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# Respondents as Interlocutors:

## Translating Deliberative Democratic Principles to Qualitative Interviewing Ethics

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Centre for Deliberative Democracy & Global Governance  
Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis  
Nicole Curato  
e-mail: [Nicole.Curato@canberra.edu.au](mailto:Nicole.Curato@canberra.edu.au)

**Abstract:** The epistemic interview is a conversational practice, which aims to generate knowledge by subjecting respondents' beliefs to dialectical tests of reasons. Developed by Svend Brinkmann, this model draws inspiration from Socratic dialogues where the interviewer asks confronting questions to press respondents to articulate the normative bases of their views. In this article, the author argues that Brinkmann's model is a valuable methodological innovation but warrants further development. The author suggests that the epistemic interview can be put on a stronger methodological footing when the Socratic model is complemented by developments in democratic theory, particularly its deliberative variety. Translating deliberative democratic virtues to methodological terms addresses some of the epistemic model's gaps, including an account of the dynamic of knowledge production and the ethical norms that govern this method. To illustrate the practice of epistemic interviewing, the author draws on her experience in interviewing junior military officers.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy, qualitative interviews, Socratic dialogue, epistemic interview

The qualitative interview is often characterized as a research technique used to “allow respondents to tell their own story in their own terms” (MacCracken, 1998, p. 34). It empowers respondents “to engage in an unusual form of sociality” in that they are at the center of the interviewer’s attention, stating perspectives that are otherwise unheard and engaging in a reflective, and sometimes cathartic, process of selfcharacterization.

Researchers gain insight into the intricate dynamic of constructing autobiographical narratives and descriptions of complex social phenomenon. Because of these advantages, in-depth interviews have become a favored, if not the most prominent, data collection strategy in qualitative research (Holloway, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

This, however, is just one approach to qualitative interviewing. In the article “Could Interviews Be Epistemic: An Alternative to Qualitative Opinion Polling” (Brinkmann, 2007), Svend Brinkmann argues that the predominance of what he calls “doxastic” or experience-focused interviews in qualitative research is a manifestation of contemporary consumer society “in which the client is always right, in which his or her experiences and narratives are always interesting” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1123). Although he acknowledges the value of gathering experience-focused narratives, he identifies significant limitations to this approach. In particular, it fails to take advantage of the unique characteristics of interview as a research technique in that it is a form of human conversation that has potential for knowledge production. In the classical philosophical sense, knowledge is produced through the dialectical process of questioning, justifying, and placing one’s opinions in the logical space of reasons. Brinkmann puts forward “epistemic interviews” as an alternative to doxastic ones, which entails questioning and justifying what respondents believe is the case rather than “merely” (his term) letting interviewees articulate their opinions and personal preferences. He identifies Socratic dialogues as a model for epistemic interviews where interviewers, like Socrates in *The Republic*, consistently ask conversation partners to provide justification for their beliefs. Such interview style requires confronting questions to press respondents to articulate the bases of their judgment and initiate public conversation on societal values. Viewed this way, interviews can be appreciated as knowledge-producing practice and not just a methodological technique that mainly extracts information from respondents.

In this article, I argue that Brinkmann’s model of epistemic interviewing is a positive contribution to qualitative research but necessitates further development. In the first part of this piece, I locate Brinkmann’s project in opposition to experience-focused interviews and in relation to methodological innovations that challenge the doxastic approach. I argue that

Brinkmann's model has gone farthest in terms of foregrounding the knowledge-producing properties of qualitative interviewing by drawing on the Socratic tradition. In the second part of this piece, I argue that Brinkmann's model can be put on a stronger methodological footing when the Socratic model is complemented by developments in democratic theory, particularly its *deliberative* variety.

Consistent with the Socratic tradition, deliberative democratic theory considers the dialectical exchange of reasons as drivers of knowledge production. Deliberation is defined as a "special" process of communication where interlocutors "are amenable to changing their judgments, preferences and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation or deception" (Dryzek, 2000, p. 1). It identifies rational discussion as the heart of politics, in contrast to political traditions that put premium on vote aggregation, majority rule, or zero-sum decision making (Cooke, 2002).

Translating deliberative virtues to methodological terms allows for the development of epistemic interviewing's conceptual and ethical components. On the conceptual level, deliberative theory provides the language to characterize the dynamic of knowledge production in epistemic interviewing. Largely implicit in Brinkmann's model is an account of the ways knowledge is produced as well as the nature of knowledge that emerges from a dialectical process. I suggest that the dynamic account of deliberation can provide conceptual clarity on this matter. On the ethical level, I argue that deliberative democratic theory's virtues can be translated as principles for research practice. Although Brinkmann has hinted at some ethical considerations in his piece, the principles that govern epistemic interviews have yet to be clearly laid out, especially for those that appear to be in conflict with the ethics of doxastic interviews. I also raise some reservations against the epistemic approach's tendency to frame the relationship between the researcher and the respondent as antagonistic and confrontational and, instead, advocate a more cooperative and democratic approach to interviewing. This approach, I argue, allows the epistemic model to reconcile the positive value in doxastic interviews, which is giving voice to respondents in a supportive communicative context. With these conceptual and practical clarifications, I aim to contribute to the development of epistemic interviews as a viable approach to qualitative research. To provide an empirical illustration of my argument, I draw on my experience in interviewing junior military officers from the Philippines who launched a failed uprising back in 2003.

### **Limitations of Doxastic Interviewing**

The “traditional” approach to qualitative interviewing aims to generate detailed and intimate descriptions of participants’ perceptions and lived experiences (King & Horrocks, 2009, p. 198). Researchers pose open-ended questions, which respondents can answer using their own voice and direct the flow of the discussion by bringing up topics or issues they consider relevant. There is “conscious partiality” toward hearing the respondent’s perspectives, recognizing that a respondent’s distinct social location offers unique insight into a particular social phenomenon (Mies, 1993, p. 68). The relationship between the interviewer and the respondent is described as “pedagogical,” where the interviewer assumes the role of the student who tries to learn from the respondent by listening carefully, taking down notes, and asking thoughtful follow-up questions (Roulston, 2010, p. 17). Other methodological traditions such as the feminist approach use the “method of friendship” (Fontana & Frey, 2005) and the “ethic of care” (Gilligan, 1982) when describing the relationship between the researcher and the respondent.

Brinkmann’s take on phenomenological interviews diverges from the student/researcher–teacher/respondent analogy and feminism’s friendship paradigm. By his own admission, his background in psychology led him to liken this approach to psychotherapy, where “respondents (clients) are subject to the full disclosure of their private world while the researcher (therapist) assumes the ‘knowing position’” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1122). He considers this a “psychologistic” framing of interviews in that respondents are limited to sharing their experiences, narratives, opinions, and beliefs (*doxa*) and researchers maintain their unique position of obtaining knowledge (*episteme*) given their advanced theoretical and psychoanalytic training (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1121). Although respondents are given the space to characterize their lifeworlds during interviews, researchers ultimately analyze, evaluate, and generate structural descriptions of the data gathered, much like therapists analyzing their clients’ lives to identify the causes of their debilitating conditions (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1127). He contextualizes the popularity of such form of interviewing in the late capitalist society where narratives of the experiencing self have become hot commodities in the academic marketplace for interviewers to collect, interpret, and disseminate (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Brinkmann raises a valid point about phenomenological interviews’ tendency to be complicit to the trends of a consumerist society, but I consider his psychologistic framing as oversimplified and indifferent to the developments in qualitative interviewing. Marxist feminists, for example, encourage respondents to share intimate biographical details not

because researchers treat them as suffering subjects waiting for diagnosis but because researchers aim to get a “systematic view from below” or information about the needs and interests of respondents, as defined by respondents themselves (Mies, 1993, p. 123). This methodological tradition also asks researchers to practice reciprocity and share their own experiences instead of acting as dispassionate, neutral diagnosticians. Postmodern interviewers, for their part, are conscious of the researcher’s editorial authority, the socially situated nature of interviews, and its effects on the kinds of data generated—an approach to interviewing that clearly diverges from the “all-knowing therapist” paradigm (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 56). By glossing over the specificities and diverse dynamics in qualitative interviewing, Brinkmann’s characterization leaves us a distorted caricature of experience-focused interviews. As I will discuss toward the end of this article, such weak characterization of depth of interviews places Brinkmann’s alternative model of epistemic interviewing in a more precarious rather than secure position. I suggest that Brinkmann’s model would benefit more from incorporating the developments in experience-focused interviews to his model, instead of putting forward a static characterization of it.

The methodological contribution that I consider to be more relevant is Brinkman’s analysis of the epistemic limitation of doxastic interviewing: that it fails to take advantage of the interactive, dynamic, and using his term, “knowledgeproducing” properties inherent in human conversations. He argues that using interviews as a method to gain insight about respondents’ *doxa* is not too distinct from qualitative opinion polling, which collates and examines respondents’ personal views and subjective experiences (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1131). I regard Brinkmann’s observation salient even in research contexts where interviewers practice reflexivity or “methodological self-consciousness” (Lynch, 2000). Researchers can critically reflect on how their demeanor, lexical choices, and positionalities influence interviewees’ responses, but this is a unilateral process given that researchers conduct their reflection outside the interview, often behind closed doors. Even though interviewing is often framed as a “conversation,” it remains an “informationproviding” exchange where one participant predominantly gives information to the other (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987, p. 302). In this sense, experience-focused interviewing is a unidirectional rather than dialogic data gathering strategy in that voices of different research participants are amplified at different stages—the respondents’ perspectives during interviews (data gathering) and the researchers’ methodological judgments after interviews (data analysis)—but rarely do these voices come across and engage each other in a dialectical manner.

The unidirectional nature of experience-focused interviews relates to the kind or quality of knowledge produced by using this data gathering strategy. Brinkmann (2007) asks:

What is this kind of knowledge *about*? And the answer is—to use a word from classical Greek philosophy—it is about *doxa*. That is, it is about the interview respondents' experiences and opinions, which no doubt can be very interesting and important to learn about, but which—when viewed through the lenses of classical philosophy—rarely constitute knowledge in the sense of *episteme*, that is, knowledge that has been found to be valid through conversational and dialectical questioning. (p. 1117)

The view of knowledge Brinkmann puts forward is a normative one—the kind that presupposes a distinction between correctness and incorrectness. Drawing on the work of Wilfrid Sellars (1956/1997), he considers the state of “knowing” as one that does not simply involve participants providing descriptions of particular episodes but being able to place these descriptions or opinions in the “logical space of reasons.” In order for something “to count as knowledge, we have to be able to justify what we think we know” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1124). Justification occurs through a dialogic process of critically testing and refining doxastic beliefs to secure epistemic knowledge. The reasons as to how and what kind of knowledge is produced in such process remain largely implicit in Brinkmann's model, and I will try to fill in this gap in the next section. At this stage, it suffices to point out that the unidirectional approach of experience-focused interviews fails to provide space for generating such epistemic knowledge, leading Brinkmann to call attention to other kinds of interviews that are “nonexperiential, nonpsychological, nonphenomenological [and] nondoxastic” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1121).

### **Interviews as Knowledge-Producing Practice**

Unlike doxastic interviews, which encourage participants to place the personal at the center of their narratives, epistemic interviews require respondents to subject their beliefs to critical tests of reasons. It emphasizes the dialectical nature of human interaction where conversation partners are transformed from a “state of being simply *opinionated* to being capable of *questioning* and *justifying* what they believe is the case” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1118; emphasis in the original).

Brinkmann locates his methodological project in line with Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) classic work on active interviewing. Instead of treating respondents as repositories of knowledge, interviewers actively incite respondents to draw on their different narrative positions to generate data on the process of meaning making. Agonistic interviewing is a

similar approach where confrontational techniques are used to gain new insights through a dialectic of opposites (Aaronson cited in Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 174).

These approaches use confrontational techniques not only when respondents make contradictory or unclear statements but also to uncover assumptions that respondents have left implicit.

The model of epistemic interviewing, however, moves further away from these approaches, which, based on Brinkmann's observation, is still about conveying experiences rather than developing knowledge. Although Holstein and Gubrium have conceptualized a form of interaction between researchers and respondents that is distinct from the fluid and empathetic interviewing norms, their methodological innovations are still aimed at enhancing representational accuracy in conveying respondents' experiences. Brinkmann finds more affinity with Bella, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton's version of active interviewing where interviews are identified as avenues to stimulate public conversation or argument (Bella, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 305). Tanggaard (2007) advocates a similar position in that she appreciates interviews as a "battlefield" where discourses cross each other like swords in combat. Respondents can be challenged whenever appropriate and are given the space to fight back and contest the researcher's claims. Emphasis is placed on the sociopolitical and civic contexts where interviews are carried out, rather than dealing with questions of the self, biography, and intimacy. In the book *Habits of the Heart* (Bella et al., 1985), for example, one of the authors pressed the respondent to explain the bases of his statement that lying is wrong. In spite of the respondent already declaring that he cannot be bothered to think about the reasons as to why lying is wrong, the interviewer pressed the respondent to answer the question and asked whether he thinks lying is bad because it negatively affects people or because it is inherently wrong in itself. The respondent ended up stating that anything that compromises other people's space is bad (Bella et al., pp. 304-305). Brinkmann observes that "standard textbooks on interviewing" depict this approach as "an example of how *not* to interview" but considers such approach useful in eliciting a "conceptual reflection" than a "concrete description" (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1130; emphasis in the original).

On the basis of these precursors of epistemic interviewing, Brinkmann puts forward a model that sets out how this conversational approach works in practice. He anchored his model on Socratic dialogues where the interviewer considers him or herself an essential part of the knowledgeproducing process, similar to Socrates framing his role as a "midwife" of

understanding (see Dinkins, 2005, p. 119). The interviewer puts up beliefs against each other, moves the inquiry forward by comparing beliefs, and, like a midwife, “matches ideas together in an attempt to produce fruitful offspring, that is, genuine insights” (Dinkins, 2005, p. 119).

Brinkmann draws from Dinkin’s exposition of the principles of Socratic interviewing to illustrate how epistemic interviews work in practice:

1. Socrates encounters someone who takes an action or makes a statement into which Socrates wishes to inquire.
2. Socrates asks the person for a definition of the relevant central concept, which is then offered.
3. Together, Socrates and the respondent (or “coinquirer” to use Dinkins’ term) deduce some consequences of the definition.
4. Socrates points out a possible conflict between the deduced consequences and another belief held by the respondent.
5. The respondent is then given the choice of rejecting the belief or the definition.
6. Usually, the respondent rejects the definition because the belief is too central—epistemically or existentially—to be given up.
7. A new definition is offered, and the steps are repeated (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1128; see Dinkins, 2005, pp. 124-125)

There are a number of conversational practices that are akin to the Socratic method. One of the examples Brinkmann cited is legal interrogation, where the central issue is not what people believe but whether there is enough normative evidence to back their claims. He encourages researchers to gain inspiration from this practice, move away from the therapeutic model of conversation, and use techniques that do not simply gather opinions but probe the bases on which these opinions rest (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1134).

### **Epistemic Versus Doxastic Interviewing: A Practical Example**

Several examples of epistemic interviews are cited in Brinkmann’s article, including an excerpt from an interview Pierre Bourdieu and colleagues (Bourdieu, Accardo, & Parkhurst Ferguson, 1999) conducted for *The Weight of the World* where he pressed his respondents—young men from poor Parisian suburbs—to explain the bases of their actions,

similar to a legal interrogation (see Bourdieu et al., 1999, pp. 64-65). I personally have come to appreciate the value of this approach when reflecting back on the kind of information I generated in my own research. One component of my research was designed to understand the reasons why junior military officers in the Philippines participated in a coup d'état. On July 27, 2003, as many as 324 junior officers and enlisted men from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) forcibly took over Manila's central business district and declared their withdrawal of support from the chain of command. The incident was peacefully terminated with mutinous officers returning to barracks after 6 hours of negotiations with government emissaries. There have been a number of speculations regarding the political motives that triggered the mutiny, but there has not yet been any systematic study that examines its underlying causes. I conducted semistructured interviews that focused on junior officers' experiences that led them to participate in the failed uprising. My demeanor was similar to that of a therapist who closely listened during interviews and interpreted the data after it. What follows is an excerpt from one of my interviews with a young lieutenant:

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that you were slightly nervous when you left the barracks and deserted your post. Can you take me through what was going on in your mind at that point?

Lieutenant: I am from a poor family. I am in the military because I want better things for my family, [and military officers get] good benefits. You can study. You learn [and] experience a lot. But joining the group [that launched the coup] was my chance to do something right. I want them [my family] to be proud of me . . . to stand up for what is right, not just sit around and wait for change. This society is so rotten . . . because of corruption. I felt that change was badly needed, I cannot just sit around. I was nervous, yes, but I was proud [that I] stood up for what is right.

Because I was concerned with ensuring the purity of the lieutenant's narratives, I neither intervened nor attempted to weave together and clarify his reasons for joining the coup during the interview. I considered it sufficient to play back the recording later, identify the resonant themes in his narrative, and compare them to the responses of the other 14 respondents.

After the interview, the lieutenant and I sat together over lunch and had an informal discussion about the coup<sup>1</sup>:

Lieutenant: Who else have you spoken to?

Interviewer: Well, I've spoken to General X, General Y.

Lieutenant: So what did they say?

Interviewer: Obviously, they disapproved of the coup. [They] said you disrespected the sanctity of the chain of command, that a small group of junior officers put the entire institution to shame.

Lieutenant: No. Actually, we followed the chain of command.

Interviewer: But you demanded the President's resignation, right? Didn't you ask her to resign? That is clearly breaking from the chain of command.

Lieutenant: Yes, but the President is not the top of the chain of command.

Interviewer: Isn't the President also the commander-in-chief?

Lieutenant: But the commander-in-chief is not the highest [in the hierarchy]. It's the people.

Interviewer: Because the people put the president to power. She became President

through popular uprising. She owes her power to the people.

Lieutenant: Yes. We just followed the clamor of the people. Because this President turned out to be corrupt. We gave her a chance to make reforms [but] she fooled the people. We have to follow the commander-in-chief's, what do you call that, higher ups—those who are above her [in the hierarchy].

Interviewer: So, for you, the coup is an act of siding with the people.

Lieutenant: I do not have regrets. Even if they call us rebels, that's fine. I am proud of siding with the people. That is [the] AFP's constitutional mandate. [We are] the protector of people and state. We have to defend the people from corrupt officials. . . . Even though the coup failed, at least, we did not fail the people. Your research should also see it from that angle.

This conversation exhibits key characteristics of epistemic interviewing. First, unlike the formal interview, my demeanor in our informal conversation was engaged. I put forward my other respondents' beliefs up against the lieutenant's while also building on what he says. I asked short critical questions to clarify or challenge the lieutenant's positions, consequently giving him the opportunity to provide justifications for his participation in the coup. Second, the focus of the conversation was not the lieutenant's personal experiences but his political appreciation of the principle of the chain of command. Whereas the formal interview uncovered the lieutenant's experiences and beliefs that led him to join the coup, the informal epistemic interview located how his *doxa* relates to the logical space of reasons in the public sphere, which in this case challenges the conventional view of the military hierarchy. This conversation shifted the focus from a self-centered narrative to one that discusses the logos or rationale for the way the respondent behaved. Third, the conversation was dialogic in the sense that our own individual standpoints came across and engaged each other. The lieutenant proposed an alternative approach for my research, particularly the way the principle of chain of command is conceptualized. I contributed to the development of his argument by describing the link between the president's power and popular support.

### Methodological Gaps

Brinkmann's characterization of epistemic interviewing has opened the doors to appreciating the uniqueness of interview as a research method: that it is a form of human conversation capable of producing epistemic knowledge. It emphasizes the dialectical rather than psychoanalytic way of producing knowledge through a cooperative process of testing, refuting, and placing doxastic knowledge in the logical space of reasons. As mentioned earlier, there have been some developments in qualitative research that challenge the researcher–therapist paradigm, promote reciprocity, encourage active questioning, and practice methodological selfconsciousness. However, none of these approaches go to the same extent of foregrounding the link between the dialogic process and the epistemic outcomes of human conversation as does the model of epistemic interview.

I aim to further develop the epistemic model of qualitative interviewing in the second part of this article. In particular, I address two methodological gaps that warrant further discussion in order for epistemic interviews to be a viable alternative to doxastic ones. First, on the conceptual level, further characterization of the kind of knowledge produced from epistemic interviews is necessary. If Brinkmann's main contribution to qualitative methodology is to frame interviews as knowledge-producing practice, a clear exposition of the relationship between dialectical questioning, knowledge, and knowledge production is warranted. Second, on the methodological level, the epistemic model needs to identify the ethicopolitical principles that make it acceptable in qualitative research. Epistemic interviewing challenges some of doxastic interviews' ethical commitments such as giving voice to respondents by allowing them to tell their narratives in their own terms. It also puts forward data gathering strategies that, in my view, are not entirely acceptable, such as asking leading and confrontational questions, as evidenced by Brinkmann's identification of legal interrogation as one form of conversational practice where epistemic interviews can draw inspiration from. The next sections aim to clarify and further develop this model by drawing on the developments in democratic theory, particularly its *deliberative* variety. I suggest that deliberation is also a fitting if not a better model of communication that epistemic interviewing can pattern itself after because of its intersubjective and normative character. By extending Socratic principles to the ethical requisites of deliberation, I aim to provide a stronger methodological backbone to epistemic interviewing.

### **What Kind of Knowledge Does Epistemic Interviewing Produce?**

Brinkmann defines epistemic knowledge as “knowledge that has been found to be valid through conversational and dialectical questioning” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1118). He describes it as “important knowledge,” which develops from challenging respondents to provide good reasons for their beliefs. Knowledge is “discursively produced” as coenquirers test each others’ beliefs and transform from simply being “opinionated” to a state of “knowing.” Brinkmann concedes that the term *knowledge* is “immensely complex and the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing is probably futile” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1123). As far as Brinkmann’s article goes, epistemic knowledge is characterized as the kind of knowledge produced through a dialectical process.

Brinkmann’s notion of epistemic knowledge warrants further characterization as key conceptual questions still need to be answered: What is the nature of epistemic knowledge? How is knowledge produced through the dialectical process? If generating epistemic knowledge is important enough to warrant a distinct interviewing method, then conceptual clarity is necessary in terms of the dynamic of knowledge production.

Deliberative democratic theory can contribute in conceptualizing the kind of knowledge epistemic interviews produce. Consistent with Socratic principles, deliberative theory considers the dialogic exchange of reasons as drivers of knowledge production (Habermas, 1984). Some deliberative democrats (Gundersen, 2000; Markovits, 2008) regard deliberative practice as derivative of the Socratic tradition, citing the Socratic art of government as one that does not push for predetermined and fixed sets of preferences but one that promotes the rational pursuit of yet-to-be-established good. Both deliberative and Socratic traditions find it ideal for coenquirers to revise original preferences in light of good reasons, foregrounding the dynamic and contingent nature of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

There are various theoretical strands and empirical models of deliberation (see Bachtigter, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steenbergen, & Steiner, 2010; Dryzek, 2010), but one of its more popular illustrations is the Porto Alegre model of participatory budgeting. In this model, residents of Porto Alegre, Brazil, attend a series of local assemblies to decide the way in which the public budget is allocated. Instead of leaving this function to government officials and policy experts, power is devolved to ordinary citizens, including traditionally disenfranchised ones, to engage in a series of public deliberations and ascertain the structure of the city budget. The Porto Alegre model has been deemed successful, as outcomes of deliberation have led to more equitable public spending and satisfaction of basic necessities.

Research findings also suggest that deliberation enhances social cohesion in that citizens learn to be more understanding and sensitive to others' needs (see Baiocchi, 2005). I interpret this outcome to be a function of citizens gaining epistemic knowledge in the process of engaging with their peers. Based on deliberative theory, the dialectical exchange of reasons produces knowledge in two ways.

First, by exposing our beliefs to the critical scrutiny of our peers, we move away from our private doxastic enclaves to a shared discursive space. In this space, we are challenged by dialectical questioning to consider new or opposing perspectives, allowing us to gain resources to break with our past, think in different terms, and consider new possibilities (Warren, 1999, p. 340). Together with our peers, we gain insight on the way we view a particular issue, the kinds and level of tensions that exist with our different opinions, and the extent of our willingness to hold on to our beliefs. Unlike questionnaires, opinion polls, and doxastic interviews, which capture subjective preferences, deliberative or epistemic dialogues provide the avenue to process, distil, and revise our own views to generate *intersubjective knowledge*. Such form of knowledge does not reside in the knowing or experiencing subject but is developed through a linguistic process of exchanging standpoints and bringing together different perspectives into a shared frame of understanding. This, for example, is the kind of knowledge the lieutenant and I generated in our conversation about the principle of military hierarchy. Our respective opinions about the normative justification of military intervention were synthesized as I extended his reasoning, and him, in turn, extending mine. Generating intersubjective knowledge, however, does not necessarily mean that coenquirers reach “agreement” or “consensus” (Habermas, 1984). I take the position of deliberative democrats like Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000), and Gutmann and Thompson (1996) that it is sufficient for deliberators to learn from each other and understand the bases on which one's peers reasoning rests. Deliberation's success is not hinged on participants reaching consensus but on the process of exchanging justifications in an inclusive, transparent, and public-spirited manner. This process is discussed in more detail in the succeeding section. Even if participants do not end up agreeing with each other, they can at least be confident that their voices have been heard and their arguments understood and considered.

Second, epistemic conversations generate knowledge by providing us the opportunity to gain clearer understanding of our own ideas and self-perceptions. Rostbøll argues that self-knowledge is limited when we are left to our own devices but that it can be improved through deliberation (Rostbøll, 2008, p. 183). When we critically and openly discuss the bases of our

positions, we are challenged to be introspective and reflect on the justifications as to why our beliefs are acceptable in the first place. The intersubjective nature of deliberation also compels us to think in otherregarding terms in order for our peers to understand us. This is one of the empowering characteristics of deliberation as we gain what Talisse (2006) calls “epistemic self-control.” Deliberation challenges us not to stubbornly hold on to our *doxastic* beliefs but to justify and revise them through a process of critical yet constructive engagement with our peers. This explains why deliberative democrats consider deliberation as a particularly fair practice as it exposes us to more considered versions of our original positions, which consequently allows us to overcome unfair inequalities in knowledge (Festenstein, 2002, p. 103). My conversation with the lieutenant has proven to me that no amount of desk research and literature review can guarantee epistemically superior outcomes, especially when I am left alone to process the information I have acquired. Challenging and prompting a reflection of my views allowed me to take a step back, reflect further, and reconsider the literature I have read.

Translated to methodological terms, epistemic interviews generate knowledge through the direct interaction between the researcher’s and the respondent’s points of view. Unlike doxastic interviews, epistemic interviews are dialogic where participants consider each other’s beliefs instead of simply giving an account of preformed preferences. But unlike legal interrogation or confrontational interviews, the deliberative model does not just press respondents to provide justifications but allocates the same discursive responsibility to interviewers. Deliberation treats the interviewer and respondent as coenquirers who can interrogate, build on, and synthesize each others’ opinions. Interviewers do not hold the privileged position of being midwives of understanding, as in the case of the Socratic model, but are part of a joint process of critically testing and revising preferences in light of good reasons. This, I argue, is a more ethical and democratic way of producing knowledge compared to Socratic questioning and legal interrogation where “cunning tactics” such as the frequent use of flattery and asking leading questions— tactics that Socrates is known to use in his dialogues—still give interviewers the upper hand in shaping the interview’s outcomes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 174). Although I do not disapprove of asking difficult questions, I am wary of the normative foundations and practical implications of endorsing such interviewing tactics. In the succeeding section, I discuss the ethical grounding for deliberative model of epistemic interviewing, its practical implications for research practice,

and the importance of contextualizing epistemic interviews in line with deliberative democratic norms.

### **Ethics of Epistemic Interviews**

Brinkmann characterized his discomfort with doxastic interview not only in relation to the kind of knowledge it produces but also in terms of its ethicopolitical implications. He argues that doxastic interviewing expresses complicity to the trends in contemporary consumer society where questions of the self have displaced questions about public, civic, and social life (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1132). Citing Richard Sennett (1977/2003), Brinkmann argues for the need to break from the “tyranny of intimacy” by conducting interviews based on public-spirited and civic principles rather than bringing forth intimate aspects of people’s lives (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1132). Qualitative interviews can move on from “telling tales from the field” to becoming a form of “radical democratic practice” that emphasizes the civic context of data gathering (Denzin, 2001, p. 23). Interviews can be conducted in such a way that it becomes meaningful to engage with respondents without the need to know them as persons, particularly if the aim is to examine political and social issues for the sake of the *res publica*.

With Brinkmann laying down the macro ethicopolitical considerations for epistemic interviewing, the challenge now lies in structuring these considerations into ethical principles that can inform research practice. Clearly mapping out these principles is necessary not only to serve as guide for epistemic interviewers but also to tease out the ethical tensions they may face with doxastic interviews and identify the discursive obligations of researchers and respondents to each other. I draw on three deliberative virtues that are consistent to and can help in developing Brinkmann’s initial conceptualization, which foregrounds the cooperative and democratic nature of knowledge production.

### *Inclusion*

Epistemic interviews appreciate respondents as accountable social agents capable of defending their views (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1113). This is a departure from doxastic interviews in that respondents are treated as interlocutors whose beliefs are tested in open conversation instead of participants bearing privileged standpoints. In deliberative democratic terms, engaging in civic discourse is a manifestation of respect toward interlocutors’ epistemic ability. Part of interrogating opposing opinions is the presupposition that the interlocutor has communicative competence and cognitive ability to explain the bases

of one's opinions. It also indicates respect in that the researcher takes what the participant says seriously enough to disagree with it and hold the participant accountable for holding such beliefs (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1126).

In contrast to the doxastic approach, which expresses inclusivity by allowing respondents to develop their narratives in their own terms, epistemic interviews give voice to respondents by asking them to characterize their positions in relation to the researcher's critique and vice versa. It is an inclusive form of communicative practice in that it enables researchers and respondents to engage each other as peers or partners in social interaction. To engage with opposing arguments is to recognize the equal civic and discursive status of our peers (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996); not engaging with another's views "is to treat her as if she is incapable of responding to reasons, as irrational, and to disregard her status as a fellow citizen" (Rostbøll, 2008, pp. 202-203). The deliberative appreciation of inclusion not only gives participants access in a dialogic process but also allows them to take part in cooperatively ascertaining the validity of a particular opinion.

The example I cited about my encounter with the lieutenant illustrates the manifestations of inclusiveness in epistemic interviewing. In the formal interview, I played the role of the researcher who was concerned about the lieutenant's biographical narratives. In turn, my line of questioning activated the respondent's experience-focused subjectivity ("take me through what was going on in your mind"). He characterized the coup as a personal journey, a self-centered description of a public event. After reviewing the kind of data my doxastic interview produced, I observed that the information generated reinforces the mainstream media's framing of the coup where the political issue of a military uprising has been interpreted in psychological terms—from military officers having a "messianic complex" of saving the country from a corrupt regime ("I stood up for what is right") to presenting the coup as an emotional outburst of frustrated young officers ("change was badly needed, I cannot just sit around"). Generals and the politicians pathologized junior officers, describing them as vulnerable and disgruntled men who caught the "coup virus" (see Doronila, 2011). Instead of being able to critically analyze the dominant analytical frame, findings from my experience-focused interviews would only reinforce the dominant, psychologistic interpretations of the coup.

Nevertheless, the informal dialogue activated the subjectivity of the lieutenant as an interlocutor—an autonomous individual taking accountability for his actions. Instead of expressing the vulnerabilities of his personal circumstances, the officer was able to penetrate

the broader democratic discourse by explaining the bases of his appreciation of the chain of command. The interview was used as avenue to establish his subjectivity as a political agent who can provide justifications when his views are challenged while I, as a researcher, positioned myself as a coenquirer keen on understanding the bases of my respondent's opinions. I did not frame my questions in a caring, empathetic manner, but I demonstrated respect by actively engaging the lieutenant's justifications and treating him as a coequal who is more than capable of keeping up with my questioning. This, in my view, is a particularly important episode for a respondent who came from a totalizing, hierarchical institution such as the military, where members are socialized to articulate official, institutional discourse. Our exchange was inclusive in that the lieutenant actively took part in the process of knowledge production by pushing the boundaries of democratic discourse and introducing alternative normative justifications for the role of the armed forces under a corrupt regime. The discussion did not necessarily end up with me agreeing to the lieutenant's justifications, but the process of questioning developed insights that did not emerge during our formal interview, such as the alternative interpretation of the principle of chain of command.

#### *Transparency in Knowledge Production*

Deliberative theory puts a premium on the principle of transparency—whether it involves the disclosure of information relevant to the discussion or the honest expression of one's opinion. Giving citizens equal access to discernible information allows them to reflect, scrutinize, make informed judgments, and influence the outcome of discussion on the basis of the information they have on hand. Without it, citizens are vulnerable to coercive power, which can be hidden in the opacity of jargon, lies, deception, or lack of information and consequently deters the generation of intersubjective understanding based on dialectical reasoning (see Habermas, 1984).

Methodologically, the principle of transparency is compromised when researchers use techniques that withhold important information and mask unequal power relationships in the research process. One of Brinkmann's critiques against doxastic interviewing is its tendency to be saturated with concealed forms of power. Behavior and self-presentation are carefully managed to build rapport and trust with respondents, whereas friendship and empathy are commodified to obtain biographical data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 174). This echoes the critique of some feminists against the claim that open-ended interviews are

“empowering” because they obscure rather than mitigate inequalities in the research process (see Wolf, 1996).

Even though power inequalities may not be completely eliminable in research, Brinkmann argues that epistemic interviews have more potential in making power relationships more transparent, thereby countervailing soft forms of domination in knowledge production (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 174). One way of making these power relationships transparent is by rendering the questioner’s subjectivity visible. Instead of posing as sympathetic observers or therapeutic analysts, “intruding” or actively engaging in conversation enables researchers to openly situate their contributions and influence the process of knowledge production (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1137). This has some similarities with postmodern interviews where researchers express consciousness of their voice and positionality, except that this practice is manifest in the interview itself rather than after it. For deliberative democrats, putting interlocutors’ preferences on the table makes the process fairer in that participants are able to directly address critiques, clarify positions, or revise preferences after hearing the comments of fellow interlocutors. This view of transparency is not evident in Brinkmann’s model, where interviewers are left to probe their respondents’ answers without disclosing their views (or the ones they are considering) on the matter.

Needless to say, the principle of transparency is not exclusive to epistemic interviewing and is an indispensable requirement for any research to be considered ethical. In my letter of invitation to the lieutenant, I indicated the aims of my research, provided guide questions, and explained how I intend to use his narratives in my analysis. I reiterated these considerations before we started the interview and gave him the opportunity to clarify some matters regarding my research. Our informal conversation, however, advanced the level of transparency from providing respondents some research-related information to sharing the opinions I am considering in my research, such as the generals’ normative disapprobation of the coup. This disclosure enabled the lieutenant to engage me on the basis of my research terms, suggest an alternative position for me to consider, and the reason why I should do so. It also pressed me to articulate the bases for my initial opinions (my understanding of the chain of command), recognizing my obligation as a conversation partner. The outcome of our conversation is knowledge developed through an honest and engaging conversation, rather than one that emerged through aggressive one-sided interrogation.

In spite of this dynamic, I also acknowledge that reciprocity in its absolute terms may be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce in an interview context in that researchers are often

beholden to the pursuit of particular lines of enquiry. The lieutenant may have been able to engage me based on the terms of my research, but he still did not have much input on my research agenda or the overall structure of the research process. Although deliberative theory does not have direct answers to this recurring and pertinent issue in research ethics, lessons can be drawn from its distinct conception of reciprocity. For deliberative democrats, reciprocity is an obligation to appeal to mutually acceptable and other-regarding reasons when making claims (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). It is a principle that keeps self-interests in check, by challenging citizens to think in terms that take into consideration the concerns of others. In the research context, I suggest that this deliberative virtue can be appreciated as the researcher's obligation, not only to be transparent in expressing one's views and research intentions but also in ensuring that one's agenda is explained in terms that the respondent can understand. It requires an additional normative layer to transparency in tokenistic terms—that is, telling respondents what the research is about—to taking a step further in ensuring that respondents not only understand the terms of one's research but are also given the opportunity to challenge, interrogate, or support a researcher's aim and receive an explanation that is meaningful to him or her.

### *Public Spiritedness*

As discussed earlier, one of the epistemic interview's major difference from doxastic ones relate to the topic of discussion. Instead of focusing on private experiences and biographical details, epistemic interviews deal with themes of common human interests for the sake of *res publica*. The interview focuses on rational justifications for the both researcher's and respondent's opinions and encourages the reader to evaluate and engage the arguments put forward (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305).

The public-spirited nature of discussions is also one of deliberative theory's distinctive normative requirements (Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Habermas, 1984).

Deliberation is different from other forms of political participation, for example, voting, where citizens are under no obligation to offer public justification for their vote, or lobbying, where nothing stops campaigners from putting forward self-interested goals (Fearon, 1998, p. 53). Both deliberation and epistemic interviews foreground a different form of subjectivity where the experiencing self gives way to the civically minded self, which takes responsibility for ascertaining the common good, especially if the topic under discussion relates to public issues. Interlocutors are challenged to appeal to common interests

instead of putting forward self-interested claims in order for one's justifications to have currency (Bohman, 1996, p. 5). Even though interviews usually involve two participants, there is a hypothesized third party in the form of the broader public, which also deserves to be considered when putting forward reasons for one's preference.

Coupled with the conception of public-spirited deliberation are critiques against deliberative theory that are equally applicable to epistemic interviews. Because of the requirement of providing public justifications for one's opinions, critics judge deliberation as an elitist process that privileges the "aristocracy of intellectuals." Professionals, pundits, and researchers themselves, by virtue of their advanced education, quickness of thought, and fluency of speech, have more chances of persuading others of the acceptability of their arguments (Berkowitz, 1996; Young, 1996). However, those who fail to comply with the demands of public deliberation are usually individuals who are already traditionally considered marginalized in formal political institutions including women, racial minorities, and poor people (Sanders, 1997, p. 349). This is precisely why some qualitative researchers prefer storytelling, testimonies, or other experience-focused forms of discourse because it empowers marginalized citizens to express their subjective positions using their own voice, in their own terms. The principle of public-spiritedness is in tension with the doxastic appreciation of inclusion in that everyone should have a chance to tell their story, which may not necessarily be shared by differently situated interlocutors or explicitly rooted in the common good but nevertheless deserves to be heard and considered in a discussion (Sanders, 1997, p. 372; Young, 1996, p. 72).

This critique relates to the comment I brought up earlier regarding the need for epistemic interviews to accommodate the developments in doxastic interviewing, instead of defining itself in opposition to it. I suggest that experience-focused narratives can claim space in an epistemic conversation, as long as it fulfills two deliberative criteria. First, these narratives should contribute to stimulating public conversation and argument. Even though stories are not explicitly framed in other-regarding terms, they reveal knowledge from the point of view of a particular social position (Young, 1997, p. 67). Narratives are powerful discursive tools in terms of providing contexts to a particular normative issue. These can be acceptable contributions in an epistemic interview if they prompt reflection and engage with the practical judgment of fellow interlocutors (Chambers, 2009, p. 335). Second, experience-focused narratives are constructive in epistemic interviews if they lend themselves open to questioning. One of the reasons why deliberative theory places heavy emphasis on "public

reasoning” is to distinguish it from forms of “nonpublic reasoning,” which include invoking the authority of sacred texts, appealing to the interpretive authority of particular individuals, and, as mentioned earlier, using cunning discursive tactics (Hicks, 2002, p. 243). If respondents using experience-focused narratives are open to dialectical questioning, willing to work through their assumptions, and think about the normative implications of their stories, then these forms of discourse are acceptable. This approach, I think, is a more charitable way of conducting epistemic interviews, rather than pressing respondents to come up with normative reasons for their beliefs. One of the limitations of patterning epistemic interviews to legal interrogation is its propensity to limit the flow of the interview to particular responses and discursive styles, which may discourage respondents from contextualizing their positions and further contributing to knowledge production. Over the years, deliberative theory has evolved to accommodate different approaches to discourse, even doxastic ones, as long as these styles induce reflection, weighing of preferences, and shared understandings.

Openness to more “traditional” experience-focused styles of interviews may also help set the stage for an epistemic approach. In societies where the tyranny of intimacy remains strong, it may be instructive to begin the interview using modes of conversation that the respondent is familiar and comfortable with. Knowing a respondent better by letting him or her focus on discussing personal experiences first could provide the interviewer more capital to ask otherregarding and meaningful questions later on. Even though there are no hard-and-fast rules in implementing a dialectical conversation, building a discursive relationship with one’s conversational partner remains important. Asking difficult or confronting questions in the beginning of an interview may not always be the best way to go about this, making the doxastic approach more relevant at the initial stages of the interview. Deliberative processes are known to have used this technique especially in contexts where interlocutors are coming from diverse backgrounds. Storytelling or sharing personal anecdotes have been used to generate the “bridging capital” necessary for deliberators to engage in an honest and critical discussion later on.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Deliberative Model of Epistemic Interviewing**

Brinkmann began the discussion about the use of interviews as knowledge-producing practice. In this article, I attempted to bring the discussion forward by suggesting that deliberation is a fitting model of conversational practice where epistemic interviewing can

draw inspiration from. Deliberative theory offers clear explanation as to how knowledge is produced through dialectical discussion and sets out guiding principles when engaging with coenquirers. I developed this argument by juxtaposing the deliberative model to two forms of conversational practice that Brinkmann used in his model.

First, unlike the therapeutic approach, deliberation creates space for respondents to act as accountable social agents capable of providing normative justifications for their beliefs. The conversation is not experience focused but deals with themes of the common good. However, in contrast to Brinkmann, I also argued that there is value in emphasizing the overlap between the two models, particularly the ways in which self-centered narratives can provide important contexts and nuances to arguments put forward in epistemic interviews. Without such nuance, epistemic interviewing's requirements could be too demanding and exclusionary for respondents who are uncomfortable when they are pressed to give justifications for their beliefs.

Second, I juxtaposed the deliberative model to legal interrogation and confrontational interviews—communicative forms Brinkmann considers to be an “inspiration” for developing the model of epistemic interviews. Instead of leaving the role of asking leading and confrontational questions to researchers, I argued that epistemic knowledge is produced in a more ethical and democratic manner when both parties critically interrogate each others' views, weigh their preferences, and contribute to generating shared understanding. Such dynamic emphasizes the normative commitments of both parties to be inclusive, transparent, and other regarding. Framing epistemic interviews in this manner gives it the much-needed ethical backbone that was left implicit in Brinkmann's original model. By clarifying some conceptual and practical issues on epistemic interviews, I hope to push the conversation about alternative ways of organizing qualitative interviewing continue further.

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**Notes**

1. My voice recorder was accidentally left on during this conversation. The lieutenant gave consent to publish this excerpt as long as all names are anonymized.
2. In the deliberative model, however, the Socratic tradition of exchanging of reasons, revising indefensible claims, and generating knowledge through face-to-face dialogue is just one component to deliberation. Deliberation can also happen in the broader public sphere where discourses are transmitted through different networks and pockets of discourse without having to formally go through the formal dialectical process of testing standpoints.
3. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer's suggestion to include a discussion on this topic.

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## Bio

**Nicole Curato** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the Australian National University. Her research interests include the theory, methodology, and practice of deliberative democracy and alternative forms of political participation.