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## **Philosophy in practice? Doctoral struggles with ontology and subjectivity in qualitative interviewing**

### **Abstract**

This article presents an auto-ethnographic, narrative account of the struggles we – as doctoral students working in a business school – experienced navigating the link between research philosophy and methodology. We focus on a popular philosophical perspective among doctoral students: critical realism. In particular, we use an illustrative example of how we sought to apply this seemingly abstract philosophical perspective in practice in our qualitative interviews, using what we term the ontological whats and epistemological hows. Our initial critical realist approach proved inadequate, however, prompting us to understand qualitative interviewing in more social constructionist terms. Given this, we suggest that doctoral students (and researchers) are reflexive and provocative in their use of applying research philosophy to methodology. In sharing our experiences, we offer a pedagogical contribution for fellow doctoral students and qualitative researchers alike.

Keywords Auto-ethnography, business schools, critical realism, narrative, qualitative methods, social constructionism

### **Introduction**

Encountering research philosophy for the first time as a doctoral student in a business school is both a daunting and exciting prospect. The possibilities appear endless, with an array of different and competing perspectives to discover and apply to our study of the social world. Considering research philosophy, however, is not a task performed in isolation. As doctoral students, we must adopt a philosophical perspective based not only on our perception of the social world but also which, more instrumentally, consistently informs the methodological aspects of our theses. Given that for some (like ourselves) the introduction of research philosophy into academic studies is new terrain, difficulties are bound to arise, particularly due to the multitude of philosophical perspectives and methods on offer. In this article, we contribute an auto-ethnographic narrative account of the struggles we experienced, in a style akin to Jones (1995) and McDonald (2013), in order to suggest that doctoral students (and researchers alike) should act reflexively and provocatively in navigating the link between philosophical perspectives and their methodological practice. The aim of auto-ethnographic narratives is to ‘draw on the experiences of researchers in particular contexts in order to illuminate reflections and foster learning about social phenomena’ (McDonald, 2013: 134). The fact that auto-ethnographic accounts allow us to write about our experiences as researchers and individuals in the research process means our experiences are open to interpretation and revision as we take those experiences forward in order to theorise from them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005;

McDonald, 2013). We have asked questions that are familiar to fellow doctoral students concerning the link between research philosophy and methodology. For example, how important is developing a clear, philosophically informed research strategy before conducting our data collection? To what extent should the adopted philosophical perspective dictate the design of our methodology, and how does one apply research philosophy in the practical moments of data collection? Indeed, how can we ensure we remain consistent through to our data analysis when interpreting themes in the data? Such concerns are borne out of what Shotter (1999) describes as 'after-the-fact-justificatory-rhetoric' whereby doctoral students consider 'slotting the philosophy' into their theses in a retrospective and perfunctory manner, without an informed awareness of how one's philosophical perspective may influence research prior to data collection. Additionally, we believe there is an assumption that by doctoral students understanding a particular theoretical perspective (philosophical or otherwise), the application will follow and be subsequently undertaken with ease (Raelin, 2007; Ramsey, 2011). This article documents how our attempts to develop a framework informed by critical realism was inadequate when practically applied to qualitative interviews, and that an understanding of social constructionist principles emerged during the practical stages of data collection. The primary aims are threefold. Initially, our overarching motivation is to explore how philosophical perspectives may be applied in the practical moments of data collection. Second, we aim to illustrate how critical realism offers an attractive proposition, particularly to doctoral students engaging with philosophy for the first time, due to its ostensible 'middle ground' status. We suggest, following Brown (2014), that those intending to adopt such a position exercise caution when doing so. Finally, there is a pedagogical motivation for fellow doctoral students and those teaching research philosophy to advocate a continued reflexivity in one's philosophical standpoint during the research process. Subsequently, we follow Ramsey (2011) in suggesting that the relationship between research philosophy and methodology should be used 'provocatively'. Adopting a given philosophical perspective determines the research design and ultimately how the data are interpreted, shaping our findings. By reflecting back on the research process, researchers are provided with the opportunity to see how their stance influences both the process and findings, enabling us to evaluate alternative interpretations of our data and remain open-minded about how we view, and research, the social world. Therefore, the structure of this article follows the logic of our narrative. We begin with an overview of our initially adopted philosophical perspective, critical realism. We then go on to conceptualise the interview setting and outline in detail the critical realist informed framework that we developed to enact our chosen philosophy during the interview process. This is then illustrated with examples from interviews conducted as part of our doctoral research, before critically reflecting on this process, highlighting the

pitfalls in applying critical realism, and the requirement for continued reflexivity when applying research philosophy to one's methodology

### **Philosophical perspective: Critical realism**

As doctoral students, we recognise that we are exposed to a wide range of competing philosophical and methodological perspectives as demonstrated in Cunliffe's (2011) typology of meta-theoretical problematics within research methodology. The way we make sense of and understand these perspectives relates to the specific topic and goals of our doctoral research. As such, our discussion here is not to recite all the philosophical possibilities available to doctoral students working in a business school, but to offer a consideration of a particular perspective that is increasingly common and popular within qualitative organisational research: critical realism. We provide a narrative of how we – as PhD students located in a business school – sought to understand and apply this philosophical perspective so as to inform our subsequent methodological decisions. Indeed, we recognise that in any type of research (doctoral or otherwise), assumptions about ontology and epistemology are vital as how the social world is viewed and studied is unavoidably influenced by these assumptions. Moreover, our motivation for pursuing this idea deeper is to consider the extent to which philosophy influences our research a priori. Adopting a philosophical perspective prior to conducting data collection helps guide us with a theoretical view of the social world that necessarily enriches our research endeavours at the point of data collection. Such a viewpoint stems from a concern for the tendency of doctoral students to not seriously consider the importance of research philosophy from the outset of our studies. This again links back to Shotter's (1999) notion of 'after-the-fact justificatory rhetoric', which we feel leads to doctoral students slotting the 'philosophy' into research accounts retrospectively and even superficially during or after the data analysis phase. The following discussion is presented in a narrative fashion that reflects the contested, journey-like process involved in encountering research philosophy during our doctoral studies. Understanding critical realism The initial starting point in our navigation through the philosophical realm began with the discovery of critical realism in our research philosophy training (e.g. Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000; Bhaskar, 1978, 1979; Sayer, 2004). The use of critical realism in qualitative research has become increasingly accepted within organisational and management research and within social research in general (Brown, 2014; Brown and Roberts, 2014; Maxwell, 2012). Indeed, Brown (2014) describes critical realism as being 'seductive' across a range of human sciences. Essentially, critical realism seeks to make a distinction between our ontological and epistemological understanding of the social world. As such, critical realism espouses an ontological realism and epistemological relativism, as introduced by Bhaskar

(1978, 1979). That is, there is a reality 'out there' that exists independently of our knowledge of it. The only way we can interpret this reality, however, is through our own subjective, conceptual schemas. Put simply, critical realism argues that what exists in the social world cannot be reduced to what we know about it. Furthermore, critical realism views methodological inquiry as the explanation of underlying structures and mechanisms that generate powers within subject matter. Therefore, critical realism proposes a layered, stratified ontology of the social world containing these structures, mechanisms and emergent powers. Critical realism has also been considered to share an affinity with Marxism – although there are viewpoints for and against this within the debates – due to its roots in emancipatory politics and dialectical materialism (Benton and Craib, 2011; Brown et al., 2002) – a fuller discussion of which is outside the purview of this article. Now, while a simplistic overview of the dense, nuanced field of critical realism, it is exhaustive enough to represent our initial introduction with this research philosophy. It is also enough to lead us to our next point in which we echo and extend the words of Brown (2014: 112), and which we believe are particularly poignant in relation to doctoral students: Critical realism is seductive. Given our experience, critical realism has become 'seductive' precisely because of its ostensible (and workable) centre ground between two opposing poles of the philosophical spectrum: extreme positivism and extreme constructionism (Contu and Willmott, 2005). Due to its engagement and consideration of both an ontological realism and epistemological relativism, it appears, in principle, as a research philosophy that is answerable to both extremes: positivism, as it believes in a mind-independent reality, and constructionism, in that our understanding of this reality is subjective. Indeed, to borrow a further quote from Brown (2014), the critical realist ontology 'is in tune with, rather than an affront to, common sense' (p. 113, our italics). Albeit a controversial and contested philosophical perspective, the fact remains that the extent to which PhD students in a business school engage with research philosophy is often delimited by the amount needed to sufficiently address the methodology chapters in our theses. This is compounded by the time constraints facing doctoral students who simultaneously seek to engage with large bodies of theoretical and empirical literature, collect and, in our case, transcribe significant amounts of data. Therefore, we argue that any philosophical perspective or methodological approach that presents itself as one that essentially incorporates both ends of the spectrum is – as Bhaskar (1989) has described himself – doing a useful job of 'philosophical under labouring' for us. These broad tenets of critical realism make it, we argue, an attractive position for doctoral students to adopt. However, it is exactly these reasons that we believe contribute to both its misuse and cursory application. Our experience with critical realism as a research philosophy, therefore, also led us to further question this initial allure. While its ontological realism/epistemological relativism is a generally attractive position, an idea developed from Pawson (2006) – and discussed in Welsh and Dehler (2007) –

suggests that the inclusion of the word 'critical' in its title can be the source of misunderstanding for doctoral students. We believe that use of the term 'critical' can be a beguiling tagline due to its suitably radical undertones. By placing the tagline of 'critical' over one's research philosophy, there is the suggestion that the research seeks to engage with the more taken-for-granted aspects of social phenomena from a point of substantial critique. Critical realism is then a convenient way in which to proclaim the challenging nature of our doctoral research. But is this how the term 'critical' should be understood when speaking of 'critical realism'? In addressing this point, Pawson (2006) also highlights the potential confusion of the 'critical' element (p. 20). He notes the contrasting intent in Bhaskar's critical realism and Campbell's (1984), which is described as the difference between 'righteous indignation' and 'organized scepticism', respectively. Pawson (2006) notes that Bhaskar's criticality stems from the analysts' (researchers') privileged and sophisticated understanding of the social condition, whereas Campbell's suggests that criticism is something that scientists (researchers) apply to each other through a process of 'constant, focused disputation, attending to each other's arguments and illustrations, mutually monitoring and "keeping each other honest" until some working consensus emerged' (Pawson, 2006: 20). While this is a technical debate related to definitional aspects of critical realism, it is an important difference to highlight. That is, the way doctoral students approach critical realism does not appear to fall into either of these two camps, given our earlier discussion around the reasons for its adoption that it is simply based on a critical approach to taken-for-granted aspects of the social world (Welsh and Dehler, 2007). Therefore, the concern that presented itself to us was whether by taking a critical realist position in our research, were we actually being 'critical'?

### **Our narrative of connecting research philosophy and qualitative interviewing**

Undoubtedly, qualitative interviewing is one of the most prominent and utilised research methods at all levels of research, from doctoral study and beyond. The method is viewed across a range of philosophical spectrums, from positivism to extreme constructionism. For example, positivism understands the interview method in a structured, standardised fashion in order to elicit 'facts' about the social world that are accurate, reliable and valid (Silverman, 2011). Alternatively, constructionist approaches to interviewing reject this, prioritising the interactional element of the interview through an intersubjective and reflexive exchange with 'participants'. This is only achieved, however, through a co-constructed, collaborative and meaning-making process between interviewer and interviewee (Cunliffe, 2011). Given the focus on critical realism, this section discusses our earlier question: is there a concrete way in which 'to be' critical realist in interview research? In order to begin to address these questions, we needed to understand whether developing a philosophical approach is an idea that

works a priori to conducting interview research and can be enacted in situ during the interview setting. Drawing on our personal experience of approaching the connection between research philosophy and methodological practice, our auto-ethnographic account offers an application and analysis of a particular method adopted from Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011). These authors suggest that this approach helps researchers understand the whats and the hows of the interview process. Indeed, as Welsh and Dehler (2007) note, these whats and hows are inextricably bound within the critical realist approach. That is, we must consider both the substantive and constructed aspects of the interview experience. Holstein and Gubrium's method is analysed through our narrative in relation to how we felt it could be applied to critical realism, as it is argued that by linking a philosophical perspective to a conceptual framework (like Holstein and Gubrium) before conducting our research, we may necessarily enrich both our research experience and also augment the data we collect. This is an important pedagogical discussion for how PhD students (and researchers more generally) can more readily explicate the connection between research philosophy and methodology in order to inform the decisions they make in their research design.

#### *Conceptualising the interview*

As stated by Rapley (2004), interviews generally involve a practical situation where researchers and respondents will 'sit down and talk about a specific topic' (p. 15) in order to elicit facts, attitudes, perceptions and viewpoints on the 'reality' of the specific topic in question. In most cases for PhD students, this topic is their specific doctoral research. Now, the interviewing method was not historically considered a theoretical problem (Alvesson, 2003; Maseide, 1990; Pawson, 1996). As Maseide (1990) highlights in his work on sociological methodology, the notion of 'reality' was given to be 'out there', and it was a matter of using the most precise, unbiased and objective means possible to extract information on this hidden reality – a position indicative of a traditional positivist approach. The work by Maseide (1990), however, acts more as a proponent for the rise of social constructionist trends in interview research as it represented a shift away from the historical traditions of positivistic interviewing. This is the moment in interview research where ideas such as emphasising the respondents' subjective experience, reflexivity and issues of representation began to enter and pave the way for more nuanced social constructionist approaches to interviewing (Alvesson, 2003; Borer and Fontana, 2012; Cunliffe, 2008). This discussion highlights that the introduction of more theoretically informed interview research has created a complex and challenging role for research philosophy (and doctoral students). Interview research has become, as suggested by Maseide (1990) and Pawson (1996), a theoretical issue. These concerns have arisen out of what form of ontological status we can ascribe to the interview setting and to what extent we should privilege and prioritise respondents' subjectivity in the process. Therefore, contemporary doctoral study requires a

consideration of these ideas prior to conducting our research. But which research philosophy to choose and how to apply it during our interview research, as opposed to a perfunctory post hoc philosophical analysis? Such a question is largely dependent upon the nature of one's research and the area of study under investigation. In seeking to address the connection between philosophy and interviewing, we adapt the work by Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011) and also Miller and Glassner (2011), who propose an anti-dualistic stance towards finding 'reality' in interview research. The notion of being 'anti-dualistic' is, arguably, a suitably attractive position for doctoral students (and indeed, it was for us) to adopt because it proposes an engagement with important theoretical aspects from both ends of the philosophical spectrum (positivism–constructionism). Next, we consider this approach further and its implications for our philosophical outlook (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Miller and Glassner, 2011).

*Methodology: the whats, the hows and critical realism*

The basic idea of Holstein and Gubrium's (2008, 2011) approach is to create an interview setting that is active and animated, in opposition to one that is based on any foundational or gold standard of interview practice. In order to do this, the authors suggest two communicative contingencies that shape interview activity: the whats and the hows of the interview. The whats refer to the substantive focus of the interview, described here as the specific doctoral topic being researched. For example, our doctoral research considers the impact public sector redundancy has on familial (gender) roles, and as a result, any interview conversation is based around discussing this topic and related to our specific research questions. Then, the hows relate to the more constructed aspects of the interview, that is, the way people's experiences, perceptions and meanings continually develop within the interactivity of the interview setting. To follow our doctoral research, conceptions of gender differ depending on how respondents understand and reorient their familial roles given the relationship with the interviewer. Furthermore, the hows emphasise the interactional element of the interview, including the trajectory of the talk and the conversation, the co-construction of narratives and the way respondents express the content under investigation (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, 2011). In order to provide a more nuanced account as to how their method may be conceptualised, Miller and Glassner (2011) offer an implicitly similar position. Here, the importance of the contextual, situational (hows) nature of interview is the key to understanding our respondents' experiences of the social world. What we learn about our respondents during this interview process therefore presents us with what Miller and Glassner describe as a 'cultural frame' (whats), which extends to a 'reality' beyond the context of the interview setting (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, 2011). Thus, we are not simply concerned with the content of what is being said in the interview but also the nature of the interaction – as it is the combination of the whats and the hows that provide the cultural frame by which people

make sense of their experiences. At face value, this method was initially extremely appealing due to an ostensible resonance with a critical realist philosophy. Had we found an interview method that linked our philosophy and methodology in a consistent fashion? In order to assess whether this was the case, we must clarify our proposed link between Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011), Miller and Glassner (2011) and critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979). Given our discussion of critical realism, the composition of the whats and the hows was an appealing prospect in applying our philosophical criteria (Edwards et al., 2014). In essence, the interview method is viewed as a dynamic relation between what we term the ontological whats and the epistemological hows. We propose that, in principle, this is similar to the basic idea of critical realism, which advocates ontological realism and epistemological relativism (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979). In both instances (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, 2011; Miller and Glassner, 2011), there appears a concerted effort to distinguish between ontology and epistemology so as to generate greater insight from the interview. Therefore, through a distinct understanding of the substantive content under investigation (ontological) and how the interaction with the interviewee generates knowledge (epistemological), we formulated our interviews and data collection in accordance with this perspective. For example, we sought a balance between conversations related to the reality beyond the interview setting – that is, the specific research topic – and also the ways in which respondents experientially locate themselves in relation to this reality through the interaction of the interview setting. We argue that because critical realism splits the ontological and epistemological, any application of these criteria to an interview method would necessarily require a similar distinction to be made. This is a point echoed by Smith and Deemer (2000), who suggest that ‘any elaboration of criteria must take place within the context of their [critical realists’] commitment to ontological realism on the one side and, on the other, their realization that they are obligated to accept a constructivist epistemology’ (p. 880). Thus, it seems reasonable that if we apply a philosophical perspective – such as critical realism – to qualitative interviewing in an a priori manner, then our endeavours to do so should be consistent and coherent with the basic principles that underlie that philosophy (Smith and Elger, 2014). As PhD students, therefore, we felt we could take relative solace in that both our philosophical view on the social world and the way we plan to research this social world were, in principle at least, and perhaps naively so, theoretically sound. A point must be made in relation to Miller and Glassner’s (2011) anti-dualistic position and the understanding of critical realism more generally. As outlined by Miller and Glassner (2011), the anti-dualistic approach rejects the need to place one’s methodological practice at either end of the philosophical spectrum. The fact that Miller and Glassner (2011) are identifying a methodological position ‘that is outside of this [the] objectivist-constructivist continuum yet takes seriously the goals and critiques of researchers at both of its poles’ (p. 132) suggests that there is a way out of this

philosophical quagmire by placing ourselves right in the middle of it. Put simply, the idea of a philosophy, method or methodology that avails itself from a specific commitment to either end of the philosophical spectrum is an attractive prospect for (business school) doctoral students. This is a point that relates back to our proposed reasoning for critical realism's popularity. The reason we believe our position to be anti-dualistic – using the concept from Miller and Glassner (2011) – is because critical realism presents itself to doctoral students as this – a way in which to borrow and merge aspects of positivism (such as ontological reality) and constructionism (such as epistemological relativism) in one philosophical perspective. We did, however, fall foul to such arguments. Therefore, we reiterate that critical realism is seductive precisely because of this occupation of the middle ground. By considering the anti-dualistic stance of Miller and Glassner (2011), one may suggest we acted in a (typically) critical realist fashion and adopted a position that, in essence, sought to recognise and reconcile two opposing ends of the philosophical spectrum.

### **Applying our method: An illustrative example**

We will now illustrate our efforts in seeking to align these philosophical and methodological decisions in practice. Here, we continue our narrative account of how we have navigated this philosophical terrain and include examples from interview transcripts to illustrate our argument. This is a purposeful decision, as in fact – as is discussed – there appeared to be a discord in how we initially conceived of our philosophically informed interview and how it worked in practice. As part of our doctoral research, we conducted qualitative interviews with married, dual-earner couples affected by public sector redundancy in the United Kingdom's post-recession period of austerity. The objective of our doctoral research is to explicate how individuals adapt and manage their identities over the course of familial (gender) role change, for example, from dual-breadwinning status to that of unemployed primary care-giver. We were thus principally concerned with the content of individuals' accounts, in order to ascertain their responses to role change and to gain an insight into their perceptions of these role and identity changes. Applying our modified critical realist approach, the Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011) and Miller and Glassner (2011) conceptual frameworks outlined previously offered us a way to address our research questions, which involved an understanding of the whats from our interviewees' constructions of reality. In aiming to be consistent with the relativist epistemology, we identified that the locally produced nature of knowledge constituting respondent accounts became a key feature of each interaction and subsequent data generation. Our attempts to uphold the principles underpinning these adopted frameworks began with the design of our interviews. Questions were formulated in a way that we believed suitably addressed both the ontological and epistemological concerns of this

critical realist informed research strategy. For example, asking redundant male interviewees 'How do you define your familial role as an unemployed father?' sought to encourage respondents to actively make sense of the category 'father', specifically in the context of unemployment. Therefore, meaning making was communicated verbally as respondents engaged with the particular necessities of each probe. Responses we received, such as 'I understand the father's role to be ...' or 'Unemployment is at odds with how society typically defines fatherhood ...' granted access to how interviewees attributed meaning to these categories as well as offering the substantive data specific to our research aims, that is, how they defined their role within the family on a more personal level. In the initial stages of this process, the interview design was an effective mechanism through which our abstract philosophical concepts could bear fruit in the practical stages of data collection. As a result, the hows – the interactional aspects of knowledge production and reality construction – were explicitly significant features of data generation. This is demonstrated by the following extract from one redundant male respondent: Since losing hours at work, paid hours I mean, I've been helping out a lot more at home. Helping out sounds bad, that makes it sound like the housework is [partner's] job. I have no idea why I have that mindset or why I'm not doing the lion's share at the moment. Oh dear! Here, we were granted a privileged position into the subjectivity and meaning-making practices of this individual. Being asked to explain his share of the division of labour, this respondent was encouraged to reflect on why he engaged in a disproportionately lower share of both paid and unpaid work, which ultimately fed into social norms surrounding the expectations of each gender that had thus far remained unquestioned. This sense-making process was particularly evident in our interviews as attitudes towards gender roles and gender-appropriate behaviour are often taken for granted; even the practical conduct of partners regarding shares of unpaid work (including caring and housework) were undertaken in an unreflexive manner. The process whereby respondents themselves appear to discover new meanings in what they experience and as life experiences are reflected upon, made sense of, and ordered into a coherent whole is a crucial element of meaningful data generation (Kvale, 1996). Themes that commonly emerged in the interviews, such as 'breadwinner' and 'primary/secondary earner', were seemingly accorded an ontological status by our respondents that did not require elaboration – with their routine use presupposing that we researchers had a shared understanding of what each category meant. The unproblematic use of these categories was understood through application of the Miller and Glassner (2011) notion of a 'cultural frame'. The cultural frame reflected the ontological aspect within the interview – despite being locally and collaboratively produced – and offered a representative account of their social realities outside of our interaction during the interviews. Indeed, we were concerned with the question of how we as researchers can confidently ascertain that the whats recorded in our interviews really do reflect the

concepts, meanings and 'theories' participants use to account for what goes on in their social reality outside of the interview. Consider a further illustrative example. For the interviewed husbands sharing breadwinning responsibility with their wives prior to and following redundancy, their familial roles (as husbands and fathers) were not defined by primary earner status within the household. Partners offered complementary perspectives on this by often drawing upon the wider cultural frame of 'masculinity', where breadwinning has traditionally been considered as central to the male familial role: To be honest, not being the main income provider hasn't been a principal concern for us, because he's not really your machismo type. By situating a male partner within this cultural frame of 'machismo' – yet outside of the cultural frame in that they do not fulfil its ostensibly ontological criteria – wives were able to make sense of how their husbands managed role and identity change. Through descriptions of their husbands as less concerned with being the family's primary earner and more likely to engage in types of activities more typically considered to be 'feminine' (housework, childcare), these cultural frames were used as a reference for meaning-making in the interviews. These responses also indicate an assumption by interviewees that we researchers, as members of a shared reality in which masculinity is often perceived to be determined by factors such as earning power and status, understand this referential frame. An alternative meaning has thus been co-produced locally within the interview while also reflecting a reality external to the interactional setting in which these cultural frames make sense. We found the practical application of philosophy to our research methodology to be an ongoing, iterative process that continued beyond the research design stage and throughout the interviews themselves. Undoubtedly, the 'epistemological relativism' of critical realism was a key feature of our qualitative interviews. It was during the actual conduct at the interview stage, though, that we began to apprehend the overbearing constructionist influence in our interviews and question the relative effectiveness of the philosophical perspective for our research. We have illustrated using the Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011) and Miller and Glassner (2011) frameworks how respondents made sense of their realities in the interviews (indeed because of the interviews in some cases), and this was considered alongside what was reported in respondent accounts. In these instances, we felt that what was reported, and how reality was made sense of, were both part of an integrated, simultaneous process and separable only analytically. Put simply, respondents were seemingly constructing their realities through our interaction. This appeared to us as incompatible with the philosophical separation purported by critical realism whereby a realist, stratified ontology exists independently of the epistemological relativism that attempts to understand and describe it. In fact, our views were aligning with a position that Bhaskar's (1979) critical realism would consider to fall foul of the 'epistemic fallacy' (p. 113) or, in this context specifically, the 'linguistic fallacy' (Elder Vass, 2012). That is, by asserting that respondents actively construct social reality in

their collaboratively produced accounts during the interview, the accusation would stand that ontology (what exists) is being reduced to a subjective, dialogical account of this world. Perhaps, then, it was precisely the acceptance of such a 'fallacy' that allowed us to generate a deeper, alternative insight. Returning to the above example of the 'machismo' cultural frame, it was not wholly comprehensible that the meaning of 'machismo' changed only in the interview, and that the concept itself retained a more consistent 'identity' in the ostensible external reality. Philosophically, one of the more illuminating aspects of our research has been the (apparently) changing ontological status of concepts such as those in the examples from our interviews: for example, masculinity and breadwinning. Given that our research was longitudinal, respondents appeared to have adopted new roles and managed changes in their identities over time. Therefore, it is clear that concepts initially perceived to be fixed have been acknowledged as dynamic in nature, and in some cases as a direct result of the constructionist influence in the interview process. For example, in our research, a redundant male respondent who has adopted the role of primary carer for his children and had stopped looking for work certainly demonstrated a shift in the meaning he attached to the role of fatherhood: I'm finding it difficult at the moment. As a family man you want to provide for your family, and being out of work effectively stops you from being able to do this. (First interview) I feel that the kids benefit from me caring for them as opposed to using a child minder. They get from me an emotional investment that someone else can't provide. It's important they know that dad is around, and not just to put clothes on their backs. (Second interview) It is clear in the first interview that this individual considered providing for the family in a purely financial sense, with paid employment a central function of being a 'family man'. By the second interview, his conception of fatherhood has changed dramatically – indicating that the meanings attributed to fatherhood and his identity as a father were renegotiated socially in interaction with others (ourselves as researchers included) and prevalent cultural norms. This conclusion differs from one that may have been drawn from our original critical realist informed position where the cultural frame itself would not be seen to change (granted by its ontological status), rather it would be seen to have helped us and our respondents understand changes in, and the different dispositions to, this frame. During our practical application of philosophy to the interview process, there had been a conflation of a constructionist perspective with our initial critical realist informed conceptual framework (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Miller and Glassner, 2011). Ultimately, we found that our qualitative interviews were more effectively informed by social constructionist principles. Certainly, qualitative interviews are conducive to the social constructionist perspective in that (ontologically) people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of social reality. There is a clear and coherent link here with epistemology in that a legitimate means of generating meaningful data on these

ontological properties is to talk interactively with people and hear their accounts. Through our practical engagement with interview respondents, we found the subjectivity and meaning-making processes characterising their accounts to be more consistent with constructionist principles. In a sense, our original aim for research philosophy to inform our methodology from the outset of the research was not wholly realised. It is of interest to note that our wish to avoid the retrospective inclusion of philosophical analysis in the methodology chapter of our theses following data collection could potentially have led to a different proposition. That is, had we not made a consistent and concerted effort to be reflexive and considerate towards the practical application of philosophy to our interview research, we may have persevered with the initial critical realist informed approach, and subsequently, our methods may have 'constructed' the data differently. This, we hope, highlights not just the difficulties but also the requirement for reflexivity and re-evaluation of one's philosophical standpoint in both the research design and data collection stages of any doctoral students' 'journey'.

Further reflections: Towards social constructionism? Here, we offer further reflections on the development and application of our philosophically informed interview method in practice. What was most striking about enacting the adapted critical realist method (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979; Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, 2011; Miller and Glassner, 2011) is the amount of extra and somewhat unnatural pretence it brought to the interview setting. Although the interview is, in many senses, an unnatural setting itself – two (or more) people sitting in a room, speaking about their lives or a specific topic – applying critical realism meant the approach was rigid as we tried to consistently honour the abstract method we formulated previously. That is, because we followed a critical realist criterion by asking questions related to an ontological reality while also aiming to be cognisant of the way our respondents construct their subjectivity in relation to this reality, we relied on the ability of our interview technique to generate and perform a lot of the work for us (Smith and Deemer, 2000). In order to develop this idea further, we draw on two criticisms from our experience and the previous illustrative example that we feel were more suggestive of a social constructionist approach to interviewing. First, by approaching and enacting the interview in a way that essentially bifurcates the interview experience, we lost sight of the overall immediacy and simultaneity of the interview experience. There was a sense that by 'being' a critical realist interviewer, we were effectively, metaphorically speaking, aiming to take ourselves out of the interview situation and observe and conduct the interview from an external position. In constantly attempting to distinguish and order our own questions and responses so as to account for both the whats and the hows, we sought to command the interview from an objective viewpoint, as we were primarily concerned with satisfying some external referent to the 'reality' outside of the interview setting (Smith and Deemer, 2000). Of course, seeking to answer research questions is an obvious demand of doctoral study. Our argument

here, however, is that the perceived notion of an anti-dualistic stance is in practice problematic as in our experience it privileged the external ontological reality; despite supposedly being situated at the middle of the philosophical spectrum. By pursuing the interview process in this manner, the possibility of the subjectivity of our respondents providing greater insight into phenomena is in practice treated as secondary to gaining information on this external reality. Second, this bifurcation of interview practice appeared to discontinue the spontaneous, constructionist and meaning-making aspects of the interview experience. We have borrowed an idea from Berger and Luckmann (1966) here – as influential proponents of social constructionism – in developing this point, who suggest that discontinuing the spontaneity of our social experience is required if we are to truly reflect upon our position in the social world. We argue, however, that in an interview research setting, the discontinuity related to abstracting ontology and subjectivity tends to devalue and break the instinctive and interactive nature of the interview as a conversational activity. As highlighted by Shotter (2010), we agree that an appreciation of the temporal dimension of interviews as conversations is necessary, meaning the interviewer and interviewee are jointly re-evaluating both their individual world and the social world in which it is situated. By ignoring this aspect of interview research, we became inundated with our own abstract philosophical agenda, as opposed to a more reflexive sensitivity towards how the immediate interaction we share with our respondents can enrich our understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Our process of reflexivity is similar to the auto-ethnographic account of McDonald's (2013) work on queer reflexivity. As reflexivity asks us to question the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the research process (Cunliffe, 2003), our article corroborates McDonald (2013) in that (philosophical) identities are fluid and constantly evolving during the research process and that a priori philosophical perspectives in particular are as much open to this process of reflexivity when applied in practice. As such, we follow Crotty (1998: 58) in describing our emerging social constructionist position. That is, the knowledge created in the interview involved a 'collective generation [and transmission] of meaning' between the interviewer and interviewee in the practical moment of the interview setting. The way in which our interviews appeared indicative of a social constructionist approach must be further clarified. Given that social constructionism opposes the notion of an objective ontological reality, the fact that our critical realist approach sought to take us outside of the interview made it appear that the interview setting itself was also objective to our human experience. By simply focusing on 'acting' critical realist, there was a neglect for the importance of knowledge and meaning being constructed in the interview setting, such as the change in attitude towards the notion of 'breadwinner' in our earlier example. The shared interaction between us and our interviewees led to the construction of meaning and understanding. This follows Berger and Luckmann (1966) in that the social world cannot be removed from the human activity that

produces it. Therefore, if we understand the social world to be constructed in this way, engagement or questioning of that social world within our doctoral research is based on disbelief for any foundational objective truth. This requires a fundamental reset in how we view our philosophical endeavours, from one based on a single truth to one that understands and appreciates the multiple, subjective realities within the social world. Relatedly, the way in which critical realism denotes an epistemological relativism did not seem far removed from an appreciation of individual subjectivity within the social world. A further analysis of critical realism, however, highlights an important contradiction in the way knowledge is understood, otherwise termed as the 'realists' dilemma' (Edwards et al., 1995). The fact that practising critical realism made us realise how individuals jointly construct knowledge in the interview setting suggests that our critical realist approach to interviewing was in fact reducible to the very social nature of such an interaction (Shotter, 1992). That is, the way we understood the ontological reality was because of the shared subjectivity between ourselves and the interviewees that constructed the view of the social world. Edwards et al. (1995) describe this as a fundamental critique of realist approaches, stating that the 'very act of producing a non-represented, unconstructed external world is inevitably representational, threatening, as soon as it is produced, to turn around upon and counter the very position it is meant to demonstrate' (p. 27). This was particularly so when applying critical realism in practice. Put simply, while we may feel confident in our position as qualitative researchers to make an informed analysis of the phenomena we study, using locally produced knowledge constructed in the interview in order to make broader claims about an ontological reality was discomfiting, especially given the ways in which meanings and interpretations of gender roles changed throughout the interviews themselves. In all, our initial philosophical approach proved inadequate in the practical moment of the interview setting. While we approached the interview setting in a critical realist manner, upon reflection, we have begun to understand qualitative interview practice in more social constructionist terms. As such, having a preconceived idea or guidelines about how we might enact a certain philosophy (critical realism) in practice was actually understood as a different one altogether (social constructionism). Additionally, the way that we have understood the application of philosophy to our methodological practice corroborates Ramsey's (2011) work on the relationship between academic theory and management practice, and 'knowing-in-practice'. On reflection, we consider our use of critical realism to have essentially been used 'provocatively' (Ramsey, 2011) in order to stimulate and incite our understanding of how we may apply a philosophical perspective to methodological practice. The fact that we began to understand the qualitative interview in social constructionist terms rather than a strict critical realist approach highlights what Ramsey (2011) describes as 'scholarship of practice' (p. 480); as doctoral students, we have engaged with ideas, sought a practice of inquiry and realised the

moment-by-moment relating within practice. Thus, our use of critical realism within our interview method provoked an understanding of social constructionism when put into practice. Furthermore, our experiences also corroborate another point by Ramsey (2011), in that by emphasising a process of understanding of a specific philosophical perspective prior to application, we may actually restrict the potential of alternative approaches to be realised during the process. It was not then that our critical realist approach 'failed' but, rather, applying this approach in practice brought into focus ideas and principles that were more social constructionist in nature. Therefore, we advocate that doctoral students use philosophical perspectives provocatively, but also reflexively, in informing their methodological practice in order to understand the different ways in which data can be collected but also analysed and interpreted. Our analysis must be qualified, however, not as a direct slight on attempts to apply critical realism to qualitative interviewing as we discuss just one attempt at doing so (Smith and Elger, 2014). Indeed, there is the possibility that even the most cognitively skilled and meticulous researchers may be able to effectively bifurcate theoretical demands of ontology and subjectivity during an interview setting. We must be true to ourselves, though, that as doctoral students, we inevitably experience struggles in developing and pursuing a consistent and coherent research design.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Through the auto-ethnographic narrative presented here of how we sought to understand the link between research philosophy and methodology, we have demonstrated some of the struggles facing doctoral students doing research within a business school. Given the growing importance of applying philosophy to our research designs, this is just one account of an attempt to explicitly connect a chosen philosophical perspective (critical realism) to the qualitative interview method and our broader methodological concerns. Our narrative initially led us to an understanding of critical realism and then to question how we might apply this philosophical perspective to our methodological practice. Through attempting to align this with the work of Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011) and Miller and Glassner (2011), we felt that we had found a coherent approach that consistently linked our philosophical and methodological commitments. Having then used our critical realist approach in practice, we began to recognise the influence of social constructionism in the qualitative interview process as it was the interaction with our interview participants during the interview that constructed the meanings and understanding of the social phenomena under investigation. So as not to rehash our earlier discussion, our use of critical realism to inform our qualitative interview practice proved both difficult and inadequate. As mentioned, trying 'to be' critical realist in an interview setting led to

an approach that sought to isolate ontology and epistemology and, as a consequence, disregarded the simultaneity and immediacy of the interview experience. Furthermore, so what of separating ontology and epistemology, when the critical realist method does little to help us then bring them back together so as to create a better understanding of the phenomena under investigation? This is again where we felt that the practice of qualitative interviewing was more conducive to constructionist principles – as the supposed ‘epistemic/linguistic fallacy’ was an unavoidable part of the conversational, interactional aspect of the interview process. It must be acknowledged, though, that our initial goal was to try and develop a critical realist approach to qualitative interviewing and to share our experience of doing so. The fact that we discovered the value of constructionist principles within that process does not imply we have tacitly developed an approach to interviewing based on social constructionism. Indeed, there is much writing that highlights the influence of social constructionism on qualitative interviewing (Borer and Fontana, 2012; Cunliffe, 2011; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; King and Horrocks, 2010; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), with a paucity of critical realist application being developed in the samemanner (Smith and Elger, 2014). Thus, we took it upon ourselves to analyse the work of Holstein and Gubrium (2008, 2011) and Miller and Glassner (2011) in a way that we hoped would demonstrate a consistency between our philosophical and methodological commitments. Although this account highlights some of the issues in adopting critical realism to qualitative interviewing and research more generally, there is also a more valuable point to make. Instead, we were able to reflexively recognise the provocative role philosophical perspectives play in our research, by applying them in practice. As stated previously, that we began to understand the constructionist elements of interview practice – such as through challenging familial gender norms – during our data collection, the way we conducted our interviews and our outcomes were necessarily influenced by this recognition. Perhaps, then, having a deterministic or a priori philosophical agenda is not vital. What we feel is an important contribution, however, is being aware of the reflexive and provocative nature of applying philosophy in practice, along with a greater understanding of the way that different views of the social world will impact and construct one’s data. Better still, we hope that by getting these thoughts down on paper, we also reach out to doctoral students in a similar position. Our narrative account offers insights that we believe will resonate with the experiences of both our peers and also those interested in teaching and developing philosophically informed qualitative research. That said, our ‘journey’ in navigating philosophical perspectives continues, as we open up a debate about how experiences using philosophical perspectives in new and alternative ways leads to more insightful and meaningful qualitative data.

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