



## SPECIAL SECTION

# Exploring disagreement: Using video-based interviews to understand a communal resource

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### Abstract

Disagreement is a fundamental dimension of social life. In many situations, however, people are reticent to explicitly criticise the actions of others. It follows that if social researchers wish to study differences in people's common sense judgements of other's actions in an interview setting they need to carefully design how discussion of these differences are structured. This paper examines a research project that used context-specific video clips to structure interviews with users of a communal infrastructural resource. In digging into the practical detail of an interview encounter, the paper contributes to human geography's ongoing conversation about the practicalities of doing interview-based research.

### KEYWORDS

disagreement, infrastructure, interviews, justification, qualitative research, video

**Interviewer:** Okay, so the next clip is coming out of Petteril Street onto Warwick Road and Victoria Place ... so this is about riding on the pavement. He normally goes on the pavement there [at the start of the clip] but there are people cutting their hedge there so that is why he doesn't ...

**Ana:** There is no reason to be on the pavement on a quiet road like that, if you were going the right direction on the road coming up there. But then he is going up onto the pavement there ... oh right, I see what he is doing ... whoa ...

**Interviewer:** Right, what did you think of that then?

**Ana:** Well, he should have been on the road in Petteril Street you know as that road is quiet enough for you to be on the road regardless of whether it is cobble stones, if that is a problem for you then get out onto another road somewhere else you know. Then he went onto the pavement to get across at all the lights and crossings. I think that there he should have got off the bike there and he should have got off the bike while on Petteril Street and then to have wheeled the bike while he was walking along there, across the crossings rather than that where he was trying to ride his bike where there are pedestrians.

**Interviewer:** What were your thoughts on the No Entry sign at the start of Petteril Street?

**Ana:** I didn't see that if I am being honest, so you should just follow the rules.

**Interviewer:** We passed a few pedestrians coming along there, if you were walking along there what would you think if someone was riding past you like that guy was doing there?

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**Ana:** No ... no ... it is ignorant and selfish really. And you see in the clip there were quite a lot of pedestrians walking and crossing at the same time and I think that he was ignorant to then ride across and in front of the person at the crossing ...

**Interviewer:** Do you think that is a situation where you thinking that someone could be cycling on the pavement?

**Ana:** I think that really if they have to go on the pavement then they really should be off the bike and pushing it really ... because really, it should only be for a short distance to get around a pinch point.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A fundamental dimension of social life is that people may have differing views on the right and wrong ways of doing things. What marks social science off from moral philosophy or the study of ethics is a concern with understanding both the structure of this disagreement, and how people negotiate the fact that others hold different views of the appropriate ways to act in a certain situation. People have well defined, often intricately honed, tools for explaining to others how and why they think a certain action is appropriate in a given context or if it is not. At the same time, in many situations people wish to avoid direct conflict with those they are interacting with. This impulse to avoid direct conflict or disagreement represents a challenge for social researchers. Many social settings appear to operate smoothly, with visible conflict between people being infrequent and understood as being reasonable only for the most major infractions. The challenge, then, for the social researcher is how best to configure research encounters that afford insight into differing interpretations of the right way of navigating a particular social setting—along with evaluations of ‘deviant’ actions by others—whilst keeping that discussion grounded in the concrete details of those settings (rather than turning to extreme or exceptional cases).

Understanding these differences in people's common sense judgements of other people's actions, along with the logical structure of the justifications that explain such judgements, is important. This is because although many societal resources—things like streets, parks, libraries, public transport, to name a few obvious examples—are used in common, understandings of how they should be used varies considerably. The following paper presents a reflection on an interview-based encounter designed to explore differing interpretations of how to use a communal resource—in this case the streetscape of a provincial English city. The discussion focuses on how concrete video clip examples were used in an interview to orient and focus the interviewee's response. In digging into the nitty gritty of an interview encounter we aim to contribute both to human geography's ongoing conversation about the practicalities of doing interview-based research (Geoghagen et al., 2020; Hitchings & Latham, 2020), and to discussions of how the interview encounter might be enriched through addition of visual prompts (Dowling et al., 2016).

## 2 | THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND INTERVIEW DESIGN

The excerpt heading up this paper is from an interview with Ana, a 51-year-old school administrator, from Carlisle, a small-ish English city near the North-West border with Scotland. Ana is a car owner who commutes to work in a Volkswagon Golf. In the interview we wanted to explore Ana's views about how cyclists should share the street infrastructure of Carlisle with other road users; that is to say, people in cars, buses, vans and trucks, and other vehicles, as well as those on foot.

This is a contentious issue. Yet also one that on the surface has a clearly defined set of formal rules on how different people should behave. In England, *The Highway Code* (Department of Transport, 2015)<sup>1</sup> sets out in clear and precise language how people—road users in the language of the code—should navigate streets and their interactions with others whilst on them. Despite this tightly defined guidance, and the dense networks of instructional signs and markings that mark out most urban streetscapes, there is nonetheless a great deal of variability in how people actually use streets. And, indeed, there is a great deal of variation in people's common sense understanding of how and by whom different elements of street infrastructure should be used (Christmas & Helman, 2011; Tennant et al., 2021). The intuition that animated the project was that different road users—those who mostly walked, those who drove, those who cycled—likely had different understandings of how people who cycled should use the existing street infrastructure. Following on from

that, understanding these differences should be important in developing strategies to encourage more people to cycle in low cycling urban environments like Carlisle (where only 2% of all trips were undertaken by cycling).<sup>2</sup>

Before interviewing non-cyclists like Ana, we generated a dataset of videos of people cycling. Ride-a-longs were used to follow and video-record 21 people from Carlisle who regularly cycled.<sup>3</sup> These videos were needed because we wanted to talk about concrete, situated, instances of people cycling in Carlisle. Having analysed the video clips, ride-a-long participants were interviewed. These interviews used the video clips to explore the practicalities of cycling in Carlisle; particular focus was paid to those situations when the actions of the cyclist seemed at variance with the guidance set out in *The Highway Code*. Using the ride-a-long videos and interviews we then produced an 8-minute video that showed 11 clips of people on bicycles navigating a range of infrastructural configurations; in some cases, this involved contrasting ways of using the same street infrastructure, and in others it involved what appeared to be contentious approaches to navigating a space. This video was then used to interview a sample of people who mostly drove ( $n = 20$ ), a sample of people who mostly walked ( $n = 20$ ), and a sample of people who cycled regularly ( $n = 20$ ).

The use of the video made for a straightforward, but quite rigid, interview structure. After introducing the project, explaining the purpose of the interview, and some contextualising questions, interviewees were shown the selection of video clips on the interviewer's laptop. For each clip, interviewees were (1) asked what they thought of the cyclist's actions, (2) how they would have negotiated the situation shown in the video, and (3) if critical of the action of the person cycling in the video, the interviewer set out how the person cycling had justified their approach to the situation shown in the video and the interviewee was prompted to evaluate whether they thought this justification was reasonable. Interviews tended to last about an hour. Because we wanted to compare across the interviews this rigidity was a strength. Once the interviews were coded it made comparison across the interviews simpler. Each interviewee was talking about the same case (rather than, say, some hypothetical instance of a person cycling), and the concrete—often familiar—detail in the video (along with the original explanation from the interview of the person cycling in the video of what they were doing and why they thought that was reasonable) kept the discussion of each case focused and on topic. Each interview was transcribed, added to ATLAS-ti, and then coded.

### 3 | WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE INTERVIEW EXCERPT?

By the time we get to the interview excerpt heading up the paper, Ana has already commented on eight video clips. The ninth clip focuses on riding on the pavement (or sidewalk if your prefer). The clip shows a man in his early 70s riding the wrong way up a one-way street, then turning onto the pavement (passing a pedestrian as he does so) to wait at a light-controlled pedestrian crosswalk, riding his bike across the road on the pedestrian phase, mounting the pavement again to wait at another light-controlled pedestrian crosswalk (this time with four pedestrians); when the signal turns green, he rides his bike slowly across the crossing, passing the pedestrians, and then up onto the pavement.

From the start of the interview excerpt Ana makes clear her disapproval of the behaviour of the person on the bicycle in the video clip. This in itself is not surprising. *The Highway Code* (and English law) is unambiguous in its prohibition of cycling on pavements. What is analytically interesting about Ana's reasoning in the excerpt is how she demonstrates that she understands what is happening in the clip—'... oh right, I see what he is doing ...'—and then develops her evaluation of the inappropriateness of the cyclist's actions—'Ignorant and selfish'—without directly referring to the fact that riding a bicycle on the pavement is forbidden. Rather Ana's description of why the actions of the person cycling in the video clip are inappropriate focuses on the interaction with the pedestrians using the pavement and crosswalk. For Ana the streetscape works, both in terms of allowing people to get from A to B and keeping people safe whilst doing so, so long as different road users respect the rights of others to use the spaces allocated to them. Pavement and crosswalk spaces are spaces designated for pedestrians. It follows that if someone on a bicycle wants to share these kinds of spaces—and make use of the safety advantages of things like pedestrian cross walks—then they need to stick to the rules for pedestrians: 'I think that really if they have to go on the pavement then they really should be off the bike and pushing it really'.

Ana does not mention *The Highway Code*; her evaluation of the actions of the person cycling in the video clip depends on a background understanding that cycling on the pavement is legally proscribed. But she is open to the possibility that people in certain situations might act in ways that step outside of those formal rules for their own safety. These exceptions should, however, remain exceptions. Running through Ana's responses to the video clips and the interviewer's question is a presumption that keeping each other safe on Carlisle's streets depends on respecting other road users, and the most obvious manifestation of this respect involves following formal rules. In a question that followed on immediately from the interview excerpt at the head of the paper, Ana dismisses the explanation the person riding the bicycle in the video

clip offered for his actions. Responding to the explanation that the person cycling on the pavement did so to keep away from traffic and tries ‘to do it with utmost respect for pedestrians’, Ana laughs and says:

No, he wasn't riding like a pedestrian, at the end bit where he went and cut across the corner ... You know that to me just showed he was looking to cut corners and get across to where he wants to be, you know, with not much consideration for the rules or for any other people who are coming along there.

Ana uses the action from the ride-a-long video clip to directly challenge the justification offered by the pavement cyclist. The point that Ana is making is not that those cycling should be 100% strict rule followers when navigating Carlisle's streets. Rather that they cannot use their vulnerability as an excuse to appropriate space from other equally vulnerable people (which in this case means pedestrians).

## 4 | GROUNDING DISCUSSION WITH VIDEO

There is much more that could be said about what is going on in Ana's interview extract. But since this is a paper focusing on the interview as a research tool, let us focus on three important features of the extract and the interview encounter from which it was taken.

The first feature of the extract is how the use of carefully chosen video clips functioned to clearly establish a topic of conversation. The interviewer needed only to provide minimal contextual introduction to each clip—‘Okay, so the next clip is coming out of Petteril Street onto Warwick Road and Victoria Place ... so this is about riding on the pavement’—before Ana felt able to offer a commentary on what was happening. Moreover, the temporal sequencing of the video also offered Ana a natural narrative structure to her response. The second feature of the interview extract is that the detail of the clip kept the discussion anchored to the case in hand. The research project was not interested in people in Carlisle's attitudes to cycling or cyclists in general—a topic about which we could have asked interviewees about without recourse to arduously collected ride-a-long videos. Rather we wanted to examine people's situated evaluations of how people cycling made use of Carlisle's street infrastructure (and within this, their interactions with others using this infrastructure). The use of the ride-a-long video clip kept the discussion anchored in the detail of Carlisle's streetscape and the concrete challenges and affordances of that street infrastructure. In Ana's account from the extract, this meant pavements that are too narrow to be shared between those cycling and those walking, pedestrian cross-walks that should only be used by people on foot, roads without too much traffic, and so forth.

The third feature of the interview worth reflecting on is the impact of presenting the interviewee with an alternative justification. Presenting and asking about the justification offered by the person cycling in each of the video clips shown helped to clarify and develop the interviewee's interpretation of what is happening in the video clip. It nudges the interviewee to consider alternative interpretations of the situation, and it does so without leading to direct conflict between the interviewee and interviewer; in presenting the account of the person cycling, the interviewer is simply offering an alternative account from another person rather than directly confronting the interviewee with flaws or gaps in their account. Presenting the interviewee with an alternative interpretation also tells us something about their commitment to the position they have developed. In Ana's case, in the interview excerpt setting out the cyclist's justification led to her doubling down on her evaluation and directly challenging the sincerity of the alternative account that had been offered.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

A classic description of the interview is that they are ‘conversations with a purpose’ (in Cloke et al., 2004, p. 149). This is a useful shorthand. But it is a shorthand that leaves open the question of how researchers should go about establishing a shared understanding of what an interview conversation's purpose is. It also leaves open the question of precisely what kinds of accounts we want to hear from our interviewees. In interviews, we are often interested in more than just our interviewees' general ‘experience’ of the world, or some generic sense of the ‘meanings’ they ascribe to that world. As social researchers, we are interested—or at least we should be—in the full complexity of everyday spoken language, and how that language helps to knit together and make sense of the world. Depending on the context of the interview, we are not just interested in meaning and experience, but reasonings, justifications, evaluations and more. To produce useful interview material—spoken word conversations that can then be transcribed, coded and analysed—that speaks directly

to the topic of concern of a research project can be challenging. It often requires thinking carefully and creatively about the set-up and structure of the interview encounter. As researchers, we need to consider how we orient the conversations we have with those we interview. If we are interested in contextual reasoning and disagreements about that context, then visual prompts such as video as used in the study presented here—or photographs, maps and other visual aids, as used by other researchers (Harper, 2012)—can organise conversation in ways that just using words cannot. As researchers, we should not be wary of disagreement. Focusing on disagreement—and differing views people might have of that—can tell us a great deal about how the social world works. We do, however, need to take care in how we organise and structure interviews with such a focus. In the case study examined in this paper, generating ride-a-long video material was time consuming, as was the analysis of the generated video material and follow-up interviews with ride-a-long participants. However, this kind of attention to contextual detail and how it is described and accounted for by those we interview has the potential to open up exciting avenues for qualitative research in human geography.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A new edition of *The Highway Code* was introduced in January 2022 (Department of Transport, 2022). For the first time, this introduced a formal hierarchy of road users, placing the most vulnerable road users at the top. The interviews discussed here were carried out in 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> This is more or less the average for the United Kingdom as a whole. The average, of course, hides significant variations (Golbuff & Aldred, 2011). In countries such as the Netherlands or Denmark, intra-urban cycling modal share is well over 30% (Pucker & Buehler, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> The ride-a-long interview part of the project's research design utilises the same basic method of data collection as cultural geographers and mobilities scholars like Jones et al. (2016), Spinney (2009, 2011) and Simpson (2011, 2017), who have used videos combined with interviews. The key difference, however, was that the focus in the follow-up video-based interviews was less on the experience of cycling per se, more on the riders' justifications for navigating the street infrastructure in the ways they did in the video; particular attention was paid to ambiguous or rule-breaking behaviour.

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