



## SPECIAL SECTION

# Working with the spoken word: A candid conference conversation and some original ideas

Russell Hitchings  | Alan Latham 

UCL, London, UK

### Correspondence

Alan Latham, UCL, London, UK.

Email: [alan.latham@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:alan.latham@ucl.ac.uk)

### Abstract

This paper introduces the collection of nine short articles that make up the inaugural special section of the journal on ‘thinking with methods’. It begins by outlining why a fuller conversation about different ways of handling talk in human geography might be worthwhile. Then it describes a series of conference sessions in which a small group of researchers in this field came together to consider some of the most intriguing excerpts of talk generated by their studies. It ends with an overview of how the following articles that came out of these sessions might productively shake up some of our current working conventions.

### KEYWORDS

ethnography, interviews, procedure, qualitative methods, talk

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Human geographers spend a lot of time working with the spoken word. In interviews, it is the raw material out of which we weave our analyses. In ethnography, conversations—both those that we are involved in and those that we listen to or overhear—lead us into and through the various social worlds that we hope to understand in our studies. As the engaged, curious and eclectic researchers that human geographers often are, we approach this universe of the spoken word in all sorts of ways.

Because human geographers love a little theory, we have entered into a range of debates about how to think about what is happening when we talk to people or interpret what others have said. We have explored various ways of conceptualising speech in our studies (Anderson, 2019; Laurier, 1999; Medby, 2020; Ogborn, 2020). There have also been lively exchanges about whether we are over-reliant on talk (Barnett, 2011; Crang, 2003; Hitchings, 2012) and some challenging suggestions about how we might put it to use (Bissell, 2014; Schoenberger & Beban, 2018). Finally, there is a good deal of current creativity as geographers experiment with new ways of staging talk (Dowling et al., 2016; Von Benzon et al., 2021).

Still, amongst all this valuable work, we do not hear so much discussion about the nitty gritty of how the research material that animates so much human geography is produced and analysed (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a, 2020b). In some respects, this absence is unsurprising. Since talk has already proved so effective in giving us access to the perspectives and experiences that we seek to understand in our studies, perhaps there is little need to discuss it—if it ‘ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. However, it is also likely that many of us have developed various tricks and strategies over our research careers that, though we may not have felt especially inclined to discuss them in our published papers, have been crucial in securing the sensitive contextual understandings that we prize in the discipline. More could be said about different ways

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of handing the various issues that already surface when we turn to some of our most popular ways of working with talk in human geography. Such a discussion might even usefully challenge some of the conventions that, as a collective, we have gradually come to acquire.

## 2 | A FORUM TO TALK MORE ABOUT TALK

A couple of years back we undertook three reviews of qualitative research for *Progress in Human Geography* (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). The above summarises one of our central findings. When human geographers report on interview projects we found that they do not often say very much about how exactly their interviews went. As we suggested at the time, the interviewer, as a person who is gradually honing their craft through attempts at staging insightful talk in their projects, effectively ‘disappears’ from the accounts that we often read in published papers. Perhaps they had more important things to discuss in their articles. We get that. Perhaps they were telling their peers more about their methods elsewhere. Perhaps there was nothing particular that the authors wanted to say about the experiences involved. All that is understandable. But it also made us wonder whether this current convention represented a missed opportunity for shared learning.

Rather than just worrying about this in a journal paper, we then considered whether an appropriate platform for sharing experiences might help. Perhaps it might even spark useful innovation in how human geographers work with their favourite material. We decided to organise some sessions at the Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference in 2022 focused on the practicalities of producing and analysing talk in the discipline. Did we have colleagues willing to share their experiences of working with talk and help us to think through how we tend to do it? From the start, we were mindful of how certain conventions of professional self-presentation were likely part of the problem. One challenge for us was therefore to create the conditions in which we could collectively mull over our work practices, rather than offer carefully crafted arguments as we often do at conferences. We decided to emulate a practice more popular in other disciplines by badging our sessions as ‘Crits’—asking colleagues to introduce an intriguing excerpt of talk from a project, and then inviting the audience to respond.

We are happy to say that a small group of peers were willing to put their professional necks on the line in this way. This is something for which we remain grateful. It is a risk, after all, to reveal yourself as a faltering researcher instead of showcasing your best work at conferences. In organising our sessions, it was interesting to note how junior colleagues were often more eager to take part. This made us wonder about how, as careers progress, we may become less preoccupied with our lives as researchers trying to do effective projects, even though more seasoned scholars might have some of the most useful experiences to share. In any case, this collection is a direct result of these conference conversations, which were supportive, fun, and also, we think, genuinely useful in questioning how we work.

As the first ‘Thinking with Method’ section (Latham, 2020), our aim here is to encourage a more candid discussion about the many ways in which human geographers might practically work with talk in their studies. In developing this ambition, we hope to sidestep more abstract worries about our research practices and reach instead for concrete pointers of immediate use to other geographers—from the undergraduate student just starting to think about doing some interviewing to the comparatively seasoned social researcher—in doing more incisive, more sensitive, more effective studies. We are especially interested in how certain ‘received wisdoms’ about how geographers should probably handle talk may be productively shaken up by thinking through the implications of some of our experiences.

## 3 | THE SPECIAL SECTION PAPERS

So, what are the papers in this ‘Thinking with Method’ special section about? The essential idea is to talk openly and honestly about our experiences of undertaking research and to show how paying attention to identified empirical instances encourages us to explore ways of working with talk that do not just ‘go through the motions’ in terms of how methods are commonly discussed in journal papers. Each contribution starts with an excerpt from a project in which the author has been involved, then considers how responding to that excerpt proved challenging to them as a researcher, before working towards a pointer or two about the value of questioning some of our conventions of handling talk in human geography. In line with a collective ethos of support between peers, underpinned by the firm conviction that human geographers at all levels face comparable challenges, the section includes a mix of established and more junior scholars reflecting on both ongoing and completed projects.

To help in navigating the special section here is an overview of the papers:

*David Bissell—What's with all the quotation?* Our first paper takes on one of our most taken-for-granted ways of working with talk in human geography—the idea that we should provide a sense of people's experiences, and establish our authority in terms of being allowed to speak for them, by presenting a mixture of quotations and commentary when we write papers that draw on interviews. This practice is so commonplace now, evident in so many outputs—from undergraduate dissertations to doctoral theses and beyond, that to subject it to critical examination immediately seems like quite a bold step. But do we always want to reproduce our current 'quotation cultures' (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a) and do we really do justice to our interviewees when we slice and dice their lives through the cutting and pasting of quotes? Bissell kicks things off by using an interview with a gig economy worker to consider the implications of falling into this pattern and when we might want to write otherwise.

*Jo Waters—When should we read our transcripts?* How do we feel emotionally when we examine our interview material? As with our quotation cultures, there are ways in which human geographers are more or less likely to think about emotions in research. We think quite a lot about how to handle people in interviews as individuals, often with different life experiences and personal characteristics, work together towards a shared understanding. But what about afterwards? When it comes to analysis, our tone often becomes more safely procedural, almost scientific. Have we now somehow become comparatively dispassionate? Looking back at a quotation from an interview with Paul—a teenage migrant to Vancouver from Hong Kong—many years earlier, Jo considers how when we analyse our interviews shapes what we see within them. Now older and a parent herself, she interprets her past interviews in quite a different way. Recognising this is more than mere introspective reflection. Doing so poses some important questions about the right time for analysis. We would certainly agree that when you do your analysis matters—we have definitely seen different things in our transcripts at, for example, points in the day when we are more or less alert or emotional. In that sense, Jo's account pushes us to acknowledge, rather than overlook, issues that are more central to our interview interpretations than we would probably often admit—from times in the day to numbers of years afterwards, the point when we read our transcripts in human geography interview research clearly matters.

*Lauren Wagner—What's all the fuss about interviews?* Lauren directly challenges the conflation of talk with interviews in human geography. Because so many of us 'do' interviews, the discussions we have about analysing talk can easily end up being about them. She has done some of her studies differently. Or, at least, she did when she looked at interactions between different visitors to Morocco and those who lived there. She found that listening in to how they spoke to each another was especially illuminating since spoken exchange very often involves collective work to both position the people involved and get things done. Both were part of the haggling that happened in the Moroccan street market which provides the focus for her paper. Lingering over how that worked, we wonder whether her North African excursion provides food for thought for our interviews too. Perhaps geographers should think more about this sort of strategic choreography within those. We do not say so much about that right now. In that respect, we could probably all learn something from Moroccan market life.

*Russell Hitchings—Do people always have opinions?* This contribution focuses on agreement in focus group research. Drawing on a study in which young people spoke together online about their smartphone use in outdoor greenspaces, it considers how certain forms of data collection might serve to create opinions, as much as collect those that are often already presumed to exist. Why were the students in this study inclined to speak of 'having' and 'sharing' opinions and to what extent should opinions be the focus of human geography researchers if they are not always actively present in the lives of those they are studying. We know that focus groups can be great because they produce all sorts of insightful discussions, but one of the implications of this flexibility is that we need to be careful about how we are drawn down particular interactional paths when we talk within them. When we first start doing social research projects, it can sometimes be tempting to see ourselves as collecting and evaluating people's opinions. This paper reminds us that the social situation—in terms of who is there, the technology involved, and the style of the facilitator—can often effectively produce them, in which case it is less a matter of uncovering opinions and more a question of how they come to be made.

*Jeremy Brice—What's so special about a professional person?* This paper also considers the social experience of sharing 'perspectives' in interviews. Jeremy is interested in how a particular set of assumptions have coalesced around the idea of interviewing 'elites', namely those who may interest us because of the work they do. These people can be imagined as skilled, indeed 'powerful', in terms of how they can control our conversations in various ways. Drawing on a moment in an interview with a supermarket manager, he wonders whether we are always wise to buy into these starting assumptions. The professionals with whom we might want to speak in our studies are, just like us, people too, rather than the artful elites we might imagine them as, and sometimes they simply do not know the answer to our questions. Reframing a 'professional' as a 'person' in this way immediately makes these interviewees seem less intimidating and could put us

on a stronger footing in our projects by having an appropriately open mind about where they are coming from when they speak to us about their working lives.

*Ingrid Medby—Is it better to be an insider or an outsider?* Apprentice social researchers are taught that reflecting on their ‘positionality’ is an integral part of effective research. And, of course, it is. But often we cannot know in advance how exactly we will be positioned in a research encounter such as an interview. Furthermore, our positions can also shift as the encounters that we have in our studies unfold. Ingrid’s contribution focuses on how interviewers may be positioned as ‘insiders’ by those they are interviewing, drawing on an encounter with an official who knew her father in North Norway. Such a positioning may be advantageous because then people might be more willing to open up to others they assume to be ‘in the know’. But it can also mean the interviewee assumes a shared interpretation. How might interviewers work to ensure they are both insiders and outsiders when need be? And how much should we bring a sense of the interview context into our final research accounts, so that others might understand how we found out what we have? How much, for example, should we speak of the superficially ‘small talk’ that happens around the ‘proper’ interview? There are many positionalities involved in human geography research and they are all actively negotiated in specific contexts and in impactful ways before we turn on the recorder, during the interview itself, and also afterwards.

*Amy Barron—What’s the right way to think about silences?* Pauses are a natural part of conversation. But often researchers find pauses challenging, especially when we are nervous in ways that can make us want to hurry things along rather than relax into the experience. Zooming in on a fleeting moment with one of the older people she was researching in a Manchester café, Amy considers some of the ways that researchers might deal with extended pauses or silences in the research setting. Silences are not just empty moments to be filled by the interviewer. Neither are they to be taken to indicate that the person with whom we are speaking is preparing a ‘better’ answer such that we should endure any passing anxieties about ‘filling the conversational space’ and simply wait for the nugget of insight that should hopefully follow. Instead, Amy shows how cultivating an appreciation of the many possible ways of interpreting silence during a research encounter can be worthwhile. For the attentive researcher, she argues, pauses might point to otherwise overlooked relations of interest and suggest all sorts of possibilities about how people relate to themselves, to the situation, and to others.

*Alan Latham and Michael Natrass—What’s so bad about disagreement?* Much writing on how to interview as part of a social research project emphasises the need to build rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees have offered to help us too, so we should probably show our gratitude by treating them nicely and showing that we are eager to learn from their way of looking at things. In this context, disagreeing with interviewees can immediately seem like a sure-fire way to undermine that rapport and trust in ways that make for a ‘bad’ interview. Drawing on lively discussions about what cyclists should be doing on the roads of Carlisle, Alan and Michael directly challenge this assumption. Their contribution shows how careful attention to interview design can allow researchers to stage productive and engaging conversations about disagreements with interviewees. Despite some of our taken-for-granted ways of imagining how human geographers should probably act in interviews, they reveal how disagreements can make for both enjoyable and insightful exchanges during interviews. People often like to debate, and we would be foolish to assume that disagreement should always be avoided.

*Hannah Sender—What to do about interruptions?* The potential value of disrupted interviews provides the focus for our final paper. Taken from a study concerned with young refugee lives in Lebanon, Hannah’s excerpt examines how external disruptions to an interview—from outside noises to others joining into the conversation—can lead to useful insights about respondent lives. In her study, Hannah rarely found herself in a situation in which she could easily stage secluded conversations with selected individuals. Instead, she often ended up surrounded by friends and family who chipped in, commenting on, and correcting her interviewees’ responses. Reflecting on this experience, Hannah dismisses the idea that interviews should be an idealised time apart from others. Approached in the right way, she argues, interruptions can actually add to the interview. If we went with the flow of how many of us do our interviews, we might naturally be tempted to tidy away these disruptions when we ‘clean up’ our transcripts for appropriately scientific analysis. Hannah reminds us that sometimes we do so at our peril since a fuller sense of the social context at hand could easily be sacrificed in the process.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

Pauses, opinions, professionals, interruptions, disagreements, when to analyse, how to quote. For all of these things, there are conventional accounts, or assumed understandings at least, about how we should probably handle them in human geography research. In this sense, as we have said, there can often be a powerful kind of ‘received wisdom’ in the



discipline that sits in the background of our studies where it serves to structure a great deal of how we do our work. Taken together, this collection opens our eyes to the value of thinking harder about how we relate to this received wisdom in our studies because sometimes we might benefit from doing things a little differently. We think the papers have valuable things to say to human geographers at all levels, with each providing suggestions and provocations to inspire studies that do not just go through the motions in terms of how we usually handle talk in the discipline. Whilst talk continues to provide the backbone to so many human geography projects, we hope this collection will excite you about the many ways in which you might encourage and analyse it.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

None.

## ORCID

Russell Hitchings  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1171-8064>

Alan Latham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6826-8906>

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