INTERVIEWING
AS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Guide for Researchers
in Education and the Social Sciences

SECOND EDITION

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importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration. Finally, it is deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others' stories.

NOTE

1. The word a researcher chooses to refer to the person being interviewed often communicates important information about the researcher's purpose in interviewing and his or her view of the relationship. In the literature about interviewing, a wide range of terms is used. Interviewee or respondent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richardson, Dohrenwend, & Klein, 1965) casts the participant in a passive role and the process of interviewing as one of giving answers to questions. Some writers refer to the person being interviewed as the subject (Patai, 1987). On one hand, this term can be seen as positive; it changes the person being interviewed from object to subject. On the other hand, the term subject implies that the interviewing relationship is hierarchical and that the person being interviewed can be subjugated. Alternatively, anthropologists tend to use the term informant (Ellen, 1984), because the people they interview inform them about a culture. Researchers pursuing cooperative inquiry and action research tend all involved in the research as co-researchers (Reason, 1994). The use of this term has significant implications for how you design research, and gather and interpret data.

In searching for the term we wanted to use, my colleagues and I focused on the fact that in-depth interviewing encourages people to reconstruct their experience actively within the context of their lives. To reflect that active stance we chose the word participants to refer to the people we interview. That word seems to capture both the sense of active involvement that occurs in an in-depth interview and the sense of equity that we try to build in our interviewing relationships.

A Structure for In-Depth, Phenomenological Interviewing

The word interviewing covers a wide range of practices. There are tightly structured, survey interviews with preset, standardized, normally closed questions. At the other end of the continuum are open-ended, apparently unstructured, anthropological interviews that might be seen almost, according to Spradley (1979), as friendly conversations. (For a description of the wide range of approaches to interviewing, see Bertrand, 1981; Briggs, 1986, p. 20; Ellen, 1984, p. 231; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 286–289; Mishler, 1986, pp. 14–15; Richardson, Dohrenwend, & Klein, 1965, pp. 36–40; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979, pp. 57–58.)

This book, however, is about what I and my colleagues have come to call in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing. The method combines life-history interviewing (see Bertaux, 1981) and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology and especially from Alfred Schutz (1967). The structure of the interviews I describe in this chapter and the approach to interviewing technique and data analysis I describe in later chapters follow from these theoretical positions. (For an extended discussion of the relationship between the techniques of interviewing and the theoretical underpinning of one's approach to interviewing, see Kvale, 1996, chap. 3.)

In this approach interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore the participants' responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study.

The range of topics adaptable to this interviewing approach is wide, covering almost any issue involving the experience of contemporary peo-
In the past few years, doctoral students with whom I have worked have explored the following subjects in pilot projects, some of which have developed into dissertations and further publications:

- Eleventh-grade students as writers (Cleary, 1985, 1988, 1991)
- Long-term child-care providers
- African students studying science in the United States
- Latino teachers teaching in a Latino community
- Affirmative action officers in higher education
- Remedial tutors in an undergraduate math program
- ESL teachers (Young, 1990)
- Natives of a Spanish-speaking culture teaching in bilingual programs in the United States
- Teaching students with learning problems stemming from behavioral issues
- “White” antiracism educators
- Guidance counselors in a new urban high school
- The work of physical education teacher educators (Williamson, 1988, 1990)
- Black jazz musicians who become teachers in colleges and universities (Hardin, 1987)
- Spanish-speaking teaching assistants who teach Spanish to students whose first language is English
- Community college students on academic probation
- Women returning to community colleges (Schatzkaner, 1986)
- Docents in museums
- The impact of tracking on student teachers (O’Donnell, 1990)
- Lesbian physical education teachers (Woods, 1990)
- Gender issues embedded in student teaching (Miller, 1993, 1997)
- African American performing artists who teach at traditionally white colleges (Jenoure, 1995)
- Student teaching in urban schools (Compagnone, 1995)
- The experience of families living in Holyoke, Massachusetts (Miller, 1997)
- The literacy experience of vocational high school students (Nagle, 1995)
- The experience of students whose first language is not English in mainstream English classrooms (Gabriel, 1997)
- Advising in a land grant university (Lynch, 1997)

In each of these pilot and dissertation studies, the interviewer explored complex issues in the subject area by examining the concrete experience of people in that area and the meaning their experience had for them.

THE THREE-INTERVIEW SERIES

Perhaps most distinguishing of all its features, this model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing involves conducting a series of three separate interviews with each participant. People’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience (Patton, 1989). Interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an “interviewee” whom they have never met tread on thin contextual ice (Mishler, 1986).

Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) designed the series of three interviews that characterizes this approach and allows the interviewer and participant to plumb the experience and to place it in context. The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them.

Interview One: Focused Life History

In the first interview, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time. In our study of the experience of student teachers and mentors in a professional development school in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts (O’Donnell et al., 1989), we asked our participants to tell us about their past lives, up until the time they became student teachers or mentors, going as far back as possible within 90 minutes.

We ask them to reconstruct their early experiences in their families, in school, with friends, in their neighborhood, and at work. Because the topic of this interview study is their experience as student teachers or as mentors, we focus on the participants’ past experience in school and in any such situations as camp counseling, tutoring, or coaching they might have done before coming to the professional development school program.

In asking them to put their student teaching or mentoring in the context of their life history, we avoid asking “Why did you become a student teacher (or mentor)?” Instead, we ask how they came to be participating in the program. By asking “How?” we hope to have them reconstruct a range of constitutive events in their past family, school, and work experience that place their participation in the professional development school program in the context of their lives.
Interview Two: The Details of Experience

The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present experience in the topic area of the study. We ask them to reconstruct these details. In our study of student teachers and mentors in a clinical site, for example, we ask them what they actually do on the job. We do not ask for opinions but rather the details of their experience, upon which their opinions may be built.

In order to put their experience within the context of the social setting, we ask the student teachers, for example, to talk about their relationships with their students, their mentors, the other faculty in the school, the administrators, the parents, and the wider community. In this second interview, we might ask them to reconstruct a day in their student teaching from the moment they woke up to the time they fell asleep. We ask for stories about their experience in school as a way of eliciting details.

Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning

In the third interview, participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience. The question of “meaning” is not one of satisfaction or reward, although such issues may play a part in the participants’ thinking. Rather, it addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life. The question might be phrased, “Given what you have said about your life before you became a mentor teacher and given what you have said about your work now, how do you understand mentoring in your life? What sense does it make to you?” This question may take a future orientation; for example, “Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future?”

Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives. The third interview can be productive only if the foundation for it has been established in the first two.

Even though it is in the third interview that we focus on the participants’ understanding of their experience, through all three interviews participants are making meaning. The very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process (Vygotsky, 1987). When we ask participants to reconstruct details of their experience, they are selecting events from their past and in so doing imparting meaning to them. When we ask participants to tell stories of their experience, they frame some aspect of it with a beginning, a middle, and an end and thereby make it meaningful, whether it is in interview one, two, or three. But in interview three, we focus on that question in the context of the two previous interviews and make that meaning making the center of our attention.

RESPECT THE STRUCTURE

We have found it important to adhere to the three-interview structure. Each interview serves a purpose both by itself and within the series. Sometimes, in the first interview, a participant may start to tell an interesting story about his or her present work situation; but that is the focus of the second interview. It is tempting, because the information may be interesting, to pursue the participant’s lead and forsake the structure of the interview. To do so, however, can erode the focus of each interview and the interviewer’s sense of purpose. Each interview comprises a multitude of decisions that the interviewer must make. The open-ended, in-depth inquiry is best carried out in a structure that allows both the participant and the interviewer to maintain a sense of the focus of each interview in the series.

Furthermore, each interview provides a foundation of detail that helps illumine the next. Taking advantage of the interactive and cumulative nature of the sequence of the interviews requires that interviewers adhere to the purpose of each. There is a logic to the interviews, and to lose control of their direction is to lose the power of that logic and the benefit from it. Therefore, in the process of conducting the three interviews, the interviewer must maintain a delicate balance between providing enough openness for the participants to tell their stories and enough focus to allow the interview structure to work. (See McCracken, 1988, p. 22, for further discussion of this delicate balance.)

LENGTH OF INTERVIEWS

To accomplish the purpose of each of the three interviews, Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) used a 90-minute format. People learning this method for the first time often react, “Oh, that is so long. How will we fill that amount of time? How will we get a participant to agree to be interviewed for that length of time?”

An hour carries with it the consciousness of a standard unit of time
that can have participants “watching the clock.” Two hours seems too long to sit at one time. Given that the purpose of this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experience, put it in the context of their lives, and reflect on its meaning, anything shorter than 90 minutes for each interview seems too short. There is, however, nothing magical or absolute about this time frame. For younger participants, a shorter period may be appropriate. What is important is that the length of time be decided upon before the interview process begins.

Doing so gives unity to each interview; the interview has at least a chronological beginning, middle, and end. Interviewers can learn to hone their skills if they work within a set amount of time and have to fit their technique to it. Furthermore, if interviewers are dealing with a considerable number of participants, they need to schedule their interviews so that they can finish one and go on to the next. As they begin to work with the vast amount of material that is generated in in-depth interviews, they will appreciate having allotted a limited amount of time to each.

The participants have a stake in a set amount of time also. They must know how much time is being asked of them; they have to schedule their lives. Moreover, an open-ended time period can produce undue anxiety. Most participants with whom I have worked come very quickly to appreciate the 90-minute period. Rather than seeming too long, it’s long enough to make them feel they are being taken seriously.

At times it is tempting to keep going at the end of the 90 minutes, because what is being discussed at that point is of considerable interest. Although one might gain new insights by continuing the interview beyond the allotted time, it is my experience that a situation of diminishing returns sets in. Extending the interview causes an unraveling of the interviewer’s purpose and of the participant’s confidence that the interviewer will do what he or she promised.

A related phenomenon is that sometimes participants continue to talk after the interview is concluded and the tape is turned off. It is tempting to continue, because the participants seem suddenly willing to discuss matters heretofore avoided. The problem is that such after-the-fact conversations are not recorded and are not normally covered in the written consent form. (See Chapter 5.) Although the material may seem interesting, it is ultimately difficult to use.

**SPACING OF INTERVIEWS**

The three-interview structure works best, in my experience, when the researcher can space each interview from 3 days to a week apart. This allows time for the participant to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two. In addition, the spacing allows interviewers to work with the participants over a 2- to 3-week period. This passage of time reduces the impact of possibly idiosyncratic interviews. That is, the participant might be having a terrible day, be sick, or be distracted in such a way as to affect the quality of a particular interview.

In addition, the fact that interviewers come back to talk three times for an hour and a half affects the development of the relationship between the participants and the interviewers positively. The interviewers are asking a lot of the participants; but the interviewers reciprocate with their time and effort. With the contact visits, the telephone calls and letters to confirm schedules and appointments (see Chapter 4), and the three actual interviews, interviewers have an opportunity to establish a substantial relationship with participants over time.

**ALTERNATIVES TO THE STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

Researchers will have reasons for exploring alternatives to the structure and procedures described above. As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can certainly be explored. But too extreme a bending of the form may result in your not being able to take advantage of the intent of the structure.

Our research teams have tried variations in spacing, usually necessitated by the schedules of our participants. On occasion, when a participant missed an interview because of an unanticipated complication, we conducted interviews one and two during the same afternoon rather than spacing them a few days or a week apart. And sometimes participants have been unavailable for 2 or 3 weeks. Once a participant said he was leaving for summer vacation the day after we contacted him. We conducted interviews one, two, and three with him all on the same day with reasonable results.

As yet there are no absolutes in the world of interviewing. Relatively little research has been done on the effects of following one procedure over others; most extant research has conceived of interviewing in a stimulus-response frame of reference, which is inadequate to the in-depth procedure (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985; Hyman, Cobb, Feldman, Hart, & Stember, 1954; Kahn & Cannell, 1960; Mishler, 1986; Richardson et al., 1965). The governing principle in designing interviewing might well be to strive for a rational process that is both repeatable and document-
able. Remember that it is not a perfect world. It is almost always better to conduct an interview under less than ideal conditions than not to conduct one at all.

WHOSE MEANING IS IT? VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Whose meaning is it that an interview brings forth and that a researcher reports in a presentation, article, or book? That is not a simple question. Every aspect of the structure, process, and practice of interviewing can be directed toward the goal of minimizing the effect the interviewer and the interviewing situation have on how the participants reconstruct their experience. No matter how diligently we work to that effect, however, the fact is that interviewers are a part of the interviewing picture. They ask questions, respond to the participant, and at times even share their own experiences. Moreover, interviewers work with the material, select from it, interpret, describe, and analyze it. Though they may be disciplined and dedicated to keeping the interviews as the participants’ meaning-making process, interviewers are also a part of that process (Ferraro, 1981; Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986).

The interaction between the data gatherers and the participants is inherent in the nature of interviewing. It is inherent as well in other qualitative approaches, such as participant observation. And I believe it is also inherent in most experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies applied to human beings, despite the myriad and sophisticated measures developed to control for it (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

One major difference, however, between qualitative and quantitative approaches is that in in-depth interviewing we recognize and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer. Rather than decrying the fact that the instrument used to gather data affects this process, we say the human interviewer can be a marvelously smart, adaptable, flexible instrument who can respond to situations with skill, tact, and understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 107).

Although the interviewer can strive to have the meaning being made in the interview as much a function of the participant’s reconstruction and reflection as possible, the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the meaning is, to some degree, a function of the participant’s interaction with the interviewer. Only by recognizing that interaction and affirming its possibilities can interviewers use their skills (see Chapter 6) to minimize the distortion (see Patton, 1989, p. 157) that can occur because of their role in the interview.

Is It Anybody’s Meaning?

How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? And if it is true for this participant, is it true for anyone else? And if another person were doing the interview, would we get a different meaning? Or if we were to do the interview at a different time of year, would the participant reconstruct his or her experience differently? Or if we had picked different participants to interview, would we get an entirely dissimilar and perhaps contradictory sense of the issue at hand? These are some of the questions underlying the issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability that researchers confront.

Many qualitative researchers disagree with the epistemological assumptions underlying the notion of validity. They argue for a new vocabulary and rhetoric with which to discuss validity and reliability (Mishler, 1986, pp. 108–110). Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, substitute the notion of “trustworthiness” for that of validity. In a careful exposition they argue that qualitative researchers must inform what they do by concepts of “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” (pp. 289–332).

Others criticize the idea of objectivity that underlies notions of reliability and validity. Kvale (1996) sees the issue of validity as a question of the “quality of craftsmanship” of the researchers as they make defensible knowledge claims (pp. 241–244). Ferraro (1981) argues that the most profound knowledge can be gained only by the deepest intersubjectivity among researchers and that they are researching. Such a discussion suggests that neither the vocabulary of “validity” nor “trustworthiness” is adequate.

Yet, in-depth interviewers can respond to the question, “Are the participant’s comments valid?” The three-interview structure incorporates features that enhance the accomplishment of validity. It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interviewing participants over the course of 1 to 3 weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say. Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others. Finally, the goal of the process is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experience. If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity.
An Example of an Approach to Validity

One participant in our Secondary Teacher Education Program was a woman who had taught in parochial schools for a number of years but was not certified. She had enrolled in our program to get certified at the high school level in social studies. She agreed to be interviewed about her experience in our clinical site teacher education program.

The interviewer began her third interview with its basic question: "What does it mean to you to be a student teacher?" She responded:

Well, I guess—well, . . . [small laugh]—it kinda—it really kind of means that I’ve finally gotten down to actually trying to—I guess what it means is—that is the final passage into making a commitment to this, the profession, to teaching as—a profession. What am I going to do with my life because I have all—all this time, going up and down and in and out of teaching. Should I or shouldn’t I? I was kind of stuck in that space where people say, you know, “Oh, those who can’t, teach. Those who can, do.” Just the whole negative status that teaching and education have. So it’s kind of fraught with that. And really resists the fact that I had to student teach. I mean, I can remember [that] holding me back, what, 10 years ago, thinking, “Oh, no, I will actually have to be a student teacher some day,” and remembered what student teachers were like in my high school, and thinking, “Oh, I’ll never humiliate myself that way.” [small laugh] And so I guess it was the final—[pause]—biting the bullet to . . . making a commitment.

Is what she says valid? In the first interview she recounted how she had dropped out of college and taught in elementary grades in parochial schools because she needed money. In that interview she also talked about how she had dropped out of education courses because she didn’t think she was getting enough out of them; how she had switched to an academic field, but later realized that she really liked teaching.

The material in her third interview is internally consistent with the material in her first, which was given 2 weeks earlier. Internal consistency over a period of time leads one to trust that she is not lying to the interviewer. Furthermore, there is enough in the syntax, the pauses, the groping for words, the self-effacing laughter, to make a reader believe that she is grappling seriously with the question of what student teaching means to her, and that what she is saying is true for her at the time she is saying it.

Moreover, in reading the transcript, we see that the interviewer has kept quiet, not interrupted her, not tried to redirect her thinking while she was developing it; so her thoughts seem to be hers and not the interviewer’s. These are her words, and they reflect her understanding of her experience at the time of her interview.

When I read this passage, I learned something both about this particular student and about an aspect of the student-teaching experience that had not really been apparent to me. I began to think about aspects of the process we require prior to student teaching that enhance the need for students to make a commitment and about other aspects of our program that minimize that need. I began to wonder what the conditions are that encourage a person to make that commitment.

Finally, what the participant said about the status of education as a career and how that related to her personal indecision is consistent with what we know the literature says about the teaching profession and with what other participants in our study have said. I can relate this individual passage to a broader discourse on the issue.

The interview allowed me to get closer to understanding this student teacher’s experience than I would have been able to do by other methods such as questionnaires or observation. I cannot say that her understanding of student teaching as a commitment is valid for others, although passages in other interviews connect to what she has said. I can say that it seems valid for her at this point in her life. I cannot say that her understanding of the meaningfulness of student teaching as a commitment she had heretofore not been willing to make will not change. Unlike the laws of physics, the rules governing human life and social interaction are always changing—except that we die. There is no solid, unmovable platform upon which to base our understanding of human affairs. They are in constant flux. Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polanyi, 1958) speaks at least as directly to human affairs as it does to the world of physics.

The structure of the three interviews, the passage of time over which the interviews occur, the internal consistency and possible external consistency of the passages, the syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects of the passage, and the discovery and sense of learning that I get from reading the passage lead me to have confidence in its authenticity. Because we are concerned with the participant’s understanding of her experience, the authenticity of what she is saying makes it reasonable for me to have confidence in its validity for her.

Avoiding a Mechanistic Response

There is room in the universe for multiple approaches to validity. The problem is not in the multiplicity. Rather it lies in the sometimes doctri-
naire ways some advocates of divergent approaches polarize the issue. (See Gage, 1989.) Those who advocate qualitative approaches are in danger of becoming as doctrinaire as those who once held the monopoly on educational research and advocated quantitative approaches.

On occasion I see dissertations in which doctoral candidates are as mechanical about establishing an “audit trail” or devising methods of “triangularization” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 283) as those in my generation who dutifully devised procedures to confront “instrument decay” and “experimental mortality” (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, pp. 79, 182). What are needed are not formulaic approaches to enhancing either validity or trustworthiness but understanding of and respect for the issues that underlie those terms. We must grapple with them, doing our best to increase our ways of knowing and of avoiding ignorance, realizing that our efforts are quite small in the larger scale of things. (For a “common sense” approach to validity, see Maxwell, 1996. For a “craftsmanship” approach to validity, see Kvale, 1996. For a highly personal view of validity, see Wocott, 1994.)

EXPERIENCE THE PROCESS YOURSELF

Before readers go much further with this approach to interviewing, I recommend that they test their interest in it and explore some of the issues by doing a practice project. Team up with a peer. Interview each other about your experience in your present job or as a graduate student. (If you are doing this practice project as part of a class, this exercise can lead to some significant understanding about what graduate study is like in your school.)

Use the three-interview structure. Since this is practice to become acquainted with the technique, shorten, if you choose to do so, the time normally allotted to each interview from 90 minutes to 30 minutes. In the first interview, ask your peer participant about how she came to her work or her graduate study. Find out as much as possible about the context of her life leading up to her present position or to her status as a graduate student.

In the second interview, ask your participant to tell you as much as possible about the details of her job experience or her work as a graduate student. Ask, “What is your work? What is it like for you to do what you do?”

In the third interview, ask your participant what her work or her experience as a graduate student means to her. You might say, “Now that you have talked about how you came to your work (or to be a graduate student), and what it is like for you to do that work (or be a student), what does it mean to you?”

Arrange appointments for each of the interviews. Tape-record them, and be sure to arrange to be interviewed by your peer participant in return.

The point of this practice project is to experience interviewing and being interviewed and to see whether you connect to the possibilities of the process. The practice project should alert you to how the way you are as a person affects your interviewing. You may notice how difficult it is for you to stay quiet and let another person speak while at the same time being an active listener and following up on what your participant has said. You may become aware of issues of control and focus. You may find that you have little patience for or interest in other people’s stories; or you may connect to their possibilities.
Establishing Access to, Making Contact with, and Selecting Participants

Before selecting participants for an interview study, the interviewer must both establish access to them and make contact. Because interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and the participant, how interviewers gain access to potential participants and make contact with them can affect the beginning of that relationship and every subsequent step in the interviewing process. In this and subsequent chapters, I discuss an idea that I think is equivalent to the First Commandment of interviewing: Be equitable. Respect the participant and yourself. In developing the interviewing relationship, consider what is fair and just to the participant and to you.

THE PERILS OF EASY ACCESS

Beginning interviewers, like running water, tend to look for the easiest path to the goal, their potential participants. They often want to select people with whom they already have a relationship: friends, those with whom they work, students they teach, or others with whom they have some tangential connection. This is understandable but problematic. My experience is that the easier the access, the more complicated the interview.

Interviewing People Whom You Supervise

Conflicts of interest are inherent in interviewing people you supervise. For example, I worked with a doctoral candidate who was the principal of an elementary school. She wanted to interview teachers in her school about their experience in developing collaborative learning projects in their classrooms. She had been deeply involved in the project with her teachers and was eager to understand what effect it had on their experiences.

In discussions with me, the principal said that her school was small and not a large, unfeeling bureaucracy. She had a close working relationship with the teachers. She felt that they trusted her. Finally, she thought that despite her investment in the project, she could be impartial in the interview.

One of the principles of an equitable interviewing relationship, however, is that the participants not make themselves unduly vulnerable by participating in the interview. In any hierarchical school system, no matter how small, in which a principal has hiring and firing power and control over other working conditions, a teacher being interviewed by the principal may not feel free to talk openly. That is especially the case when the teachers know that the interviewer has an investment in the program. The issue in such cases is not whether the principal can achieve enough distance from the subject to allow her to explore fully, but rather whether the teachers feel secure in that exploration. If they do not, the outcomes of such interviews are not likely to be productive.

As a general principle then, it is wise to avoid interviewing participants whom you supervise. That does not mean in this case that the doctoral candidate could not explore the experiences of elementary teachers in collaborative learning projects; it does mean that she had to seek to understand the experience of teachers in schools other than her own.

Interviewing Your Students

Inexperienced interviewers who are also teachers often conceptualize a study that involves interviewing students, and they are often sorely tempted to interview their own. As legitimate as it may be to want to understand the effectiveness of, say, a teaching method or a curriculum, a student can hardly be open to his or her teacher who has both so much power and so much invested in the situation. The teacher-researcher should seek to interview students in some other setting with some other teacher who is using a similar method or curriculum.

Interviewing Acquaintances

Sometimes new interviewers want to select participants whom they know but not in a way related to the subject of study. For example,
one doctoral candidate was contemplating an interview study about the complexities of being a cooperating teacher for social studies student teachers. He wanted to interview a participant with whom he did not work professionally but with whom he had regular contact at church. Even experienced interviewers cannot anticipate some of the uncomfortable situations that may develop in an interview. Having to consider not only the interviewing relationship but a church relationship as well might limit the full potential of such an interview.

For example, in an interview about the experience of being a cooperating teacher, the acquaintance from church might reveal that the reason he or she takes on student teachers is for the free time it allows. Normally an interviewer would want to follow up on an aspect of an interview that made him or her feel uneasy, but to do so in this case could affect his relationship with the participant at church. The interviewer may avoid a follow-up, slant the follow-up, or in some other way distort the interview process because of concern for his or her other relationship with the participant. The result is either incomplete or distorted information on a key aspect of the subject of study.

Interviewing Friends

Some new interviewers with whom I have worked want to interview participants to whom they have easy access because of friendship. The interviewing relationship in such cases can seldom develop on its own merit. It is affected by the friendship in obvious and less obvious ways.

One of the less obvious is that the interviewers and the participants who are friends usually assume that they understand each other. Instead of exploring assumptions and seeking clarity about events and experiences, they tend to assume that they know what is being said. The interviewer and the participant need to have enough distance from each other that they take nothing for granted (see Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Hyman et al., 1954; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979).

Taking Oneself Just Seriously Enough

In addition to feeling shy about a process with which they have had little practice (Hyman et al., 1954), a major reason that some doctoral candidates with whom I have worked want to capitalize on easy access is that they tend not to take themselves seriously as researchers. Beginning interviewers find it difficult to imagine asking strangers to spend 4½ hours with them.

Many doctoral candidates see research as something others do. Our educational system is structured so that most people consume research but seldom produce it. This has led many to adopt an uncritical attitude about published material and to regard it as somehow sacred. Doing research is seen as an elite occupation, done only by those at the top of the hierarchy (see Bernstein, 1975).

At the same time, when dissertation research does not grow organically out of the course work, clinical experiences, and independent reading that have gone before, it becomes a requirement to be overcome. Doctoral candidates who have had little practice in doing research and who see it as a hurdle rather than an opportunity find it difficult to affirm their own interest in their subject, their own status as researchers, the power of their research method, or the utility of their work other than to fulfill a requirement.

Cumulative societal inequities can exact a heavy toll on researchers at this juncture. Research in our society has long been seen as a male preserve, especially a White male preserve, associated with class and privilege. New researchers who are not middle-class, White males may have to struggle against social conventions to take themselves seriously in their task. Some doctoral candidates need bracing from their advisors and their peers at this point in their program in order to affirm themselves as researchers. Taking oneself seriously enough as a researcher is a first step toward establishing equity in the interviewing relationship.

ACCESS THROUGH FORMAL GATEKEEPERS

When interviewers try to contact potential participants whom they do not know, they often face gatekeepers who control access to those people. Gatekeepers can range from absolutely legitimate (to be respected) to self-declared (to be avoided). If a researcher's study involves participants below the age of 18, for example, access to them must involve the absolutely legitimate gatekeepers, their parents or guardians. Although it may be appropriate to seek access to students through the schools, very soon in the process that access must be affirmed by the parents of the children. Within the schools themselves, teachers, principals, and superintendents serve as gatekeepers who must be respected.

Some participants are accessible only through the institutions in which they reside or work. For example, if a researcher wanted to interview prisoners about prison education programs, it is not likely that there would be any route of access other than through the warden. A researcher studying the experience of people at a particular site, whether it be factory, school, church, human service organization, or business, must gain
access through the person who has responsibility for the operation of the site. (See Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 252; Richardson et al., 1985, p. 97.)

On the other hand, one researching an experience or a process that takes place in a number of sites, but not studying the workings of any particular site, may not need to seek access through an authority. Such a researcher may want to study the work of high school teachers who teach in many schools scattered through a region. In such a case, the researcher can go directly to them without asking for permission from their principals.

Likewise, a researcher studying the experience of students in high school, but not in a particular high school, might not have to seek access through a principal but only through parents. In general, the more adult the potential participants, the more likely that access can be direct.

In our study of community college faculty (Seidman, 1985), my colleagues and I interviewed 76 participants in approximately 25 different community colleges in Massachusetts, New York State, and California. Because we were not studying a particular community college, we did not seek access to individual faculty through the administrators of the colleges. On the other hand, we were never secretive about our work; it would have been difficult to be so, carrying, as we were, a tape recorder large enough to allow us to make audiotapes of a sound quality suitable for the film that we made in the first phase of our research (Sullivan & Seidman, 1982). But even if we had been using a small, pocket-sized tape recorder, we would not have hidden our research from others. When asked in the halls what we were doing at the college, we answered explicitly about our project.

On only one occasion was a faculty member uncomfortable with our approaching him directly and not through his administration. We told him that he should inform the administration of our project and our wish to interview him; we made it clear that we were not doing research about the site. We said that if an administrator wanted to meet with us, we would be happy to do so in order to explain our project, but we were not eager to seek permission from administrators to interview individual faculty. The participant did inform his administration, but no one wanted to meet us.

INFORMAL GATEKEEPERS

Sometimes although there is no formal gatekeeper, there is an informal one (Richardson et al., 1985). Most faculties, for example, usually include a few members who are widely respected and looked to for guidance when decisions about whether or not to support an effort are made. In small groups, there is usually at least one person who, without having formal au-

thority, nevertheless holds moral suasion. If that person participates in a project, then it must be okay; if he or she doesn’t, then the group feels there must be a good reason for not doing so. To the extent that interviewers can identify informal gatekeepers, not to use them formally for seeking access to others but to gain their participation in the project as a sign of respect for the effort, access to others in the group may be facilitated.

On the other hand, groups often have self-appointed gatekeepers, who feel they must be informed and must try to control everything that goes on, even if they have no formal authority. Their self-importance is not respected by others in the group; avoiding their involvement in the study may be the best way to facilitate access to others in such a group.

ACCESS AND HIERARCHY

One of the differences between research and evaluation or policy studies is that the latter are often sponsored by an agency close to the people who participate in the interviews. In such studies, authority for access to participants often is formally granted by administrators in charge. There is a sense of official sponsorship of the project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which affects the equity of the relationship between interviewer and participant. It is almost as if the interviewer were someone higher in the hierarchy instead of outside it.

Whenever possible, it is important to establish access to participants through their peers rather than through people “above” or “below” them in their hierarchy. For interviewing children, peer access may not be feasible. But in other situations, the demand of equity in the interviewing relationship calls for peer access when possible. If your participants are teachers, for example, try to establish access to them through other teachers; if they are counselors, reach them if at all possible through other counselors.

MAKING CONTACT

Do it yourself. Try not to rely on third parties to make contact with your potential participants. No matter how expedient it seems to have someone else who knows potential participants explain your project to them, try to avoid doing so. Building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study. Third parties may be very familiar with potential participants, but they can seldom do justice to the nature of someone else's project. They have not internalized it the way the researcher has; they do not have the investment in it that
the researcher does. Once having introduced the subject, they can seldom respond to questions that naturally might arise. Third parties may be necessary for gaining access to potential participants but should be used as little as possible to make actual contact with them.

A contact visit before the actual interview aids in selecting participants and helps build a foundation for the interview relationship. A contact visit can also convince an interviewer that a good interviewing relationship with a particular potential participant is not likely to develop. The more care and thoroughness interviewers put into making contact, the better foundation they establish for the interviewing relationship.

MAKE A CONTACT VISIT IN PERSON

Telephoning is often a necessary first step in making contact, but if possible it should consist of only a brief introduction, an explanation of how the interviewer gained access to the person's name, and a decision on when to meet. Avoid asking the potential participant for a yes or no answer about participating. An easy "yes" from someone who has not met the interviewer or heard enough about the interviews can backfire later. A "no" that is a defense against too much initial pressure gets the interviewer nowhere (see Richardson et al., 1965, p. 97). The major purpose of the telephone contact is to set up a time when the interviewer and the potential participant can meet in person to discuss the study.

It takes time, money, and effort to arrange a separate contact visit with individual potential participants or even a group, but they are almost always well spent. The purpose of the contact visit is at least threefold. The most important is to lay the groundwork for the mutual respect necessary to the interview process. By taking the time to make a separate contact visit to introduce him- or herself and the study, an interviewer is saying implicitly to the potential participants, "You are important. I take you seriously. I respect my work and you enough to want to make a separate trip to meet with you to explain the project."

Although individual contact visits tend to be more effective, it is possible also to meet with a group of potential participants. Group contact visits save time and wear on the interviewer by allowing one explanation of the study to several people at once. On the downside, one potential participant's skepticism about participating can affect the attitude of others in the group.

Clearly, interviewers will not always be able to make in-person contact and will have to rely on the telephone. It will be interesting to see as time progresses how electronic mail can be used to make initial contact and follow-up arrangements with some participants. Something about the informality and directness of electronic mail and the ability of the participant to deal with it when he or she wants seems to offer promise for initiating and maintaining a connection with participants in an equitable way. E-mail may seem less aggressive than the telephone and be more timely than conventional mail.

Whether in person, on the telephone, or in an e-mail message, it is important at this point to present the nature of the study in as broad a context as possible and to be explicit about what will be expected of the participant. Seriousness but friendliness of tone, purposefulness but flexibility in approach, and openness but consciousness in presentation are characteristics that can enhance a contact visit whether conducted in person or on the phone. (For discussions of the importance of the first contact, see Dexter, 1970, p. 34; Hyman et al., 1954, p. 201; Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 65.)

The contact visit allows the interviewer to become familiar with the setting in which potential participants live or work before the interview starts. It also allows interviewers to find their way to potential participants so that they are better able to keep their interviewing appointments. In addition to building mutual respect and explaining the nature of the interview study, a second important purpose of the contact visit is to determine whether the potential participant is interested. In-depth interviewing asks a great deal of both participant and interviewer. It is no trivial matter to arrange three 90-minute interviews spaced as much as a week apart. It is important that the potential participant understand the nature of the study, how he or she fits into it, and the purpose of the three-interview sequence.

The contact visit also initiates the process of informed consent, which is necessary in some and desirable in almost all interviewing research. (See Chapter 5.) Although I seldom show the informed consent form in the contact visit, I go over orally all aspects of the study that the consent form usually covers, so that when I do present it and ask the participant to sign it, he or she will not be surprised by anything included on the form.

BUILDING THE PARTICIPANT POOL

Another primary purpose of the contact visit is to assess the appropriateness of a participant for the study. The major criterion for appropriateness is whether the subject of the researcher's study is central to the participant's experience. For example, a doctoral candidate wanting to study the way process writing affects an English teacher's experience in teaching
writing must select English teachers for whom process writing plays a central role in their teaching.

As the interviewer speaks with potential participants, he or she can keep a record of those who seem most suitable, noting their key characteristics that are related to the subject of the study. Whether the interviewer asks participants to join the study at some point in the contact visit or gets back to them at a later date, he or she must remain aware of the character of the growing participant pool in order to be purposeful in the sampling. (See section on selecting participants later in this chapter.)

SOME LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The experience of scheduling a contact visit often reflects what trying to schedule the actual interview with the participant will be like. If one is a reasonable process, the other is likely to be so too. If scheduling one contact visit is unduly frustrating, the interviewer may do well to take that into account in proceeding to build the participant pool.

Because of the time and energy required of both participants and interviewers, every step the interviewer takes to ease the logistics of the process is a step toward allowing the available energy to be focused on the interview itself. To facilitate communication, confirmation of appointments, and follow-up after the interviews, it is important for interviewers to develop a database of their participants. They can use the contact visit to begin to collect data.

A simple participant information form can be of considerable use throughout the study. The form usually has two purposes: to facilitate communication between the interviewer and the participants; and to record basic data about the participant that will inform the final choice of participants and the reporting on the data later in the study. At minimum, the form should include the participants' home and work addresses and telephone numbers, the best time to be in touch with them, and the time to avoid calling them. Paying attention to the details of communications with participants from the beginning of the interview relationship can help in avoiding the mishaps of missed or confused appointments that can later plague an interview study.

The contact visit can also be used to determine the best times, places, and dates to interview potential participants. These are crucial. The place of the interview should be convenient to the participant, private, yet if at all possible familiar to him or her. It should be one in which the participant feels comfortable and secure. A public place such as a cafeteria or a coffee shop may seem convenient, but the noise, the lack of privacy, and the likelihood of the interview's becoming an event for others to comment upon undermine the effectiveness of such places for interviews.

If it can be determined at the time of the contact visit that a person would be an appropriate participant in the study, the interviewer can schedule time and dates right then. The interviewer should try to let the participant choose the hour, scheduling interviews within a time period consistent with the purpose of the three-interview structure as described in Chapter 2. As pointed out previously, because each interview is meant to build on the preceding one, they are optimally spaced no more than a week and no less than a day apart.

In considering the time, dates, and place of interviews the prevailing principle must be equity. The participants are giving the interviewers something they want. The interviewers must be flexible enough to accommodate the participants' choice of location, time, and date. On the other hand, the interviewer also has constraints. Although equity necessitates flexibility, interviewers must also learn to set up interviews in such a way that they themselves are comfortable with the resulting schedule. Resentment on the part of either participant or interviewer will not bode well ultimately for the interviews.

After the contact visit, interviewers should write follow-up letters to the participants they select and to those they do not. The letters are used to thank the potential participants for meeting with the interviewers and, in the case of those who are selected for the study and who agree to participate, to confirm in writing the schedule of interview appointments.

Such detailed follow-up work in writing may seem onerous to the prospective interviewer; however, equity requires such consideration. In addition, this kind of step-by-step attention can have enormous practical benefits to the interviewer. Few things are more frustrating in an interview study than to drive a few hours to an appointment only to have the participant not show up. Sometimes the no-show is the result of poor communication. Sometimes it reflects a participant's lack of enthusiasm for the process because he or she feels asked to give a great deal while being offered very little consideration in return. In interviewing research, paying attention to the details of access and contact before the interviewing begins is the best investment interviewers can make as they select their participants and prepare to begin the interviews.

SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

Either during the contact process or shortly thereafter the researcher takes the crucial step of selecting the people he or she will interview. The
The purpose of an in-depth interview study is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed, not to predict or to control that experience. Because hypotheses are not being tested, the issue is not whether the researcher can generalize the finding of an interview study to a broader population. Instead the researcher's task is to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects. Because the basic assumptions underlying an interview study are different from those of an experimental study, selecting participants is approached differently.

"Only Connect"

The United States has more than 200,000 community college faculty. In our study of the work of community college faculty (Seidman, 1985), we could interview only 76 of them. The problem we faced was how to select those 76 participants so that what we learned about their experience would not be easily dismissed as idiosyncratic to them and irrelevant to a larger population. In their influential essay on experimental and quasi-experimental design, Campbell and Stanley (1963) call this the problem of external validity.

A conventional way of defining the issue is to ask whether what is learned from the interview sample can be generalized to the larger population. One step toward assuring generalizability is to select a sample that is representative of the larger population. The dominant approach to representativeness in experimental and quasi-experimental studies has been the random selection of participants. Theoretically, if a large enough sample is selected randomly or through a stratified, randomized approach, the resulting participant pool is not likely to be idiosyncratic.

In interview studies, however, it is not possible to employ random sampling or even a stratified random-sampling approach. Randomness is a statistical concept that depends on a very large number of participants. True randomness would be prohibitive in an in-depth interview study. Furthermore, interview participants must consent to be interviewed, so there is always an element of self-selection in an interview study. Self-selection and randomness are not compatible.

The job of an in-depth interviewer is to go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience. When this experience can be captured in depth, then two possibilities for making connections develop. They are the interview researcher's alternative to generalizability. (See Lincoln & Guba, 1985, for an extensive discussion of the concept of generalization.) First, the researcher may find connections among the experiences of the individuals he or she interviews. Such links among people whose individual lives are quite different but who are affected by common structural and social forces can help the reader see patterns in that experience. Those connections the researcher calls to the readers' attention for inspection and exploration.

Second, by presenting the stories of participants' experience, interviewers open up for readers the possibility of connecting their own stories to those presented in the study. In connecting, readers may not learn how to control or predict the experience being studied or their own, but they will understand better their complexities. They will appreciate more the intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces and, perhaps, be more understanding and even humble in the face of those intricacies. Understanding and humility are not bad stances from which to try to effect improvement in education.

Purposeful Sampling

How best to select participants who will facilitate the ability of others to connect if random selection is not an option? The most commonly agreed upon answer is purposeful sampling. (See Patton, 1989.) Patton's discussion of purposeful-sampling techniques is very thoughtful. He suggests several approaches, including "typical case," "extreme or deviant case," "critical case," "sensitive case," "convenience sampling," and "maximum variation" sampling (pp. 100–107).

Maximum variation sampling can refer to both sites and people (Tagg, 1985). The range of people and sites from which the people are selected should be fair to the larger population. This sampling technique should allow the widest possibility for readers of the study to connect to what they are reading. In my experience maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies.

Consider, for example, a study in which the interviewer wants to explore the experience of minority teachers in local teachers' unions in urban school districts in Massachusetts (Galvan, 1990). Using the maximum variation approach, the researcher would analyze the potential population to assess the maximum range of sites and people that constitute the population.

First she would have to define what she meant by the term urban. Then she would have to determine the range of school systems in Massachusetts that fall within her definition. Within the systems she would have
to decide whether she was interested in the experience of all minority teachers, those in grades K–12, or just those in some particular grade level.

In Massachusetts, local teachers' unions are usually affiliated with either the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers. She would have to decide whether she was interested in studying the experience of minority teachers affiliated with both unions or with just one.

After considering the range of sites, she would then have to consider the range of people who are minority teachers and belong to local teachers' unions. She would have to determine the relative number of male and female minority teachers, the range of ethnic groups represented, the range of subject matter they teach, their levels of teaching, and the age and experience of teachers represented in the larger population.

The above characteristics are illustrative but not exhaustive of the range of variations present in the population whose experience this researcher might want to try to understand. If the range became unmanageable, the researcher would want to limit the study, looking at, for example, the experience of one minority group in a number of locals or the experience of the full range of minority members in one or two locals. The goal would remain to sample purposely the widest variation of sites and people within the limits of the study.

In addition to selecting participants who reflect the wide range in the larger population under study, another useful approach is to select some participants who are outside that range and may in some sense be considered negative cases (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). In the study discussed above about what it is like for a minority teacher to be a member of a teachers' union, it would also be useful to include some nonminority teachers who are also members of the local. If the researcher discovers through interviews that nonminority and minority teachers are having similar experiences, then the researcher will know that some issues may not be a matter of ethnicity or majority-minority status.

As another example, Schatzkamer (1966) was interested in studying the experience of older women returning to community colleges. She also decided to interview some older men who were returning to college to see in what ways their experience connected to that of the women in her sample. Selecting participants to interview who are outside the range of those at the center of the study is an effective way for interviewers to check themselves against drawing easy conclusions from their research.

**SnareS TO AVOID IN THE SELECTION PROCESS**

New interviewers may take too personally a potential participant's reluctance to get involved. It does little good to try to persuade such a person to participate in an interview she or he would rather not do. In the face of initial reluctance, interviewers may go to great lengths to exercise persuasion only to find later the interview itself to be an ongoing struggle (Richardson et al., 1965). The interviewer must strike a balance between too easily accepting a quick expression of disinterest from a potential participant and too ardently trying to persuade a reluctant one that she or he really is not disinclined to participate.

Another snare is the potential participant who is too eager to be interviewed. During the contact visit an interviewer can ascertain whether the person has some ax to grind. In a contact visit Sullivan and I made to one community college, we learned that the college had just dismissed its president. The school was divided into factions: those who had worked for the president's dismissal and those who had not. Some of the faculty we contacted were very reluctant to get involved in an interview. Others were too eager. The purpose of our study was understanding the work of community college faculty. Although it is true that academic politics are a part of that work, in this particular case the partisan politics of the campus threatened to load our study with interview participants inclined to be more like informers (Dean & Whyte, 1958; Lincoln & Cuba, 1985; Richardson et al., 1965).

On occasion during a contact visit, someone would tell us we must interview a colleague who won an award and would be wonderful to talk to. Our instinct was always to avoid such "stars." The method of in-depth interviewing elicits people's stories in a way that shows each person to be interesting no matter how anonymous.

**HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS ARE ENOUGH?**

New interviewers frequently ask how many participants they must have in their study. Some researchers argue for an emerging research design in which the number of participants in a study is not established ahead of time. New participants are added as new dimensions of the issues become apparent through earlier interviews (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Other researchers discuss a "snowballing" approach to selecting participants, in which one participant leads to another (Bertaux, 1981). But even if researchers use a purposeful sampling technique designed to gain maximum variation and then add to their sample through a snowballing process, they must know when they have interviewed enough participants.

There are two criteria for enough. The first is sufficiency. Are there sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance
to connect to the experiences of those in it? In our community college study, we had to have enough participants to reflect vocational and liberal arts faculty, men, women, and minorities, and age and experience ranges. We also considered faculty with advanced degrees and without degrees. In addition, we were reluctant to interview only one person in any particular category.

The other criterion is saturation of information. A number of writers (Douglas, 1976; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) discuss a point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new. Douglas (1985) is even bold enough to attempt to assess when that began to happen in his studies. If he had to pick a number, he said, it would be 25 participants.

I would be reluctant to establish such a number. “Enough” is an interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study and each researcher. The criteria of sufficiency and saturation are useful, but practical exigencies of time, money, and other resources also play a role, especially in doctoral research. On the other hand, if I were to err, I would err on the side of more rather than less. I have seen some graduate students struggle to make sense of data that are just too thin because they did not interview enough participants. Interviewing fewer participants may save time earlier in the study, but may add complications and frustration at the point of working with, analyzing, and interpreting the interview data.

The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants. Researchers can figure out ahead of time the range of sites and people that they would like to sample and set a goal for a certain number of participants in the study. At some point, however, the interviewer may recognize that he or she is not learning anything decidedly new and that the process of interviewing itself is becoming laborious rather than pleasurable (Bertaux, 1981). That is a time to say “enough.”

**Affirming Informed Consent**

First-time interviewers tend to be hesitant about securing their participants’ informed, written consent to be interviewed. Some interviewers worry that telling people what they are studying will skew the results of their study. They also tend to minimize participants’ sense of risk at being involved in an interview. The interviewers have no doubt about their own good intentions, but they do not anticipate the type of material that can be generated in an in-depth interview.

In-depth interviews, however, ask participants to reconstruct their life history as it relates to the subject of inquiry. In the process, a measure of intimacy can develop between interviewers and participants that leads the participants to share aspects of their lives that, if misused, could leave them extremely vulnerable. Participants have the right to be protected against such vulnerability (Kelman, 1977). Furthermore, interviewers can protect themselves against misunderstanding through the process of seeking informed consent, which requires them to be explicit about the range and purpose of their study in a way that makes them be clear about what they are doing. Finally, given the extensiveness of the interview process and the method of following up on what the participants have to say (see Chapter 6), providing people ahead of time with as much information as possible about each aspect of the study is not likely to skew the results of 4½ hours of interviewing.

The relatively recent impetus toward protecting rights of research participants stems from the reaction to the disregard for human dignity perpetrated during World War II by researchers in concentration camps controlled by Nazi Germany. The Nuremberg trials resulted in the Nuremberg Code adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946, which stated that “the voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential” (Reynolds, 1979, p. 436).
As Charmaz (personal communication, March 23, 1997) pointed out, however, there are some situations and settings in which the necessity to seek informed consent may hinder the interviewing process, at least initially. In situations in which participants feel vulnerable because of the sensitive nature of the topic of the interview, they may hesitate to sign the consent form. Participants who, for a range of reasons, have a distrust of forms and formalistic language may balk at being asked to sign. Participants who feel the power relationship between them and the interviewer is inequitable may feel uneasy and awkward when asked to review and sign the form.

My experience is that the interviewer can deal with some of this type of uneasiness by thoughtfulness and care in the process of going over the form with the participant. In addition, the process of interviewing the participant three times and developing and sustaining a relationship over a period of time can relieve initial discomfort to some extent and can assuage the suspicion that may have arisen at the time that the researcher asked the participant to read and sign the informed consent form. In circumstances in which the interviewer does not have the ability to build a relationship over time, the informed consent process may be inhibiting. While necessary, seeking informed consent is not without its complexities. It is designed to foster equity between the interviewer and the participant. It may at times inhibit it. It is clear that the informed consent process is only the beginning and not the end of researchers' ethical responsibilities toward their participants and their research.

Technique Isn't Everything, But It Is a Lot

It is tempting to say that interviewing is an art, a reflection of the personality of the interviewer, and cannot be taught. This line of thinking implies that either you are good at it or you are not. But that is only half true. Researchers can learn techniques and skills of interviewing. What follows is a discussion of those skills as I have come to understand them from my own experience of interviewing and that of others.

LISTEN MORE, TALK LESS

Listening is the most important skill in interviewing. The hardest work for most interviewers is to keep quiet and to listen actively. Many books about interviewing concentrate on the types of questions that interviewers ask, but I want to start this chapter by talking about the type of listening the interviewer must do.

Interviewers must listen on at least three levels. First, they must listen to what the participant is saying. They must concentrate on the substance to make sure that they understand it and to assess whether what they are hearing is as detailed and complete as they would like it to be. They must concentrate so that they internalize what participants say. Later, interviewers' questions will often flow from this earlier listening.

On a second level, interviewers must listen for what George Steiner (1978) calls "inner voice," as opposed to an outer, more public voice. An outer, or public, voice always reflects an awareness of the audience. It is not untrue; it is guarded. It is a voice that participants would use if they were talking to an audience of 300 in an auditorium.

There is a language of the outer voice to which interviewers can become sensitive. For example, whenever I hear participants talk about
the problems they are facing as a "challenge" or their work as an "adventure," I sense that I am hearing a public voice, and I search for ways to get to the inner voice. Challenge and adventure convey the positive aspects of a participant's grappling with a difficult experience but not the struggle. Another word that attracts my attention is *fascinate*. I often hear that word on talk-show interviews; it usually works to communicate some sort of interest while covering up the exact nature of that interest. Whenever I hear a participant use *fascinate*, I ask for elucidation. By taking participants' language seriously without making them feel defensive about it, interviewers can encourage a level of thoughtfulness more characteristic of inner voice.

On a third level, interviewers—like good teachers in a classroom—must listen while remaining aware of the process as well as the substance. They must be conscious of time during the interview; they must be aware of how much has been covered and how much there is yet to go. They must be sensitive to the participant's energy level and any nonverbal cues he or she may be offering. Interviewers must listen hard to assess the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward as necessary.

This type of active listening requires concentration and focus beyond what we usually do in everyday life. It requires that, for a good part of the time, we quash our normal instinct to talk. At the same time, interviewers must be ready to say something when a navigational nudge is needed.

In order to facilitate active listening, in addition to tape-recording the interview, interviewers can take notes. These working notes help interviewers concentrate on what the participant is saying. They also help to keep interviewers from interrupting the participant by allowing them to keep track of things that the participant has mentioned in order to come back to these subjects when the timing is right.

A good way to gauge listening skills is to transcribe an interview tape. Separate the interviewer's questions from the participant's responses by new paragraphs. Compare the relative length of the participant's paragraphs with the interviewer's. If the interviewer is listening well, his or her paragraphs will be short and relatively infrequently interspersed among the longer paragraphs of the participant's responses.

Note the following one-page transcript, for example. It is taken from the beginning of interview number two on the experience of being an instructional designer.

**INTERVIEWER:** Could you tell me as much as possible about the details of your experience at work as an instructional designer presently or as a grad student working in the area of instructional design?

**PARTICIPANT:** The details of instructional design . . . O.K.

**INTERVIEWER:** Your present experience . . .

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** As an instructional designer.

**PARTICIPANT:** Uhm . . . So something like . . . you mean something like perhaps the last several jobs I've done?

**INTERVIEWER:** No, what you're presently doing, like as a student maybe right now or you said you did have a job that you're working on.

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, well, I have one current, current job umh, the thing is that when you said current I may or may in any given day, I may or may not happen to have a job; you know they just, they just fall out of the sky. You don't really—My experience in getting work has been that—no matter what I do to try to get work I don't see any direct results between those efforts and getting the jobs, right. On the other hand, I do get jobs. They just fall out of the sky [laugh]. All I can say about you know like meteorites. Umh, and they range over a wide, wide variety of—of contact. Umh [sniffle] it could be teaching office workers how to use software. I've done all of those, all of those kinds of things. Umh, and typically the things start through the proposal, umh less and less I've been doing the actual proposals, but usually I'm not ah—the actual getting the business is not my job and somewhere there is a line between; writing the proposal is part of getting the business and um so I usually have something to do with writing the proposal but I don't do a lot of getting the business. Umh [sniffle] somewhere after the proposal is written or during the proposal stage I'm brought in [sniffle]—and I get to do the work. (Reproduced from Tremblay, 1990)

This text is a good example of an interviewer's listening hard to a participant. At the beginning of the interview, the participant is not quite focused. The interviewer, concentrating on what he is saying, nudges him into the frame of reference of the second interview. Once she has the participant in the right channel, she listens and lets him talk. Even when the participant pauses for a few seconds, she does not interrupt.

Patai (1987) describes the process of listening to her Brazilian women participants as an intense form of concentration and openess to them that led her to become absorbed in them (p. 12). Although not every interview takes on the almost magical quality that Patai describes, interest in the
participant’s experience and a willingness to hold one’s own ego in check are keys to the hard work of listening in an interview that leads to the type of absorption Patai describes.

FOLLOW UP ON WHAT THE PARTICIPANT SAYS

When interviewers do talk in an interview, they usually ask questions. The key to asking questions during in-depth interviewing is to let them follow, as much as possible, from what the participant is saying. Although the interviewer comes to each interview with a basic question that establishes the purpose and focus of the interview, it is in response to what the participant says that the interviewer follows up, asks for clarification, seeks concrete details, and requests stories. Rather than preparing a preset interview guide, the interviewer’s basic work in this approach to interviewing is to listen actively and to move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share.

ASK QUESTIONS WHEN YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND

It is hard work to understand everything people say. Sometimes the context is not clear. At other times we do not understand the specific referent of what someone is saying. In everyday conversation we often let such things slide by without understanding them. In interviewing such sliding undermines the process.

The interview structure is cumulative. One interview establishes the context for the next. Not having understood something in an early interview, an interviewer might miss the significance of something a participant says later. Passages in interviews become links to each other in ways that cannot be foretold. Also, the interviewer who lets a participant know when he or she does not understand something shows the person that the interviewer is listening.

Sometimes it is difficult to get the chronology of an experience straight. It is important for interviewers to understand experiences in the context of time. A question like, “Can you tell me again when that happened?” is a reasonable one. I use the word again so as not to imply to participants that they are not being clear, thereby making them defensive, but rather, as is often the case, to suggest that I was just not attentive enough the first time around.

Sometimes participants use vague words that seem to be communicating but are not explicit. For example, one community college faculty member whom I interviewed consistently described his students by saying, “They are very nice.” I did not know what he meant by the term nice. In a way it seemed to trivialize the respect for his students that he had communicated throughout the interview. I asked him, “What is nice?” He said,

The students at the private university [where he had previously taught] were rude, and they were frequently demanding. I don’t mean intellectually demanding. They would say, “You didn’t say that. You didn’t say you were going to test us on that sort of thing.” Our students at the community college are really nice. I realize this sounds silly; I apologize for it. It really sounds crazy to say for some reason we happen to have the nicest people around that happen to live in this neighborhood. Now that’s not likely. But we have an attitude on this campus. There is a kind of mutual respect and I get a lot of this when our students come back after they have gone somewhere else. . . . There is a different feeling, even though it is a bigger school, and you really don’t know everybody. Uh, nonetheless there is a kind of community feeling here and there is a lack of what I call a mean spirit where you are just touchy and aggressive and, uh, inquisitive. Maybe our students are not that motivated; maybe that’s why they are not; but they are really nice to teach. You almost never have anything you could call a discipline problem. It just doesn’t happen. . . . I don’t know; I do like our students. I think it would be absolutely perfect if they were a little better prepared, but that’s not as important as being nice people. . . . They are the kind of people that are pleasant to work with. (Interview in Seidman et al., 1983)

In responding to my request for clarification about his use of the word nice, the participant went more deeply into the nature of his teaching experience. By my taking his language seriously, he explored what he meant when he used the word nice. As the interviewer, I then understood better what, for him, were the complexities implied in his use of the apparently simple word nice.

ASK TO HEAR MORE ABOUT A SUBJECT

When interviewers want to hear more about what a participant is saying, they should trust that instinct. Interviewers should ask questions when they feel unsatisfied with what they have heard. Sometimes they do not think that they have heard the entire story; other times they may think that they are getting generalities and they want to hear the details; or they may just be interested in what the participant is saying and want to hear more. Sometimes when listening, interviewers begin to feel a vague ques-
tion welling up inside them because they sense there is more to the story. In those instances it is important for them to ask to hear more.

For example, in a study of older women returning to community colleges (Schatzker, 1986), one student spoke about her experience in a math course. The last two thirds of the technical math course she was taking was devoted to calculus.

She said, “At that point, I capsized. That was beyond the capacities of my math ... it was beyond me. So I was obedient. This is something I don’t usually do in school, but I just memorized and did what I was told and followed out the formulas the way I was told I should and which I regret. I got an A, but I regret it.”

The interviewer, hearing the phrase “I regret it,” wanted to hear more. She asked, based on what the participant had said, “What do you regret?”

The participant responded, “I never really understood it, you know. I didn’t really learn. I’m sure there is something lovely there under all that calculus to be learned and I didn’t learn that. I theoretically learned how to use it as a tool. By being slavish you know: plugging numbers into formulas and finding the right formula and stuff; that’s not the way math should be learned and it’s not really understanding.”

By following up on the participant’s phrase of regret, the interviewer gave the participant a chance to go a step further in her story. In so doing she revealed a desire to learn and a potential appreciation for the beauty of math that increases the reader’s understanding of her community college experience and our respect for her as an individual.

EXPLORE, DON’T PROBE

In referring to the skill of following up on what participants say, the literature on interviewing often uses the word probe. (See, e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995.) I have never been comfortable with that word. I always think of a sharp instrument pressing on soft flesh when I hear it. The word also conveys a sense of the powerful interviewer treating the participant as an object. I am more comfortable with the notion of exploring with the participant than with probing into what the participant says.

At the same time, too much and ill-timed exploration of the participant’s words can make him or her defensive and shift the meaning making from the participant to the interviewer. The interview can become too easily a vehicle for the interviewer’s agenda rather than an exploration of the participant’s experience. Too little exploration, however, can leave an interviewer unsure of the participant’s meaning in the material he or she has gathered. It can also leave the participant using abstractions and generalities that are not useful (Hyman et al., 1954).

LISTEN MORE, TALK LESS, AND ASK REAL QUESTIONS

Listen more, talk less. I repeat the first principle of interviewing here for emphasis and because it is so easy to forget. When you do ask questions, ask only real questions. By a real question I mean one to which the interviewer does not already know or anticipate the response. If interviewers want to ask a question to which they think they know the response, it would be better to say what they think, and then to ask the participant what he or she thinks of the assertion.

AVOID LEADING QUESTIONS

A leading question is one that influences the direction the response will take. Sometimes the lead is in the intonation of the question: The tone implies an expectation. Sometimes it is in the wording, syntax, and intonation of the question, as when an interviewer asks, “Did you really mean to do that?” Sometimes the lead is in the conclusion implied by the question. One interviewer, listening to a participant’s story about her family and her early schooling, asked: “Your parents pushed you to study, didn’t they?” Or in another place, the interviewer asked, “How satisfied were you with your student teaching placement?” instead of, for example, “What was your student teaching placement like for you?” (For a more extensive discussion of leading questions, see Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1989; Richardson et al., 1985.)

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

An open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer. There are at least two types of open-ended questions especially relevant to in-depth interviewing. One is what Spradley (1979) calls the “grand tour” question (pp. 86–87), in which the interviewer asks the participant to reconstruct a significant segment of an experience. For example, in interviewing a counselor, an interviewer might say, “Take me through a day in your work life.” Or in
working with a student teacher, an interviewer might ask, “Reconstruct your day for me from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed.”

There is also the mini-tour, in which the interviewer asks the participant to reconstruct the details of a more limited time span or of a particular experience. For example, an interviewer might ask a vice principal to reconstruct the details of a particular disciplinary session with a student; or an interviewer might ask a teacher to talk about the experience of a particular conference with a parent.

A second type of open-ended question focuses more on the subjective experience of the participant than on the external structure. For example, a participant might begin to talk about her experience in a parent conference. After asking her what happened at the conference, the interviewer might ask her to talk about what that conference was like for her.

Although there are many approaches to open-ended questioning, when I am interested in understanding the participant’s subjective experience, I often find myself asking the question, “What was that like for you?” As Schutz (1967) indicated, it is not possible to experience what the participant experienced. If we could, then we would be the participant. Perhaps the closest we can come is to ask the metaphorical question implied in the word like. When interviewers ask what something was like for participants, they are giving them the chance to reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important, unguided by the interviewer. (For a thoughtful discussion of questioning strategies she uses in oral history interviewing, see Yow, 1994, pp. 38–44.)

FOLLOW UP, DON’T INTERRUPT

Avoid interrupting participants when they are talking. Often an interviewer is more interested in something a participant says than the speaker seems to be. While the participant continues talking, the interviewer feels strongly tempted to interrupt to pursue the interesting point. Rather than doing so, however, the interviewer can jot down the key word and follow up on it later, when doing so will not interrupt the participant’s train of thought. The opportunity may come later in the same interview or even in a subsequent one (Richardson et al., 1965).

Once, for example, a teacher had been talking early in the second interview about the frenetic pace of her day and about having no place to hide. At the time, I was very interested in what she said, but she went on to other aspects of her experience. Rather than interrupting her then, I wrote down in my working notes the phrases “frenetic pace” and “no place to hide.”

Later, when there was a pause in her responses, I returned to those phrases by saying, “A while back you talked about a very frenetic pace. You talked about coming in the door, teaching your class, walking to your office, keeping extensive hours, having no place to hide. Would you talk more about that frenetic pace and having no place to hide?” [Richardson et al., 1965, term this approach “the echo” (pp. 157–163) and caution against its overuse.]

The participant responded by talking about the effect of her community college’s architecture on her daily life. In order to make faculty as accessible as possible to students, the designers of her campus had made the wall of faculty offices that faced the hallway of glass. The participant spoke about her frustration with never having a place to go in her building where she could get some work done without being seen and, most likely, interrupted. Although she could close the door of her office, she could never close out those who sought her.

ASK PARTICIPANTS TO TALK TO YOU AS IF YOU WEREN’T SOMEONE ELSE

Every interviewer probably develops favorite approaches to participants. I have two to which I return often. The first I use when I sense that I am hearing a public voice and I am searching for an inner one (see above). In those situations, I often use what Patton (1989) calls role-playing questions (see also Spradley, 1979). I try to figure out the person with whom the participant might be most comfortable talking personally. I then try asking the participant to imagine that I am that person.

I might say, “If I were your spouse (or your father, or your teacher, or your friend), what would you say to me?” Sometimes this question falls flat. I am unable to shift the participant’s frame of reference enough so that he or she talks to me as though I were someone else. But often, if used sparingly, the role-playing approach works. The participant takes on a different voice, becomes animated in a way that he or she has not been until then, and both the participant and I enjoy for a few moments the new roles that we have assumed.

ASK PARTICIPANTS TO TELL A STORY

I also often ask participants to tell me a story about what they are discussing. In a sense, everything said in an interview is a story. But if a participant were talking about, for example, relationships with students, I
might ask for a story about one particular student who stands out in his or her experience.

Not everybody is comfortable with being asked directly to tell a story. The request seems to block people who may think they do not tell good stories or that story telling is something only other people do. Others, however, suddenly remember a particular incident, become deeply engrossed in reconstructing it, and tell a wonderful story that conveys their experience as concretely as anything could.

I will always remember the story one student teacher told when she was describing the trouble she was having figuring out how to relate to her students. She had envisioned herself as a friendly older sister to them. One day she overheard a group of her students telling dirty jokes, and she told them a mild one.

About a week later, the vice principal called her to his office to say that parents were outraged about the joke. The student teacher went on to tell of a series of meetings with parents in which she had to explain herself. She described the vice principal’s lack of real support during those meetings. Finally she talked about the sobering realization that she had not known where to draw the line with her students. She said, “The dirty joke was horrendous, and I understood that. I understood that I was just trying to be one of the kids, that I felt close to them . . . I was just being too familiar. I always thought that teaching . . . was relating to the kids.”

Stories such as this, in which the student teacher gave a beginning, middle, and end to a segment of her experience, drew characters, presented conflict, and showed how she dealt with it, convey experience in an illuminating and memorable way. (See Mishler, 1986, chap. 4, for an extended discussion of the power of narratives.) If an interviewer continually asks participants to illustrate experiences with a story, the technique will wear out quickly. Used sparingly, however, and targeted at particular aspects of the participant’s experience, it can lead to treasured moments in interviewing.

**KEEP PARTICIPANTS FOCUSED AND ASK FOR CONCRETE DETAILS**

Keep participants focused on the subject of the interview. If they begin to talk about current experience in the first interview, try to guide them back to the focus of that interview, which is to provide contextual background from their life story. Although the interviewer must avoid a power struggle, he or she must exercise enough control of the process so that participants respect the structure and individual purpose of each of the three interviews in the series.

**TECHNIQUE ISN'T EVERYTHING**

Throughout the interviews, but especially in the first two, ask for concrete details of a participant’s experience before exploring attitudes and opinions about it. The concrete details constitute the experience; attitudes and opinions are based on them. Without the concrete details, the attitudes and opinions can seem groundless.

**DO NOT TAKE THE EBBS AND FLOWS OF INTERVIEWING TOO PERSONALLY**

Watch for an ebb and flow in interviews and try not to take it too personally. In-depth interviewing often surprises participants because they have seldom had the opportunity to talk at length to someone outside their family or friends about their experience. As a result, they may become so engrossed in the first interview that they say things that they are later surprised they have shared (Spradley, 1979). Interviewers often arrive at the second interview thinking what a wonderful interview the first was, only to be surprised that now the participants pull back and are not willing to share as much as before. At this point, interviewers have to be careful not to press too hard for the type of sharing they experienced before. The third interview allows participants to find a zone of sharing within which they are comfortable. They resolve the issue for themselves.

**SHARE EXPERIENCES ON OCCASION**

There are times when an interviewer’s experience may connect to that of the participant. Sharing that experience in a frank and personal way may encourage the participant to continue reconstructing his or her own in a more inner voice than before. Overused, however, such sharing can distort their interview and distract participants from their own experience to the interviewer’s. I can remember sharing stories of mine that I thought connected to what the participant was saying and sensing that the participant was impatient for me to stop talking. (For a somewhat different perspective on the amount of interaction that is desirable between interviewer and participant, see Oakley, 1981.)

**ASK PARTICIPANTS TO RECONSTRUCT, NOT TO REMEMBER**

Avoid asking participants to rely on their memories. As soon as interviewers ask if people remember something, impediments to memory
spring up (Tagg, 1985). Ask participants, in effect, not to remember their experience but rather to reconstruct it. Ask directly "What happened?" or "What was your elementary school experience like?" instead of "Do you remember what your elementary school experience was like?"

Interviewers can assume that the participants will be able to reconstruct their experience and thereby avoid many of the impediments to memory that abound. Reconstruction is based partially on memory and partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past event. In a sense, all recall is reconstruction (Thelen, 1989). In interviewing, it is better to go for that reconstruction as directly as possible.

AVOID REINFORCING YOUR PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

Avoid reinforcing what your participant is saying, either positively or negatively. A useful training exercise is to transcribe verbatim 5 minutes of an early interview. What sometimes becomes clear is that the interviewer is in the habit of saying "uh huh" or "O.K." or "yes" or some other short affirmative response to almost every statement from the participant. Sometimes interviewers are hardly aware that they are doing it.

On having such reinforcement called to their attention, many new interviewers suggest that there is nothing inappropriate about the practice. They argue that it shows they are listening and being attentive and that participants appreciate knowing that; it keeps them talking. Often, I think, it is a relatively benign controlling mechanism that is difficult to give up.

But interviewers who reinforce what they are hearing run the risk of distorting how the participant responds (Richardson et al., 1965). A more effective and less invasive method is to refer later in an interview to something participants said earlier. (For a more balanced perspective on reinforcements, see Richardson et al., 1965.)

EXPLORE LAUGHTER

Often a participant will say something and then laugh, sometimes because what he or she just said is self-evidently funny. At other times, the laughter may be nervous or ironic, its origin unclear to the interviewer and often worth exploring. For example, when interviewing a female science teacher, I asked her how the fact that there were 10 women in her community college science division of 60 faculty affected her sense of power in the college. I related the question to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) discussion of numbers and power in her book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*. The participant responded:

> Well, you see this isn't a corporation. I mean, people are not jockeying for position within, and that would make a tremendous difference. I think, if we were really competitive with one another for something, [laugh] it might be a tremendously important factor. But we're not competing for anything. There are very few people who want to, say, go up to the next step, which is division director. I feel I could get elected to division director, if I so chose. [Pause] My sex would not at all interfere. [Pause] It might even be a plus, but, uh, most people here are not interested, it's not a power play situation; we're all retired really [laugh]. (Interview in Seidman et al., 1983)

> After she finished and I weighed in my mind the juxtaposition of her laughter with what she was saying, I said, "That sounds bitter." In reply, she spoke about the positive and negative aspects in her experience of not being in a highly competitive, upwardly mobile faculty. I did not follow up at that point because I thought doing so might make her defensive. I wrote in my working notes, "laughter?" and came back to it later in the interview. As Studs Terkel has said, "A laugh can be a cry of pain, and a silence can be a shout" (Parker, 1996, p. 165).

FOLLOW YOUR HUNCHES

Follow your hunches. Trust your instincts. When appropriate, risk saying what you think or asking the difficult question. Sometimes during an interview, a question will start to form, perhaps first as a vague impression, then as a real doubt. My experience is that if is important to trust those responses, to figure out the question that best expresses them, and to ask it.

During one interview with an intern teacher, I became increasingly uncomfortable. I could not figure out what was bothering me until I realized that the participant was talking positively about his teaching experience in a very formal way but with very little energy. His nonverbal language was contradicting his verbal language. I began to think he was really very unhappy with his teaching, even though he was talking relatively positively about it.

I was very uncomfortable with this hunch, but finally after we were more than two thirds of the way into the second interview, I said to him, "You know, I can't figure this out. You are talking as though you are enjoying your teaching, but something about the way you are talking makes me think you are not. Is that fair?"
He responded as though I had opened a floodgate. He began to talk about how angry he was that intern teachers got all the “lowest” classes. He said that even though he had solid math preparation, he would not have a chance to teach upper-level courses for perhaps 5 more years, because all course assignments were made on the basis of seniority. Then he talked about how hard he worked, how little time he had on weekends to be with his wife, and how little money he was making. As a result of following up on a hunch, I gained a completely different picture of his experience, and in the rest of the interview his verbal and nonverbal language coincided.

USE AN INTERVIEW GUIDE CAUTIOUSLY

Some forms of interviewing depend on an interview guide. (See, e.g., Yow, 1994.) The interviewers arrive with preset questions to which they want answers or about which they want to gather data. In-depth interviewing, however, is not designed to test hypotheses, gather answers to questions, or corroborate opinions. Rather, it is designed to ask participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning. The questions most used in an in-depth interview follow from what the participant has said.

 Nonetheless, in-depth interviewers may want to develop an interviewing guide. The basic structure of the interview is the question that establishes the focus of each interview in the series. However, interviewers never come into an interview situation as clean slates. They have interests, or they would not have chosen the research topic they did. In addition, some participants will require more prompting than others to go forward in the reconstruction of their experience. Also, over the course of a number of interviews, the interviewer may notice that several participants have highlighted a particular issue, and the interviewer may want to know how other participants have responded to that issue.

For these reasons, in our study of the experience of student teachers we developed a guide that listed the following areas: student teachers’ relationship with mentors, with students, with other student teachers, with parents, with tracking, testing, and grading. In most cases, student teachers raised these topics on their own as they talked about their teaching experience. In those instances when they did not, and if there was an opportunity to do so without interrupting or diverting a participant’s reconstruction of his or her own experience, the interviewer referred to the interview guide and raised an issue that had not been touched upon.

If interviewers decide to use an interviewing guide, they must avoid manipulating their participants to respond to it. Interviewers should ask questions that reflect areas of interest to them in an open and direct way, perhaps acknowledging that the question comes more from their own interest than from what the participant has said. Interviewers must try to avoid imposing their own interests on the experience of the participants. Interviewers working with an interview guide must allow for the possibility that what may interest them or other participants may be of little interest to the person being interviewed. Interview guides can be useful but must be used with caution.

TOLERATE SILENCE

Interviewers sometimes get impatient and uncomfortable with silence. They project that discomfort onto their participants. They see pauses as voids and jump into the interview with a quick question to fill the void. A useful exercise is to play back an interview tape and record how much time the interviewer gives the participant to think before he or she jumps in with a question. My experience is that new interviewers think they are waiting a considerable time before asking their next question, but when we go over audiotapes of their interviews, we determine that in reality they are waiting only a second or two. Thoughtfulness takes time; if interviewers can learn to tolerate either the silence that sometimes follows a question or a pause within a participant’s reconstruction, they may hear things they would never have heard if they had leapt in with another question to break the silence. (See Mary-Budd Rowe, 1974, on the effect of how much time teachers wait for answers to questions on the quality of students’ responses.)

On the other hand, Yow (1994, p. 63) and Gordon (1987) point out that too long a studied silence on the part of the interviewer can put undue pressure on the participant. The interviewer’s staying silent too long can turn a “pregnant or permissive pause” into an “embarrassing silence” (Gordon, 1987, pp. 423, 426).

As in other aspects of interviewing, there is a delicate balance between jumping in too soon with a question and waiting too long in silence. There are no rules of thumb here. It is important to give your participant space to think, reflect, and add to what he or she has said. This may take a second or two for some participants and 20 seconds for others.

CONCLUSION

There is no recipe for the effective question. The truly effective question flows from an interviewer’s concentrated listening, engaged interest
in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward. Sometimes an important question will start out as an ill-defined instinct or hunch, which takes time to develop and seems risky to ask. Sometimes the effective question reflects the interviewer's own groping for coherence about what is being said and is asked in a hesitant, unsure manner.

Effective questioning is so context-bound, such a reflection of the relationship that has developed between the interviewer and the participant, that to define it further runs the risk of making a human process mechanical. To some extent, the way interviewers are as people will be the way they are as interviewers. If interviewers are the sort of people who always have to be talking, who never listen, who demand to be the center of attention most of the time, who are really not interested in other people's stories, no matter what procedures they follow in interviewing, those characteristics will probably pervade the interviewing relationship.

The most important personal characteristic interviewers must have is a genuine interest in other people. They must be deeply aware that other people's stories are of worth in and of themselves and because they offer something to the interviewer's experience. With a temperament that finds interest in others, a person has the foundation upon which to learn the techniques of interviewing and to practice its skills.

Interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully (Dexter, 1970; Hyman et al., 1954; Mishler, 1986). In part, each interviewing relationship is individually crafted. It is a reflection of the personalities of the participant and the interviewer and the ways they interact. The relationship is also a reflection of the purpose, structure, and method of in-depth interviewing. For example, the fact that the participant and the interviewer meet three times over 2 or 3 weeks results in a relationship different from that which would result from a single-interview structure.

Interviewers can try to craft relationships with their participants that are like islands of interchange separate from the world's definitions, classifications, and tensions. However, individual interviewing relationships exist in a social context. Although an interviewer might attempt to isolate the interviewing relationship from that context and make it unique to the interviewer and the participant, the social forces of class, ethnicity, race, and gender, as well as other social identities, impose themselves. Although interviewers may try to ignore these social forces, they tend to affect their relationships with participants nonetheless.

INTERVIEWING AS AN "I–THOU" RELATIONSHIP

In a section of his book that is elegant even in translation, Schutz (1967) explains that one person's intersubjective understanding of another depends upon creating an "I–Thou" relationship, a concept bearing both similarities to and significant differences from the philosopher Martin Buber's use of the phrase. "Thou" is someone close to the interviewer, still
interviewing relationship, and thereby the quality of the interview, is affected and sometimes seriously limited by social inequities. At the same time, individuals committed to equity in research can find a way first to become conscious of the issues and their own role in them. They can then devise methods that attempt to subvert those societal constraints. In the process they may end up being able to tell their participants’ stories in a way that can promote equity.

Analyzing, Interpreting, and Sharing Interview Material

Research based on in-depth interviewing is labor intensive. There is no substitute for studying the interviews and winnowing the almost 1 million words a study involving 25 participants might yield. (Each series of three interviews can result in 150 double-spaced pages of transcript.) In planning such a study, allow at least as much time for working with the material as for all the steps involved in conceptualizing the study, writing the proposal, establishing access, making contact, selecting participants, and doing the actual interviews.

MANAGING THE DATA

To work with the material that interviewing generates, the researcher first has to make it accessible by organizing it. Keeping track of participants through the participant information forms, making sure the written consent forms are copied and filed in a safe place, labeling audiotapes of interviews accurately, managing the extensive files that develop in the course of working with the transcripts of interviews, and keeping track of decision points in the entire process all require attention to detail, a concern for security, and a system for keeping material accessible. One goal of this administrative work is to be able to trace interview data to the original source on the interview tape at all stages of the research. Another is to be able to contact a participant readily. The simple act of misfiling a written consent form from a participant upon whose material a researcher wants to rely heavily can create hours of extra work and unnecessary anxiety.
The best description I have seen of file management for a qualitative research study is in Lofland (1971). Although there is no one right way to organize the research process and the materials it generates, every moment the researcher spends paying attention to order, labels, filing, and documentation at the beginning and in the formative stages of the study can save hours of frustration later.

KEEPING INTERVIEWING AND ANALYSIS SEPARATE: WHAT TO DO BETWEEN INTERVIEWS

It is difficult to separate the processes of gathering and analyzing data. Even before the actual interviews begin, the researcher may anticipate results on the basis of his or her reading and preparation for the study. Once the interviews commence, the researcher cannot help but work with the material as it comes in. During the interview the researcher is processing what the participant is saying in order to keep the interview moving forward. Afterward, the researcher mentally reviews each interview in anticipation of the next one. If the interviewer is working as part of a research team, the team may get together to discuss what they are learning from the process of the interviews.

Some researchers urge that the two stages be integrated so that each informs the other. (See, e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1984.) They would have interviewers conduct a number of interviews, study and analyze them, frame new questions as a result of what they have found, and then conduct further interviews.

Although the pure separation of generating data from analyzing data is impossible, my own approach is to avoid any in-depth analysis of the interview data until I have completed all the interviews. Even though I sometimes identify possibly salient topics in early interviews, I want to do my best to avoid imposing meaning on one participant’s interviews on the next. Therefore, I first complete all the interviews. Then I study all the transcripts. In that way I try to minimize imposing on the generative process of the interviews what I think I have learned from other participants.

However, I do not mean to suggest that between interviews, interviewers avoid considering what they have just heard in order not to contaminate the next interview. In fact, I live with the interviews, constantly running them over in my mind and thinking about the next. Others may want to be even more explicit. For example, one doctoral candidate with whom I work explained:

After listening to and transcribing the interview, I made a list of the follow-up questions I hoped would be included in the next interview. . . . Having gone over the tape prior to the session, it was fresh in my mind and I was able to reassess the type of information I was getting and write questions to guide me in the next session. (L. Mestre, personal communication, May 7, 1986)

TAPE-RECORDING INTERVIEWS

I have no doubt that in-depth interviews should be tape-recorded; however, the literature reflects varying opinions on this point (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Briggs, 1986; Hyman et al., 1954; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1989). I believe that to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text so study. The primary method of creating text from interviews is to tape-record the interviews and to transcribe them. Each word a participant speaks reflects his or her consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987). The participants’ thoughts become embodied in their words. To substitute the researcher’s paraphrasing or summaries of what the participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher’s consciousness for that of the participant. Although inevitably the researcher’s consciousness will play a major role in the interpretation of interview data, that consciousness must interact with the words of the participant recorded as fully and as accurately as possible.

Tape-recording offers other benefits as well. By preserving the words of the participants, researchers have their original data. If something is not clear in a transcript, the researchers can return to the source and check for accuracy. Later, if they are accused of mishandling their interview material, they can go back to their original sources to demonstrate their accountability to the data. In addition, interviewers can use tapes to study their interviewing techniques and improve upon them. Tape-recording also benefits the participants. The assurance that there is a record of what they have said to which they have access can give them more confidence that their words will be treated responsibly.

It may seem that the tape recorder could inhibit participants, but my experience is that they soon forget the device. Some interviewers, afraid that a tape recorder will affect the responses of their participants, use the smallest, least intrusive one they can find. Sometimes they sacrifice audio quality in doing so. I use a tape recorder with a separate microphone because I have found that some recorders with built-in microphones can muffle the sound and make transcribing an agony. I also do a test of how well the recorder is picking up the sound of the participant’s and my voice before I start the actual interview. It is frustrating to interview someone for 4½ hours only to be unable to decipher the audiotape later. (See Yow,
TRANscribing INTERView TAPES

Transcribing interview tapes is time-consuming and potentially costly work. It can be facilitated by using a transcribing machine that has a foot pedal and earphones. Nonetheless, it will normally take from 4 to 6 hours to transcribe a 90-minute tape. If possible, the initial transcriptions should be made using a computer-based word-processing program. Later, when researchers sort and refine material, having the interviews in computer files will prove highly efficient and labor saving. Interviewers who transcribe their own tapes come to know their interviews better, but the work is so demanding that they can easily tire and lose enthusiasm for interviewing as a research process.

Doctoral students ask me if there is a substitute for transcribing the entire interview tape. My response is yes, but not a good one. It is possible to listen to the tapes a number of times, pick out sections that seem important, and then transcribe just those. Although that approach is labor-saving, it is not desirable because it imposes the researcher's frame of reference on the interview data one step too early in the winnowing process. In working with the material, it is important that the researcher start with the whole (Briggs, 1986). Preselecting parts of the tape to transcribe and omitting others tends to lead to premature judgments about what is important and what is not. Once the decision is made not to transcribe a portion of the tape, that portion of the interview is usually lost to the researcher. So although labor is saved in this alternative approach, the cost may be high.

The ideal solution is for the researcher to hire a transcriber. That, however, is expensive, and the job must be done well to be worth the effort. If interviewers can hire transcribers, or even if they do the transcriptions themselves, it is essential for them to develop explicit written instructions concerning the transcribing (Kvale, 1996). Writing out the instructions will improve the consistency of the process, encourage the researchers to think through all that is involved, and allow them to share their decision making with their readers at a later point. Although a transcript can be only a partial representation of the interview (Mishler, 1986), it can reflect the interview as fully as possible by being verbatim. In addition, the transcriber should make note of all the nonverbal signals, such as coughs, laughs, sighs, pauses, outside noises, telephone rings, and interruptions, that are recorded on the tape.

Both the interviewer and the transcriber must realize that decisions about where to punctuate the transcripts are significant. Participants do not speak in paragraphs or always clearly indicate the end of a sentence by voice inflection. Punctuating is one of the beginning points of the process of analyzing and interpreting the material (Kvale, 1996) and must be done thoughtfully.

A detailed and careful transcript that re-creates the verbal and non-verbal material of the interview can be of great benefit to a researcher who may be studying the transcript months after the interview occurred. (For further discussion of transcription, see Mishler, 1991.) Note the care and precision with which the following section of an interview audiotape was transcribed. The interviewer is studying what it is like to be a communications major in a large university. Here she is asking the participant about financing her college education:

INTERVIEWER: Uhm, what does that experience mean to you?
PARTICIPANT: The fact that I spent so much money or that my parents like kind of rejected me?
INTERVIEWER: Both.
PARTICIPANT: Uh, the fact that I spent so much money blows my mind because now I'm so poor and I'm. I can't believe I had so much, I mean I look back [slight pause] to the summer and the fall and [slight pause] I know where my money went. I mean, I was always down the Cape and I'd just spend at least $50 or $60 a night, you know, 3 or 4 nights a week. And then when I did an internship in town I was always driving in town, parking, saying "who cares" and I waited three shifts a week so I always had money in my pocket. So it was just, I always had money so, I never really cared and I never prepared for the future or never even considered that my parents wouldn't be there to foot the bill like they'd always been. And I wasn't really aware that they [pause] that they [slight pause and voice lowers] were becoming insulted. (Reproduced from Burke, 1990)

STUDYING, REDUCING, AND ANALYZING THE TEXT

As one can see, in-depth interviewing generates an enormous amount of text. The vast array of words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages have to be reduced to what is most important and interest (McCracken, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Wolcott, 1990). Most important is that reduc-
ing the data be done inductively rather than deductively. That is, the researcher cannot address the material with a set of hypotheses to test or with a theory developed in another context to which he or she wishes to match the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text.

At the same time, no interviewer can enter into the study of an interview as a clean slate (Rowan, 1981). All responses to a text are interactions between the reader and the text (Fish, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1952). That is why it is important that the researcher identify his or her interest in the subject and examine it to make sure that the interest is neither unhealthy nor infused with anger, bias, or prejudice. The interviewer must come to the transcript prepared to let the interview breathe and speak for itself.

Marking What Is of Interest in the Text

The first step in reducing the text is to read it and mark with brackets the passages that are interesting. The best description I have read of this aspect of the winnowing process is Judi Marshall's (1981) "Making Sense as a Personal Process." She acknowledges that what she can bring to the data is her sense of what is important, as she reads the transcripts. She expresses confidence in being able to respond to meaningful "chunks" of transcript. She says that she recognizes them when she sees them and does not have to agonize over what level of semantic analysis she is doing. She affirms the role of her judgment in the process. In short, what is required in responding to interview text is no different from what is required in responding to other texts—a close reading plus judgment (Mostyn, 1985).

Marshall also talks about the dark side of this process: that time when, while working with interview data, you lose confidence in your ability to sort out what is important, you wonder if you are making it all up, and you feel considerable doubt about what you are doing. You become worried that you are falling into the trap of self-deception, which Miles and Huberman (1984) caution is the bane of those who analyze qualitative data. Marshall (1985) calls it an anxiety that you learn to live with.

It is important that researchers acknowledge that in this stage of the process they are exercising judgment over what is significant in the transcript. In reducing the material interviewers have begun to analyze, interpret, and make meaning of it. The interviewer—researchers can later check with the participants to see if what they have marked as being of interest and importance seems that way to the participants. Although members checking can inform a researcher's judgment, it cannot substitute for it (Lightfoot, 1983). That judgment depends on the researcher's experience,

both in the past in general and in working with and internalizing the interviewing material; it may be the most important ingredient the researcher brings to the study (Marshall, 1981).

Although I can suggest some of the characteristics that make interviewing texts meaningful to me, there is no model matrix of interesting categories that one can impose on all texts. What is of essential interest is embedded in each research topic and will arise from each transcript. The interviewer must affirm his or her own ability to recognize it.

There are certain aspects of individual experience and social structure to which I respond when they appear. I am alert to conflict, both between people and within a person. I respond to hopes expressed and whether they are fulfilled or not. I am alert to language that indicates beginnings, middles, and ends of processes. I am sensitive to frustrations and resolutions, to indications of isolation and the more rare expressions of collegiality and community. Given the world in which we live, I am sensitive to the way issues of class, ethnicity, and gender play out in individual lives, and the way hierarchy and power affect people (Kanter, 1977). I do not, however, come to a transcript looking for these. When they are there, these and other passages of interest speak to me, and I bracket them. Inductively.

Even when working with a research team, I give little instruction about marking what is of interest in a transcript other than to say, "Mark what is of interest to you as you read. Do not ponder about the passage. If it catches your attention, mark it. Trust yourself as a reader. If you are going to err, err on the side of inclusion." As you repeat the winnowing process, you can always exclude material; but materials once excluded from a text tend to become like unembodied thoughts that flee back to the stygian shadows of the computer file, and tend to remain there. (See Vygotsky, 1987, p. 210.) Despite my open instruction about marking transcripts, I have often found considerable overlap among my colleagues in what we have marked.

SHARING INTERVIEW DATA: PROFILES AND THEMES

One goal of the researcher in marking what is of interest in the interview transcript is to reduce and then shape the material into a form in which it can be shared or displayed (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Reducing the data is a first step in allowing the researchers to present their interview material and then to analyze and interpret it (Wolcott, 1984). It is one of the most difficult steps in the process because, inevitably, it means letting interview material go.

I have used two basic ways to share interview data. First, I have
developed profiles of individual participants and grouped them in categories that made sense. Second, I have marked individual passages, grouped these in categories, and then studied the categories for thematic connections within and among them.

Rationale for Crafting Profiles

Although there is no right way to share interview data, and some researchers argue for less reliance on words and more on graphs, charts, and matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1984), I have found that crafting a profile or a vignette of a participant’s experience is an effective way of sharing interview data and opening up one’s interview material to analysis and interpretation. The idea comes from Studs Terkel’s Working (1972).

Not all interviews will sustain display in the form of a profile. My experience is that only about one out of three interviews is complete and compelling enough to be shaped into a profile that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, as well as some sense of conflict and resolution. Other interviews may sustain what I call a vignette, which is a shorter narrative that usually covers a more limited aspect of a participant’s experience.

A profile in the words of the participant is the research product that I think is most consistent with the process of interviewing. It allows us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis. (See Dey, 1993, pp. 30–39, for an excellent discussion of the question, “What is qualitative analysis?”) We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what the participants say. Although the interviewer can never be absent from the process, by crafting a profile in the participant’s own words, the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person’s consciousness.

Profiles are one way to solve the problem the interviewer has of how to share what he or she has learned from the interviews. The narrative form of a profile allows the interviewer to transform this learning into telling a story (Mishler, 1986). Telling stories, Mishler argues, is one major way that human beings have devised to make sense of themselves and their social world. I would add that telling stories is a compelling way to make sense of interview data. The story is both the participant’s and the interviewer’s. It is in the participant’s words, but it is crafted by the interviewer from what the participant has said. Mishler provides an extended discussion of interviewing and its relationship to narratives as a way of knowing, and I strongly recommend it both for its own insights and the further reading that he suggests. (Also see Bruner, 1996, chaps. 6 & 7, for an important discussion of the role of narrative in constructing reality in the field of education.)

What others can learn from reading a profile of a participant is as diverse as the participants we interview, the profiles we craft and organize, and the readers who read them. I have found crafting profiles, however, to be a way to find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant’s experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual’s experience to the social and organizational context within which he or she operates.

Steps in Crafting a Profile

Crafting profiles is a sequential process. Once you have read the transcript, marked passages of interest, and labeled those passages, make two copies of the marked and labeled transcript. (The labeling process is explained later in this chapter.) Using either the capabilities of a word-processing program, a dedicated qualitative analysis program, or even a pair of scissors, cut and file the marked passages on one copy of the transcripts into folders or computer files that correspond to the labels you devised for each passage. These excerpts will be used in the second, thematic way of sharing material. It is important never to cut up the original transcript because it serves throughout the study as a reference to which the researcher may turn for placing in context passages that have been excerpted.

From the other copy of the transcripts, select all the passages that you marked as important and put them together as a single transcript. Your resulting version may be one third to one half the length of the original three-interview transcript.

The next step is to read the new version, this time with a more demanding eye. It is very difficult to give up interview material. As you read, ask yourself which passages are the most compelling, those that you are just not willing to put aside. Underline them. Now you are ready to craft a narrative based on them.

One key to the power of the profile is that it is presented in the words of the participant. I cannot stress too much how important it is to use the first person, the voice of the participant, rather than a third-person transformation of that voice. To illustrate the point for yourself, take perhaps 30 seconds from one of your pilot interviews. First present the section verbatim. Then craft it into a mini-narrative using the first-person voice of the participant. Next try using your voice and describing the participant in the third person. It should become apparent that using the third-person voice distances the reader from the participant and allows
introducing more easily than when he or she is limited to selecting compelling material and weaving it together into a first-person narrative. Kvale (1996, p. 227) points out the temptation for researchers to expropriate and to use inappropriately their participants' experience for their own purposes. Using the first-person voice can help researchers guard against falling into this trap.

In creating profiles it is important to be faithful to the words of the participants and to identify in the narrative when the words are those of someone else. Sometimes, to make transitions between passages, you may wish to add your own words. Elsewhere you may want to clarify a passage. Each researcher can work out a system of notation to let the reader know when language not in the interview itself has been inserted. I place such language in brackets. I use ellipses when omitting material from a paragraph or when skipping paragraphs or even pages in the transcripts. In addition, I delete from the profile certain characteristics of oral speech that a participant would not use in writing—for example, repetitious "uhms," "ahs," "you know," and other such idiosyncrasies that do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she has said.

Some might argue that researchers should make no changes in the oral speech of their participants when presenting it to an audience as a written document. I think, however, that unless the researcher is planning a semantic analysis or the subject of the interview is the language development of the participant, the claims for the realism of the oral speech are balanced by the researcher's obligation to maintain the dignity of the participant in presenting his or her oral speech in writing.

Normally, I try to present material in a profile in the order in which it came in the interviews. Material that means something in one context cannot be transposed to another context that changes its meaning. However, if material in interview three, for example, fits with part of the narrative based on interview two, I may decide to transpose that material, if doing so does not wrench it out of context and distort its meaning. In making all these decisions, I ask myself whether each is fair to the larger interview.

An important consideration in crafting a profile is to protect the identity of the participant if the written consent form calls for doing so. Even when transcribing the interview, use initials for all names that might identify the participant in case a casual reader comes across the transcript. In creating the profile itself, select a pseudonym that does justice to the participant. This is not an easy or a mechanical process. When choosing a pseudonym, take into consideration issues of ethnicity, age, and the context of the participant's life. Err on the side of understatement rather than overstatement. If a participant would be made vulnerable were his or her identity widely known, take additional steps to conceal it. For example, change the participant's geographical location, the details of his or her work—a physics teacher can become a science teacher—and other identifying facets of the person's experience. The extent to which an interviewer needs to resort to disguise is in direct relation to how vulnerable the person might be if identified. But the disguise must not distort what the participant has said in the interview.

The researcher must also be alert to whether he or she has made the participant vulnerable by the narrative itself. For example, Woods (1990) had to exercise extreme caution because, if her participants were identified, they might be fired from their teaching positions. Finally, the participant's dignity must always be a consideration. Participants volunteer to be interviewed but not to be maligned or incriminated by their own words. A function of the interviewing process and its products should be to reveal the participant's sense of self and worth.

Profiles as a Way of Knowing

I include in the Appendix two examples of profiles. The first is an edited version of a profile developed by Toon Fuderich (1995), who is doing doctoral research on the child survivors of the Pol Pot era in Cambodia. She interviewed 17 refugees who had come to the United States to start a new life. The profile presented is of a participant called Nanda who was 28 at the time of her interview and worked part time in a human services agency. In a note to her paper, Fuderich indicated that in order to present the material clearly, she eliminated hesitations and repetitions in Nanda's speech. She also removed some of the idiosyncrasies of Nanda's speech and made grammatical corrections while at the same time remaining "respectful of the content and the intended meaning of the participant's words" (Fuderich, 1995).

I hesitated to include the profile of Nanda because I was afraid readers would think in-depth interviewing is only successful when it results in the kind of dramatic and heart-rending material Fuderich shared in Nanda's profile. I was concerned that potential researchers, especially doctoral candidates, would hesitate to try the process if their research areas seemed to them, in comparison, to be mundane.

As Nanda's profile reveals, in-depth interviewing is capable of capturing momentous, historical experiences. I wanted to both reveal that capability and share Fuderich's work, which seemed to me so compelling. However, in-depth interviewing research is perhaps even more capable of reconstructing and finding the compelling in the experiences of everyday life.
As a second example, therefore, I include in the Appendix an edited version of a profile developed by Marguerite Sheehan (1989). (For other examples of such profiles, see Seidman, 1985.) This profile resulted from a pilot study Sheehan conducted of the experience of day-care providers who have stayed in the field for a long time. (See Chapter 3 for a description of her interview structure.)

The profile presented is of a participant, Betty, who is a family day-care provider. She takes care of six children in her home every day. Most of the children are in "protective slots," that is, their day care is paid for by the state. Their parents are often required to leave them in care because the children either have been or are at risk of being abused or neglected.

Sheehan presented a version of this profile to our seminar on In-Depth Interviewing and Issues in Qualitative Research. In her final comments, she wrote:

Betty had many other things to say that I was not able to fit into this report. She talked quite a bit about how her daughter and husband were involved in the Family Day Care whether through their physical presence or their interest in the children. She told me more stories about individual children and families that she worked with. I was impressed with how she identified at different times with both the children and the parents and how she had to let go while still remaining involved with them. Betty was often nervous and worried that she was not saying the "right thing." She told me that this was the first time that anyone had asked her about the meaning in her work.

(Sheehan, 1989)

Betty's profile tells an important story in her own words. It may not have the life-and-death drama of Nanda's profile, but it captures compellingly, I think, the struggle of a day-care provider from which anyone interested in day care can learn.

As both Fuderich and Sheehan have pursued their research, they have interviewed additional participants. If they choose to do so, they will be able to present a series of profiles grouped together around organizing topics. In addition to the profiles' speaking powerfully for themselves, the researchers will then be able to explore and comment on the salient issues within individual profiles and point out connections among profiles. For example, in the profile of Betty, the issues of how people come to the work of day care, the preparation they have, the support they are given, the effect of the low status and gendered nature of the work, the relatively unexplored subject of working with the parents, and the issue of child abuse, to name several, are raised. In Nanda's profile, issues inherent in the traumas of history, being a refugee, learning English as a second language, and the tensions and complexities of acculturation are raised, among others.

Each researcher would be able to make explicit what she has learned about those subjects through the presentation of the profiles and also through connecting those profiles to the experience of others in her sample. By telling Betty's story of her everyday work in her own words, Sheehan is setting the stage for her readers to learn about the issues involved in providing day care through the experiences of a person deeply involved in that work. By telling Nanda's story, Fuderich is inviting readers to both bear witness and begin to understand the factors influencing resilience among those who, as children, survived the Cambodian genocide, which is the subject of her dissertation study.

MAKING AND ANALYZING THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

A more conventional way of presenting and analyzing interview data than crafting profiles is to organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories. The researcher then searches for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories and for connections between the various categories that might be called themes. In addition to presenting profiles of individuals, the researcher, as part of his or her analysis of the material, can then present and comment upon excerpts from the interviews thematically organized.

During the process of reading and marking the transcripts, the researcher can begin to label the passages that he or she has marked as interesting. After having read and indicated interesting passages in two or three participants' interviews, the researcher can pause to consider whether they can be labeled. What is the subject of the marked passages? Are there words or a phrase that seems to describe them, at least tentatively? Is there a word within the passage itself that suggests a category into which the passage might fit? In Sheehan's transcript, some of the labels for the passages included in the Appendix might be "background of provider," "support groups," "parents," "impact on family," "abuse," and "parents."

The process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files is called "classifying" or, in some sources, "coding" data. (See Dey, 1993, p. 58, for a critique of the term coding as applied to qualitative research.)

Computer programs are available that will help classify, sort, file, and reconnect interview data. By telling the computer what to look for, the program can scan large amounts of data quickly and sort material into
categories according to the directions. (See Dey, 1993; Weitzman & Miles, 1995, for introductions to the use of computer programs in qualitative data analysis and reviews of specific programs.)

For those who choose to work with either a dedicated analytical program or even a word-processing program, I suggest caution in doing significant coding or editing on screen. I recommend working first on a paper copy and then transferring the work to the computer. My experience is that there is a significant difference between what one sees in a text presented on paper and the same text shown on screen, and that one's response is different, too. I have learned, for example, that it is foolish of me to edit on screen, because I invariably miss issues that are easily evident to me when I work with a paper copy. I would not recommend relying on reading an interview text on screen for the process of categorizing material. Something in the medium of screen and paper affects the message the viewer retrieves (see Marshall McLuhan, 1965, for an early and influential commentary on this process).

At this point in the reading, marking, and labeling process it is important to keep labels tentative. Locking in categories too early can lead to dead ends. Some of the categories will work out. That is, as the researcher continues to read and mark interview transcripts, other passages will come up that seem connected to the same category. On the other hand, some categories that seemed promising early in the process will die out. New ones may appear. Categories that seemed separate and distinct will fold into each other. Others may remain in flux almost until the end of the study (Dey, 1984).

In addition to labeling each marked passage with a term that places it in a category, researchers should also label each passage with a notation system that will designate its original place in the transcript. (Dey, 1993, points out that many dedicated analytical computer programs will do this automatically.) I use, for example, the initials of the participant, a Roman numeral for the number of the interview in the three-interview sequence, and Arabic numbers for the page number of the transcript on which the passage occurs. Later, when working with the material and considering an excerpt taken from its original context, the researcher may want to check the accuracy of the text and replace it in its full context, even going back to the audiotape itself. The labeling of each excerpt allows such retracing.

The next step is to file those excerpts either in computer files under the name of the assigned category or in folders. Some excerpts might fit reasonably into more than one file. Make copies of those and file in the multiple files that seem appropriate.

After filing all the marked excerpts, reread all of them file by file.

Start sifting out the ones that now seem very compelling, setting aside the ones that seem at this stage to be of less interest. At this point, the researcher is in what Rowan (1981) calls a "dialectical" process with the material (p. 134). The participants have spoken, and now the interviewer is responding to their words, concentrating his or her intuition and intellect on the process. What emerges is a synthesis of what the participant has said and how the researcher has responded. Some commentators regard this sorting and culling as an entirely intuitive process (Tagg, 1985). It is important, however, that researchers also try to form and articulate their criteria for the winnowing and sorting process. By doing so, they give their readers a basis for understanding the process the researcher used in reducing the mass of words to more manageable proportions.

I do not begin to read the transcripts with a set of categories for which I want to find excerpts. The categories arise out of the passages that I have marked as interesting. On the other hand, when I reflect on the type of material that arouses my interest, it is clear that some patterns are present, that I have certain predispositions I bring to my reading of the transcripts. When working with excerpts from interview material, I find myself selecting passages that connect to other passages in the file. In a way, quantity starts to interact with quality. The repetition of an aspect of experience that was already mentioned in other passages takes on weight and calls attention to itself.

In noticing excerpts from a participant's experience that connect to each other as well as to passages from other participants. Sometimes excerpts connect to the literature on the subject. They stand out because I have read about the issue from a perspective independent of my interviewing. Some passages are told in a striking manner or highlight a dramatic incident. Those are perhaps the most troublesome for me. They are attractive because of their style or the sheer drama of the incident, but I know that I have to be careful about such passages. The dramatic can be confused with the pervasive. The researcher has to judge whether the particular dramatic incident is idiosyncratic or characteristic (Mostyn, 1985).

Some passages stand out because they are contradictory and seem decisively inconsistent with others. It is tempting to put those aside. These, in particular, however, have to be kept in the foreground, lest researchers exercise their own biased subjectivity, noticing and using only materials that support their own opinions (Kvale, 1996, p. 212). The researcher has to try to understand their importance in the face of the other data he or she has gathered (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The process of working with excerpts from participants' interviews, seeking connections among them, explaining those connections and build-
Interpretive categories is demanding and involves risks. The danger is that the researcher will try to force the excerpts into categories, and the categories into themes that he or she already has in mind, rather than let them develop from the experience of the participants as represented in the interviews. The reason an interviewer spends so much time talking to participants is to find out what their experience is and the meaning they make of it, and then to make connections among the experiences of people who share the same structure. Rowan (1981) stresses the inappropriateness of force-fitting the words of participants into theories derived from other sources.

There is no substitute for total immersion in the data. It is important to try to articulate criteria for marking certain passages as notable and selecting some over others in order for the process to have public credibility. It is also important to affirm your judgment as a researcher. You have done the interviewing, studied the transcripts, and read the related literature; you have mentally lived with and wrestled with the data, and now you need to analyze them. As Judi Marshall (1985) says, your feeling of rightness and coherence about the process of working with the data is important. It is your contribution as the researcher.

INTERPRETING THE MATERIAL

Interpreting is not a process researchers do only near the end of the project. Even as interviewers question their participants, tentative interpretations may begin to influence the path of their questioning. Marking passages that are of interest, labeling them, and grouping them is analytic work that has within it the seeds of interpretation. Crafting a profile is an act of analysis, as is presenting and commenting upon excerpts arranged in categories. Both processes lay the ground for interpretation. (I am using Wolcott’s (1994) distinction between the words analysis and interpretation. I think Wolcott offers a solid approach to working with interview data in his thoughtful explication of the terms description, analysis, and interpretation. In this book, I have used the phrase sharing the data instead of Wolcott’s description.)

In some ways, it is tempting to let the profiles and the categorized, thematized excerpts speak for themselves. But another step is appropriate. Researchers must ask themselves what they have learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of excerpts. What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants they interviewed? How do they understand and explain these connections? What do they understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts? How have their interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How have they gone beyond?

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Maxwell (1996) address these questions with a practical suggestion: When you have identified passages that are important but the category in which they fall seem undefined or its significance is unclear, write a memorandum about those passages. Through your writing about them, about how they were picked, about what they mean to you, the properties and import of the category may become clear. If you write such memos about each of the categories you have developed and about the profiles you have crafted, the process of writing about them will lead you to discover what it is you find important in them both individually and relatively.

Much of what you learn may be tentative, suggesting further research. In the early stages of our study of student teachers and mentors (Fischetti, Santilli, & Seidman, 1988; O’Donnell et al., 1989), we began to see evidence in the language of the student teachers we interviewed that tracking in schools was affecting how they were learning to become teachers. That led O’Donnell (1990) to conceptualize a dissertation study on the impact of tracking on learning to become a teacher.

The last stage of interpretation, then, is consistent with the interview process itself, asks researchers what meaning they have made of their work. In the course of interpreting, researchers asked the participants what their experience meant to them. Now they have the opportunity to respond to the same question. In doing so they might review how they came to their research, what their research experience was like, and, finally, what it means to them. How do they understand it, make sense of it, and see connections in it?

Some of what researchers learn may lead them to propose connections among events, structures, roles, and social forces operating in people’s lives. Some researchers would call such proposals theories and urge theory building as the purpose of research (Fay, 1987). My own feeling is that although the notion of grounded theory generated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) offered qualitative researchers a welcome rationale for their inductive approach to research, it also served to inflate the term theory to the point that it has lost some of its usefulness. (See Dey, 1993, pp. 51–52, for a useful critique of the casual use of the word theory.)

The narratives we shape of the participants we have interviewed are necessarily limited. Their lives go on; our presentations of them are framed and reified. Betty, whose profile is in the Appendix, is still working out her relationship to child care. Nanda is still living out her life in the
United States. Moreover, the narratives that we present are a function of our interaction with the participants and their words. Although my experience suggests that a number of people reading Betty's or Nanda's transcripts separately would nevertheless develop similar narratives, we still have to leave open the possibility that other interviewers and crafters of profiles would have told a different story. (See Fay, 1987, pp. 166–174.) So, as illuminating as in-depth interviews can be, as compelling as the stories are that they can tell and the themes they can highlight, we still have to bear in mind that Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy pervades our work, as it does the work of physicists (Polanyi, 1958). We have to allow considerable tolerance for uncertainty (Bronowski, 1973) in the way we report what we have learned from our research.

Every research method has its limits and its strengths. In-depth interviewing's strength is that through it we can come to understand the details of people's experience from their point of view. We can see how their individual experience interacts with powerful social and organizational forces that pervade the context in which they live and work, and we can discover the interconnections among people who live and work in a shared context.

In-depth interviewing has not led me to an easy assessment of the possibilities of progressive reform through research (Bury, 1932; Fay, 1987). It has led me to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the amazing intricacies and yet coherence of people's experiences. It has also led me to a more conscious awareness of the power of the social and organizational context of people's experience. Interviewing has provided me with a deeper understanding of the issues, structures, processes, and policies that imbue participants' stories. It has also given me a fuller appreciation of the complexities and difficulties of change. Most important and almost always, interviewing continues to lead me to respect the participants, to relish the understanding that I gain from them, and to take pleasure in sharing their stories.

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APPENDIX

Two Profiles: A Cambodian Survivor of the Pol Pot Era and a Long-Time Day Care Provider

NANDA—A CAMBODIAN SURVIVOR OF THE POL POT ERA

Toon Fuderich

Before the war, . . . we had a very large extended family . . . a lot of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. I am one of four children. I have an older brother and a younger brother and sister. My family was quite well-off. My father had his own business; my mother owned a grocery store; my paternal grandparents owned a flour mill. My father was well respected in our village. He was a handsome and intelligent man who valued education highly. He always told us about the importance of getting an education.

I was 8 years old when Pol Pot took over Cambodia . . . forced labor camps were established throughout the country. People were forced to leave their home to work in these camps. When the war broke out, Khmer Rouge soldiers came to our village. They told us that they came to free us from the oppressive government. They told us not to worry about anything and that everything will be fine. But nothing was fine. It was all a lie. They killed innocent people. The educated professionals like doctors, businessmen, teachers were the first to be killed. It was just horrible.

Every day the soldiers organized a meeting to re-educate the villagers. The meeting usually runs from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Everyone had to attend except for those who were gravely ill. . . . One day just before my father left for the meeting, a group of soldiers came for my father. My mother was already at the meeting. I was the only one left at home at the time. They entered our house. Ransacked the whole place (long pause) took everything . . . Then my father was led outside, his hands were tied behind his back. I was so frightened, but decided to follow them.

I hid behind a cupboard and tried to peer through a small crack to see my father. The soldiers accused my father of betraying his country. My father kept saying to them "I love my country. I have children. I love my