1985) follows Lofland (1971) in considering that it is most productive of information for the interviewer to assume a non-argumentative, supportive and sympathetically understanding attitude (see also Burgess 1982b). Oakley (1979, 1986) has ridiculed the traditional approach in her studies of motherhood. When faced with questions such as 'Which hole does the baby come out of?', 'Does shaking the child harm it?' or even 'Did you breastfeed?', to respond by laughing the question off or not providing information would be both insulting and potentially damaging. She concluded that interviewing should be 'a two-way street' (Oakley 1986, p.311).

In the supportive empathetic mode of interviewing, it is recommended that interviewers should expose something of themselves and give something back to those interviewed, which is also a requirement of the ethics procedures. Not all interviews, however, conform to this model of unequal power relations. Smart (1984), when interviewing people who were 'locally powerful', felt that it was inappropriate to expose any vulnerability in herself to them:

powerful groups like the police, the judiciary, the banks etc. are quite capable of resisting our attempts to research them without us making ourselves more vulnerable to them. (Smart 1984, p.158)

The empathetic mode indicates that the interviewer should attempt to make the interview a two-way flow, and in so doing should give something back. This could be at a personal or at a collective level. In Oakley's (1986) study of women through pregnancy and childbirth, most of the women (73 per cent) interviewed felt that they got something out of the research even if it was only that it made them think about their own experiences more. The women also asked Oakley literally hundreds of questions of various sorts, about herself, about the research, for information and for advice. As indicated above, some of these questions were of the most basic kind.

The ethics procedures only provide a limited control over the interview process, one aspect of which is access to the target group, as outlined above. Other hurdles of the ethics procedures also help protect the potentially vulnerable; these hurdles include the need to demonstrate the original nature of the research, to state the procedures for obtaining informed consent and provision for withdrawal without penalty, and to consider seriously all types of possible trauma which may be experienced by respondents. Other safeguards which are required that protect powerful and powerless alike are procedures for data handling and the maintenance of confidentiality and safety, and procedures for returning information to the participants. However, the ethics procedures do not deal with issues such as the deliberate use of femininity and/or masculinity, which are assumed to be constrained by social and academic conventions, nor the nature of interaction through language (which is discussed in more detail below).

#### *The lone father survey: power and gender relations*

In this study there was no difficulty gaining access to the target population. I approached the Lone Fathers' Association (LFA) in Newcastle (New South Wales, Australia) and spoke briefly at one of their committee meetings. The committee members were keen to have their voices heard, and the interviews were all conducted with this group. It was always clear that I was the researcher and there was never any questioning of my status.

The double oppression of the gendered language of the interview and of the empathetic stance of the interviewer placed these predominantly sexist men in a position of some power in relation to the interviewer. The power they could exert was undoubtedly less than that enjoyed by the judiciary (Smart 1984), but certainly greater than that of many women. The active role played by these men in the interview process was shown by their involvement in arranging interviews for me with people they considered to be useful contacts, and by post-interview telephone calls from some of them suggesting ways in which the proposed questionnaire could be improved. These ranged from details to major proposals. Details included suggestions about the phrasing of the question on access (days per fortnight rather than days per week, as the local norm for access is one weekend in two and a regular weekday evening). Major proposals included questions on legal aid and the role of the court in settling disputes.

The frustration caused by the gendered nature of the language used was felt intently in most of the interviews. Many men referred to their ex-wives in extremely derogatory fashion, using terms such as 'bitch' or 'gold-digger'. Others expressed views that their former spouses were unreasonable to the point of mental illness; that they had been

deliberately 'out to trap a man and get his money'; that they were perverse in not working merely to claim more in legal aid and maintenance. These derogatory views of their ex-wives were often generalised to women as a whole. One man when making a general point personalised it, identifying himself as the man and the interviewer as the woman:

If I buy the house, decorate it, make it nice, then you try and take it from me ... well, I wasn't having that ... I just stayed put ... *you* can try what you like (his tone of emphasis)

On some occasions, as interviewer, I voiced a mild disagreement such as 'there may be other points of view on that' or 'maybe your wife wouldn't think so'. It was noticeable that these were generally swept aside and used merely as facilitating remarks for the flow of the man's thoughts to continue.

In the lone fathers project, an attempt was made to give something back both personally, in revealing my own family situation, and also to the group as a whole in sending out the LFA newsletter at the same time as the information about the survey and in providing the LFA with a copy of the statistical results for their own use. I was asked many questions, mostly about myself and the research, but also about legal complexities. This group, however, being committee members of an active lobbying organisation, was relatively well informed and so tended to bombard me with information, even references and documents, rather than seeking advice. I was able, though, to supply them as a group with information about themselves that they were keen to know. In this case, the power relations between interviewer and interviewed were finely balanced.

### Analysis and interpretation

The advantages of interviewing include the fact that people are speaking for themselves. Quotations are not only the proof used in the analysis, but they also preserve the language of the respondents (Mostyn 1985, p.141). However, Oakley, in the second (1986) edition of her motherhood study, considered that the use of transcribed interview material, despite its immediate appeal, may be a way of getting out of analysis. In the first (1979) edition of her work, she argued that the interviewed women said it all much better than she could. On reflection in the second edition, she felt that at the time of writing she had been:

unable to articulate the logic behind using women's own words because research on motherhood was, at the time, still in its beginning stages. (Oakley 1986, p.2)

The key issue here is a combination of two related themes which permeate contemporary cultural geography. The first theme is that of *representation*, in particular of those defined as 'other'. Such representations necessarily have to be mediated through our own words, knowledge and experience. The second theme is the *reading of texts*, in this case, usually transcriptions of the spoken word. As Oakley found, even letting the interviewees' own words speak for themselves involves a choice on the part of the interviewer. This crisis of representation through language is a task, a problem and an ethical issue which does not begin to be addressed by the ethical procedures now in place in Australian universities.

The empathetic mode of interviewing appeared to offer at least a partial solution to

this burning issue of representation: a warm and fuzzy approach which would somehow overcome the barriers of language through a recognition of shared experiences. Achieving empathy has been thought to depend to some extent on the congruence of class, ethnicity, age and gender. In a study of Sydney working-class mothers, one researcher commented:

My own middle class background was at times a disadvantage. However, the fact that I have five children appeared to be a positive factor in establishing rapport at the beginning of an interview, mothers related to me as a mother, rather than as a sociologist. (Wearing 1984, p.223)

In a reverse twist to the class and gender dimension, Schoenberger (1992) commented that a congruence of class appeared sufficient to overcome the difference of gender. In another study of health and illness in the lives of black people in London, the researcher commented:

As a white but Jewish woman, for example, I was able to share with the informants some experience of racism (anti-semitism). It is obvious, however, that because I am not black, there are some things that they could not share with me. (Donovan 1988, p.187)

However, in other circumstances it was found that the bond of gender was 'not enough': a white middle-class woman interviewing women on their experiences of divorce found difficulty in interpreting the episodic rather than historical narrative style of Hispanic working-class women (Riessman 1987). This last, very interesting example pays particular attention to the form and structure of the language used by both interviewer and interviewee.

The issue of ethnicity is a significant element both in the power relations between interviewer and interviewee and in the issue of representing others. The examples given above from the United Kingdom (Donovan 1988) and the United States (Riessman 1987) are just as significant in Australia, a multicultural society where there is an indigenous racialised minority and where there are marginalised migrant groups. Differences in meanings for essentialised terms such as 'land' and 'home' may give rise to problematic interpretations (Jacobs 1993; for New Zealand parallels, see Dyck & Kearns 1995). Young (1992, p.257), reflecting that English words were inadequate to express the Aboriginal bond between people and land, commented:

... when discussing the activities of ancestral 'bush plums' with an elderly Ammatyerre woman on Ti Tree Station in Australia's Northern Territory in 1984 I was firmly told that the informant's grandfather, camping at the spring at Aliwaye, was himself a 'bush plum'.

The impossibility of representing this expression in white terms suggests the need for researchers to adopt a post-colonial approach, recognising the need for a 'third space' in which colonised peoples can have their voices heard (Jacobs 1993, p.104 and references therein). The concept of *cultural safety* has been developed in health care in Aotearoa/New Zealand to enhance 'sensitivity to Maori concepts of health, home and land' to enable Maori voices to be heard and understood (Dyck & Kearns 1995, p.143). In interviews with the Vietnamese community in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, Dunn (1993) selected key informants, such as social workers and community leaders, who interpreted the words, actions and feelings of the community they represented to the white interviewer (Dunn 1993, p.231).

A more immediate, but more superficial, approach is to develop strategies for analysis of the structure of language (text). Donovan (1988) proposed that interview analysis should use some of the techniques from ethnomethodology to attempt to understand the structure of language itself. A problem common to the analysis of interviews is that of assessing what people are hiding and what they are not saying (Mostyn 1985). In interviews, people (especially women, according to Gottlieb 1987, p.60) may set out to please and to give the information that they think is required. Analysis of text, however, goes well beyond the omissions and elisions to take account of symbolism, syntax and structures (see, for example, Brosseau 1995). Techniques of textual analysis may also highlight the differences between public and private accounts of events (see, for example, Jacobs 1992).

*The lone father survey: representing their voices*

In this project, empathy could not be established through gender, but as in Wearing's (1984) study, family status became significant. The main point of empathy was the fact that at the time I was pregnant, although it was not very obvious at that stage. Invariably I was asked 'Are you married?' 'Got any children?'. On revealing that I was pregnant, conversations would ensue about children in general, ranging from the experiences of their former wives in pregnancy—'Any morning sickness?'—to speculations about the sex of the forthcoming infant—'If your husband is the eldest of two boys you say, well it'll be a boy, you mark my words ...'. Empathy was established through the common experience of being in the child-bearing and child-rearing stage of life.

Class, 'race' and age, significant sources of difference in other studies (Reissman 1987; Donovan 1988; Schoenberger 1992) did not appear to cause difficulties. Class distinctions are blurred and academic jobs are not necessarily valued above other occupations. In a country where informality is widespread, I did not need any particular mode of dress to establish or maintain status. I sometimes felt uncomfortable driving one of the new large and gleaming University vehicles to interviews beyond walking or cycling distance, but car ownership is considered to be the norm and the use of a University car was widely accepted as one of the perks of the job. Newcastle is predominantly a city peopled by long-standing residents of Anglo-Celtic origin; all the lone fathers interviewed and all of those who subsequently filled in questionnaires were white and of Australian or north European background. My age was similar to most of the people being interviewed; many of the people I interviewed asked me exactly how old I was. The differences in narrative style attributable either to class or ethnic status found by Riessman (1987) did not occur in these interviews. The interviewees were very forthcoming and many of them voluntarily produced court orders and confidential documents which were never asked for, as well as a text which appeared relatively straightforward to interpret.

In this case, the men seemed to have very few inhibitions in talking about extremely sensitive matters, such as alleged sexual abuse of their own children. In considering possible omissions and elisions, they were probably most inhibited in discussing their own inadequacies in the marriage: a common refrain was 'I don't know what I did wrong' or 'I still don't know why she left'. However, after probing, many would venture a remark or two about their own faults while sticking essentially to their view of their wife's unreasonableness:

*Patrick:* I suppose what with the house an' that there was always something at

weekends, building, painting, laying concrete ... I did all that out there (gesticulates to verandah, carport, sandpit) ... and she had the kids ... I suppose we never saw that much of each other really ...

They were also reticent about their feelings on the break-up:

*Interviewer (probing):* You seem very calm about all this ...

*Simon:* Calm! Calm! I'm bloody boiling inside I tell you ...

One linguistic feature of the interview texts which stands out is the repeated use of metaphor to emphasise strongly held views. Contrasting examples are found in the terminology applied to their ex-wives and mothers of their children, who were condemned as 'tramps', 'whores', 'bitches', and 'sluts', while the family as a concept was extolled as the 'linchpin', the 'cornerstone', or the 'foundation' of society (a more substantive analysis of this discourse is contained in Winchester 1996). This highly expressive use of language reinforces the significance of the ideologies which structure, and the causal mechanisms which underlie, their experiences of marital breakdown.

### **Conclusions: ethical issues in interviewing**

Interviews have become an increasingly important qualitative method in human geography, and their increasing use in Australia is now subject to ethics procedures. This paper considers that such ethics procedures have some limited value in controlling access to disadvantaged populations and in enforcing consideration of a number of questions of procedure. These include consideration of possible trauma which may be experienced by respondents, and procedures for obtaining informed consent, provision for withdrawal without penalty, maintaining confidentiality, data safety and handling, and for returning information to the participants. However, many of these procedures, intended originally for invasive medical procedures such as blood-sampling, are of less significance in qualitative studies where interviews are being undertaken with not only consenting but interested, and sometimes locally powerful, adults.

This paper has further argued that the ethics procedures currently adopted by Australian universities have three significant shortcomings when applied to qualitative interview-based studies. Firstly, and most generally, the ethics procedures are based on an empirical–realist conception of science, where reality can be determined from empirical observations which should be replicable and quantifiable. Such a view of science, and the methodological and ethical procedures which derive from it, are not easily adapted to qualitative techniques. In this view of science, qualitative techniques tend to be seen as a soft and anecdotal supplement, and therefore interview-based studies are generally justified within the empirical–realist model as part of a mixture of methods. It is argued here that interviews undertaken in a critical–realist framework aiming to elucidate underlying structures and causal mechanisms are excluded from the current procedures.

Secondly, issues of power and gender relations are often highly significant structuring factors in interviews. Although ethics procedures function as gate-keepers to protect vulnerable populations and encourage the return of information to participants, they offer little guidance for the structure of interviews in situations of great social inequality or possible gender manipulation.

Thirdly, they fail to cover the issues of language, text, discourse and interpretation which arise from using and representing the language of others. As geographers, we

represent others through their words, but mediated by our own words, knowledge, experience and power. Such problems of power and representation are only partially addressed by an empathetic approach to interviewing and by analysis of text. The crucial issues of power and representation are concealed in an empirical–realist model where behaviour is seen as objective and value-free and results as reducible to numbers. It is therefore only by changing the conception of what constitutes science and reality that we can grapple with the ethical issues involved in speaking to and for others.

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### NOTES

- [1] The ethics procedures considered here are not completely uniform across Australia and hence the comments relate particularly to procedures at the University of Newcastle.  
 [2] Names have been changed to protect the identity of those interviewed.

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