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# THE PRACTICE OF FEMINIST IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

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## A FITNESS TALE

### **Setting the Scene**

It is around 3 p.m. at my gym and I am waiting to interview Annette, a fitness trainer. She has been in the fitness industry for over 20 years and works as a personal trainer to mostly a well-to-do white female clientele. She herself is a picture of perfection, with not one ounce of fat on her body. Her 5-foot, 3-inch frame and well-defined arms, flat abdomen, and muscular all-over tone make her clients want to replicate her physique. I often hear her clients jokingly say “I want your body!” Annette has agreed to speak to me about her experiences as a trainer. I have known Annette for several years, and we have taken many gym classes together, mainly yoga. I have what I would call a casual gym friendship with her and consider her more of an acquaintance than a friend. I have explained to her that I am interested in understanding women’s

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body image concerns and issues. We move to a quiet room upstairs, away from the hustle and bustle of the gym floor. Annette allows me to tape record the interview. The following is an excerpt from a longer interview I had with Annette that lasted almost 2 hours.

**So what do women want from you when they come to you?**

**Annette:** Well, different people want different things. A lot of women want to be altered totally. I try to find a place on their body that they like, one place on their body that they can relate to in a positive way. And some of them don't even have that one place they can relate to in a positive way. They want it changed.

**In what way?**

**Annette:** They want it smaller; they want it tighter. You know, they want it off, they want it on. For most of them, it's off.

**Any specific areas?**

**Annette:** The butt and the thighs.

**OK. Do you think they are ever going to reach those ideals?**

**Annette:** No. That's the insidious deception. They are impossible ideals to reach. They're unreachable goals. There's maybe what 1 in 500. How many perfect bodies, according to the standard. And how many beautiful bodies and beautiful people do you see walking around? One in 500?

**So what do they come to you for?**

**Annette:** Most anything. And hurt another person to achieve it as well. There are fights over treadmills, fights over spots on aerobic floors, and fights over benches. And I mean it's an intense environment.

**Can you give me an example of the typical person who might come to train with you?**

**Annette:** This morning is a good example. I had a woman come in. You know what I want to say. I try to teach people to enjoy the process. The end is immaterial really, because you'll just have this end in your mind that you want to be like and rather than saying to them you are never going to achieve it because that is very deflating. I rather focus in on the process and enjoying the process. But I had a woman come in this morning who was overweight. She used to be thinner. But you know the more overweight you are the thinner you were. And that's sort of the way the thing is, the better you were. . . . I think it's a lot that she just came in the gym. She wants to be thinner. She wants to get rid of the butt and thighs. Gains the weight in the butt and thighs. Weighs almost 200 pounds, which is reason to be concerned just even from a health standpoint. . . . She really wanted to alter her body. But I told her she would not be able to alter the genetic structure of her body but that we could make it tighter and that she should take her time. Because this is the thing that I gathered from her. She didn't even tell me that she wanted it right away. But you kinda get an instinct about it. That she was very anxious about the summer approaching and what was she going to do.

**So she wanted to come to you for some kind of body alteration?**

**Annette:** Right. If you are trying to achieve a goal that's unattainable, you're gonna be pretty unrealistic about yourself too. I mean you're not going to be able to see yourself either. You see yourself through the eyes of whatever you've come to that place with. If you come with a lot of dysfunction, you're going to look at yourself with a lot of dysfunction.

## FEMINISM AND INTERVIEWING

As a feminist interviewer, I am interested in getting at the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated. I am asking questions and exploring issues that are of particular concern to women's lives. I am interested in issues of social change and social justice for women and other oppressed groups. As a feminist interviewer, I am aware of the nature of my relationship to those whom I interview, careful to

understand my particular personal and research standpoints and what role I play in the interview process in terms of my power and authority over the interview situation. I am cognizant, for example, in my interview with Annette, the fitness trainer, that I am both an “insider” and an “outsider.” I am part of the fitness world, in that I am a member of Annette’s gym, where she is a trainer and also one of my class members, but I am also a researcher, who inhabits a social world different from Annette’s. I am asking Annette specific questions about her clients; I have a research agenda. I want to know “a something.” Yet I am open in the types of questions I ask Annette, for they are not “yes” or “no” questions; I do not ask her to answer a question with a fixed number of choices. I am conducting what in interviewing terminology is called an *unstructured interview*. Sometimes my questions are in response to what she tells me or I am asking for clarification of one of her answers. However, I do have some specific ideas I want to find out, but I do not have a specific set of questionnaire items with which I begin. I tend to “go with the flow” of the interview, seeing where it takes me. In this interview, however, I do not probe for how Annette is feeling about her training of these women specifically, but through the conversation we are having, her own feelings about women and their bodies surfaces.

Interviewing is a particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents. It is a method used by feminists who are in a range of social and natural science disciplines, from an anthropology where the researcher conducts field work within a given culture, to a sociology where the feminist researcher wants to gain a new perspective on the lives of respondents living in a particular community or society, to the field of nursing and medicine where nurses and doctors want to understand, for example, the impact of certain illnesses and treatments on the ability of patients to cope in their daily lives. Interviews are also conducted by feminist survey and market researchers hoping to generalize their research findings concerning women’s issues to a wider population. So, for example, feminist survey researchers are particularly interested in understanding the public’s attitudes toward violence against women, whether or not the public supports increased spending for research into women’s health issues. These are only a few disciplines where interviewing plays an important role in better understanding the human condition. We can see that the range of interviews feminists conduct span from the unstructured, in-depth variety to a much more specific set of questions that fit into a survey format.

## TYPES OF INTERVIEWING

Interviews come in a series of formats. We can think of the interview method running along a “continuum” from “informal” to “formal.” The *informal* interview has little structure. Very often this type of interview is used to build a relationship with your respondent, to explore what might be the relevant topics of interest to them, and to uncover topics that might otherwise be overlooked by the researcher. So, for example, if I didn’t have any prior contact with Annette and I knew very little about the role of fitness training in relation to women’s body image issues, I might start out my interview by asking a set of questions to establish some trust between myself and Annette. The questions would also seek to open up a space for her to speak about what she feels is important, to convey her own feelings about training in general and her training of specific clients. I might begin the interview with the following types of open-ended questions:

- “Can you tell me how you came to be a trainer?”
- “What is it like to train?”
- “How did you happen to train at this sports club?”

*Unstructured* interviews are like the one I conducted with Annette, in which I have a basic interview plan in mind, but I have a *minimum of control* over how the respondent should answer the question. I am often taking the lead from my respondents—going where they want to go, but keeping an overall topic in mind. Therefore, I might ask the following questions:

- “Do you think women have unrealistic expectations regarding what you can do for their bodies?”
- “Why do you think this is the case?”

In this interview example, I am interested in the general topic of how trainers think about their female clients and how they view their body change expectations during their training session.

A *semistructured* interview is conducted with a *specific interview guide*—a list of written questions that I need to cover within a particular interview. I am not too concerned about the order of these questions, but it is important that I cover them in the interview. I have *some control* then in how the

interview is constructed and how I would like my respondent to respond, but I am still open to asking new questions throughout the interview. I have an agenda, but it is not tightly controlled and there is room left for spontaneity on the part of the researcher and interviewee.

- “Do you think women who come to see you have unrealistic body change expectations? Why?”
- “To what extent are women unrealistic about their bodies? Realistic?”
- “Why do you think that is the case?”
- “Would you train someone whom you thought has an eating disorder? Why or why not?”

These are some of the questions I might try to interject during the interview with Annette (my agenda), but I would not be very concerned about when I asked them. Ideally, I would try not to disrupt the flow of the interview but would do my best to interject them at a time when I felt some new space opened up in our conversation.

*Structured* interviewing is where the researcher has total control over the agenda of the interview. All respondents are asked the same set of questions in a specific order. Sometimes the questions are *open-ended*, such as the ones I asked Annette, but many of them are *closed-ended* questions with a set of fixed choices, such as

- “On the average, how many of your clients would you say have problems with their body image? ‘Many,’ ‘some,’ ‘few,’ ‘none’?”
- “On the average, how many of your clients would you say suffer from an eating disorder? ‘Many,’ ‘some,’ ‘few,’ ‘none’?”
- “Which of the following describes how you are currently feeling about your body image? ‘Very happy,’ ‘happy,’ ‘somewhat happy,’ ‘unhappy’?”

I would ask a respondent to pick just one of these choices when answering the questions. We can use the first two questions to gauge the frequency with which certain behaviors occur among Annette’s clients. Consequently, we are creating a more standardized profile of her clients in terms of the frequency of body image and eating issues among her clientele as a whole. We can think

of the third item as more of an attitudinal question that captures Annette's feelings about her own body image. In this question, I am not asking Annette to go into detail about her feelings but, instead, I want her to respond to a specific *fixed-choice response*. I am asking for a single response that best captures her feelings. I would ask these questions in the order that they are presented here and would not waver from this sequence as I begin to interview other fitness trainers.

We can see that there are a variety of formats for interviewing. Which is best? The answer to this question depends on the *overall goals of your research project*. A move from the informal end of interviewing to the more formal, structured end is to move from an *exploratory data gathering and in-depth understanding* goal of a project to a more *theory testing set of goals*. Feminist researchers use both of these interview formats. As we shall observe in Chapter 10 (on survey research), feminists ask questions that require structured interviews to test out the relationships within their data. These structured interviews require large-scale data sets with fixed-choice items. Feminist who carry out mixed-methods research, as we will see in Chapter 9, may also have to integrate both types of interviewing styles, with one type of interview illuminating another. For example, feminists can gain insights from unstructured interviews. These interviews can reveal to them what specific questions they need to ask in a survey and what fixed-choice items they should include.

These interview styles, then, often complement one another or are even integrated in a given research project. What is feminist about each of these interview styles, however, are the *types of questions* feminists ask. Research that gets at *an understanding of women's lives and those of other oppressed groups*, research that promotes *social justice and social change*, and research that is mindful of the *researcher-researched relationship* and the *power and authority* imbued in the researcher's role are some of the issues that engage the feminist researcher. Feminist researchers practice *reflexivity* throughout the research process. This practice keeps the researcher mindful of his or her personal positionality and that of the respondent. Feminist researchers are also concerned with issues of representation of the researched. The interviewees and research subjects are presented in how the researcher interprets and presents the research findings. It is to these issues that we now turn.

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter, we will focus on the in-depth interview, which is one of the three types of interviews covered in this book (in the next chapter we will review oral history and focus group interviews). The *in-depth interview* seeks to understand the “lived experiences” of the individual. We are interested in getting at the “subjective” understanding an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances. In-depth interviews are *issue-oriented*. In other words, a researcher might use this method to explore a particular topic and gain focused information on the issue from the respondents. The *oral history* method of interviewing usually covers a respondent’s entire life story. A *focus group* interview provides the researcher with an opportunity to gain information from a group of people in a short period of time. The researcher can also observe the types of interactions among group members concerning a given topic or issue.

### The In-Depth Interview

Feminists are particularly concerned with getting at experiences that are often hidden. In-depth interviewing allows the feminist researcher to access the voices of those who are marginalized in a society; women, people of color, homosexuals, and the poor are examples of marginalized groups. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) explains how interviewing is a way feminist researchers have attempted to access women’s hidden knowledge:

Interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women. (p. 19)

### Designing an In-Depth Interview Study

- What is your research question?

It is important to point out that your research question will most often determine your research method. Suppose you want to study eating disorders among college students from a feminist standpoint. Given this perspective,



your research goal becomes understanding from the point of view of those you are studying. So, for example, you might ask the following research question:

- What is the “lived experience” of college women’s relationship to food and to their body image?

Conducting a survey with closed-ended questions gleaned from the research literature on this topic would *not* capture the lived experiences of these college students. We are interested in their story. We might decide to begin with an unstructured interview that would maximize our understanding of the process by which eating and body issues become gendered and perhaps even begin to build some *theoretical ideas* concerning this topic as we go along.

### **Sampling**

The logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually involves working with *small samples*. The goal is to look at a “process” or the “meanings” individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations. For example, we investigate women’s attitudes toward their bodies not to make overall generalizations about *how many* women have problems with their body image, but to understand how women *experience* being overweight, for example, in a thin culture. Here we would be interested in the process by which women do or do not cope with their body image and the ways in which they interact with cultural messages of thinness from the media and significant others in their lives.

Qualitative researchers are often interested in selecting *purposive* or *judgment samples*. The type of purposive sample chosen is based on the particular research question as well as consideration of the resources available to the researcher. Patton (2002, pp. 243–244), in fact, has identified 16 different types of purposive samples, and more than one purposive sampling procedure can be used within any given qualitative study.

While many qualitative interviews are conducted face to face, some may be conducted via telephone and even over the Internet. Interviews that are not conducted in person often make it more difficult for the interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent, and the researcher also loses the impact of visual and verbal cues, such as gestures and eye contact. In this chapter, we are

going to focus on in-person interviewing, although we want to bring these other options to your attention as well. Patton (2002) notes that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244). Patton goes on to note that part of determining the size of your sample depends on your research question, your specific economic resources, and the particular context within which you are practicing your research project (ask: Have you covered the phenomenon under investigation? If you are doing a grounded theory analysis: Did you add new samples based on emergent information?). If you are funded by a private or governmental agency, for example, they may have strict criteria established for what they believe to be a credible sample size for a qualitative project. Patton leaves us with the following advice with regard to sample size:

Sample size adequacy, like all aspects of research, is subject to peer review, consensual validation, and judgment. What is crucial is that the sampling procedures and decisions be fully described, explained, and justified so that information users and peer reviewers have the appropriate context for judging the sample. The researcher or evaluator is obligated to discuss how the sample affected the findings, the strengths and weaknesses of the sampling procedures, and any other design decisions that are relevant for interpreting and understanding the reported results. Exercising care not to overgeneralize from purposeful samples, while maximizing to the full the advantages of in-depth, purposeful sampling, will do much to alleviate concerns about small sample size. (p. 246)

### **Obtaining Informed Consent**

It is important to obtain the *informed consent* of each respondent after explaining the nature of your research project in advance. If your project is conducted under the auspices of a university or other organizations, each of these institutions will most likely have some type of review board that must approve your study to ensure that you are following the ethical guidelines set forth by that specific institution to protect human subjects. Even though the study and the participant’s informed and voluntary participation have been discussed in advance, it is important to reiterate this prior to beginning the interview. Interviewees should be given every opportunity to ask questions and should also feel free not to answer any question they may not feel comfortable with.

### **When Would I Use an Interview Guide?**

If you have a specific set of issues and concerns to discuss with your respondent, you might find a more structured interview to be the best research method for your purposes. In other words, if you have a specific agenda that you want to explore in the interview, you might find it helpful to prepare an *interview guide*. An interview guide is a set of topical areas and questions that the interviewer brings to the interview. Weiss (1994) suggests beginning with a “substantive frame” and then using that to create a guide for the interview process. It is often helpful to think topically before creating and choosing the specific questions you’d like to address in your interview. This can make the creative process of making an interview guide much simpler and better organized. In other words, guides can be constructed by first focusing on broader, more abstract areas of inquiry and then creating a series of interview questions. To begin, write down a “topics-to-learn-about” list. The topics you select become a “line of inquiry” or “domain of inquiry” that you might pursue during the interviews with respondents. You can then construct and organize your interview questions to “get at” the information that might relate to each of these “lines.” The interview guide is ultimately a list of topics with or without specific questions under each topic that speak to the “lines of inquiry” that were suggested during the initial drafting of the guide (p. 48). The process of creating an interview guide, even if it remains unused, is an important tool that you might use in preparation for the interview, for it often helps the researcher isolate key issues and consider the kinds of things he or she might like to ask respondents. Pilot interviews are an opportunity for researchers to test out the effectiveness of their research guide:

- Is the guide clear and readable?
- Does the guide cover all of the topical areas you are interested in?
- Are there any topical areas or general questions missing from the guide?

Based on early experiences with an interview guide, you can then modify the guide to better suit your needs.

David Karp (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) talks about creating interview guides as an *analytical process* in the following Behind-the-Scenes piece:

### Behind-the-Scenes With David Karp

[I'm] looking for major themes, what I think of as "domains of inquiry." Of course, they do not just come out of nowhere, because I have done so much preliminary work before this. And this is really critical, because too often when people do in-depth interviews, they see putting together the interview guide as, "Well, I've got to get this out of the way." And I see this task of discovering the areas of inquiry as an incredibly important analytical step in the process of doing this work. And if we talk about the full process, when you get to the point of writing, in my case books or articles, it comes full circle because the amount of time and energy that I put into getting this interview guide together really previews what will be the central pieces that I ultimately will write about. Now, in the end, it's just a guide, and in any interview, maybe 60% of the questions I ask are not on that guide. You are sitting, having a conversation with a person, and the artfulness of doing that in-depth interview is to know when to follow up on what a person is saying in the moment. By the end of the interview, I want to make sure that all the areas that I want to have covered are covered. But you would be missing the whole deal if the only questions you asked were the questions on your guide.

It is important that interview guides are not too lengthy or detailed. They are meant to serve as aids to the researcher but ideally will not be heavily relied on because too strong a focus on the interview guide itself can distract a researcher from paying full attention to the respondent. An interview guide is meant to be glanced at when needed and ideally remains unused or as a prompter for the researcher (Weiss, 1994, p. 48). The guide can also serve as a "checklist" for the researcher at the end of the interview, as a way of making sure all of the topics under investigation have been addressed even if not in the sequence suggested by the guide (p. 48).

## CONDUCTING AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

The in-depth interview can be particularly helpful when the feminist researcher wants to focus on a particular area of an individual's life. The interview tends to occur in one session, although multiple follow-up sessions may occur to expand or develop the ideas from the initial session. The goal

of intensive interviews is to gain rich data from the perspectives of selected individuals on a particular subject. For example, in my own research on body image among different populations, I became interested in how young college-aged women experienced living with eating disorders while going to college. Let us take a look at a transcript excerpt from an interview with Alison, a white, middle-class, 20-year-old college student. I am interested in knowing more about Alison's experiences with eating disorders in college and specifically how her transition from high school to college affected how she negotiated her eating issues. She is Asian American and the second oldest of five sisters, one of whom is a half-sister from her father's second marriage. Alison has been bingeing and purging since she was in high school. Her father remarried when she was in the fifth grade, but in Alison's words, "That's about the time of the onset of my eating problem." In this excerpt, Alison talks about her eating problems and their current manifestation in her life as a college coed. Alison's mother is a compulsive binge eater whose eating issues apparently began after her divorce from Alison's father. We enter the conversation as Alison begins to talk about her binge-eating disorder and her mother's problems with food:

**Alison:** My mother was binge eating at night. She's a compulsive eater. And I'd watch her, and I thought it was normal. And just in spurts. At night, she'd get up by herself and get a big bowl of something, and just like, eat it all. I can remember the sounds very well. That, in addition to me thinking I was fat because I was eating so much, and my stomach was hurting and I would feel bad. You know . . . I was obsessed with food all throughout high school. I had not vomited except, you know, a good amount, but I wouldn't say it was bulimic. Once every month, 2 weeks, something like that.

**So what happened when you made the transition from high school to college?**

**Alison:** First year of college was OK. I was a little obsessed with food as I always am, but I never vomited. My sophomore year, after, you know, I told you about my boyfriend, and he wasn't there, but I was, you know, that was my crutch, you know, I used it exactly the way an alcoholic would alcohol. So that's what I was doing.

**Can you tell me how you were feeling during this time?**

**Alison:** A lonely Friday night, I was in a single room by myself at a school I didn't like, you know. I didn't have a big social life. I had a close friend but that wasn't enough. I had lots of good acquaintances, one close, best, trustworthy friend, but I don't know, it just didn't seem like enough somehow.

**So when you said, "It didn't seem like enough somehow," what did you mean?**

**Alison:** Mealtime was always hard because I'd always overeat, and the problem was I would always go to classes from like 9:00 until 12:00, or whatever, and then I would have like the whole rest of the day. And, like, I liked high school because you are supposed to do this from this time to that time, and then you're supposed to do homework, but then you have to organize your own time, set your own schedule, and I just don't know what to do, and I'm always thinking, am I studying too much? I feel like I've been studying forever, but if I don't then I'll feel guilty. And I just didn't know what to do with myself. Today it's easier, because I have a tight schedule now.

**So you'd go home and eat?**

**Alison:** So I guess around dinnertime I would eat and then, you know, being premed, you have to study all the time. And the only break you can take without feeling guilty is mealtime or exercise time. But I guess if you are binging, that's not really mealtime. I don't know. After dinner I would just, I think it was physical after a while. I honestly was compelled to go back down, you know, I have a food card. I can put anything on my food card. Of course, later I did spend lots of cash I didn't have, and then I would just go to the bathroom, which was the community bathroom for the floor.

**Right after you ate?**

**Alison:** Yes. And after, my friend and I would do study sessions. I would come back at like 10 p.m., and I had a refrigerator in my room, and

I grocery shopped, and I would make like bread with peanut butter and jelly, or jelly and butter, just whatever I had. I knew there was a vending machine in our building, and I would go down there and I'd come back up, and I'd go down there, and I'd come back up. And also, my best friend who lived next door to me in her single, she went home a couple of weekends, once a month or so, and I would be there. I felt alone. There were people I could hang out with. But nobody who really knew me, and so I would go down to the vending machines, and I can remember thinking, "This just isn't going to do it for me. It's not going to make my Friday night that exciting, but then again, why not?" So. . . I would binge 4 times a week. Sometimes I stopped.

**Uh-huh. So for how long?**

**Alison:** Most of my sophomore year, and a good part of that summer.

**So you also binged when you went home as well?**

**Alison:** I remember when I went home for Christmas my sister. . . Oh, Christmas was the worst at my house. That's where all the memories came back. My family left for Florida. I was there by myself with my brother. It was the house, the emptiness, the food. You know, it was just the worst. It was an awful Christmas. My boyfriend was seeing these other girls and I was in town, and I had no friends left that I kept in touch with. It was just really awful. My sister, I remember, mentioned it to me. She said, "Are you bulimic?" She knew I was defending my food. I told her, I said, "Yes." And she started crying and she got real upset, and she said, "Would you please make an effort, or something like that?" And so, when I went back to college, I stopped being bulimic for a couple of months.

In looking at Alison's transcript, several points can be made. First, the in-depth interview is a way of gaining information and understanding from individuals on a *specific topic*. In this example, we were interested in understanding Alison's transition from high school to college and her experience

with bulimia. Second, the in-depth interview is a very particular kind of interaction, a particular kind of conversation. The in-depth interview dialogue is one where the researcher asks a question or seeks some clarification or amplification on what the respondent is saying. The role of the researcher is to listen to the respondent's story. If we look at the sheer number of words coming from the interviewer and the respondent, we cannot help but note that most of the conversation is coming from the respondent. The researcher often seeks to gain more insight into the respondent's life by asking questions that probe, in a neutral way, for more information or understanding. The researcher is engaged with the respondent and shows this by listening and providing signs of engagement. These include gestures such as nodding or asking the respondent to clarify a point or term. We can think of "probing" as an essential tool for an effective interview. *Probes* are also critical to a good interview, and you should be able to distinguish between when a marker has been dropped that you want to pick up on and when you should probe further into a respondent's response. Probes are particularly helpful and important during an in-depth interview; if it is a low-structure interview requiring you to ask fewer questions, you will find it very important to delve deeper into what the respondent is choosing to discuss. A probe is the researcher's way of getting a respondent to continue with what they are talking about, to go further or to elaborate, perhaps by virtue of an illustrative example. Sometimes a probe is simply a sign of understanding and interest that the researcher puts forward to the interviewee. Let's look back to a snippet of our talk with Alison to examine the various types of probing you might employ in this type of interview.

### THE ART OF PROBING

Probes allow researchers to provide the respondent with support and encouragement without pushing their own agenda into the conversation. The following are some common ways you might use to employ probing in your own in-depth interviews:

*A Silent Probe:* You remain silent, but gesture with a nod. You might also convey your interest and support by maintaining eye contact with the respondent while she is speaking.



*Echo Probe:* This is where you may repeat what the respondent has just said and ask the respondent to continue. Such an example might be where I ask Alison, *So when you said “it didn’t seem like enough somehow,” what did you mean?* You can see that I repeated what she had said before asking her to clarify what she meant by this statement. I asked a new question but followed the direction of her general concern by asking her to elaborate on this. A neutral probe does not create a new agenda, but it is a way of keeping the conversation going and encouraging respondents to continue with their agendas.

*Uh-Huh Probe:* This is where you can encourage your respondents to continue to tell their stories by providing an affirmation sound like “uh-huh,” “yes,” or “uhmm, I understand.” We can find an example of this probe in my interview with Alison. After she spoke, I said: *Uh-huh, so, for how long?* This is a “neutral probe,” in that you are not trying to steer the conversation in a specific direction, but rather you are encouraging the respondents to continue with their stories. It is a sign that you are listening and supporting their telling of their story.

*Probing by Leading the Respondent:* Here you are being a bit more explicit about your probing. You want to lead the respondent toward a specific question or touch on a specific issue. In the interview with Alison, I might go on to ask a specific question about her relationship with her mother.

- “Was your mother ever critical about your body?”
- “If so, in what sense?”

I might probe further with this line of questioning by asking Alison a few more questions that would depend on her answer. If, for example, she tells me that her mother was critical and the ways in which she was critical about her body, I might be interested in knowing how often she was and when this tended to occur—as a young child, all throughout her childhood, and so on. I am taking a particular thread of the interview and following up with several other questions I consider pertinent to the specific issue. In this sense, I am following where Alison is taking me, but I am also mindful of my interests and research agenda regarding her mother’s attitude toward her body.

## RESEARCHER-RESEARCHED RELATIONSHIP IN THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

Feminist researchers are particularly concerned with reducing the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. In fact, there is concern among feminists that the researcher and the researched are not on the same plane and there is much attention paid to the interview as a “co-construction” of meaning. Early on feminist researcher Ann Oakley (1981; see also Reinharz, 1983) advocated a “participatory model” that stresses the importance of the researcher sharing his or her own biography with the researched. The idea of sharing identities and stories with one another is thought to increase reciprocity and rapport in the interview process, thus breaking down the notions of power and authority invested in the role of the researcher. In particular, there is concern regarding the *power and authority* issues that can ensue between the researcher and the researched. These issues might interfere with the ability of those researched to provide a subjective account of their understanding on a specific issue, their life story, or a specific topic. To further balance out the inequities of power between the researcher and the researched, some feminist researchers and others advocate the process of giving back their research findings and interpretations to the respondent to get his or her input and to resolve possible disagreements between their interpretation and that of their respondents. However, there are some feminist researchers who caution against getting too close to your respondent. They argue that closeness alone can determine whether or not you will obtain the respondents’ subjective understandings and perspectives. Feminist sociologist Judith Stacey (1991) suggests that while self-reflection is important to decreasing the power differentials between the researcher and the researched, being too personal with a respondent can provide a false illusion that there is no power and authority. This case might make the respondents more vulnerable, encouraging them to reveal the more intimate details of their lives. The researcher, however, still has the power to analyze and interpret the respondents’ stories in a way that renders them with little or no voice in this process. Daphne Patai (1991) argues that giving back one’s research findings to respondents as a way to address any power imbalances in the researcher-researched relationship may serve only as a “feel good measure.” In doing so, the researcher may forgo his or her intellectual responsibility of interpretation to gain rapport and approval from the respondent (p. 147). Feminist researchers have suggested a number of important factors to consider throughout the interview process to make sure the respondent’s stories are heard.

## KNOWING YOUR OWN POSITION AS A RESEARCHER: REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The feminist, reflexive researcher's perspective begins with an understanding of the importance of one's own values and attitudes in relation to the research process. This recognition begins prior to entering the field. Reflexivity means taking a critical look inward and reflecting on one's own lived reality and experiences; this self-reflection or journey can be extremely helpful in the research process. Consider the following questions: How does your own biography affect the research process; what shapes the questions you chose to study and your approach to studying them? How does the specific social, economic, and political context in which you reside affect the research process at all levels? Reflexivity is the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process. Like the researched or respondent, the researcher is a product of his or her society's social structures and institutions. Our beliefs, backgrounds, and feelings are part of the process of knowledge construction. To practice reflexivity means to acknowledge that "all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced and that it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed" (Mann & Kelley, 1997, p. 392). The following is an excerpt from a reflection memo I wrote concerning being a white middle-class researcher who is interviewing young adolescent girls in the heart of an inner-city black community center.

**Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber:  
Can a White Middle-Class Researcher  
Interview African American Teens of Color?**

I walked into the community center in the heart of an African American community in a medium-sized inner city located in the Northeast. I was scheduled to meet with a group of African American teens between the ages of 13

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

and 17 to talk with them about their experiences in “coming of age” in their community and their attitudes about school as well as their hopes and concerns for the future. I was definitely the “outsider.” I was the researcher and the only white person in the community center that day. My concerns centered around trying very hard not to have a strict agenda—a set of prepackaged questions I would ask all of them, reminiscent of a survey where there is little room for the voices of those I interview to be heard outside of my own agenda of questions. I also wanted to find a way to position myself in the setting so that I would be able to break down somewhat the power and authority that is often inherent in the researcher-researched relationship. I remember the first day I came to the center. The director piled us all into a room she had reserved for us; after initial introductions, I provided more detailed information about myself, telling them I was a researcher and a teacher, that I was not the expert, but rather they were the experts on their own lives. I wanted to begin to shift the emphasis and flow of conversation around their concerns and hopes; I was to become the learner, bearing witness to their lives. What was important to them? How did they see their lives unfolding at home? At school? During the course of the interview, they asked me questions: What do you teach? Are you married? Do you have children? Sometimes they would ask me to join them in playing basketball or to look at something they had drawn, and we would engage each other in conversation. I volunteered one day a week at one of the community centers, where I tutored several of the younger children, helping them with their homework assignments. Yet I was concerned about whether or not I was listening in a way that the girls felt they were being heard. How do I listen to them across the many differences I bumped up against with them—my race, my class, my age, my position as a researcher?

Reflexivity goes to the heart of the in-depth interview; it is a process whereby the researcher is sensitive to the important “situational” dynamics that exist between the researcher and the researched that can affect the creation of knowledge. To understand what biases you bring to a research project, and what specific power and privilege you might impose onto your own research, you might try the following exercise before you begin your research. This

simulation could be particularly helpful as you prepare to begin the interviewing phase of your research:

### **Research Exercise: Finding Your Research Standpoint**

Take 10 minutes and write down the various ways your social position affects the way you observe and perceive others in your daily life.

- What particular biases do you bring to and/or impose onto your research?
- How does this affect the types of questions you ask in your own research?
- How does this influence the research style you take on?

As reviewed in Chapter 3 on feminist standpoint epistemology, Sandra Harding (1993) introduces the concept of “strong objectivity” and argues that considering one’s own standpoint during all phases of a research project “*maximizes* objectivity” for the researcher. This also ensures that the respondent’s voice is represented, listened to, and understood throughout the research process. Harding urges researchers to examine the questions they ask during interviews and notes that these questions are not “value free,” for they often reflect the values, attitudes, and agendas of the researcher. Researchers who practice “strong objectivity” might ask the following questions:

- How do my values and attitudes and beliefs enter into the research process? Do I only ask questions from my perspective?
- How does my own agenda shape what I ask and what I find?
- How does my positionality affect how I gather, analyze, and interpret my data, and from whose perspective?

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING**

Sociologist Marjorie DeVault (2004) urges researchers to pay attention to the language with which a respondent expresses his or her reality. She is particularly interested in not just what is said but what is not said or might come

across as “muted” language. For example, in my interview with Alison, she uses the phrase “You know?” many times. Let’s take a snippet from her interview to illustrate what DeVault means:

**Alison:** A lonely Friday night, I was in a single room by myself at a school I didn’t like, you know. I didn’t have a big social life. I had a close friend but that wasn’t enough. I had lots of good acquaintances, one close, best, trustworthy friend, but I don’t know, it just didn’t seem like enough somehow.

What DeVault would note is the hesitation that becomes evident in Alison’s interview through her use of language; this is especially clear when she begins to talk about her loneliness. She uses the term *you know* when she begins to describe the lonely Friday night in her dorm room. In transcribing Alison’s interview, the researcher may in fact decide to omit the term *you know* since it appears to be irrelevant. Yet DeVault (2004) notes,

I believe, this halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of not-quite-articulated experience, where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting. (p. 235)

DeVault (2004) suggests we should honor hesitant language and terms like *you know* during the interview process. This can be done by acknowledging this language not only when it occurs in the interview but also when the time comes to represent our respondent’s voices in writing up our research findings. She discusses what she has done in a similar interview situation:

I nodded, “um hmm,” making the interview comfortable, doing with my respondent what we women have done for generations—understanding each other. But I fear that the request is too often forgotten when, as researchers, we move from woman talk to sociology, leaving the unspoken behind. In some sense, this is a betrayal of the respondent—I say I understand, but if I later “forget,” her reality is not fully there in what I write. (p. 236)

A feminist perspective regarding in-depth interviewing would see the interview process as a *co-creation of meaning*. The researcher must stay on his or her toes and listen intently to what the interviewee has to say, for the researcher must be prepared to drop his or her agenda and follow the pace

of the interview. The interview and conversations with the researched will assume an agenda independent of that of the researcher, and researchers should be ready to work with these changes. This can be difficult to do, and Kathryn Anderson ran into this kind of problem in her research. Anderson, a speech communications expert, wanted to document the lives of rural farmwomen living in northwest Washington State for the Washington Women's Heritage Project (1991). During the course of her research, however, her focus on the rural farmwomen's attitudes and feelings was often displaced by her personal agenda. Anderson hoped to find specific descriptions of women's farm life activities that could be used as material for an exhibit. She notes,

In retrospect, I can see how I listened with at least part of my attention focused on producing potential material for the exhibit—the concrete description of experiences that would accompany pictures of women's activities. As I rummage through the interviews long after the exhibit has been placed in storage, I am painfully aware of lost opportunities for women to reflect on the activities and events they described and to explain their terms more fully in their own words. (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 13)

Let us listen in on one of Anderson's interviews. She interviews a farmwoman named Verna, who candidly discusses how difficult life has been for her as a mother. Verna opens up to Anderson in the following excerpt, but notice Anderson's response to Verna's emotional remarks:

[Verna:] There was times that I just wished I could get away from it all. And there were times when I would have liked to have taken the kids and left them someplace for a week—the whole bunch at one time—so that I wouldn't have to worry about them. I don't know whether anybody else had that feeling or not but there were times when I just felt like I needed to get away from everybody, even my husband, for a little while. Those were times when I just felt like I needed to get away. I would maybe take a walk back in the woods and look at the flowers, and maybe go down there and find an old cow that was real and gentle and walk up to her and pat her a while—kind of get away from it. I just had to, it seems like sometimes. . . .

[Anderson:] Were you active in clubs? (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 16)

We can use this excerpt as an example of how a researcher's agenda can interfere with the interviewing process. This interview demonstrates Anderson's pursuit of her own agenda, and we can see that she did not really "listen" to Verna's heartfelt remarks. Instead, she follows her own agenda and

fails to acknowledge the powerful emotions Verna has discussed. Anderson's follow-up question on clubs is an excellent example of how personal research agendas can conflict with the intimacy and spontaneity of the interviewing process.

A feminist perspective on the in-depth interview process reveals that it is more of a conversation between coparticipants than a simple question and answer session. Information flows back and forth throughout the interview, but it is important to underscore the role of the researcher in this process. The researcher's primary job is to listen carefully, discerningly, and intently to the comments of the researched. Researchers may want to ask specific questions that relate to their field or area of study, but it is important that their questions evolve as cues from the researched. This keeps the researcher from asserting his or her own agenda while emphasizing the researcher's role as a listener. Anderson and Jack (1991, p. 24) offer us a guide to sharpening our "listening" skills during the interview process. This guide is especially helpful in listening across our differences.

- Have an open-ended interview style to enable your interviewees to express their attitudes and feelings.
- Probe for feelings, not just facts. For example: How does the respondent understand what is happening? What meaning does she give to the course of events in her life?
- What is not said?

Anderson and Jack (1991) also suggest consulting the following checklist *before* you conduct your interviews:

- Be mindful of your own agenda.
- Go with your own "hunches, feelings, responses that arise through listening to others" (p. 24).
- If you are confused about something, don't be afraid to follow up on an issue or concern.
- What about your own discomfort and how this might affect the interview situation? Can your personal discomfort also provide you with a clue as to where you need to look at "what is being said" and what the respondent is feeling?

I have also provided you with a "listening exercise" you might want to practice with a researcher partner (see the following boxed text).



## Developing Good Listening Skills

### *Introduction*

Good interviewing starts with good listening. This exercise is intended to help you practice your listening skills. You will need one person who will be the interviewer, another who will be the respondent, and another who will serve as a timekeeper. The interviewer will start out by asking only one question of the respondent; after that it is important that the interviewer not think about what he or she wants to ask next (your agenda). The interviewer should concentrate on what is being said and try to remain silent during the interview process itself.

### *The Listening Exercise*

1. Pair off with a research partner.
2. Position yourself in the interview situation so that you are facing one another at a distance that feels comfortable.
3. Flip a coin to decide who will first take on the role of interviewer, with the other taking on the role of respondent.
4. The respondent should talk for 30 seconds on a specific topic that the interviewer will determine. It should be a fairly neutral topic such as "my favorite restaurant" or "my favorite vacation spot."
5. A moderator will call time out after 30 seconds have elapsed.
6. At this point the interviewer should repeat what it is that he or she heard the respondent say.
7. Now reverse roles.
8. After this is complete, the time will increase to 60 seconds; you should inquire concerning a more personal issue, such as "something you are concerned with about yourself" or "the most difficult challenge faced in the past year."
9. Some questions you might want to ponder: What differences, if any, did you notice happening in the interview situation between the 30-second interviews and the 60-second interviews? Did your body language change? Did you make more or less eye contact? Did your verbal expressions change? How? How much were you able to recall in the 30-second encounters versus the 60-second interview? Was it hard to listen? In what sense?

There are other tools you can use to conduct a successful interview. Picking up on *markers* is one way to show a respondent that you are listening and interested in what is being said. Markers are also a valuable source of information and often lead to the thick descriptions that characterize and enrich qualitative interview data.

### PICKING UP ON “MARKERS”: A STRATEGY FOR LISTENING

*Markers* are important pieces of information that respondents may offer while they are discussing something else. Weiss (1994) explains the marker and its appearance as

a passing reference made by a respondent to an important or feeling state. . . . Because markers occur in the course of talking about something else, you may have to remember them and then return to them when you can, saying, “A few minutes ago you mentioned. . . .” But it is a good idea to pick up a marker as soon as you conveniently can if the material it hints at could in any way be relevant for your study. Letting the marker go will demonstrate to the respondent that the area is not of importance to you. It can also demonstrate that you are only interested in answers to your questions, not in the respondent’s full experience. . . . Respondents sometimes offer markers by indicating that much has happened that they aren’t talking about. They might say, for example, “Well there was a lot going on at that time.” It is then reasonable to respond, “Could you tell me about that?” (p. 77)

Let’s revisit the interview with Alison and examine the markers that appear in this discussion. There is a moment in the interview where Alison describes her loneliness. This issue comes up several times during the course of my interview with her. Here is one snippet from the excerpt you have already read:

**Alison:** Yes. And after, my friend and I would do study sessions. I would come back at like 10 p.m., and I had a refrigerator in my room, and I grocery shopped, and I would make like bread with peanut butter and jelly, or jelly and butter, just whatever I had. I knew there was a vending machine in our building, and I would go down there and I’d come back

up, and I'd go down there, and I'd come back up. And also, my best friend who lived next door to me in her single, she went home a couple of weekends, once a month or so, and I would be there. I felt alone. There were people I could hang out with. But nobody who really knew me, and so I would go down to the vending machines, and I can remember thinking, "This just isn't going to do it for me. It is not going to make my Friday night that exciting, but then again, why not?" So. . . I would binge four times a week. Sometimes I stopped.

### **Uh-huh. So for how long?**

In this particular exchange, I heard Alison's concern about how empty and lonely she felt. She notes above, "I felt alone. There were people I could hang out with. But nobody who really knew me. . . ." It would be important for the interviewer to pick up on this "marker" shortly after she finished her response. I might follow her marker and ask, "Can you tell me more about your feeling lonely?" Alison mentions her loneliness at several points throughout the interview, but she never fully describes what she is feeling. It appears, however, that these feelings are strongly associated with her bulimic behaviors. By listening for these markers, you are showing the respondent that you are in fact listening very carefully to the hints and issues that matter to them.

At this point, let us join David Karp behind-the-scenes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) to get a glimpse at how he conducts an interview and addresses some of the following issues:

- How do you get someone to start talking?
- Is it hard to be an active listener while in the role of interviewer?
- Do respondents want to share their stories?
- What do respondent's get out of this process?

### **Behind-the-Scenes With David Karp**

Well, I think you should be making it easy on people. You should begin by asking the easy questions. You know, "What religion did you grow up with, etc.?" And not to ask threatening questions, and to give people a sense

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about what you are doing because what they are trying to figure out, just like in any interaction, is, who is this guy? What is he after? Is he genuine? Are his intentions good? Does he listen? Does he seem to care about what I'm saying? And when you do an interview, you must make that person feel that he or she is the only person in the world at the time that you are talking to. I could never do more than one interview a day, never! Because the amount of energy that is required to really listen, to really pay attention, is enormous. And to know just when to ask a lot of questions.

Part of this conducting thing is to reach a balance between. . . . You should be respectful of the story that the person you're interviewing wants to tell. See, people come into your office and they have a story that they want to tell. And when they walk in, at the beginning, maybe they want to talk about how medicine screwed them over, or something like that. That's what they really want to talk about. I have to go with that at the beginning. I'm not going to turn them off. I'm not going to say, "Well, I didn't want to talk about that until 2 hours into the interview." And I think it's reaching balance between allowing people to be heard, to tell the parameters of the story that they really want to tell—and every story is to some degree idiosyncratic in meaning—and at the same time, as I said, to know what you want to get covered before you're done with this person.

I find in doing interviews that if you ask the right question at the beginning of the interview, once you really get into the substance of it, you often don't have to ask much more. In the depression stuff, the first question I typically asked people was, "You may not have called it depression, but tell me about the first moment it entered your head that something was wrong. What was the first time there was any kind of a consciousness that something was wrong?" Sometimes I didn't have to say much of anything else for the next 3 hours. People had a way of telling their story, and they spontaneously covered all of those domains of inquiry that I wanted to have covered. And the other thing I would say about this is that people really do want to tell their stories. Almost invariably, people thanked me at the end of their interview for giving them a chance to tell their story. And to have a sociologist ask them questions. . . . They often got a different perspective on their life than they could have gotten through years of therapy, because I was asking questions that only a sociologist would ask.

## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON “DIFFERENCE” IN THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Feminist researchers view social reality as complex and multidimensional, and this perspective shapes their opinion of the interview process. The researcher and the researched come together for an interview with different backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Class status and other differences might also affect the flow and connection of the interview.

Researchers often pay little attention to how these differences might affect or define the interview situation. Positivist researchers are especially apt to overlook these differences, for traditional positivistic research deals with the issue of difference by *minimizing* its effects. Positivistic researchers standardize their participation in the interview situation by being “objective” or “bracketing off” these differences in their positionality vis-à-vis their respondent, so as not to influence the interview process itself. This minimizes the effects of difference, but it also means that the following questions are rarely considered:

- Can a single, white, middle-class, male researcher interview a black, working-class mother?
- Can a middle-class, white female interview a woman from the Third World who is living in poverty?
- Can a straight, white, middle-class male interview a gay working-class male?

Feminist researchers argue that “bracketing” off attitudes is not as easy as it may seem, for it is difficult to overlook the attitudes and values that emanate from any given individual’s mix of positional ties. In fact, acknowledging the similarities and differences between the interviewer and the respondent allows the researcher to assess the impact of difference on the interview situation. Issues of difference affect all phases of the research process, from the selection of a particular research question, the formation of a hypothesis, to the overall process of data collection. The ultimate analysis, interpretation, and the writing up of our research findings are all affected by our perception of difference.

### **Insider or Outsider?**

Some researchers have found ways to overcome the impact of difference in the interview process. One way this can be done is to “match” the interviewer’s

more important status characteristics (race, age, gender, or sexual preference) so that they use their *insider status* to gain access to an interview. This might also help the researcher obtain cooperation and rapport within the situation that would help him or her to better understand his or her respondents. After all, the researcher is an insider and should be familiar with the respondent's group situation. It is also important to achieve a balance in some of these status markers to decrease the possibility of power and authority imbalances negatively affecting the interview situation (Oakley, 1981). If the interviewer is perceived as an *outsider*, it is generally thought that his or her differences might make it more difficult to gain access to and understand the situation of "the other." But does an "insider" status guarantee a more valid and reliable interview? How might differences affect the research process?

Embedded in this example of difference is the realization that, from the beginning of our research project, who and what we choose to study is grounded in an appreciation of difference. *What* and *who* we study has affected our cognizance of difference and our general approaches to these issues. An appreciation of difference allows us to ask the questions: Which women? Are all women around the world the same? How are they different and what differences are important to my research question?

Difference is also critical in terms of the *interview situation*. Can a researcher from a First World country truly understand and relate to the plights of women working in the global marketplaces of the Third World? Suppose the researcher is a white middle-class male conducting a research project. How might his gender, race, ethnic background, and social class affect the interview process? Can the researchers "overcome" differences between themselves and those they research? Does the researcher want to "overcome" all of these differences?

If the interviewer and the interviewee are of the same gender, class, and ethnicity, it is easy to assume that an open dialogue would quickly be established. This situation might also provide a maximum opportunity for the voice of the respondent to be heard and represented. These are not unreasonable suppositions. In her field research among Gullah women, Beoku-Betts (1994) found that her research was enhanced when she informed her participants that she too was raised in a rural community with similar cultural practices. This revelation of her social positionality and background helped her to make contacts and gain data that would not otherwise have been available. Kath Weston (2004) is very reflexive about her identity as a lesbian and how it has

influenced her research. She notes that while she still would have chosen to study gay families, her project would have been very different if she were not a lesbian. Weston also recognizes that her position within the homosexual community was the reason she had little trouble finding lesbian participants. These women seemed virtually invisible to her male colleagues who were also conducting sexuality research. She notes,

In my case, being a woman also influenced how I spent my time in the field: I passed more hours in lesbian clubs and women's groups than gay men's bars or male gyms. (p. 202)

Sometimes sharing some insider characteristics with a respondent is not enough to ensure that the researcher can fully capture the lived experiences of those he or she researches. Catherine Kohler Riessman (1987) researched divorce narratives, and she provides an example of this instance. Riessman found that just being a woman was not enough for her to understand the experiences of divorced women whose class and ethnic backgrounds differed from hers. Her positionality as an Anglo, middle-class, highly educated individual prevented her from fully understanding the particular ways these women structured their divorce narratives (episodically instead of chronologically). The researcher realized the challenge of separating her own cultural expectations from the narratives that were shared with her from women of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Beoku-Betts (1994) confronted a similar scenario in her field research among Gullah women. Beoku-Betts is a black female researcher, and her race helped her secure insider status in the black community she was studying. Beoku-Betts relates how one of her respondents told her that "she preferred a black scholar like myself conducting research in her community because 'black scholars have a sense of soul for our people because they have lived through it'" (p. 416). However, Beoku-Betts found that her racial insider status was intertwined with other differences in class and cultural backgrounds. These differences created considerable resistance within the community toward her fieldwork activities:

My shared racial background proved instrumental in providing access to research participants and in reducing the social distance at a critical stage of the researcher process. However, my identity as an outsider was also defined by other subgroups within that identity. For example, my gender, marital status (unmarried), and profession status as a university researcher often

operated separately and in combination with my race to facilitate and complicate the research process. (p. 420)

Beoku-Betts (1994) also provides vivid illustrations of how difference created conflict in her research. Her status as an unmarried female created some tensions in one of the communities she studied, and she relays how difference created the following incidents in the field:

In one community a local man visited the family with whom I was staying. When we were introduced, he recalled that he had heard about me and shared with me the rumor in the community that I was there to look for a husband. . . . Another incident occurred in church one Sunday with an African American minister who invoked the topic of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearing after I was asked to introduce myself to the congregation. At first, the minister was very supportive and welcomed me warmly into the community as an African coming to study aspects of a common historical heritage. However, he soon switched to the Hill/Thomas hearings and began to remark on the fact that Anita Hill was also an educated woman who had used that privilege to accuse and embarrass Clarence Thomas (whose hometown was not far from this community). (p. 428)

Beoku-Betts found that she must negotiate her differing statuses if she is to obtain interviews with her respondents that reflect how they actually feel about her. It was only after she completed this negotiation process that she was given full access to her research subjects and could begin to co-create meaning and understanding.

While it is important to familiarize yourself with the challenges of difference, it should also be noted that being an outsider can actually be an advantage. This hinges on the research problem and population you have chosen to study, but not belonging to a specific group can make you appear more unbiased to your respondent. Similarly, being an outsider might encourage you to ask questions you might otherwise have taken for granted as “shared knowledge,” and you might discover the unique perspectives your participants have on a particular issue. Sociologist Robert Weiss (1994) comments on issues of difference between the interviewer and the respondent as follows:

One way to phrase this issue is to ask to what extent it is necessary for the interviewer to be an insider in the respondent’s world in order to be effective as an interviewer. . . . It is difficult to anticipate what interviewer attributes will prove important to a respondent and how the respondent will react to



them. . . . There are so many different interviewer attributes to which a respondent can react that the interviewer will surely be an insider in some ways and an outsider in others. . . . I have generally found it better to be an insider to the milieu in which the respondent lives, because it is easier then for me to establish a research partnership with the respondent. But some of my most instructive interviews have been good just because I was an outsider who needed instruction in the respondent's milieu. (p. 137)

It is interesting and important to note that one's insider/outsider status is fluid and can change even in the course of a single interview. Your role/status might be shared with your respondent on some issues, but you might also discover glaring differences exist on other particularities of your research question or a topic of conversation. A good example of such a situation comes from research conducted by Rosalind Edwards (1990). Edwards is an educated, middle-class, white woman who is interested in conducting unstructured interviews with mature, Afro-Caribbean mothers who are also students. She wanted to understand the lived experiences of these women around issues of education, work, and family life, but she had trouble accessing the population and gaining their trust in interview scenarios. She and her respondents finally acknowledged these differences in an open discussion, and it was then that they were able to candidly discuss their experiences. Edwards experienced an ebb and flow feeling from insider to outsider status that shifted as she discussed different issues with her respondents. She notes that she felt more like an insider when the discussion was focused on motherhood: "The black women did indicate some common understandings and position between us" (p. 488). A noticeable shift occurred when the discussion reverted to a more "public" realm like their educational experiences. Even though Edwards also shared the positionality of having been a mature mother and student, the conversation became one where "black women were least likely to talk to me about what we had the most in common" (p. 488).

### **Reflexivity and Difference**

The concept of reflexivity becomes important once again when we discuss studying across difference. Reflexivity can be an important tool that allows researchers to be aware of their positionalities, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and any other factors that might be important to the research process. We can use the previously discussed research projects to see how similarities and

differences affect the interview process. Each of the above researchers had to face how they were like and different from those they researched and then channel these factors into their research. *Doing reflexivity* in fact empowered both the researcher and the researched within the interview situation. Reflecting on difference allowed Beoku-Betts (1994), Edwards (1990), Riessman (1987), Weston (2004), and Weiss (1994) to *negotiate their differences and similarities* with their respondents to *gain access* and *obtain data* that would not have been available to them otherwise. They were also able to *gain new insight* into their data from the perspective of difference. Kath Weston's (2004) reflexivity concerning her lesbian identity and its impact on her research allowed her to easily obtain access to the lesbian community. Edwards's (1990) recognition of the similarities and differences she shared with her Afro-Caribbean population offered her a more in-depth understanding of how her population talks about public and private issues. Weiss (1994) and Edwards (1990) also realized the fluidity of being an insider or outsider, which can shift depending on the given research topic and the individual current of the actual interview.

Reflexivity also reminds us of the important role difference plays in our research project as a whole. Difference enters every facet of our research process. It guides the projects we select, informs the questions we ask, and directs how we collect, analyze, write, and interpret our data. Differences should be explored and embraced, for ignoring and disavowing them could have negative effects on your data and overall project.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEW DATA

In this section, I will provide you with some general concepts to consider as you analyze your interview data. The sociologist David Karp (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, pp. 142–144) provides a step-by-step approach (see text box on the following page) to use as you begin the analysis of your interview data. He stresses the importance of starting your analysis early, for qualitative data analysis is an *iterative process* of data collection along with data analysis. These two processes should proceed almost simultaneously. Karp suggests *memoing* throughout your research process to trace how your data do or do not fit together. Memoing will help you track your project's progress, and it is also a fine time to jot down any hunches and ideas you might have about

connections within your data. You can reflect on breakthroughs in your memos, but the memoing process will also help you become more reflexive about your own positionality and how it might affect your research. Karp also underscores the importance of purposely seeking “negative cases” that do not fit cohesively or create problems in your research. You can find these cases by asking yourself: What doesn’t support my interpretation?

### **David Karp’s Tips for Successful Analysis of Your In-Depth Interview Materials**

Remember that the analytical work you do along the way is every bit as important as the task of data collection. Never subordinate the task of data collection to thinking about and analyzing your data. The great strength of methods such as in-depth interviewing is that you can engage simultaneously in the processes of data collection and analysis. The two processes should inform each other.

Start writing memos with the very first interview. Let your early data tell you which of your ideas seem sensible and which ones ought to be reevaluated. Especially at the beginning, you will hear people say things that you just had not thought about. Look carefully for major directions that it had just not occurred to you to take. The pace of short memo writing ought to be especially great toward the beginning of your work. I advocate “idea” or “concept” memos that introduce an emerging idea. Such memos typically run two to three pages.

Reevaluate your interview guide after about 10 interviews. Ten interviews ought to give you enough information to do a major assessment of what you are learning or failing to learn. This is probably a good point at which to take a close look at your research questions and emerging themes.

If you think that you have been able to grab onto a theme, it is time to write a “data” memo. By this, we mean a memo that integrates the theme with data and any available literature that fits. By a data memo, I mean something that begins to look like a paper. In a data memo, always use more data on a point than you would actually use in a research paper. If you make a broad point and feel that you have 10 good pieces of data that fit that point, lay them all out for inspection and later use. Also, make sure to lay out the words of people who do NOT fit the pattern.

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Once themes begin to emerge, go out of your way to find cases that do not fit. You must try as hard as you can to disprove your ideas. Do not be afraid of complexity and ambiguity about themes. The world is complicated and your writing must reflect that complexity. There is a tendency of social scientists to describe patterns as if they were uniform and monolithic. To do that slights the complexity of things. Don't fall in love with early, plausible theories.

After 15 to 20 interviews, it is probably a good idea to create coding categories. Here the task is to begin by creating as many categories as you can that seem sensible. Coding is another way of "getting close to the data" and telling you what you know. You can eventually use these codes as you go through the data for paper and memo writing.

Write a fairly complete memo every time your work takes on a new direction (say, a major change in sampling procedure). Provide a full explanation for changes in analytical directions. Your memos can constitute an "audit trail" for people who want to retrace your steps. People who do qualitative research should be as fully accountable for their procedures as those who employ more standardized procedures.

If you think you have a theme significant enough to write a paper on for publication, do it. Getting papers published is very affirming and brings your ideas to a point of high refinement. You do not have to wait until all your data are in to write papers. You will find that some of your papers will be on "subsamples" within the larger sample.

Periodically, write outlines for what a book, thesis, or report from your data might look like. Draw up preliminary prospectuses. Pretend that you were about to sit down and write a book. This is a good exercise that requires you to paint the total picture.

Do not get crazy about getting exactly the same data from every respondent. You will find that each respondent's story is to some degree unique. In your writing, you will want to point out here and there the unique story. It is probably a good idea to write up a summary sheet of about one page that describes the main themes in each interview.

Test out your hypotheses on your respondents. Incorporate your hypotheses into questions ("You know, several of the people with whom I have talked tell me that. . . . Does this make sense to you?"). There is no reason to hide or conceal hypotheses, ideas, and concepts from subjects.

Pay attention to extreme cases, because they are often the most informative. Be on the lookout to do "negative case analysis."

In-depth interviews capture an individual's lived experiences. Feminist researchers bring a unique perspective to the practice of in-depth interviewing, for they are often cognizant of issues of power and authority that might affect the research process. These researchers are mindful that they must consider their own standpoints. Feminist researchers are able to discern how their own values and biases affect their research at all points along the research continuum. This includes the types of research questions that are asked and how data are to be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. Feminist research is committed to getting at the subjugated knowledge that often lies hidden from mainstream knowledge building. Feminist researchers are particularly interested in issues of social justice and social change for women and other oppressed groups.

In the next chapter we turn to other forms of feminist research that involve interviewing as a means of data collection. We will first consider feminist oral history research and then turn to feminist focus group interviewing. We will focus on how these methods can be employed in the service of feminist concerns.

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