Epistemic Attitudes and Source Critique in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore and discuss current practices of source critique. In our empirical analysis of a sample of interview-based studies, we find that few studies show a careful and reflective stance toward their sources. In the majority of cases, we discern a tendency to either ignore basic issues of the trustworthiness of interview material or produce technical descriptions which seem to have no real effect on the actual assessment of the study´s sources. We suggest five epistemic attitudes which describe how scholars engage—or rather not engage—in source critique. To improve source critique, we suggest tactics of intra- and extrasource critique which seriously consider interactional dynamics behind and quality of interview content other than "truth" reporting, aiming to corroborate interview statements by carefully cross-checking interview material with observations and multiple sources.

Keywords

interviews, qualitative research, source critique, trustworthiness, epistemic attitudes

Introduction

For some time now, organizational scholars have become increasingly interested in qualitative research methods, especially interviews (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011). With our essay, we wish to join a stream of literature that problematizes current practices in interview research (see among others Alvesson, 2003; Dingwall, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Roulston, 2010; Silverman, 1993). We highlight in this article what we consider a basic problem in interview research: *a lack of source critique*. Source critique refers to a careful evaluation, reflection, questioning, rejection, and probing of interview accounts (and other empirical material) and a carefully crafted research design which is essential for obtaining strong evidence for derivative knowledge claims. We consider such a general lack of source critique as a fundamental problem, which is ignored by the abundance of extant advice on qualitative interview research, often focusing heavily on technical procedures (e.g., coding), or referring loosely to discourse or narrative as ways of avoiding careful consideration of the value of interview statements. We see serious and systematic source critique as a key element in research. Source critique corroborates credible claims about what is being studied, whether these are behaviors, structures, or social practices ("objectivities") or informants' meanings, emotions, and perspectives ("subjectivities"). Social science research could produce much more reliable and valuable studies if there was less emphasis on technical matter of design and coding and more on evaluation of the data's value as indicators of "objective" or "subjective" (or "constructed") phenomena the researcher aims to study.

Interviewing in qualitative research has been addressed widely, and views concerning interview setups, tactics, and their respective possibilities abound (see Alvesson, 2011, for an overview). In many cases, researchers understand interviews as instruments or particularly structured settings for the delivery of reliable "data" which involves interviewers asking passive respondents questions and eliciting neutral interview statements (Oakley, 1981). Some scholars argue that interviews are occasions for encouraging interviewees to provide rich and "authentic" accounts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Other researchers emphasize the interactive and mutual relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and talk about the "co-construction of knowledge." Here, the idea is that the researcher's interventions transform the interview subject "from a repository of opinions and reasons or a well-spring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge" as "the subject's interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, pp. 121-122).

We argue that while these approaches build on different philosophies and emphasize different interviewing techniques, they share the common view that they can elicit informative and authentic statements from interviewees. As shown in this essay, many scholars suppose that (or at least

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produce reports as if) interview statements can be taken as reliable and robust evidence on objective phenomena "out there." Others argue that they have evidence for authentic experiences, feelings, and beliefs, while in turn some claim that interviews allow the tracing of discourses and their constitutive effects. Of course, we can see indicators that interviewers may succeed in attaining valid statements, and a description of authentic experiences and meanings. Yet, the qualitative interview is not just a matter of asking the right questions in the right way or establishing rapport with the interviewee. Scholars need to be careful about giving interview statements such robust ontological and epistemological status. This includes common convictions that interview talk necessarily or typically expresses the subjective views, beliefs, or experiences of interviewees. Empirical material may in fact not reveal any "truth" from the perspective of those studied. Interview talk—such as conversation in general—may be influenced by other factors besides the perspectives and meanings of interviewees, for example, adaptations to the interview situation, satisfying the perceived interests of the researcher, following social and conversational norms, exuding an air of morality and competence or pushing for political interests (Alvesson, 2011).

In the cases where researchers signal an awareness of potential problems with interviews, they either refer to their triangulation practices (see Jick, 1979) or merely signal their awareness of problems. As illustrated below, the reference to triangulation mostly appears to have a legitimizing function rather than playing a decisive role in research practices. As readers, we are oftentimes left with abstracted and technical descriptions which do not indicate how the data were precisely "triangulated" and which assessments played the decisive role to deem sources trustworthy. A recent review of qualitative research by Bluhm et al. (2011) strengthens our observations. They conclude that "interviewing is by far the most popular [qualitative method], with interviews conducted in 84 per cent (168) of the articles[.]" (p. 1877), and further show that "45 per cent (89) of the articles were coded as non-transparent, as their descriptions of data collection and analysis were *incomplete, missing, or extremely vague"* (p. 1880, emphasis added). Of course, we acknowledge that there are limits to what can be said about methods in a journal article, but the fundamental issue of value and reliability of the empirical material is a crucial issue seldom treated with care and circumspection. Hence, we believe that we have good reasons to reflect upon whether "interviewing has been too easy, too obvious, too little studied, and too open to providing a convenient launching pad for poor research" (Potter & Hepburn, 2012, p. 555).

We wish to emphasize that for us source critique is a fundamental issue of interview research that exists *regardless of epistemological and ontological differences*.[1] We argue that *any source that substantiates a conceptual premise or theoretical proposition should be assessed critically* whether a scholar writes about objective facts, people's authentic experiences, true meanings, identity constructions, narratives, or discourses. Being committed qualitative researchers, our critique certainly does not favor quantitative research—problems with source critique in questionnaire studies are fundamental, and we often wonder what the crosses made in questionnaire responses say about phenomena "out there," beyond questionnaire-filling behavior—but we limit our concerns in this article to interview-based, qualitative research.

A key question researchers should bear in mind with regard to source critique is "How far and with what justification may I move from noting that this is what a person told in an interview to claims about behavior, episodes, cognitions, emotions or even narrative identity and experiences?" This question is, as shown, seldom (explicitly) asked. In a recent evaluation of the field of organization studies, Barley (2016) recounts how reviewers used to demand justification and explanation:

> Even though I was an ethnographer, reviewers almost always focused on my methods, my empirics, and the warrant for my claims—all of which seemed fair game to me. They might, for example, ask for additional proof: Just how many times did you see "X"? or How many people said "Y" and under what conditions? [. . .] Sometimes reviewers asked for quotes or excerpts from my field notes to back up or illustrate a claim I made. (p. 5)

Barley points out a fundamental issue that plagues social science research in general and organization studies in particular. While advice on coding and procedure abound, less time and energy is devoted to substantiating and validating empirical claims. His students confess that "they read the front of the paper and the back of the paper but skipped the middle" (Barley, 2016, p. 4). We provide an empirical insight into tendencies of "skipping the middle and focusing on the back." We explore how researchers assess their sources which they use as justification for their theoretical and conceptual contributions, and find that the majority of the studies we examined do not engage in source critique; at least they do not seriously and explicitly demonstrate it to the reader. Based on these findings, we suggest five "epistemic attitudes" which describe the relationship between source-critical practices and knowledge claims. Second, we present ideas on how we could improve source critique. We suggest engaging in intrasource critique and extrasource critique. The former pays close attention to elements other than "truth" telling as central to people's interview behavior, while extrasource critique involves other, directly related sources and observations who are interviewed about an interesting empirical phenomenon.

To unfold our argument, we proceed as follows: First, we provide a brief theoretical discussion of the notion of source critique and what it means in the context of qualitative, interpretative research. We then proceed to our analysis of

source-critical issues in a sample of articles. Based on our analysis, we describe five different epistemic attitudes. In a subsequent step, we then propose the notions of intra- and extrasource critique which could be used to improve source-critical practices, and we use an example to illustrate our argument. The article concludes with a brief discussion.

Source Critique

The historian Collingwood (1993) distinguishes between an authority and a source. An authority is evidence of something we uncritically accept as a form of definite testimony. A source in contrast tells us something about the past which we should not uncritically accept. A source is only one among many, and can contradict itself, voice differing opinions, or cheat and deceive. A source should therefore never be taken as an authority. A source possesses traces of the past which means that it has in one way or the other been exposed to or even constitutes the phenomenon we would like to learn about. In this respect, historiographers distinguish between remnant and narrating sources. Remnant sources are sources which tell that something has unquestionably taken place such as a meeting, and are accordingly closer to a testimony. Narrating sources recount events related to the phenomenon and have therefore little to no authority (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Interview research should ideally make use of a blend of narrating sources and remnant sources. Yet, what we find is that often the former is the only support, and quite regularly researchers treat sources like authorities. Scholars present interview statements as accurate evidence on a phenomenon or authentic experiences, for example, an event, a behavior, an emotion, or a relation, without much assessment and analysis of the credibility of the statements. Collingwood (1993) refers to the uncritical acceptance of interview statements as a "scissors-and-paste" method—or more apt for the digital world "copy-and-paste." A copy and paste method accepts interview statements as true and valid data, and copies and pastes such data into written texts treating them as "objective" knowledge claims. Collingwood (1993) is highly critical of such a copy-and-paste approach, and urges "to step right outside the world of scissors-and-paste history into a world where history is not written by copying out the testimony of the best sources but by coming to your own conclusions" (p. 260). Hence, critical reflection on sources and their statements should be a common practice. Yet, thorough and conscientious source critique and "coming to your own conclusions" based on trustworthy empirical material has become less and less common (Barley, 2016).

Watson (2011) has recognized such lack and articulates strong doubt about the value of the interview, claiming that the interviewees in the organization he worked as a participant observer told visiting researchers that they "would rarely have given any kind of help, insight, whatsoever to the researchers about how things 'actually worked' in that organization" (p. 211). Interviews are complex social interactions between interviewer(s) and interviewee, and some scholars go as far as arguing that interviews need to be understood as "local accomplishments" (Potter & Hepburn, 2012; Silverman, 1993). We do not agree with such radical view, but it is apparent that while the interviewer might strive to control the general setup of the interview, cross-check statements, or achieve rapport, there are situational and contextual factors that are out of control of the interviewer (Alvesson, 2011). Interviews are far from neutral occasion for "knowledge extraction." Place and spaces (Herzog, 2005; Sin, 2003), gender and other power relations (Aléx & Hammarström, 2008), mutual expectations (Potter & Hepburn, 2012) as well as organizational and societal norms (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) for interview talk influence the interview situation and of course the answers given. These influences underscore the necessity for source critique.

In the cases where researchers do consider possibilities of the limited and unreliable nature of individual interviews, "solutions" are often rather simple and standardized. Eisenhardt (1989) advocates the use of multiple methods to make theoretical inferences. Interviews should be complemented by observations, documents, surveys, and other methods to triangulate the phenomenon under study and minimize biases. Often however interviewees' accounts of experiences and meanings cannot be confirmed *unambiguously* by formal documents and observations of behavior, partly because contexts vary and with that the meaning of talk and text (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Other researchers emphasize building trust and collaboration with the interviewee as key for a successful interview. They propose to structure interviews in a way that establishes a close rapport with the interview subject and their life worlds (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) "empowering" them in a shared task of interviewer and interviewee in the production of meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). This may of course lead to interview outcomes strongly affected by local dynamics, and does not provide solid ground for source critique. This is especially the case when researchers avoid confronting interviewees with contradictory statements or using information which could be used for checkup questions outside the "in-depth" interview. Such skepticism seems misplaced if one believes that "interview participants collaborate to construct the interview's shifting subjectivities in relation to the topics under consideration" (p. 21). "Shifting subjectivities," however, is not necessarily the same thing as shifting talk in interviews.

We, the authors of this article, have over the years conducted in-depth empirical research which regularly illustrates potential problems of a "copy-and-paste" strategy or a highly technical and standardized approach to interview data. Such issues for instance surfaced when we did repeat interviews with the same people about a single specific

Table 1. Overview of Sample Studies.

Journal	Article
Administrative Science Quarterly	Maurer and Ebers (2006), Zott and Huy (2007); Sauder (2008); Davis and Eisenhardt (2011); Petriglieri (2015); Lawrence and Dover (2015)
Academy of Management Journal	Creed, Dejordy, and Lok (2010); Fauchart and Gruber (2011); Lepoutre and Valente (2012); Canato, Ravasi, and Phillips (2013); Sonenshein (2014); Byron and Laurence (2015)
Organisation Studies	Currie, Finn, and Martin (2010); Van Dijk, Berends, Jelinek, Romme, and Weggeman (2011); Dieleman and Boddewyn (2012); Catino and Patriotta (2013); Khaire (2014); Symon and Pritchard (2015)
Journal of Management Studies	Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009); Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2011); Hall, Matos, Sheehan, and Silvestre (2012); Elsbach and Flynn (2013); Fraher and Gabriel (2014); Canales (2015)
Organization	Delbridge (2014); Harrington, Warren, and Rayner (2015); Kalonaityte (2010); McKenna (2011); Da Costa and Silva Saraiva (2012); Lê (2013)

empirical phenomenon, or when different people were interviewed about an empirical phenomenon. We experienced the unreliability, variation, and ambiguities of empirical material firsthand. These issues cannot be remedied by strict codification or other rational procedures leading to clear-cut patterns, or the reporting of a variety of different, internally consistent, experiences or subjectivities. Of course, we realize that discrepancies in the empirical material lead to interesting research about different experiences or the relationship between beliefs and behavior.

Yet, we see that there is still a need to be more cautious about taken interview accounts at face value. In many cases, when we read papers we are startled that scholars use many of their examples and empirical examples for their knowledge claims even though they do not appear to withstand critical scrutiny. In the following, we systematically pursue these observations by presenting findings from an analysis of a sample of studies with a focus on their source critique.

Method

For our analysis, we reviewed articles published over the last 5 years in influential journals of the field which mainly publish empirical studies namely *Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ), Academy of Management Journal (AMJ), Journal of Management Studies (JMS), Organisation Studies (OS)*, and *Organization*. We focused on the last five volumes dating from 2010 to 2015. We searched for articles which were using interviews as their primary source. Consequently, we excluded mixed-methods, pure document studies or full-fledged ethnographies. Our initial intention was to randomly select five articles from each volume of every journal. We were under the impression that interview-heavy qualitative research studies would be present in all years not least due to the documented increasing interest in qualitative research, especially interviews (see Bluhm et al., 2011). However, while interview-heavy qualitative studies abounded in the journals *OS, Organization*, and *AMJ* they were fewer in *ASQ* and *JMS*. We therefore had to deviate from our intended sampling strategy, and broadened our search to include two articles from 2007 and 2008 in *ASQ* and one from 2009 in *JMS*. Our final sample comprised of 30 studies which are listed in Table 1.

As we aimed for a careful reading of the various articles, we meticulously explored the nuances of the respective articles and assessed them first holistically before fragmenting them into chunks which represented instances of source critique. A smaller sample size also allowed us to detect implicit references to source critique scattered throughout the articles. Accordingly, our sample had to be kept at a manageable size to do justice to such intention. Moreover, a smaller size adheres to our principles of qualitative research which does not focus on surveying a field but doing intense and in-depth studies (McCracken, 1988). In addition, 30 studies allowed us to reach a point of saturation as a pattern of limited source critique in the majority of cases emerged. Reading journal articles outside our sample more broadly and variedly rather than systematically did not indicate any significant deviation from what is found in our sample. We were interested in patterns, not the rare exception.

For our analysis, we first perused the articles' front to back to get an impression of the purpose, outline, and contribution of each article. We then focused specifically on the method sections and the representations of the findings. We looked for evidence in the article which indicated any evaluation and critique of its sources. The dimensions we considered in our analysis were an explicit signaling of questioning, probing, and rejecting sources. Furthermore, we looked at how interview statements substantiated knowledge claims; that is, the degree of reflective and careful consideration of the sources' contribution to the study.

The analysis of how interview sources were employed is of course tricky as we only refer to the paper's published, explicit text. Much of the implicit understandings and tacit contextual knowledge is concealed to the reader. In addition, limited space in journal articles forces authors to make decisions on how to present their material lest they do not want to bother readers with lengthy and cumbersome method discussions and endless reflections. Nonetheless, the published text makes explicit the authors' communication of how they

used their interview material as a basis for their knowledge claims, and any serious engagement with source critique would be mentioned more than marginally in the text. The texts also clearly convey the norms and the templates for doing and reporting research; there is presumably a strong performative effect. Researchers read published texts and follow them in a research field where academics are eager to be published, and follow established patterns and formulas (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). Moreover, as we learned during our analysis, there are significant qualitative differences in treating interview sources, and a few studies in our sample explicitly showed to the reader how to discuss and use interviews with a degree of reflexivity. We therefore feel confident that our sample illustrates common practices of source critique, in particular norms and standards for (not) dealing with this.

Epistemic Attitudes and Source Critique

Our analysis discerned what we refer to as different *epistemic attitudes* in relation to source critique. Our notion of epistemic attitudes is inspired by Katz (1960). He defines attitude as a "predisposition of the individual to evaluate some symbol or object or aspect of his [her] world in a favorable or unfavorable manner" (p. 168). Katz asserts that attitudes can be expressed verbally or nonverbally. In our case, knowledge claims are expressed verbally as part of the conceptualization of the research paper. He further argues that one of the functions of attitudes is to order and systematize knowledge to provide coherence and stability to an individual's universe which relates closely to the notion of "epistemic." Following him, we thus understand epistemic attitudes as researchers' (dis-)inclination to evaluate interview material and the characteristics of knowledge claims based on the theretofore evaluated empirical material.

Regarding the evaluation aspect, we found a range of passive to active inclinations to critique sources. While some studies do not respond at all to evidently problematic source-critical matters, others proactively deal with them. An active responsiveness to source-critical issues makes problematic issues transparent and explicit. A passive stance on the contrary either passes over any source-critical issues or uses mechanical strategies which might contain abstract claims yet lack substantial measures. With a view to knowledge claims, we found that some authors provide rather "minimalistic" knowledge claims, for example, about "narratives" or indications about subjective orientations, while others are inclined to make strong, objective knowledge claims about "facts", experiences, and meanings.

These two dimensions span *different epistemic attitudes* on how studies deal with source-critical problems which are summarized in Figure 1.

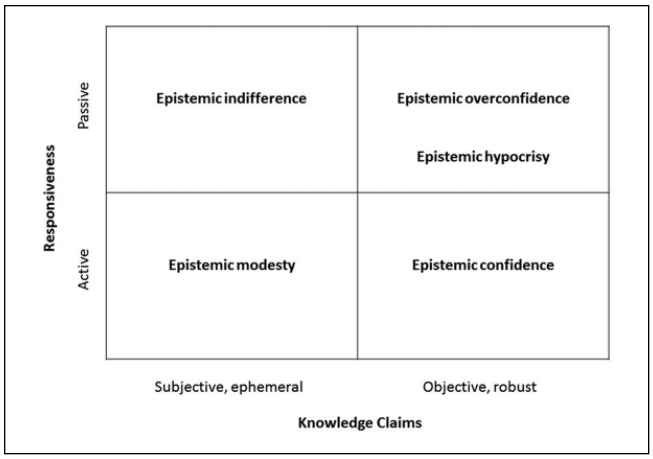

Figure 1. Epistemic attitudes.

Epistemic Indifference: Bypassing Source Critique

Epistemic indifference describes how scholars consider sources as authorities and uncritically accept interview statements. Scholars usually refrain from making too strong knowledge claims varyingly referring to their study of meanings, sense making, or identity constructions. Petriglieri (2015), for instance, conducts interviews with a selected sample of BP executives exploring their identification with the company after the oil spill. Her description of the method lays out in detail the interview sampling procedure and analysis but it does not raise any source-critical issues at all. In the limitations section, Petriglieri even writes that BP selected all the interviewees for her but chooses not to discuss or at least acknowledge how management's choice might have affected the trustworthiness of her sources. In a study on identity work among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender ministers, Creed, Dejordy, and Lok (2010) present the reader an elaborate coding scheme. We are missing however a discussion on any source-critical issues that might arise when studying the ministers' subjective "manifest experiences of contradiction" as well as "their engagement, and subsequent responses" (p. 1342). In both these studies, one cannot rule out that political considerations and social norms about the addressed issues guide the interviewees.

Epistemic Overconfidence: Procedural Cleansing

Epistemic overconfidence explicitly recognizes source-critical issues. Scholars assuming such attitude however argue that strong knowledge claims are warranted after they have applied predefined tactics for reducing source-critical issues usually. We usually find highly abstracted descriptions about reducing biases, validating interview statements, or triangulating data in the paper's methodology section. While these procedures sound reliable, we find that procedural cleansing tactics based on epistemic overconfidence are

largely decoupled from scholars' actual work with empirical material. We read jargonized descriptions but no profound description of specific problems with sources. For example, the description of interview procedures usually provides no information on how unreliable sources were identified and dealt with, how contradictory and ambiguous statements were *actually* treated, and the nature of the criteria used to trust one source more than the other. We also find that an overconfident epistemic attitude is consistently reflected in the robust knowledge claims of these papers.

Authors with an overconfident epistemic attitude thus remain vague about the intricacies and practicalities of source-critical issues while providing strong knowledge claims. van Dijk, Berends, Jelinek, Romme, and Weggeman (2011), for example, write that "[o]ther stakeholders in the innovation process mentioned during interviews were interviewed too, to cross-check statements and findings. Interviewing people with different positions and types of involvement helped offset biases or lapses (Huber & Power, 1985)" (p. 1492). Here, we do not learn how these biases or "lapses" were "offset" in practice. van Dijk and colleagues claim not to have used dubious sources to derive objective facts about empirical descriptions but the reasons *why* some sources were more trustworthy than others are not made explicit. Similarly, Currie, Finn, and Martin (2010) in their study on nurses' role transitions and identity let the reader know that "[a]t all stages, authors were alert to counter-evidence to the emergent analytical themes." Yet, the interesting aspect of what this alertness means and what happened once one of the authors "was alerted to counter-evidence" is not further elaborated.

Epistemic Hypocrisy: Acknowledging Uncertainty While Making Strong Knowledge Claims

Another attitude which we identified is epistemic hypocrisy. This involves researchers' acknowledgment of basic problems when assessing the trustworthiness of sources. Yet, they also indicate that nothing can be done about this and make strong knowledge claims as if the robustness of the interview material enables them to do so anyway. There is an apparent inconsistency between recognizing source critique (talk) yet using sources as if those problems do not exist (action); the characteristics of hypocrisy (see Brunsson, 2003). Hall, Matos, Sheehan, and Silvestre (2012), for instance, describe how they aimed to alleviate source-critical issues by not only keeping data confidential but also informing their interviewees that they will check statements against other sources. To qualify these attempts of cleansing empirical material, they further "acknowledge that our empirical data do not go beyond what the interviewees were able to articulate and we were able to interpret. Furthermore, the views of our interview subjects are not necessarily the only relevant perspectives on these issues" (p. 805). Even though Hall et al. describe various source critique strategies, it seems that they want to be certain that they also acknowledge the limits of their material. Yet, they use their empirical material to suggest "theoretical implications" (p. 801) and four robust propositions, while the possibility of going beyond interviewees' statements and making efforts to look for other sources and corroborate their strong knowledge claims does not become an issue. They silently drop any caution here associated with the limited validity of the data. Of course, it is important to suggest theoretical ideas, but if they are based on empirical work then the latter needs to be strong enough to support the theoretical implications. Byron and Laurence (2015) provide another example. They admit that biases existed in their empirical material which could not be eliminated. They recognize that "[o]ur interview questions forced our participants to make sense of their past actions, and we cannot be certain that such sensemaking reflects their actual motives or behaviors" (p. 319). With this statement, they seem to be absolved from any rigorous attempts to reflect on their sources and the necessity to follow up on interview statements. In their analysis, Byron and Laurence go on to make confident knowledge claims based on their interviews which they conclude "make several theoretical contributions—in particular, *seem to change what is known about identity* and the communication of the self and their influence on workplace relationships" (p. 317, emphasis added).

Epistemic Confidence: Proactive Design

Epistemic confidence involves a careful, proactive design of an interview-heavy study which includes a tailored approach to possible source-critical issues and the ability to make more robust knowledge claims. An example of epistemic confidence is the study by Elsbach and Flynn (2013) on the self-conceptions of toy designers and collaborative behavior. Elsbach and Flynn relate to us in detail the minutiae of their methodology. It reduces much of the ambiguity a reader has. In the first step, Elsbach and Flynn conduct open-ended interviews with 40 designers about their work tasks, collaborative behavior, and self-concepts. They then use those interviews to create self-concepts of the designers which are in a second step evaluated by the previously interviewed designers. Subsequently, they carefully assess the interviews by cross-checking them against observations of the very same interviewees. For us the authors here proactively embrace source-critical elements by carefully thinking through and then designing their methodology. Sonenshein (2014) also shows such epistemic confidence. He describes in detail his ongoing and proactive search for interviewees for a constant comparison of his emerging interpretation and new empirical insights. Furthermore, he aspires to constantly learn more by visiting the stores he studied and interviewing "all available and consenting employees at the time of my visit" (p. 818). He illustrates how sources are constantly assessed for their statements, and proactively complemented by other impressions and sporadic observations.

While proacting authors are careful designing their studies, there is a certainty that source-critical issues have been resolved which is indicated in their confident knowledge claims. However, we find that the subsequent analysis of findings usually refrains from pointing out ambiguities, contradictions, and difficult choices of trusting and possible jettisoning sources. We get the impression that there is a coherent pattern of data which points in the same direction, without more careful meditation on what is credible and what seems to be misleading in interview accounts. All interviewees seem to be confirmed by observations without any discrepancies calling for attention. This is of course possible but does not correspond to many of our experiences, indicating that people's talk and observed behavior quite often diverge and sometimes in significant ways (Alvesson & Jonsson 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2016). However, epistemic confidence might reflect the norms of writing in our field, with an emphasis on rationality, procedure, and clear and consistent results delivered through robust design.

Epistemic Modesty: Acknowledging Uncertainties and Moderate Knowledge Claims

Epistemic modesty tackles source-critical issues head on, and provides less robust and more reflective and cautious empirical knowledge claims, perhaps in favor of bold interpretations and novel ideas. In the sample, we see very little of this attitude. One study which shows some epistemic modesty is presented by Fraher and Gabriel (2014) who studied furloughed pilots with regard to narrative identities. They describe their method as "prob[ing] the data to tease out tensions, irregularities, and ambiguities" (p. 933). They elaborate how their mode of working with the empirical material was "iterative, discursive, and reflexive [. . .]" (p. 933). We learn from them that the holistic impression as well as the various nuances of the interview is an important cornerstone for their methodology. With regard to the re-presentation of their sources, they draw attention to the fact that "creative imagination" (p. 935), rather than objective facts, had played a central role, and that they "struggled through the data" (p. 934) to find a way of capturing interview statements conceptually. However, even though Fraher and Gabriel (2014) reiterate their intention of working carefully through the empirical material some source-critical issues could have been reflected even more critically, for instance, their claim that the first author might have established a closer rapport with the interviewed furloughed pilots because of her background as a retired pilot. Whether this led to more truthful and reliable interview accounts is still an open question. Would interviews with another interviewer create very different or similar accounts? The study makes unfortunately only little efforts to check interview statements through invoking knowledge outside the brief and one-shot individual interview (impressions from others living nearby the furloughed pilots, asking probing questions, doing reinterviews, checking for consistency in narrations). Yet, we find that out of the 30 papers we analyzed it comes closest to a careful and considerate approach to source-critical issues.

Somewhat predictably, the large majority of studies in our sample showed epistemic indifference, overconfidence, or hypocrisy. Scholars signal some methodological awareness, and then drop it as they move toward presenting findings and contributions. In written texts, we therefore often find a shift from claims of people in interviews to scholarly claims about issues supposed to be reflected in such interview talk. In the case of overconfidence, source critique almost becomes a "lip-service." In extreme cases, we might call it "pseudo source critique." Pseudo-source critique is based on the paradoxical stance of communicating biases and acknowledging the subjective nature of empirical material while implicitly proposing to deliver objective knowledge based on robust data (see Wray-Bliss, 2002). Such attitude, we argue, lacks a proactive and rigorous stance that indicates *which and why* sources are deemed more trustworthy, or how to combine or compare sources to make a strong case for subsequent knowledge claims. Studies working with epistemic confidence and modesty, however, carefully customize their research designs. They make source-critical problems explicit for the reader. We also find that they refrain from too robust knowledge claims (given uncertain material) and show an awareness of the potential pitfalls of interview situations. In the following, we draw on these ideas and suggest ways of developing them further.

Tactics to Strengthen Epistemic Confidence and Modesty

Our analysis demonstrates that in research practice, a balance between trust in what people say in interviews and careful source critique is needed. Interviewees need (a) to know their experiences, corporate practices, or other facts about the empirical phenomenon; (b) to be willing to talk about them; and (c) able to communicate their knowledge fairly clearly. These criteria are more easily fulfilled when our interviewees describe not too complicated phenomena that they feel fairly neutral about. Yet, weighty issues such as ethics, emotions, experiences, or slippery phenomena indicated by concepts such as strategy, leadership, creativity and values are loaded with uncertainty, inconsistency, self-aggrandizing tendencies, political interest, and even deception. It is possible that interviewees (a) may not *know* because of a bad memory, a limited overview, false consciousness, self-serving bias, defense mechanisms, or because of the complexity of the subject matter at hand; (b) they may not be *willing* to tell because of politics, shame, fear, loyalty; and (c) even if they know and want they may have difficulties to *communicate* complex issues in a standard interview encounter of 60 min to strangers in a formal interview setting. Those are the reasons why researchers

need to engage seriously in source-critical practices, and we find it worrying that interview studies seldom discuss these types of concerns. In what follows, we suggest practices that help improve source critique. Of course, some interviewees may be unhappy about being questioned about their ability to know and reveal the truth (their genuine experiences), and this can create complications in the researcher–informant relationship, but the point of social research is not just to preserve harmonious relationships with those studied. In fact, social research often benefits from studies that problematize individual's understandings and knowledge claims. Research which reproduces what people say or believe without much critical questioning seldom offers much new insights or stimulation to critical reflection—arguably key contributions of good social science.

Intrasource Critique

Working with *single sources* should involve *intrasource critique*. For us intrasource critique consists of three elements: (a) careful consideration of the rationales influencing interview talk which involves an alertness for other motivations than efforts to report "the truth" (including experiences); (b) possibility to repeat and vary interviews, change context, location and framing, and allow for comparison between one and the same interviewee's interview statement checking consistency over time and space; (c) asking insightful questions which reflect researchers' gradual learning about the subject matter during a research project and handling the uncertainties of the situation better through "instant source-checking."

The first step is to carefully interpret and *assess a specific interview in its entirety* (as well as in significant parts of it) asking oneself whether there are good reasons to see interview material as reflecting the interviewee's knowledge, willingness, and capacity to tell the "truth," not only about external phenomena but also about experiences, motives, or language use outside an interview setting. The critically inclined researcher should carefully consider signs for expressions of political correctness, norms for corporate ideology, exercise in "management lingo," situated identity work, or efforts to make the researcher happy. If the alert researcher detects nontrivial influences of the mentioned forces, scholars should exercise caution with the interview material.

The second element of intrasource critique carefully considers the situatedness and time boundedness of interviews, and makes sure that interview statements do not just reflect something tied to space and time. The researcher needs to consider variations and consistency in interview statements in two dimensions: temporal and social-linguistic context (through reframing of interview situation). These dimensions inform different related practices, namely *repeat interviews and interview framing*.

Before a source is treated as an authority and interview statements are treated as valid data, it is important to make sure that the temporal context does not strongly interfere and explain the outcome. It is necessary, if one is to treat a source as an authority, to go beyond knowing that interviewee X at a specific time said this, and make sure that the person at another time is not saying something different because initial interactional dynamics during an interview or a certain recent media coverage of an issue may color the entire interview. A single interview can be affected by the various moods of the interviewee (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997), "priming" effects (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996), or the specific local interaction context of an interview situation (Sin, 2003). To check for consistency and richer insights, scholars should contemplate using *repeat interviews*, at least with some interviewee subjects, to see whether interview statements are tied to a specific time context, possibly reflecting how you respond to a person you have never met before. The value of repeat interviews, apart from obtaining richer empirical material (and sometimes see developments/variations over time), lies in an assessment of the interviewee's ability, reliability, and motivation as a source of knowledge which is further strengthened by experimenting with the framing of the interview (see below). One option is to vary the site (office, home, bar) and vary the (in-)formality of interviews.

Researchers' framing of a project and their area of expertise might offer clues about the research project. This in turn might preempt and frame interviewees' articulations by triggering a certain set of responses. Potter and Hepburn (2012) argue that interviewees will try to articulate the position they are expected to take, for instance, as managers, leaders, moral beings, or creative geniuses. Within these positions, various different templates are available which inform the interviewees' answers. A senior manager indicated to be a leader or an administrator or an entrepreneur or a strategist will most certainly invoke different types of responses. Articulations might be mere templates that are played back to the interviewer making interviews little more than exercises in "intra-discursivity" or template talk. Experimentation with different framing and reframing of the interview theme can thus provide indications of the interviewee's authority on the subject at hand. *Experimenting with framing an interview* involves mainly the type of questions asked. Asking quite different questions may give the researcher a chance to assess whether representations of a particular subject matter are fairly consistent or just follow the logic introduced by the question. For example, if a person is asked about creativity and innovation and, later in the interview, about cost control and effective production and the interviewer still obtains broadly similar answers about, for example, priorities at work, then the responses carry more credibility than if the answers go in different directions.

The third option is to learn before and through the research project, and be well prepared to engage in *continuous assessment of interview material*. Such preparation is

based on an intimate understanding of the interview material before and between interviews. This is sometimes considered in studies emphasizing the research process, as in grounded theory suggesting theoretical sampling and doing sequential interviewing to follow up on earlier leads (Charmaz, 2003). Grounded theory is based however mainly on a process approach. Grounded theory aims to gradually learn from empirical material. Insights and ideas emerge from the data through constant comparisons. Grounded theory however does not emphasize source critique but views empirical material as robust building blocks for further work, proposing "a tight fit between the collected data and analysis of those data" (p. 312). Our idea here is that sequential interviewing is important not only to get preliminary ideas and move ahead with emerging theory building but also to increase the chance of assessing the empirical material in terms of its value and meaning. One may learn as much as possible about the company, the interviewee's occupation, unit, or even person being studied. Previous research, accessible social media, corporate documents, and/or talks with insiders can be used for preparation. It is often also possible to present inconsistent interview material from previous interviews to the interviewee.

At this point, we also want to emphasize that merely interviewing a large sample of interviewees who are not directly connected but are from different workplaces about their work situation, subjectivity, corporate policies, or other issues does not solve the problem of intrasource critique. Even if most managers in one and the same big firm say that they do transformational leadership, half of all female accountants perceive gender discrimination in their careers and half do not, or researchers find three different orientations among IT people in relation to creativity at work, *each of the interviews*—at least among those one is heavily relying upon—needs to be carefully assessed before being turned into an authority and their accounts treated and presented as reliable data. Patterns of interview answers may reflect broadly shared social scripts (management lingo, politically aware talk, use of templates for ego boosting), and are never in themselves a guarantee for the existence of valid empirical material. Consequently, large numbers of interviewees do not by themselves solve the problem of source critique, at least not if interviews are scattered and do not refer to the same episode, relation, or specific practice.

Overall, the key element is to use one's critical faculties, and follow all hunches and warning signs that seem odd or unusual. When in doubt, unreliable sources should be jettisoned or further checked (repeat interviews, seeking of background information). In addition to checking single interviews, scholars should aim to find complementary sources which can address an interviewee's descriptions or set of meanings, experiences, feelings, ambitions, or sense making. We have touched upon this above, and it overlaps with what we refer to as extrasource critique.

Extrasource Critique

To seriously cross-check and validate accounts of various interviewees, researcher needs to engage in *extrasource critique.* In case sources vary, a researcher has four choices: (a) signal explicitly and then study the inconsistency, variation, and ambiguity (as important phenomena); (b) carefully investigate the various sources and demonstrate why some are to be relied upon while others are discounted; (c) do more work to get clear support for a knowledge claim; or (d) drop the subject matter (at least as planned) as it becomes impossible to really find out what is to be trusted.

A careful investigation and demonstration of the viability of a source should involve what we refer to as convergence. Convergence means that we "encircle" an interesting knowledge claim or empirical phenomenon. Empirical materials can thus be linked and are not just aggregated. It implies that we cannot readily accept what people tell us but need to have a set of different sources which are *immediately related* and used for the support or questioning of a focal source. Even though different sources are seldom directly comparable and often "honed out" rather than "honed in" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), they can still support an assessment of the object under study and aid the use of critical judgment. Extrasource critique involves consulting people who can verify or question accounts of other interviewees, checking relevant documentation, or conducting observations.

Once researchers have come across (an) interesting knowledge claim(s), they should start looking for *stakeholders* who have something substantial to say about *that specific knowledge claim*. Stakeholder sampling implies that researchers need to make more efforts to think through their research design beforehand (e.g., Elsbach & Flynn, 2013) to include relevant people yet at the same time they need to have an open mind to bringing in unplanned voices that can provide actual insights into the interesting phenomenon. Sonenshein (2014) describes how he would seek to corroborate other people's knowledge claims, for example, "when the early importance of creativity during family ownership became apparent, I interviewed the organization's first store manager" (p. 818). In an in-depth empirical study on organizing for creativity, Schaefer (2014) focused on five creativity initiatives and compiled the sample, so that specific stakeholders of these initiatives were interviewed. This included the managers organizing the initiative, participants, and advisors. By compiling such a sample, it was possible to converge on the empirical phenomenon at hand, the creativity initiative, and thereby extract more trustworthy claims that had a bearing on precisely each specific creativity initiative. It was clear that the responsible managers' view on the creativity initiatives differed from the understandings of others and hardly could be taken at face value without the critical assessment of other stakeholders.

In the process of seeking out stakeholders, it is important to try to muster people who are informed and who do not have

an interest in supporting the original source. This means *finding counterbiased sources* who have diverse opinions or interests, who are shunned for some reasons or come from different hierarchical levels in the organization. If juxtaposed, articulations from these different sources reveal contradictory positions, and can provide clues that a claim needs to be checked further. If there is agreement between the original source and the counterbiased source, then related knowledge claims have much more credibility and trustworthiness. As a complement to potential extreme positions, neutral sources might be found in other parts of the organizations which have no obvious reason such as political interests to distort information or misrepresent events. People who have left the organization and who were involved with the empirical phenomenon in question may be valuable. Neutral sources should have a good insight into the empirical phenomenon under study from a distance. People in human resource management (HRM) may, for example, comment on the relationship between sales and production in a company.

Approximately one third of the studies in our sample mentioned observations as part of their empirical material. Yet in most cases, there was no obvious indication of how observations contributed to source critique and how it influenced the result. Jenkins and Delbridge (2014) in their study of a happy workforce, for instance, write that they "shadowed" a receptionist and attended a recruiting event to get a feel for the work processes of the organization. Such observations potentially aid in (repeat) interview preparation, sample selection, and the search for possible countersources but do not substantially improve source critique. An exception is the study by Elsbach and Flynn (2013) who follow up on their interview and observed all of their 40 interviewees over a course of 5 days to directly substantiate their previous interview statements. Often, at least in our sample where interviews dominate, it is unclear what observations actually contribute with. They are referred to as a general support of the study, giving the impression of it being based on much more than just interviews, but often it is only interviews that are really being used (e.g., Costas & Grey, 2014). A presence in the context being studied may give the researcher a better grasp of norms and values, processes and the overall atmosphere, and may improve interview quality. However, to be really effective for source critique, observations should be related to interview statements.

Concluding Discussion

Almost 40 years ago, Laurent (1978) noticed that the managers he interviewed always asserted that they informed their subordinates about planned changes, while they claimed that their own managers did not. He revealingly concludes that "[t]he same people perceive—or at least report—very differently the same events depending upon which hierarchical glasses they are invited to wear: proud masters or frustrated servants" (p. 221). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) found that the managers they interviewed regularly claimed that while they were honest, had integrity, and showed concerns, other managers were often conceived differently (interfering, micromanaging, pretending to know, etc.). These observations are supportive of skeptics such as Potter and Wetherell (1987), Silverman (1993), and Watson (2011) who argue that interviews are often much less reliable than they appear.

Based on our own experience, we share this skepticism but see different ways of strengthening source critique. In this article, we have analyzed the current state of affairs concerning interview sources which demonstrates a rather careless treatment of sources by a majority of scholars. Many researchers seem to have an implicit template for how interviews should proceed: A perceptive researcher asks the interview subject carefully prepared questions and receives informed answers either on social facts or subjective meanings. These answers can then be used to corroborate abstract and robust knowledge claims by presenting selected interview quotes. It is likely that many researchers disregard interviewees who appear openly confused, noninformed, or seem to be lying. But our concerns go beyond not using obviously problematic empirical material. Our analysis shows a dominance of epistemic overconfidence indifference and hypocrisy which appears to be the norm for most published research. Such norm insinuates that researchers should devote much attention to design and coding but do not seriously need to consider the credibility of empirical material, and affords researcher a license to treat sources as authorities. This overemphasis on coding and neglect of source-critical issues which indicates whether the material deserves to be taken seriously (and be coded) is deeply unsatisfactory.

This is not to say that there are not excellent exceptions where researchers carefully demonstrate why one should have trust mainly in their interview-based studies (e.g., Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012; Hallett, 2010; Jackall, 1988). These studies are based on interviews with a variety of people involved in the same processes but with different backgrounds, perspectives, and interests (e.g., manager-subordinates, or representing different corporate functions or ideologies). Such diversity allows the researchers to assess and enrich the understanding of the processes "as such" (and not only a single individual's personal view on the subject matter) as well as understandings of the actors in a social setting. Moreover in these studies, people with antagonistic views were interviewed, which provides rich material about what may be significant for understanding but is often not mentioned (due to embarrassments or ignorance, or simple lack of time or consideration) during interviews with single interviewees about how they see and experience things. Yet, the mentioned studies are rare, as our sample shows. A few excellent exceptions do not compensate for major problems in the large majority of all qualitative research, where interviews are the dominant method.

Dismissing our (hermeneutically inspired) concerns about source critique by labeling it "positivism" or "post-positivism," or to emphasize that social constructionism does not aim to reveal objective patterns, misses our central point. Interpretive and constructionist research does not have carte blanche to outright dismiss source-critical concerns. Research on experiences, discourses, subjectivities needs to address source-critical issues to substantiate their findings. Interview talk does not necessary say that much about discourses or narratives outside the interview situation. Of course, the precise nature of the phenomena studied differs depending on philosophical orientation and different kinds of knowledge claims, but a discussion of this is beyond the scope and space of the article.

As a general rule, serious qualitative researchers need to be reflexive and (self)critical regarding the capabilities of interviewees and possibilities of interview material. A conscientious researcher needs to show critical judgment and a proactive stance which are as vital as formal procedure. Simply assuming that we do not and cannot really know if the encounter of an academic and a supposedly truth telling or authentic revealer of experiences says more than how people talk in artificial encounters between two strangers is unsatisfactory. Scholars need to go beyond a formulaic specific methods section, and question why sources need to be trusted and treated as reliable data. A reader deserves to know more details as to why she or he should trust the sources of the study. Admittedly, space limitations in journal articles are a restriction, and few readers appreciate lengthy method sections as Barley (2016) has experienced. Nonetheless, scholars could reduce formal methods sections which provide long accounts for coding procedures and provide more space for demonstrating source critique. If interview statements are of doubtful value, then the most diligent coding and data analysis will not compensate for poorly evaluated empirical material. Rigorous coding does not render questionable interview accounts reliable.

Rigorous source critique may be seen as a pure nuisance as it increases the workload and complexity in terms of field, footwork, and head work. This in turn slows down the speed and decreases the volume of (paper) publications which has become a sole measure for research activity (Willmott, 2011). However, a social science worth its name needs to fight the quick and dirty tendencies. It needs to increase rigor and more importantly circumspection, and care when carrying out empirical work (Mills, 1959). Scholarly rigor cannot be simply reduced to rigid designs, mechanic interviewing, beliefs about trustful in-depth interviews, abstracted triangulation, and subsequent sorting and coding of data all for the purpose of a fast-paced succession of publications. A critical and careful evaluation of sources as part of a well-designed research study produces good empirical material to work with. Better empirical material might also lead to more in-depth and creative insights and interesting ideas. Working through the richness and ambiguities of qualitative material may make the production of simple patterns more difficult, but this does not prevent other types of insights about the often complex, inconsistent, and fragmented nature of organizational life. Beyond the smoothness of data revealing clear patterns, we may be able to find more interesting phenomenon based on careful source critique. Sources, as we have hopefully established in this article, are the linchpin of any empirical knowledge claim and should therefore be treated accordingly.

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Note

1. An exception is of course "localist" study of the interview conversation, as in some discourse or conversational analysis, which do not aspire to claim any generalizability to a phenomenon described in the interview (Silverman, 1993).

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