Using interviews when studying epistemic impacts of the work conditions in academia

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Introduction

The aim of the presentation is to argue that philosophical research based on qualitative analysis of interviews with scientists can contribute to the project of more empirically informed and more practically applicable philosophy of science. Justin Biddle's observation that "[s]ome ways of organising research are conducive to the production and dissemination of knowledge, and others are not; the examination of which is which is an important project in social epistemology" (Biddle 2014, 14) is one example of this project. Heather Douglas's (2010) proposal for "applied philosophy of science in context", developed in cooperation with practitioners of a specific scientific discipline, is another example.

Originally, our research was inspired by studies of work cultures of academic science. Developing it as philosophers of science, we have been specifically interested in the researchers' perception of the epistemic impact of these cultures. Accordingly, bringing forward these impacts has been at the centre of our interviews and analyses, summarised in the following section.

Academic working environment includes that and much besides. Photo by Katrin Velbaum

Our research

	Lõhkivi et al. (2012)	Eigi et al. (2014)	Eigi et al. (2018)
Interview method	Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews	Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews	Semi-structured focus group interviews
Sample	• 59 interviews: 36 with physicists; 23 with humanities researchers • 30 women and 29 men • All levels of academic hierarchy • Included researchers who had left academia by the time of the interview	• 23 interviews with humanities researchers (majority were historians) • 12 women and 11 men • All levels of academic hierarchy • Included researchers who were not active in academia at the time of the interview	• 9 focus group interviews with social scientists • 24 women and 10 men • Early career researchers • Included researchers who were not active in academia at the time of the interview • Groups divided by gender; female groups also by activity/inactivity
Method of analysis	• Qualitative analysis using the method of culture contrast (Hasse and Trentemøller 2009)	• Qualitative analysis using the basic principles of grounded theory	• Qualitative analysis
Main topic(s)	• Disciplinary aims and values of physics and humanities • Current research evaluation practices and funding approaches in Estonia	• Supervision, mentorship, and the beginning of a career in the conditions of extremely project-based science	• Positive and negative experiences of supervision and mentorship • Support networks in professional life
Main conclusions	• For humanities researchers, there is a conflict between what they value as high quality research in their disciplines and the current approaches to research evaluation and funding • These evaluation and funding practices lead to epistemic injustice with respect to humanities	• Early career humanities researchers aim to do meaningful work • The regime of extremely short-term competitive funding hurts the professional development of early career researchers • The current funding regime can also be harmful for academia as a whole	• Early-career researchers experience various problems with supervision • There are several types of support networks that may compensate for the problems of supervision • Support offered to early career researchers should take existing support networks into account • Offering adequate support also requires attention to the general funding and employment conditions

Conclusions

In Lõhkivi et al. (2012), we show the impact of research evaluation practices on the production of knowledge by humanities researchers. The predominant practices conflict with the researchers' view of quality research and negatively influence the reception of the knowledge created. They unfairly undermine the credibility of humanities research and thus perpetuate epistemic injustice.

In Eigi et al. (2014) and Eigi et al. (2018), we demonstrate the impact of extreme project-based funding on the "production" of the next generation of researchers. We show how these conditions have a negative impact on research that early career researchers and their supervisors can perform and on the development of early career researchers.

These analyses contribute to social epistemology as described by Biddle. We show how certain ways to organise research, for example, certain research evaluation and funding practices, can be detrimental to the successful production of credible knowledge or to the successful preparation of researchers themselves. Also echoing Biddle, we focus on issues specific enough to be potentially amenable to step-by-step improvement.

Similarly to Douglas's proposal for applied philosophical research, researchers' concerns are the starting point of our analysis. Unlike Douglas, we focus not on the philosophical problems researchers encounter in their practice but rather on the conditions in which they find themselves when doing research.

Thus, we suggest that interviews-based research has the potential to contribute to the understanding of the social organisation of science and of more general issues such as epistemic injustice. It also allows engaging with scientists in helping them to understand what is important for them, while producing rich and detailed accounts of scientific practice in the context of specific academic cultures.

Literature cited

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