



**University of Dundee**

## **The politics and ethics of research into 'wicked' social problems**

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## Lessons from the Field

### **The politics and ethics of research into ‘wicked’ social problems: The case of Jimmy Savile at Duncroft**

#### **Introduction**

While research might be imagined to be a dispassionate search for the truth, it is rarely that simple. In most fields of research, but in social scientific research in particular, any conception of truth is invariably overlaid with personal, political and ethical sensitivities. Within this, some research topics are more sensitive than others. Child sexual abuse (CSA), understandably, is one such topic (Sikes & Piper, 2010). This chapter will identify some of the issues involved in researching subject matter that has become moralised and politicised. It takes as its focus the case of the former BBC entertainer, Jimmy Savile, who, following his death in 2011, became subject to allegations of historical sexual abuse.

The chapter will outline the emergence and impact of the Savile scandal based on research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to collate a data-base of information on the case<sup>1</sup>. I will reflect on the experience of seeking to open up such contentious subject matter to serious research. I, rather naively, set out to bring an academic perspective to the Savile case amidst lurid media accounts and knowing that I had access to information that cast doubt on some of the central claims made against Savile. I quickly discovered, however, that even raising such a possibility is contested at deep existential and visceral levels, threatening fundamental beliefs, identities and political positions. It can be represented as calling into question the accounts and, by extension, the experiences and

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=ES%2FL011778%2F1>

identities of those claiming to have been abused and of making it more difficult for those who have been abused to come forward. But it also threatens to disrupt a highly politicised consensus that we should not question the accounts of those who claim to have been abused. Engaging in research that may do so leaves one subject to accusations of contributing to a backlash of denial or, worse, of complicity in abuse.

Alongside external pressures, there are intrinsic disincentives to questioning dominant narratives around abuse. To seem to dismiss the experiences or the pain of others is not something that most academics, and certainly social work academics, would wish to do. Foundational ethical principles of professional practice and of research are those of non-maleficence, of doing no harm and ideally of doing some good (beneficence) (Humphries, 2008). Moreover, anyone researching this issue does so in the knowledge that there were abuses in the past that were not adequately addressed and that there have been significant and proper advances in how we respond to child abuse, which we would not want to see reversed (Burnett, 2016).

As the introduction to this chapter indicates, my intention is to problematise the conceit that there is a 'truth' waiting out there for researchers to uncover. Although it is, I argue, a conceit, a quest for the 'truth' has nevertheless become a common claim in approaches to historical abuse. Canada, for instance, has established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). The English and Wales Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has set up a 'Truth Project'. In the Savile case, Surrey Police, in a letter sent to former Duncroft residents stated: "This is a search for the truth and you will be believed". Such a statement, through equating believing one's account with the 'truth', opens up an ethical and epistemological minefield that needs to be deconstructed. I go on to do so, asking how we

have got to the point where such misguided assumptions can take root and then identifying some of the conceptual and indeed policy problems inherent in such a position.

### **Learning outcomes**

By the end of the chapter readers should be able to: 1) understand the need for researchers to locate themselves, reflexively, in relation to their research; 2) recognise the concept of ‘truth’ as contested and politicised and 3) appreciate the power of stories in constructing a particular version of reality.

### **Overview of the research study**

The BBC entertainer, Sir Jimmy Savile, died in 2011, lauded in the UK as a national treasure on account of his charity work. A year later, following a television documentary, he became engulfed in accusations of sexual abuse, the reverberations of which rocked the cultural and political establishments in the UK. The revelations have been employed at a policy level to reorient the criminal justice system towards a default position of ‘believing’ those who say they were victims of abuse. Savile was identified in the *Exposure* programme and in subsequent reports as a serial sex offender and predatory paedophile. Early allegations made against him emanate from Duncroft, a Home Office Approved residential school in the South of England. Former residents claimed that Savile sexually abused them on the school premises and on visits to television studios. This version of events has become the received account of Savile’s involvement and behaviour at Duncroft.

With colleagues, I was working on another ESRC project exploring contemporary social issues and anxieties through a lens of moral panic (see Cree et al., 2016). The focus of my

own interest in moral panics was in relation to allegations made against care workers. In the course of this project, a colleague received the following e-mail and passed it on to me:

I blog on the Internet as 'Anna Raccoon' and as such have published several articles on the current 'Savile saga' (<https://annaraccoon.com/>). However, having found myself at the centre of the 'Duncroft' furore, I have also been given a mound of information which I have not yet published. ... I am not in good health ... and I am growing concerned that should I kick the proverbial bucket, then the knowledge and the contacts that I hold will be lost forever, and one day academics will want to piece together the origins of this current panic. Although I am both a writer and a lawyer myself, I know it would be unwise for me to embark on a lengthy project like a book at this stage in my life, and really am looking for someone who might be interested in researching the actual truth and delineating the path by which we arrived at the current situation.

'Anna' was a former pupil of Duncroft and, as such, might be considered in current terminology to be an 'expert by experience', with a legitimate voice to bring to the unfolding Duncroft story. What initially piqued her interest in claims against Savile was an allegation made by another former resident who claimed that Savile had assaulted her at Duncroft in 1965 when she was 15: 'If you were walking down the corridor he would come up close and touch you inappropriately... He always came when we were getting ready for bed. There were girls in there who were quite terrified of him' (Greenhill & Ellicott, 2012).

In the mid-1960s, Anna Raccoon had shared a dormitory in Duncroft with the woman making these claims but she herself had never seen Savile there. She began to blog on the case and a number of other former Duncroft girls contributed with questioning accounts. Subsequent

investigation indicates that Savile first visited the school in 1974, a fact confirmed by police reports. So, a foundational claim supporting the Savile narrative is questionable.

Not long after this initial approach, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) put out a call for ‘Urgent’ research proposals, intended to enable researchers to respond to situations where there was a strong case for immediate research. The scheme only funded research focusing on urgent data collection and initial analysis. Given the important and contemporary nature of the subject matter, Anna Raccoon’s own health and the fact that other key informants were elderly or unwell, we applied for and were awarded a grant. The primary aim of the project, in line with the funding call, was to safeguard and archive Anna Raccoon’s social media content. A secondary objective was to interview former staff and pupils from Duncroft, especially those who were elderly or unwell, to garner accounts that might soon be lost. We also gathered the various official reports into Savile’s activities from the Police, the BBC and the National Health Service. All of this material was brought together digitally, allowing for cross-referencing between different sources and providing an archive that researchers might utilise in seeking, as Anna Raccoon hoped in her original e-mail, ‘to piece together the origins of this current panic’.

The project team involved academics from social work, criminology, informatics and university librarians. The role of the data scientists on the team was to use text analysis tools to gather and study the large data sets that existed on Anna Raccoon’s blogs and the thousands of comments on these and to bring these together in a searchable form. In that sense it opened up relatively new sources of research data and methods for social science and especially, perhaps, social work.

The project was approved through the Ethics processes at my then University. Unlike Sikes and Piper (2010), who detail attempts to obstruct their research project into false allegations made against teachers, my own experience of ethics approval was painless. Indeed, the message given was that this was the kind of subject matter that social scientists ought to be interrogating. The concern of the University was to seek to protect me through managing the hostility the research would undoubtedly engender. This may reflect the positioning of social work, which is my subject area, within a School of Social and Political Science – academic disciplines such as sociology and anthropology recognise the complex interaction of individual, social and cultural processes and the need to interrogate these.

We sought to reach out to a broad range of former staff and residents, including those who had made allegations against Savile. Because of ongoing police investigations, several of the staff members were reluctant to be interviewed. Apart from an anonymous email that seemed it might have been from one, and who did not follow up our prompts, we did not manage to engage any complainants. In the event, we ended up with a small number of interviews: Anna Raccoon herself; another resident from the 1960s and two former residents from the 1970s, including the girl who introduced Savile to Duncroft. We also interviewed two former staff members.

## **Findings**

Some of our initial findings are reported in a journal article (Smith & Burnett, 2017). Aside from obvious instances where certain stories could be shown to be factually incorrect, our research findings also began to unsettle some of the reported contextual details, which set the scene for Savile's alleged abuse. A particularly negative and uncaring picture of the Duncroft staff and regime was painted in media coverage. One former pupil was quoted as saying that

Savile treated Duncroft like ‘a paedophile sweet shop’, suggesting he had free run of the establishment. Former residents claimed that they had reported the abuse to school staff, including the headmistress, who allegedly replied: ‘Don’t be stupid.’ This dismissive attitude was represented through what has become the standard story of institutional abuse – that of innocent victims whose pleas for help fell on deaf ears.

Our research portrays a very different picture of the school. It was not a lax or uncaring regime but a pioneering and highly regarded institution, setting new directions for how to deal with what was, in the 1960s, called juvenile delinquency. The regime was tight and certainly not sexually permissive. Furthermore, Savile’s presence there was not necessarily sinister as might be imagined, as he was but one of a number of celebrities who visited the school. While we cannot discount that he abused girls there, it seems unlikely that he could have done so in the uncontained manner claimed and upon which the current narrative rests (Smith & Burnett, 2017).

## **Discussion of key themes**

I now move on to discuss key pieces of learning from this research as identified in the learning outcomes identified above: reflexivity, the politicising of research and the role stories play in constructing the social world.

### Reflexivity

Traditionally, social research took its cue from research into the natural sciences, and adopted a position whereby the researcher sought to stand above the object of her/his research lest this introduce bias. Over time, the quest for ‘objective’ research has been challenged by various shifts in the understanding of knowledge, associated, *inter-alia*, with feminist and other



critical perspectives. These posit that knowledge is inevitably and unavoidably produced within social, cultural and historical contexts within which particular power relations are at play (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011 for an overview). It is also co-produced within the research relationship and what has become known as the ‘positionality’ of the researcher (Reinharz, 1997) percolates every stage of the research process through data collection to interpretation and presentation. This being the case, it is increasingly recognised as being important, especially but not exclusively in qualitative research, that a researcher is aware of how their subject position(s) might influence the way that knowledge is constructed. This process of locating oneself in relation to the research to be undertaken is called reflexivity. It involves being aware of and turning a critical gaze towards oneself (Finlay, 2003) and how one’s various positions within a field might impact the way a subject is constructed and understood. There is rarely one truth, therefore, but multiple and contingent truths, which emerge through the inter-subjective construction of meaning that emerges within research relationships and processes. Different researchers might engage with the same subject matter very differently and come up with very different findings and interpretations.

Central to my own engagement with the subject of this study was my own position, not just as a researcher but as a former residential child care worker, which, arguably, allows me to bring an ‘insider’ perspective to the research; I could form a picture of Duncroft and locate it within social context. Moreover, when it comes to addressing the vexed issue of historical abuse, while recognizing that abuse happened in such settings as in any other where adults interact with children, I also bring a position as sceptic regarding the *extent* of claims made against residential care workers (see Smith, 2016). Doucet (2008) identifies how particular ‘ghosts’ can haunt a researcher’s understanding of a particular subject. Personally, I am haunted by cases that I am aware of where I am convinced that care workers, some of them former colleagues, have been falsely accused and in some cases wrongly convicted of

historical abuse. While the experience of those who were abused is increasingly and rightly being recognised, another category of victim is being created in those falsely accused (Burnett, 2016; Hoyle et al, 2016; Sikes & Piper, 2010; Webster, 2005).

This experience has had a major bearing on how I engage with the subject. I am aware that my starting position is not to accept allegations at face value and in so doing I may be accused of dismissing accounts that are genuine. On the other hand, failure to question in a reasoned and suitably reflexive way allows other abuses, of, for instance, due process or the presumption of innocence to seep, unquestioned, into the body politic which, in turn, leads to false allegations and wrongful convictions.

Furthermore, from an academic position, failure to subject contested subject matter to rigorous scrutiny, just because it is sensitive, leads to the debasement of social scientific research. So, while on a personal level, I did not find Savile to be an attractive personality and many of his behaviours were undoubtedly lecherous by the standards of today and perhaps of any day, it is perhaps because of this that he deserves to be judged on a fair appraisal of the facts and circumstances of the case rather than personal dislike. As a social scientist, I have become increasingly uncomfortable that professional and public discourse on Savile have become so moralised and politicised that assumptions about the case proceed with scant regard to any facts at all.

#### Moralising and politicising research

A case can certainly be made for questioning and perhaps disrupting the quest for ‘objective’ knowledge and its dominant modes of construction in order to give voice to groupings previously marginalized in the research process. On the other hand, privileging personal experience alone might lead to the acceptance of claims that may have little anchorage in

facts. This trend is increasingly evident in public policy, especially in sexual matters, where there is pressure, reflected in police and prosecution service practice, to ‘believe’ such accounts as the default response (Henriques, 2016). This contributes to an intellectual climate in which rationally justified knowledge claims can take second place to subjectivist commitment to a cause. It is all the more important, then, for researchers to interrogate how a particular story can take hold, often regardless of the facts, and it is to such processes I now turn in relation to the Savile case.

These processes were intensely political, reflecting changing social and cultural attitudes across the Western world towards, in particular, sex crime and a corresponding turn within the criminal justice system and in civic society towards valorising a notion of victimhood (Campbell & Manning, 2014). The accounts of those who claim they were abused by Savile have resulted in a singular story of his behaviours, which assumes its power because it fits with a wider cultural script rather than being built up through systematic inquiry. Thus, the cultural and political context within which a story has its origins and takes root determines what is allowed (and not allowed) to be said about it. The potency of such scripts are such that to question them is personally and academically risky – only one story is allowed to be told.

Political or ideological standpoints can be bolstered by claims that they are supported by research, often termed advocacy research because it seeks to support a particular conclusion. On the one hand, advocacy research can identify and seek to improve responses to social concerns and, as such, can help raise awareness of hidden problems and can influence policy (McLaughlin, 2015). On the other, it can reflect the agendas of particular claims makers and can talk up and distort understandings of social problems and responses to them. Children’s charities are adept at using advocacy research to inflate particular matters of concern to elicit

public sympathy and to encourage financial support (McLaughlin, 2015). In this sense, they blur the boundaries between research and ideology.

A classic example of this is provided in *Giving Victims a Voice* (Gray & Watt, 2013) a joint report by the Metropolitan Police and the children's charity, NSPCC, which presents the findings of the Police's *Operation Yewtree*, established to investigate allegations made against Savile. *Yewtree* offers the lustre of research in its style and presentation and has been instrumental in laying down the received version of the Savile story. While its intention is to provide the impression of objective investigation and analysis, it is a thoroughly partisan and political account, which sets out to reify a particular narrative calculated to advance the shift in criminal justice practice towards 'believing' those who claim to be victims. It lacks any critical analysis but has, nonetheless been largely accepted by the media but also by the social work and social care professions, which, Trinder (1996) argues, often fail to address fundamental questions with regard to the political space within which knowledge is constructed.

*Giving Victims a Voice* states that, taken together, the various accounts of those who claim to have been abused by Savile "paint a compelling picture of widespread sexual abuse by a predatory sex offender. We are therefore referring to them as 'victims' rather than 'complainants' and are not presenting the evidence they have provided as unproven allegations" (Gray & Watt, 2013, para 2.4). Elsewhere it states: "From the information provided by the hundreds of people who have come forward to Operation Yewtree, police and the NSPCC have concluded that Jimmy Savile was one of the UK's most prolific known sexual predators. Indeed the formal recording of allegations of crime on this scale is, to the best of our knowledge, unprecedented in the UK" (Gray & Watt, 2013, para 11).

*Yewtree* assumes, explicitly, that the sheer number of those making allegations against Savile offers a corroborative picture of his behaviour and that one might conclude, by virtue of scale alone, that Savile was guilty of most of the allegations made against him. This kind of thinking exposes a logical fallacy at the heart of the affair. It takes no account of how the stories come to be constructed. For instance, an interview conducted in the course of our research indicates that the figures, introduced by the police and NSPCC, of hundreds, rising to over a thousand allegations made against Savile, only reflect phone calls or other contacts about the case, the content of which we are not informed of and which, mostly, were not even subject to even cursory investigation. Our interviewee questioned a police officer:

So I said can you just take me through the process of how *Giving Victims a Voice* works and how you dealt with all these? So he says basically people would ring up, oh, I've got something to report about Jimmy Savile, so we'd write it all down and everything. So I says and then what would you do? So he says well, what do you mean? So I says well, did you bring them in for interview or did you go to interview them? So he says the thing is, [name], what you've got to appreciate is that we need to concentrate the ones that are alive, not [Jimmy Savile]. So I says oh, I agree there.

Our interviewee continued: “So that *Giving Victims a Voice* is just an accumulation of telephone statements then? So he says yeah, that's right. ...”

Central to the way of thinking exemplified in *Yewtree* (and indeed wider public discourse on historical allegations) is the premise that people's stories refer back to and reflect a wider external reality. I go on to question this.

## The power of stories

There has been a significant ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences over recent decades (Andrews et al., 2013), which emphasises the importance of stories in how people make sense of their social worlds. Stories shape the ongoing process of how we interpret and reinterpret our experiences, helping us construct our biographies and sense of self (Woodiwiss, 2015), connecting and integrating the past with the present. They are not fixed but shift in light of changing circumstances and understandings – there is often only a tenuous link back to an event and sometimes none at all.

Researching the Savile case has convinced me of how individual stories both draw upon and feed into a wider public narrative and it is to this process that I now turn. While we make sense of our lives through stories, we are constrained in the stories we can tell by the narrative scripts that our culture makes available and which determine which stories can be told, and heard (Woodiwiss, 2014). Woodiwiss’s (2009) research with women who claimed to have experienced sexual abuse in childhood but subsequently retracted is important in identifying how such claims can emerge from a general sense of disaffection in life, aligned with the availability of checklists of symptoms of CSA presented in self-help and self-improvement literature. The CSA story reflects and runs alongside what Furedi (2004) identifies as the therapy culture that has come to dominate the contemporary Anglophone world. This powerful cultural narrative informs the stories that individuals can and do tell, making it difficult to tell alternative stories.

In the context of residential child care, individual lives interleave and resonate with a public narrative that tells of endemic abuse. In such a context, people can, for a host of reasons, write themselves into the prevailing storyline. The Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking, in his

work on the memory wars that were fought out over the course of the 1990s, notes that “When vile stories are rampant, minds that are sufficiently confused, angry and cruel will turn fiction into fact” (Hacking, 1995, p. 28). One might at least ponder how many of those making claims against Savile did so because the public story that was circulating offered them something on which to hook a range of personal troubles and motivations.

To identify this possibility is not to diminish the importance of the stories people tell or to suggest that all accounts of historical sexual abuse are false or questionable – that is clearly not the case. There is a need to hear people’s stories respectfully but also to pay attention to the context of their construction. In the Savile case, a key protagonist changed the published story of her time at Duncroft to include claims of abuse by Savile only after accounts of him being began to circulate publicly, raising questions as to whether this public story might have prompted personal recollections or whether it gave the author the opportunity to write herself into a wider cultural script. Such questions merit academic interrogation.

Listening to people’s stories is the bread and butter of social research. In a wider political climate in which we are exhorted to validate people’s experiences, it can feel inappropriate to question stories. Yet, using stories for the purpose of research requires questioning. Riessman and Quinney (2005), in their review of narrative research in social work conclude, that there are few good examples of the genre, largely because researchers do not subject people’s stories to the same methodological or analytic rigour that they might to other forms of research. Rather, stories are left to speak for themselves, “an indefensible position for serious scholarship” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 393). A concern for serious scholarship would ask questions of *Yewtree*’s ready acceptance of claims of abuse, highlighting the importance of research perspectives in offering an alternative, rigorously argued account to set alongside those laid down by the Police and children’s charities.

Similarly, in his critique of the prominence given in the social sciences to narratives of suffering, Atkinson identifies that while sympathy might be an entirely appropriate response to people's stories, it should "not substitute for social science" (2009, 2.12). Like Riessmann and Quinney (2005) he highlights the importance of an appropriate analytic framework to making sense of stories, arguing that the failure to apply such "constitutes a betrayal of any claims to well-warranted knowledge" (Atkinson, 2009, para 4.4). The failure to question any of the claims made against Savile leaves anyone wishing to understand this central cultural episode with little of substance on which to hang any conclusions.

Suggesting that stories may not always be all they claim to be is not an exercise in either abuse denial, nor is it a self-indulgent expression of academic purity that ignores the experiences and needs of victims. One of my motivations for raising such issues is to question the headlong rush to victimhood that characterises contemporary society (Campbell & Manning, 2014). The victim label is rarely a helpful or attractive one. Telling a story does not heal wounds; people can be imprisoned as well as liberated by the stories they tell (Tavris, 1992), consigned to endless and formulaic repetition of a victim story. In fact, given the linkage between stories and identity, privileging one story over others is problematic in that it might render other, possibly more adaptive, selves less or unimportant, 'fixing' one identity at the expense of other possibilities. We only need look around to the serial victims who circle, restlessly, around child abuse inquiries never finding the 'closure' promised by a therapeutic discourse. One might legitimately ask whether the lives of those former pupils of Duncroft who made the initial claims against Savile are any the better for having done so or whether they might now regard themselves as pawns in a wider political game?

## **Conclusions and recommendations**



### Balancing sympathy with facts

A number of lessons might be drawn from the foregoing account. As someone who is drawn to ideas of narrative in research, this project has confronted me with the need to recognising that people achieve some sort of meaning from their stories, while reconciling such a perspective with the realisation that their stories often bear little relation to any wider reality.

Moreover, when others are implicated in such stories to their detriment, facts matter.

Certainly, the social world is much too complicated to be accommodated within simple realist accounts, which look only for facts. On the vexed question of historical abuse, for instance, just because a case cannot be proved does not mean something didn't happen or that those claiming that it did should be disbelieved. But, neither should we go so far along the road to discount facts altogether in favour of mere solipsism. We need to go to the next level and explore where a particular subject perspective might arise from (Silverman, 2006). Such perspectives do not arise spontaneously but, as argued above, are constructed and sustained by particular interests in particular cultural and political contexts. So, the researcher has to balance sympathetic understanding with facts. This is especially important in situations where the subject matter of research can elicit powerful, visceral reactions, which can make it easier not to ask questions.

### Looking beyond a single story

Part of the difficulty in researching historical abuse is that the subject is currently bound up in a single linear story of rights abuses, resultant trauma, and the right to redress. This reflects the dominance of particular disciplinary and knowledge regimes defined by therapists and lawyers (both human rights and personal injury). The privileging of one source of knowledge and one 'voice' is a major constraint to other ways of thinking about what is undoubtedly a 'wicked' social problem. It hinders the ability to unpack issues both theoretically and instrumentally, making it difficult to gain a more comprehensive understanding from which

policy and practice might develop. Good research into ‘wicked’ social problems requires that researchers draw on ideas from a range of disciplinary perspectives to create new ways of thinking and problem solving around issues where there is no easy or readily accepted answer.

### Stay unfinished and stay critical

My final point is, in some respects, a personal reflection on what has kept me going in this and similar projects when it would be easier to walk away. There are two reasons: the first is that the subject matter is intellectually fascinating, and perhaps all the more so because it involves going against the grain, encouraging the belief that I am unearthing knowledge and understanding that isn’t countenanced in conventional accounts; the second is to do with research integrity, which goes beyond procedural requirements, to involve subjecting knowledge claims to scrutiny, uncomfortable though this might be. This ought to be the role of the social researcher. It requires, at a personal level, a capacity to resist kneejerk reactions and look below the surface of what seems obvious and keeping an eye on the ultimate purpose, which is a search for as near to the truth as one can hope for. This is a story to live by, and one that draws upon particular values. This value dimension is captured in the conclusions of a philosopher writing on the issues raised as a result of the Savile case erupting after his death:

Rightful judgement weighs the evidence carefully, avoids snap conclusions and notes any potentially mitigating circumstances. Even where the crimes alleged against the dead are appalling, charity joins hands with justice in urging us to remember our common human frailty before we rush to condemn. One day people may come to pass posthumous judgement on us; and the same care and discretion (with a dash of mercy) that we would wish to be brought to our case we should ourselves employ when speaking about the dead.

Finally, coming back down to a more practical level, in an era where there is growing concern about the social significance and impact of research, questioning the origins of the Savile scandal potentially destabilises the foundations of the policy shifts in criminal justice that followed in its wake. One of the former Duncroft residents recognized this when she said “if all this Duncroft stuff could be debunked then the rest of it is going to fall apart” (Smith & Burnett, 2017, p.15).

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