Article

A social researcher researching social researchers – Lessons from feminist epistemologies

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Abstract
Qualitative research literature discusses how power shapes the interview process and the resulting data and explores the epistemic basis for interview research theoretically. However, processes of negotiating epistemic authority in the interview situation, and in data analysis, are investigated less frequently. This paper draws on 34 interviews with social science academics interested in gender, feminist and queer studies in four English universities to reflect on the epistemological challenges of researching social researchers about their work. Through this, it contributes to explorations of how, in qualitative interviewing and data analysis, we can combine a critical reading of interview data with a commitment to respondents' accounts of their realities. I argue that Black, anti-colonial, queer, feminist epistemological approaches can be well suited to navigate this challenge. I advocate for an epistemic reflexivity that acknowledges the fluidity of speaker positions while taking structural power relations, and their effects on epistemology, seriously.

Introduction

In 2018 and 2019, I visited four universities in different parts of England to talk to academics interested in feminist, gender, and queer studies about their work. Specifically, I wanted to find out how the marketisation of Higher Education had shaped and reshaped how these academics produce knowledge, and the knowledge they produce. I expected feminist and gender knowledge production to provide an illuminating case for exploring the 'paradoxical' (Pereira, 2017) ways in which political, institutional and economic changes can affect academic knowledge: simultaneously held up as progressive, inclusive and 'global' in some

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contexts, the field is threatened by ongoing funding cuts and restructurings, by border controls and *Prevent* policies.[1] I also hoped to think through how, as a feminist committed to liberatory knowledge production, I might position myself in relation to the dismantling of the public university system on one hand, and the assimilation of aspects of feminism into neoliberal hegemony on the other.

Exploring this posed methodological and epistemological questions, which I turn to in this article. Conscious of the pitfalls of too closely tying epistemic authority to positionality and lived experience, I was nevertheless committed to taking my research participants' narratives – to producing knowledge that disrupted epistemic hierarchies by drawing on the voices and experiences of participants, especially of those who were most negatively affected by the structures I explored. I also approached this research based on some political convictions: dismay at the state of Higher Education, as well as an aspiration to interrogate academic feminism's internal epistemic hierarchies and violences. Once I began interviewing, these motivations became harder to translate into practice than I anticipated, and challenges were exacerbated as I analysed the interview data. Notions of hierarchy and authority had made their way into the research often unconsciously, requiring unpacking. Several of my participants had themselves researched topics related to Higher Education, and most of them had significantly more experience of working in the field than I did. In accounts of their working lives, theoretical reflections were intertwined with their experiences. However, their interpretations of what was happening in universities often significantly differed from mine, as well as differing between respondents. How, then, could I combine a critical reading of such interview data with a commitment to respondents' accounts of their realities? Taking this question as a starting point, this article reflects on the epistemological challenges of researching social researchers about their work. It argues that queer, Black, anticolonial, feminist epistemological approaches can help navigate these challenges, and advocates for an epistemic reflexivity that acknowledges the fluidity of positionality while taking structural power relations seriously. This discussion, then, provides insights into the challenges of, and possibilities for, negotiating epistemic authority in interviews more broadly.

Reflexivity, power and epistemic authority in the interview process

Social science has a long history of exploring the epistemic basis for its enquiry. Bourdieu's notion of 'reflexivity' accords epistemic advantages to social scientists who are able to break with common-sense beliefs of fields in which social actors are placed (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Our ability to reflect upon the collective unconscious of our own field then legitimates our sociological enquiry. This notion of an 'epistemic break' has been critiqued since Bourdieu's time of writing, as has his tendency of positioning interview respondents as vessels for an untheorized 'voice' (Kenway and McLeod, 2004; McRobbie, 2002). Asserting the ability of research participants to theorise their own experiences, and create knowledge from this experience, is a central tenet of anti-racist, anti-colonial and feminist interventions.

This epistemological and methodological corrective is not merely important for its own sake. Rather, postcolonial and settler-colonial gendered, sexualised, spatialised, abled and classed hierarchies between the knower and known are tied to material

distributions of power (Kuokkanen, 2007; Mihesuah and Wilson, 2004; Mills, 1997; Smith, 2021; Spivak, 1988; Wekker, 2016). The poststructuralist emphasis on multiplicity and fluidity of identity and voice stands in some tension with the fact that epistemic erasure is essential to gendered colonial capitalist modernity (Lugones, 2007; Wynter, 2003). Theorising from a marginalised position is then essential, epistemologically and politically (Alcoff, 1999; Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Bernal, 2002; Collins, 2014; Dillard, 2000; Fricker, 2007; Harding, 2008; hooks, 2015; Hurtado, 2003). While feminist empiricism, as well as some early approaches to standpoint theory, strive to iron sexist bias out of historical and contemporary scientific enquiry by according epistemic privileges to the marginalised (Code, 1995), contemporary standpoint theoretical approaches emphasise the futility of correcting (social) scientific bias in the first place. Contemporary feminist standpoint theory, arising out of Black and Women of Colour thought on the interrelation between experience, knowledge and intersecting structures of oppression (see Combahee River Collective, 1977) underlines that epistemic privilege is not a static and fixed quality that individuals possess, but always relational, incomplete, and contested (Alcoff, 1991; Collins, 2014). Within these paradigms, multiple, intersecting axes of oppression have some persistence through time and space while not being all-encompassing, hierarchical and static. As such, marginalisation does not automatically equate to epistemic privilege – this would assume an essentialist and hierarchical understanding of oppression and marginalisation (Alcoff, 1991). Within qualitative research, reflexive engagements with relations of power accordingly must go beyond a 'shopping list' approach which reifies fixed identity categories (Folkes, 2022). Shifting negotiations of positionalities and identities throughout the research process must be engaged with while closely attending to power (Baz, 2023; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Roulston, 2010).

Such reflexive engagement does not remove the epistemic and often material violence that structures the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In recent decades, participatory research design, including Participatory Action Research, has aimed to redistribute epistemic authority and material gains from research by centring the needs of the researched community (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019). Some interview-based research projects include possibilities for respondents to review scripts or engage with preliminary research findings (Gomes Pessoa et al., 2019; Kirsch, 1999; Riach, 2009; Stengers and Despret, 2014). Reflexive methodologies such as Black Feminist auto-ethnography, memory work and photovoice seek to shift epistemic hierarchies by paying deep, close attention to marginalised voices and narratives (Coemans et al., 2019; Dillard and Bell, 2011; Griffin, 2012; Onyx and Small, 2001; Tynan and Garbett, 2007). In the context of Higher Education Research, individual and collective auto-ethnography and critical autobiography have moved the gaze from race and gender-blind analyses of marketisation and neoliberalism to highlighting how these structures affect academics differently (Jubas and Seidel, 2016; Musser, 2016; Nyklová, 2017; Pearce, 2020; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). While not able to displace epistemic and material hierarchies, these methodologies go some way in challenging them. However, in the contemporary, marketised Higher Education context, building participatory elements into a research project may not be logistically or financially possible, nor may it be always desirable (see James, 2022). Traditional interview-based research can still be useful, enabling researchers to draw connections between individuals' experiences and

meso- and macro-level structures. Given the ongoing popularity of interviews in quali-
tative social research, issues of epistemic hierarchies in interviews remain pertinent.

Qualitative research literature has emphasised the co-constructed nature of interviews,
and of the meaning that arises within them (Cassell, 2005; Denzin, 2001; Tanggaard,
2009). Within such a framework, an interview is regarded as an 'active text, a site
where meaning is created and performed' (Denzin, 2001: 25). Rather than interviewing
to gain access to scientific truths, constructivist and other post-positivist approaches have
been interested in exploring how the interaction between interviewer and interviewee
shapes how different truths are expressed and how they interact in the interview
setting (Roulston, 2010). Reflexivity, then, is essential to trace these meaning-making
processes, and their relationship to interviewer positionality. Many feminist reflections
on interviewing align closely with this constructivist view, arguing that the aim of fem-
inist social research should be the exploration of multiple truths and life-worlds, in par-
ticular of marginalised participants (Roulston, 2010). Building on and drawing from these
insights, there is now a widespread recognition in methodological scholarship that power
in interview situations is never fixed, and that it cannot be fully accounted for (Hamilton,
2020; Harris, 2016; Macías, 2022; Rollock, 2013).

Nevertheless, few feminist studies explore the methodological challenges of researching
fellow feminists, or feminist academics. Stengers and Despret's (2014) reflection on
female academics discusses the epistemic and methodological challenges of discussing a
shared terrain without pre-imposing a framework for this discussion. In their collective
letter-writing exercise, participants' critical engagement with, and even rejection of,
the premises of the research project, is written into its final project. Pereira's (2017)
and Coates' (1999) studies both use interviews with feminist academics to study
gender and feminist knowledge production in Portugal and the UK, respectively. Both
speak of the complexities of being, and being read as, a feminist ally in interview situa-
tions, and of being pulled in multiple, often contradictory directions in line with partici-
pants' political commitments and views on the research topic. This is echoed by Kathy
Davis (2010), who focuses on silences about racism in interviews with a feminist collect-
ive, thereby reflexively exploring how one might critique the blind-spots of a field, and
social group, that one is embedded in. These contributions however focus less on epis-
temological challenges than on issues of embodiment, rapport and scholarly
responsibility.

Reflections on interviewing peers, stemming from wider social research, tend to have a
similar focus. Much literature on researching academics discusses this research as an
exercise in 'studying up': the researcher, often a PhD student or early career academic,
conducts interviews with university management or senior academics (Hoskins, 2015;
Nudzor, 2013; Perera, 2020a; Ruan, 2020; Stephens, 2007; Wiles et al., 2006).
Authors describe how they manage physical self-presentation, as well as issues of
access, rapport-building and communication. Power here is generally understood to be
shifting and contingent, and the interview is a space in which hierarchies become con-
structed, deconstructed and reconstructed (Perera, 2020a, b; Stephens, 2007).
Gunasekara (2007) reflects on occupying multiple identities when interviewing aca-
demics: being positioned as both novice researcher and academic insider, at times
during one interview, required him to 'constantly pivot the centre in negotiating the influ-
ence of multiple constructed identities' (Gunasekara, 2007: 471).

My own position in relation to my research participants could not easily be categorised as 'studying up'. At times, I was and felt like a student interviewing a powerful, well-connected leader in my field. At other times, my interview conversations were more akin to the casual chats with colleagues I frequently have in departmental corridors and kitchens, or 'critical friendships' (Holvikivi, 2019) which allowed for respectful disagreements about understandings of, and forms of engagement with, the university. The above studies offer useful insights into practical ways of navigating these multiple, shifting positions: they underline the necessity of ongoing reflexive engagement with the impact of the researcher's embodied positionality on the interview process, not merely as a one-off 'confessionary' exercise with privilege which ultimately reproduces the authority of the researcher (Pillow, 2003). They emphasise that reflexivity must be intersectional and must pay close attention to both 'identities and structures as research participants might represent them [and] to their instability and capacity to be made and remade' (Hamilton, 2020: 522). They also underline the importance of reflecting on how the respondents' knowledge of the interview process affected the interviews and data analysis, and the need for querying deeply into meanings that are taken for granted in the shared field. They highlight the co-constructed nature of the interview encounter, and the way that power relations are produced and reproduced within this space. However, how power shapes *epistemic* authority is negotiated in interview situations are far less frequently explored. This is also the case when it comes to discussions of data analysis, despite ongoing theoretical discussions on the epistemic basis of interviewing (Brinkmann, 2018), and despite the rich traditions of anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist methodologies and epistemologies discussed above. As qualitative researchers, we may unconsciously accord different kinds of epistemic authority and privilege to our interview participants. Therefore, without interrogating when and why we do so, we easily fall prone to hidden inconsistencies shaped by political and personal situatedness. This has consequences for the way we conduct interviews, analyse, and write up our interview findings. While this problem is not specific to studying other social researchers, we can look towards social research with, and about social researchers as an 'extreme' case which reveals complex challenges of navigating authority and voice, and which therefore also provides productive insights into navigating them.

Paper overview

I begin this paper by exploring three vignettes from my research. These vignettes are not representative of my research overall – rather, they provide insights into the context of my study while also outlining in some more detail the epistemic challenges I encountered. The vignettes lay out three different ways of understanding and experiencing developments in Higher Education. Respondents are positioned differently both with regards to their identities and backgrounds and in relation to the institutions in which they work. I show how these vignettes speak to broader questions of epistemic authority and the role of the social researcher. I then investigate more closely my own relationship to my respondents in the interview encounter, drawing out some of the misunderstandings and misrepresentations that took place in this context. I move on to explore how epistemic authority might be negotiated in these situations. I suggest that moments of misrecognition and uncertain and shifting relations of power in the interview encounter

should be considered productive openings for challenging epistemological and methodological orthodoxies both during the interview encounter itself, and in analysis. Lastly, I make the case for drawing on, and thinking with, Black, anti-colonial, queer, feminist epistemologies when navigating the complex issues of positionality, power and voice involved in researching other social researchers. I also suggest some practical strategies for analysing data drawn from interviews with social researchers. Overall, I argue that the epistemic challenges involved in interviewing other social researchers can be navigated – if not overcome – with an epistemological commitment that recognises the fluidity of subject position and 'standpoint', while also emphasising the importance of both experiential knowledge *and* structural analysis.

Competing narratives

It is a rainy afternoon in January 2019, and I am standing outside a busy coffee shop in London's East End, waiting for Rita, a senior lecturer[2] at post-1992[3] Histon University.[4] I am glad that Rita suggested this location for our interview. In past interviews I had been tasked with deciding on locations, only to worry about their suitability for private conversations, about being exposed as an inexperienced researcher after background noise threatens to disturb recordings. These worries are not without foundation. My research concerns feminist and gender knowledge production in English universities. I am myself a sociologist working on gender and feminism – unnervingly, the audience of my research is therefore also its subject, opening it up for critique that entangles the research process with its output. Moreover, many of the academics I interviewed are themselves experts in qualitative interviewing. An interview participants' remark on a loud coffee machine in the background of an interview, which would have likely gone unnoticed by non-academic interviewees, had previously led to rapid shifts in authority between me and my participants, making me nervously question my skills as a researcher instead of focusing on the conversation (see Wiles et al., 2006 for similar issues).

When Rita arrives, we easily build rapport. Like me, she is a white, cisgender, female social researcher. In contrast to me, she is permanently employed in a vocationally orientated department, and describes herself as being from a working-class background, and the first in her family to attend university. Towards the end of the interview, I ask Rita about the role of inclusivity initiatives in her university, and the meaning of an 'inclusive curriculum'. She tells me:

> The number of times that people [students] are saying oh, I'm paying nine and a half thousand pounds and basically you know you could be doing this degree for me almost, you know there's an expectation, they are not paying anything because they are taking a loan, taxpayers are paying for their loan as such until they pay back. So there is a conflict there – and some of the students say that they'll never pay back, they've got no intention of working in the future, which is bizarre really.

I respond by suggesting that perhaps students are unable to confront their debt due to its enormous proportions, to which Rita replies that while this may be true, the UK economy simply cannot afford the number of students entering universities.

Jane is an academic of colour who works at the same university as Rita, but in a different department. I interview her in her office. After we speak briefly about her role in the institution and her career trajectory – she has worked in the same university for several decades – I ask her what she considers to be the major changes in the institution. She says:

> A lot has changed over grades of the importance of research, things have got harder in terms of the impact of REF and then TEF,[5] the NSS,[6] all of those things, things that we're constantly having to think about, unless we just kind of think in terms of, you know, 'I'm going to do what I'm going to do, and that's as much as I can do'. That's a hard thing here. You know, it's a very ego-invested environment and it's more so now, so you know whether you have low self-esteem – which I do –, or high self-esteem, this is the environment to make it worse…

I responded by inquiring in more detail about how this affected her specifically, which led to an in-depth conversation about the challenges of her working life.

Henry is a white, cisgender male senior lecturer. I had previously interviewed several of Henry's female colleagues, all of which had told me about the effects that regulatory frameworks, such as the REF and TEF, increasingly have on their working lives. I had also spoken to a few other white, cisgender male academics who all felt that the marketisation of Higher Education negatively affected their ability to do research, albeit in a way that seemed overall less significant than the experiences of their female and non-binary colleagues. Consequently, I expect Henry's account to be similar: he is neither more senior than his colleagues, nor should his department or his role come with significantly different freedoms or responsibilities. However, Henry's description of his teaching and research practice touches rarely on institutional structures or regulations. Towards the end of the interview, I ask him:

> Lili: I hear from a lot of respondents, and generally from literature as well, how Higher Education has become increasingly regulated, how there's more rules, more tick-boxing, is that…

> Henry: I don't know whether there's increasingly more. It's just … it's just we are perhaps noticing … I'm not convinced if I'm honest. Perhaps I've had a sheltered life and I've never really come across this.

I decide to stop digging and move on to ask him in further detail about his teaching and research.

The conversations described in these three vignettes revolve around similar topics: changes in, and challenges of, work in Higher Education, and regulatory frameworks. Jane and Rita describe an institutional context which is fraught with problems, and which, at least to some extent, has experienced a turn to the worse. My reactions to the quotes however reveal that I feel differently towards the two accounts: while I gently challenge Rita, I sympathetically nod at Jane's account; my follow-up questions to Rita come close to political and theoretical enquiries, while I ask Jane questions about her lived experience. I disagree with Rita's account, but agree with Jane's, and the interviews develop in different directions accordingly. Henry, on the other hand, offers a narrative that is very different from Jane's and Rita's, as well as being different

from my understanding: according to him, everything is largely fine in Higher Education, there have been no major changes. I do not challenge Henry during the interview, but circle back to questions about institutional structures later in the interview. His responses remain similar.

As I attempt to analyse the data from these interviews thematically, I am at a loss. I had chosen thematic analysis for its ability to gain insights into overall patterns, while also being attentive to individual difference and experience. Maria do Mar Pereira reminds us that interviews with feminist academics can be sites for inquiry into the processes under investigation, while also providing 'always partial, contextual, and mediated' insights into a phenomenon, for example, the functioning of universities (Pereira, 2017: 12). I hoped that reading my interview data as would enable me to understand larger structures of power, and the institutions in which power circulates, *through* my participants' experiences, while allowing me to situate my respondents' accounts within these structures and institutions.

I am now confronted with three different accounts of what has happened to Higher Education, and who is responsible for changes, if there have been any. If I want to read any of this as insights into the functioning of Higher Education (even if mediated, contextual and partial), I must make a choice of whose account to accord what kind of epistemic authority, in relation to which statements. However, if I diverge from my respondents' accounts to choose my own, often conflicting analysis, I have to read my respondents' accounts as somehow less epistemically authoritative than mine. Neither of these option feels immediately justifiable: How, if at all, could I justify such a differential treatment of the data, and a differential treatment of my respondents? And on what basis do I justify my own authority to pass any judgement on my respondents' experiences analyses? In order to explore these questions, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the epistemological and methodological foundations of my study and explore its interview context more closely.

Power and politics in interviewing academics: of (mis-)recognitions and silences

Jane, Henry and Rita are three of the 34 academics I interviewed; all academics were interested in gender, queer and/or feminist research, while not necessarily self-defining as feminists, or as gender studies or queer studies scholars. Most of my participants were sociologists, but some were critical legal scholars, media studies academics and anthropologists. They were at different career stages, ranging from PhD researcher to emeritus lecturer. I expected that semi-structured interviews would allow for an exploration of my research questions that was structured enough to provide comparable insights, but in-depth and flexible enough to allow for surprises and differences in responses. An analysis of public-facing documents and archival data would then provide context, and a macro and meso view. My ontological, epistemological and methodological perspective was rooted in a commitment to what might be broadly termed 'feminist research methods'. Roulston (2010) describes feminist interviews as 'used for the purpose of doing feminist work and contributing to the advancement of women's causes in a patriarchal, capitalist society' (p. 2). I reject the 'woman' at the centre of this description: the positioning of 'woman' as feminism's 'proper object' is

troubled by queer and trans scholars (Butler, 1994; Wiegman, 2002), while Black and women of colour feminism have emphasised the impossibility – and undesirability – of being captured under this inherently white signifier (Lugones, 2007; Spillers, 1987). This is not merely an issue of inclusion, but of a liberatory feminist politics that aims for the abolition of all forms of gendered and intersecting oppressions. Accordingly, I understand feminism, following Lola Olufemi, as a project of 'justice work', aimed at the 'abolition of all prevailing systems of violence' (Olufemi, 2020: 3). This includes the violence continually inflicted by mainstream feminism on those who fall outside of its imagined white, middle class, cisgender, abled subject and object.[7] Feminist research praxis is part of this justice work: it is committed to dismantling epistemic and material hierarchies and structures of oppression in its own knowledge production, and in society more broadly. Approaching research from this perspective meant drawing from anti-essentialist, post-foundationalist approaches to feminist epistemologies which consider marginalised perspectives to hold some epistemic privilege, but which simultaneously emphasise the 'uneasy, under determined, and contested relationship between location on the one hand and meaning and truth on the other' (Alcoff, 1991: 16).

My interview respondents differed with regards to the power they held in their institution and their embeddedness within gender and feminist research. While many of them were precariously employed and otherwise structurally disadvantaged in academia, others held positions of relative power, as tenured professors and occupants of managerial and other leadership positions. At the end of each interview, I asked my participants to self-define in relation to protected characteristics as defined by the UK Equalities Act, with class and migration status added after several of my respondents noted their relevance. I also told my participants to indicate which ones of these self-identifications they considered important in shaping their working lives. My respondents and I frequently challenged the binarism of those categories, and their relevance for academic life, either explicitly or through laughter and ironic comments. Nevertheless, almost all my respondents agreed about the importance of self-defining in relation to such categories. The majority (28) of my participants defined as white, 20 were from the UK, about two-thirds defined as heterosexual, and six reported disabilities that were relevant to their work and academic life. Four of my participants were defined as men, 28 as women, and two defined as non-binary or genderqueer.

I approached the study holding assumptions about Higher Education which interlinked with political commitments. While invested in the intellectual project of feminist theory and pedagogy, I was sceptical of narratives which considered the field unilaterally 'under threat', thus easily glossing over its entanglements with universities' violences (see Boggs and Mitchell, 2018). I was highly critical of the neoliberal turn in universities and assumed that in England this manifested in a combination of managerialism and 'audit culture', and in the commodification of knowledge affecting all academics, but in very different ways. Henry's narrative, by indicating that he had no experience of regulation whatsoever, thus contradicted my understanding of the current university context. I further sought to challenge critiques that exceptionalise the current situation, thereby reifying the idea of a 'golden age' of universities. Rita's analysis, I found myself thinking as I interviewed her, tapped into some of the discourses that perpetuate such an idea of downfall, especially as much of her critique of marketisation was structured around the figure of the 'student-as-consumer' (see Ahmed, 2015 for a critique of such narratives).

Embedded in a feminist methodological tradition that emphasises the epistemic and material inequalities behind the construction of the 'neutral', unbiased researcher, I did not consider these political commitments and prior assumptions a hindrance to the research. I nevertheless sought to construct an interview space that allowed my participants to share their thoughts freely and confidently. However, I often became positioned as political from the beginning of the interview process, merely by virtue of my role as a feminist critiquing the contemporary university through this research project. This was always also mediated by other attributes of our shared, or different identities. I was resistant to this positioning at the beginning, unsure whether being read this way might prevent my respondents from being honest about their opinions. However, sometimes it was precisely those moments of solidarity in the interviews in which I gained insights beyond the standard narratives, which were often already in dialogue with now common-sense truths of critical university studies scholarship and public critiques of the university on social media. Wiles et al. (2006) note the difficulties of getting their (academic) interview participants to speak about their experiences, rather than offering scholarly critiques of widely known literature. They also mention their attempts to steer the researchers towards the experiential. In my case, political alignment or shared vocabularies could facilitate my stirring back conversations to the 'everyday' of my respondents' working lives.

At other times, the respondents' readings of my positionality and politics resulted in them leaving out significant information due to assuming shared knowledge. This was particularly noticeable with regards to assumed mutual understandings based on shared subject positions. For example, it is likely that shared whiteness at times led to race and racism not being brought up in interviews, reproducing the idea of whiteness as a racially unmarked positionality (Frankenberg, 1993). Sometimes, race or racism was also brought up only to then not to be included in any subsequent discussion. My white participants' declarations of whiteness or acknowledgements of the existence of racism, in combination with mine, could slip into making interviews 'happy points' (Ahmed, 2012: 14) where race and racism were not mentioned after its existence was declared, as if it had been solved simply through our acknowledgements. Ahmed (2004) shows how declarations of whiteness can become a substitute for doing anti-racist work: academic and political insights about the invisibility of whiteness lead white people to conclude that they are 'not-that' (i.e. racist) because racists do not know that they are white. This insight felt particularly relevant given the self-understanding of at least some of my white participants as politically progressive, non-racist or actively anti-racist. I expected that in data analysis, leaving more space for the experiences of those academics occupying minoritised positions, or the insights of the 'outsiders within' (Collins, 2014), would enable me to counterbalance some of the effects of the whiteness, British/EU heritage and middle-classness of most of my sample, and the silences and 'loudnesses' arising from it. I also hoped that the semi-structured nature of the interviews would provide me with space to investigate the power relations between me and my research participants during analysis (Wolf, 1996). Aware of the impossibility of fully accounting for the ways in which power operates, I aimed to approximate an understanding of its effects through a reflexive exploration of my own role in shaping respondents' narratives. However, power and positionality, and their role in the interview encounter and resulting data, was even more challenging to understand than expected.

Indeed, interview encounters were ridden with misreadings and misunderstandings; my own identity and self-presentation often sat uncomfortably with how I felt I was being read by my respondents. Sometimes, these misunderstandings were quite blatant: for example, when it emerged towards the end of my interview with a German-origin academic that they thought I was South African (instead of German) throughout the interview. While this might seem inconsequential, their misreading of my nationality might have shaped the interview in ways that are now indiscernible, for example when it came to discussing international students and movements to decolonise the curriculum. While some aspects of my identity – such as my whiteness – are easily legible, others (most notably perhaps sexual orientation, age and class) might be less so. I thought of these shifting readings and identifications as I was dressing for each interview, wondering whether I could and should present myself in a way that was more easily legible and therefore made the interaction more readily analysable, the power relations undergirding our exchange easier to understand. This, of course, would have been impossible. Feminist analyses of interviews remind us that the attempt to be known, and to know the other, in the interview encounter is futile: subject positions themselves are and reshaped in the interview encounter (Angod, 2022; Badwall, 2022; Cassell, 2005). Sztainbock and Gajardo accordingly argue for an 'ethics of ambiguity' when it comes to the positioning of both researcher and researched; an approach that 'render[s]. the researcher 'opaque' and knowledge 'suspect' (Sztainbok and Gajardo, 2022: 28). However, the inability to grasp the power relations in the interview posed questions when analysing the data. Affective pulls and often unconscious epistemological judgements undergirded decisions as to whose narratives and experiences I was responding to positively, which ones I was debunking; which ones I read as evidence, and which ones I instead considered specific to subject and context.

Who knows what, and why?

Let us think back to the vignettes introduced above. Emphasising lived experience and voice, in line with methodological and epistemological paradigms outlined, has to imply according to at least some (contingent and relative) epistemic authority to my respondents' narrations of their experiences, and thus to analyses of Higher Education which contrasted and often clashed with mine. I am sceptical towards Rita's account of student's entitlement, but how do I ground this scepticism epistemically? I disagree with Henry's account of the lack of regulation in his university. Would it be epistemically justifiable to claim that he, as a white man, has better knowledge of regulation than me? I agree with Jane's account of the regulatory impact of the REF and TEF, but does my agreement indicate that she knows better than her colleagues?

One way to navigate problems of epistemic authority and epistemic privilege here might be to distinguish between experiential and theoretical knowledge: I could simply choose to give epistemic weight to my respondents' accounts of their *experiences*, but not their interpretations or explanations of them. This would be at least somewhat in line with my rationale for the interviews, to understand experiences as well as power structures. I would take as given Jane's narrative in so far as her workload is significantly heavier than it used to be, that she is very worried about the REF and TEF, and that this affects her self-confidence. This would however not lead me to deduce that these

frameworks indeed have led to the increase in workload. I could give epistemic weight to Rita's assertion that her students say that they will never pay back their loans but disagree with the idea that this poses a problem for Higher Education. I would assume that Henry might not understand changes in Higher Education, which he might well have experienced, to be regulatory. I would acknowledge that he has had experiences which may or may not be described as regulatory by others but would be careful when using this as proof that regulation does not affect him at all.

However, the distinction between experiential knowledge and theoretical analysis does not hold. The theoretical and experiential are always interconnected; and experiential knowledge becomes theorised in its narration (see Ahmed, 2017; Alcoff and Potter, 1993; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981: 23). My research corroborated this insight. My respondents' accounts of the REF and TEF could not be considered merely experiential. Jane is a social scientist, trained to analyse relations between structure and agency, and to apply this critical lens to her own position. Rita might well have misunderstood or misinterpreted her students' statements about fees based on her theoretical assessments of Higher Education. Henry could have his own reasons for claiming that regulation has not increased or might have understood the concept of 'regulation' differently than I used it in the interview, due to thinking from a different social scientific paradigm. Reflexively engaging with the scientific, and often also structural context for their statements, my participants provided accounts of institutions that were based on an amalgamation of theoretical knowledge and experiential knowledge that were impossible to disentangle. Personal narrative, based on lived experience, was deeply entwined with analysis of, and commentary on, the state of contemporary Higher Education. It was therefore also impossible to accord my respondents full epistemic authority with regards to their experiences, while challenging their authority to make sense of it.

In any case, one could easily argue that an analysis which pays closer attention to the relationship between positionality, speaker position and power, is needed. Such a reading would then also allow me to emphasise minoritised positions, while remaining critical in my own analysis of the context that my respondents describe. In this way, some effects of the whiteness, British/EU heritage and middle-classness of much of my sample could be alleviated. In an extreme version of this way of reading the data, Jane's positionality as an academic of colour would assume her epistemic authority to give insights into the impact of the REF and TEF on women of colour. I could take her accounts as stemming from experiential knowledge gained through viewing structural problems from a marginalised, and thus epistemically privileged, position. Such an analysis would certainly be justified with reference to the literature, which clearly indicates that academics of colour, and women of colour specifically, are at the sharp end of these reforms (Ahmed, 2012; Duncan, 2014; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2016; Hong, 2008; Musser, 2016). An explanation for Henry's lack of experience of regulation might then be precisely his positioning as a white man. I could deduce that regulation affects those that are positioned differently in different ways, and that Henry has been untouched by these trends precisely because of his privilege. I might also argue that Rita, as a white woman in a relatively senior role, has interests and viewpoints that are specific to these subject positions, and which make it more likely that she blames students for the changes in universities rather than investigating her own role, and that of her colleagues.

This analysis would however verge on an essentialist standpoint politics that falls prone to fetishizing speaker positions understood as marginal. Importantly, such a reading relies on an understanding of power and positionality as static, legible, and inherent in individuals. While similar understandings of power are sometimes misread as characterising intersectional analyses (see Bilge, 2013; Lewis, 2009 for critiques), Black feminist epistemology emphasises that power does not operate in a straightforwardly hierarchising way: understanding power structures as co-constitutive is essential to intersectional thinking (Collins and Bilge, 2020). As the above discussion on fluidity and standpoint in the interview encounter illustrates, power relations in interviews are never fully legible by those present and cannot be fully accounted for: 'Identification practices partially fix subjects into positionalities – but it is an inadequate fixation' (Ahmed, 1997: 164). We can connect this analysis of encounters to reading practices of data: seeking to fix power is not only impossible, but undesirable. In data analysis, such readings indeed could accord disproportionate epistemic weight to testimony, risking a fetishization of 'experiential knowledge'. Tuck and Yang (2014) critically investigate the search for 'authenticity' and 'voice' in social research. In the colonial university, the coding and writing up of narratives of pain, exploitation and violence follow a lineage of expropriation; subaltern voices become commodified particularly in a context which always strives for 'newness' and 'originality'. An over-emphasis on the experiential knowledge of marginalised research participants risks aligning subject position, experience and voice in a way that essentialises difference, while also ignoring the fluid boundaries between theory and experience (See Scott, 1991). This does not imply that Jane's experience of racism in relation to regulatory structures should not be taken seriously, or that it should not be accorded with more epistemic weight than a white colleague's narratives about race. My concern is with a reading that draws direct connections between legible positionality, lived experience, and truth.

A third option would be to favour my own explanation of my respondents' circumstances over theirs simply based on my role as the person who designed the study, and who asked the questions in the interview. This, however, required at least some belief in the explanatory potential of my own analysis, as a *better* or more *useful* social science. This neither felt justifiable with reference to my respondents' scholarly authority nor with reference to experiential knowledge. As a PhD student, I was falling short on both accounts: I had spent less time working in Higher Education than most of my participants, and consequently, my understanding of structural changes and their effects on the knowledge field was largely literature-based. Several of my participants had researched and published on topics surrounding Higher Education: they were reflexively engaged with the institutions that employed them in both a Bourdieusian and a feminist sense. If I nevertheless erred on the side of a critiquing my respondents' accounts – such as in my dialogue with Rita and my subsequent analysis and writing up of her interview data – I sometimes swerved into a 'paranoid reading' (Sedgwick, 2003) of the data: I read their engagements with and experiences in the university as if they were published work that I was seeking to debunk, and as if by simply exposing how they were wrong I was able to do politically and intellectually valuable work. This felt ungracious and ultimately unproductive, contradicting my intention to take my respondents' narratives seriously. Overall, my lack of epistemological and ontological grounding then led to an indecisive analysis and writing style.

Reading misrecognitions as openings

I suggest that bringing the attention back to micro-manifestations of power in the interview – their illegibility, combined with an acknowledgement of their structural situatedness – can open up some pathways for how we might navigate these epistemic and methodological challenges at the analysis stage. Paying close attention to the ways power manifests here illustrates the futility of attempting to comprehensively capture, analyse and understand speaker positions. Indeed, my attempts at making my respondents' epistemic positions, and the epistemic authority that comes with it, legible, through discussing their self-identification according to Equality Act categories, ultimately proved futile. Similarly, as I discussed above, my own positionality in the interview process was not just fluid and shifting, but frequently misrecognised and misread. This shifted the interview, and the relations of power within it, in ways that were and remain impossible to account for. Pillow (2003) critiques the modernist conception of identity and subjectivity prevalent in dominant approaches of reflexivity in social research. Instead of a reflexivity that seeks to fix, and account for the self and other, 'an understanding of a subject as postmodern, as multiple, as unknowable, as shifting, situates the purposes and practices of research, and the uses of reflexivity, quite differently' (Pillow, 2003: 178). Such an 'uncomfortable' reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) can also help us think through the relationship between power and epistemic authority as we analyse our data.

However, this must involve a recognition of the situated and contingent nature of all knowledge. Sylvia Wynter understands the structures that situate subjects as intertwined with knowledge: humans are *bios* and *logos*; the collective (biological and secular) narrative of humanity is unable to be disentangled from its material conditions (Wynter, 1995: 35). Rejecting the gods-eye view of traditional Eurocentric scientific enquiry, we can recognise that perspectives are situated as much as all identities are constructed, but some have more 'bearing on' some truths (Alcoff, 1991: 16), are able to gain more insights into particular manifestations of power than others. Perspectives never map neatly onto identities, in as much as identities are themselves always in flux. Within such a framework, a standpoint is not 'achieved' simply by occupying a particular position vis-à-vis power – rather, knowledges are formulated collectively, often through contestation and political struggle, in epistemic communities (Harding, 1992; Mohanty, 1993). Lived experience can be a powerful source of knowledge and is able to challenge master narratives though recognising their inconsistency with experience, as writing on 'outsider within' positionalities (Collins, 2014) and border epistemologies (Anzaldúa, 1999) illustrates. This does not imply that some insights are specific to some epistemic communities and 'closed off' to those not sharing the same epistemic location, as again this would imply that epistemic locations can be fixed. Knowledge *can* be acquired, including through listening to and learning from those positioned differently, and by reflexively engaging with how their own set of knowledge relates to what is learned (Harding, 1992; Sholock, 2012). While this will not equate to speaking *as* or *for*, it allows for collective knowledge production that is attentive to power. We can then recognise the fluidity of speaker positions and the inadequacy – but also the importance – of experiential knowledge, while holding on to a structural analysis and never understanding experience as disconnected from theory. This allows for collective knowledge production that is attentive to power without reifying identity and its epistemic authority. A feminist political and epistemological commitment – or a commitment to producing knowledge as

'justice work' (Olufemi, 2020) – can guide the process of analysis, grounding its conception of epistemic authority and epistemic privilege in the collective political project of dismantling epistemic and material hierarchies, rather than an individualised and essentialised epistemic privileging of subject positions.

In practice, this can mean reading interview data generously and reparatively (see Sedgwick, 2003; also Lewis, 2014) while reflexively analysing one's own reading practices, and the commitments and motivations that underlie them. This must involve a refusal of searching for an essence in voice, and an emphasis on its interactional construction (Harris, 2016). With regards to the vignettes introduced in this paper, this could include questioning my desire to 'make a point' out of Rita's story and experimenting with asking different questions about her data. It could also mean embracing an indecisive writing style and writing in moments of uncertainty (see Harris, 2016; Lippke and Tanggaard, 2014). What kind of generative questions might, for example, be posed by reading Henry's statements as a refusal to engage in the obvious, ever-present critique of regulation, or as an attempt to introduce different concepts to describe his experiences? Haraway recommends we 'simultaneously have an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world' (Haraway, 1988: 579). When researching fellow social researchers about their work, this could translate to a practice of tracing the reasons why their accounts of Higher Education are the way they are – what epistemological, political and intellectual frameworks their claims are based on -, without placing oneself and one's own analyses outside of these frameworks.[8] It would mean retaining an openness towards challenges, and a reflexive engagement, both in relation to the scientific field we are embedded in, and in relation to wider structures of power and knowledge.[9] We might then, for example, indeed, give specific epistemic weight to Jane's story, in an explicit acknowledgement of the material and epistemological hierarchies that make a centring of her story necessary. At the same time, we can acknowledge, and write in, the risk of essentialism and fetishization that such a positioning brings. At times, this can also mean disagreeing, while being aware of how our own subject position might have shaped our knowledge, and the motivations for our critique.

Understanding the messy and often contradictory ways of making sense of institutions could entail tracing the way that core concepts from our shared, or overlapping, intellectual fields were used and how they circulate through conversations.[10] Plesner (2011) describes how social scientific concepts and everyday language intermingle in interviews with fellow social scientists, creating 'unstable divisions between interviewer and interviewee, slippery statements and positions, and an inconspicuous co-construction of common discursive horizons' (Plesner, 2011: 477). Plesner suggests moving away from a concern with power relations as defined a priori and towards closer attention to processes of negotiation and meaning making in the interview. The move away from structural analyses of power here comes close to overlooking and under-estimating the epistemic blind spots connected to structurally privileged speaker positions. However, we can take from this work the importance of analysing the role of shared discursive repertoires in collective meaning-making.

In my case, making these shared discursive repertoires an object for research meant coding instances of 'feminist intertext' or 'education studies intertext' to 'follow them

around' (Ahmed, 2019: 3), revealing their shifting meanings. Ahmed's (2017) figure of the 'feminist killjoy' was one such travelling concept, as well as Foucauldian ideas of governmentality and the figure of the 'student-as-consumer'. Exploring how these concepts circulated provided an entry-point into understanding the discursive logics underlying their use, and therefore the epistemological and political foundations for my participants' claims. These techniques are not a solution to the epistemic double-bind that comes with researching social researchers but should be seen as part of an ongoing exploration of the relationship between positionality, knowledge, and social and political structures. Embracing the inadequacy and shifting nature of positionalities can then not mean losing sight of structural analysis, or politically committed research. Rather, it allows us to acknowledge the incompleteness and collective nature of all research and invites us to continue looking reflexively towards the (relative, shifting) margins for knowledge about the structures we are exploring.

Conclusion

By investigating the epistemic challenges involved in interviewing fellow social researchers, we can gain valuable lessons for conducting qualitative interviews and analysing interview data more generally. Black, queer, anti-colonial, feminist and other critical methodological and epistemological approaches emphasize the ability of research participants to produce knowledge about their social worlds, calling into question the epistemic basis for social scientific inquiry. Based on a discussion of shifting positionalities and power relations in my research with fellow social researchers interested in feminist, queer and gender studies, I have demonstrated how, when interviewing social researchers about their work, an a priori positioning of the social researcher as epistemically authoritative is impossible to justify. Further, neither a simple standpoint politics nor a differentiation between experiential and scientific knowledge serves as an adequate basis for epistemic authority. I have advocated instead for an epistemic politics that recognises the fluidity of standpoint and positionality, while always contextualising them within macro and microstructures of power. Such an approach takes epistemic location into account when thinking through epistemic authority but understands that its analysis can only ever be an incomplete process. We might then extend such an approach to other interview contexts: fellow social researchers are by no means the only research participants that share conceptual vocabularies, and theoretical as well as embodied knowledge of the contexts we research.

Presupposing that our interview subjects have intimate knowledge of the contexts that they are describing does not have to make away with our ability to disagree and critically contextualise. Being 'uncomfortably' (Pillow, 2003) epistemically reflexive about the conditionality of our own knowledge and about our unconscious or less conscious reasons for according to epistemic authority differentially opens up for a more collective engagement with the shared and contrasting assumptions underlying the interview discourse.

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Notes

1. Anti-terrorism measures; shown to target Muslim students and staff and to restrict academic freedom (see Pilkington and Acik, 2020).
2. Associate Professor equivalent.
3. Former polytechnical institutions which have gained university status through the 1992 'Further and Higher Education Act', and institutions which have gained university status since.
4. Names of participants and universities are pseudonyms.
5. Research Excellence Framework and Teaching Excellence Framework aim to assess the quality of research and teaching. Funding for universities is accorded in relation to the results of these frameworks.
6. The 'National Student Survey' measure final-year undergraduate students' 'satisfaction' with their degrees.
7. Labelling this project 'feminist' is epistemically tricky: At times the term draws into the conceptual fold work that does not understand itself as such due to the exclusionary history and present of the term. See (charles) (1997), Mirza (1997) for a discussion of these fractures in Britain, where the term 'womanism' has less purchase than in North America.
8. See Thompson (2002).
9. See also Sweet (2020).
10. See Egeberg Holmgren (2013).

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