

CHAPTER 5

Personal Dimensions: Field Relations and Reflexivity

When I stayed away too long, they scolded and snubbed me. When I was not completely fair (and sometimes even when I was) in the distribution of attention, I paid dearly for it.

(Myerhoff 1979, 27)

Recent decades have seen a drastic change in scholarly thinking regarding how qualitative researchers should be in relationship to research participants and how and why they should inquire into those relationships. Once interpretivist and more recent theoretical perspectives began to reshape the conception and enactment of field relations, the positivist concern with objectivity and bias no longer made sense. In positivist work, researchers were urged to take a “fly on the wall” approach, remaining neutral and impartial in dealings with participants so that they would not influence actions and responses. With a primary goal of research that of contributing to knowledge in the scientific community, the interests and desires of research participants were often not considered. The researcher and researched were seen as separate entities with one being the seeker or inquirer and the other being the receptacles of particular bodies of knowledge. The inquirer’s role was to uncover/excavate (note the mining metaphors) that knowledge and to process the “raw” data into something usable by the communities of which the researcher was a part.

No wonder that such approaches to research are perceived by many as exploitative and colonial. Poststructuralists, feminists, and indigenous scholars have been at the forefront of challenging previous perspectives on study purposes, field relationships, and roles of power and reflections in the research process. This chapter introduces you to some of these debates that continue both in the field and in research institutions.

FIELD RELATIONS

Our informants tell and show us what they do because they are in a research situation with us as individuals; this encounter and the knowledge produced through it can never be objective. Therefore it is essential that we attempt to understand the subjectivities through which our research materials are produced.

(Pink 2007, 367)

Qualitative research is often used interchangeably with the term *fieldwork*. As a researcher, your work occurs in a place or places (including virtual reality places) rather than in a laboratory setting. In those places, you develop relationships with others who live and interact there. You gain access, create rapport, develop trust, interact, conduct yourself ethically, and finally you leave and do something with what you've learned. You do none of this alone, but rather in relationship with others in the research site(s). The nature of these relationships is the topic of the first half of this chapter.

Before the past several decades, as mentioned above, much fieldwork remained influenced by positivist thought while, at the same time, challenging aspects of that paradigm. In reference to field relations, fieldworkers were particularly conscious of trying to remove bias from observations and interactions. In another often-used metaphor, this included entering the field with the mind as a "clean slate." Researchers worked to not convey their own perspectives on the issues into which they inquired. In other words, "objectivity" and a kind of scientific detachment remained constructs that many researchers worked to achieve. Some researchers today not only challenge whether objectivity in fieldwork is possible, but also ask questions such as "whose interests does the objective stance serve?" For example, Russell Bishop (2008), writing from an indigenous Kaupapa Maori perspective, argues that scientific communities' emphases on validity, reliability, and objectivity have "dismissed, marginalized, or maintained control over the voice of others" (171). He goes on to say that choosing to do qualitative research does not automatically mean that this changes. When researchers do not make explicit their interests and concerns, but rather work to appear neutral and to monitor all subjectivity in the sake of objectivity then this continues a "colonizing discourse of the 'other'" (171). Savyasaachi (1998, 90), a scholar and activist in India, argues that such neutrality "discourages dialogues and discourses across differences, prevents exchange of ideas and becomes a means to accumulate and monopolise symbolic capital." The research participant continues to be viewed as an object to be studied rather than as a person with whom to engage in conversation.

In this chapter, the process of establishing and maintaining field relationships and the complexities of doing so receives attention before discussion of reflexivity and the process of critically reflecting upon self and relationships in the context of research procedures.

Establishing and Maintaining Field Relations

Rapport. Rapport and trust are two concepts that have been used to describe ideal field relations in qualitative inquiry. The dictionary defines *rapport* as the "relation characterized by harmony, conformity, accord, or affinity" and notes that it refers to the "confidence of a subject in the operator as in hypnotism, psychotherapy, or mental testing with willingness to cooperate" (Webster's 1986). Rapport is an attribute that is instrumental to a variety of professionals, from used-car salespersons to marriage counselors. Its function, however, varies. For example, counselors establish rapport so that clients can feel sufficiently comfortable to disclose information; their intent is to attain ends shaped by the clients' needs, as they and the clients ascertain them. Researchers traditionally established rapport to attain ends shaped primarily by their own needs. As Freilich (1977, 257) states, "The researcher . . . 'engineers' people and situations to get the type of data required by the study." Feminists, poststructuralists, and others challenge this instrumental use of rapport in which researchers paradoxically seek to engender cooperation while maintaining distance through benign neutrality, suppressing their own perspectives on the issues at hand.

Rapport is often used interchangeably with trust, although some are careful to distinguish differences. Wieder (2004, 25) sees "rapport as a research tool and trust as a living relationship," stating that it is trust, not rapport that facilitates people to tell their stories. *Trust*, according to the dictionary, is "firm belief or confidence in the honesty, integrity, reliability, justice, etc. of another person or thing" (Webster's 1986). For many, qualitative research should move in a direction in which trust is needed for working together on the issue under inquiry. Rapport, however, is often a precursor to building trust and part of gaining access and "fitting in."

Fitting In. Malinowski's emphasis on fieldwork sent generations of anthropologists, sociologists, and later healthcare workers, educators, and others into various natural settings attempting to ascertain the "insider's" point of view. The literature and lore of fieldwork portray consummate researchers as sensitive, patient, friendly, and inoffensive. They have a sense of humor and a high tolerance for ambiguity; and they learn the other's language, wear appropriate dress, and maintain confidentiality. Such factors help the researcher fit in.

Measor (1985) discussed the role of appearance and shared interests in her data collection in a British school. She found that how she looked mattered to both students and teachers and that this in itself caused a problem because each group had a different notion of appropriateness. As a result, Measor sought a compromise that showed she was fashion conscious, but not too much so. Figuring out how to best manage appearance or behavior is not always easy. Davis (2001) was interested in nurses' use of computers and arranged to do ethnographic work in a hospital. For her, openly taking notes on her observations was easily done because hospitals are "paper-oriented" cultures. Her identity as researcher, however, was complicated by the ease with which she "fit" the setting. Patients mistook her

for a receptionist when she sat in the office area and became annoyed when she continued with her note taking, rather than assisting patients. When she sat taking notes in the reception rooms, confusion still surfaced: "One patient who had suffered a heart attack asked me if I wanted to see the doctor before him" (43).

If doing research with strangers, chances are that to fit in, at least in some situations, you will have to act in certain ways that you might not otherwise if you did not have the researcher role. This could mean "getting mad" or "causing a disturbance," as Pettigrew (1981) discovered while working among Sikhs in the Punjab. When someone made a derogatory remark, she could not ignore it with a tolerant, indifferent attitude. In keeping with cultural rules, she had to display her opposition in order to maintain respect and rapport. Conversely, when Pettigrew witnessed the blatant sexist treatment of women, she could not object, or she would not have been allowed to stay. Whitehead and Conaway's (1986) book *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork* contains many examples of ways in which researchers managed their behavior and appearance to build and maintain rapport. For Regina and Leon Oboler (1986), working with the Nandi in Kenya, developing rapport meant that they could not openly display affection for each other, a condition they met:

It pleased us when people would comment to us, with approval, that we acted just like Nandis because this implied that they viewed us as unlike the Europeans they had previously encountered. (43)

You consciously reflect upon your behavior so that people who are unaccustomed to the presence of researchers in their lives will be at ease in your presence.

That your appearance, speech, and behavior is acceptable to research participants does not have to imply stifling your own personality into a bland, removed researcher. Rather it means learning and being respectful of the customs and expectations within the culture of the group with whom you are working. Of course, this requires more consideration in some studies than in others. Teachers in the Christian day school that Peshkin (1986) and I studied were actively involved in rallies protesting the Equal Rights Amendment. As researchers concerned not only with rapport, but also with maintaining access to the school, we could not be seen endorsing what was antithetical to core fundamental Christian belief. Thus, rapport can place limitations on the researcher's ordinary interactions and expressions.

Yet, you do not have to always agree with your research participants in order to fit in. Sometimes when researchers question participants' viewpoints, they receive information they would not obtain otherwise and are even more accepted into a group as a result of open dialogue. "Fieldworkers worry," state Kleinman and Copp (1993), "that participants will interpret disagreement as unfair criticism or rejection, and thus it will drive a wedge between them. But...saying what one thinks can be an *engaging* experience and thus constitute closeness rather than distance" (40). When to disagree and when to keep opinions to yourself is one of those issues that depends upon other factors such as your mode of inquiry, the nature of your topic, and the kind of relationships you have developed.

Developing and maintaining rapport obviously involves more than consideration of one individual at a time; it calls for awareness of social interactions among participants. Researchers enter into social systems in ways that demonstrate that participants are valued—that is, that the worth of their time and attention and association is appreciated. Thus, if you are not equitable in the time you allot to participants, you may risk bruising feelings or eroding relationships, as Myerhoff (1979) observed in the opening quotation to this chapter.

You may remain uninvolved in the politics of your site, but this does not free you from needing to understand the political landscape and the pitfalls into which you might tumble. Maintaining rapport is associated with becoming informed about your setting's social and political structure. It is no small matter to be aware of the formal and informal loci of power, of the issues that irritate, and of the history that continues to shape current behavior. All of this is part of rapport—both developing it and keeping it.

Juefei Wang (1995), an educational researcher from China who has been living in Vermont, reflected on the role of time in the development of rapport in the United States and China. He indicates that rapport building may look very different in diverse cultures. After a short introduction to his study, most Vermont respondents were willing to talk openly with Wang. Most Vermonters were also willing to participate in his research, but some would simply decline with a "No thank you, I'm not interested," or refuse to answer certain questions saying, "I don't know." He contrasts the U.S. response to that in China:

Among the people I have interviewed in China, probably over a hundred altogether, I have never had the case of fast-paced trust building. Even with young, open people, it takes me longer to build the trust. I have to find a way to make the interviewees believe that I am one of them. They talk about their families; I ask questions about their parents, wives, husbands, and children, and tell them about mine. They complain about their low pay; I tell them my pay is not high either. This is the process to build trust. It takes much longer, yet it can be long-lasting.

In China, I have never had any refusal for cooperation. The frank American way of saying "I don't know" would not be acceptable by most Chinese. . . . They would always try to save face for me by not refusing me, yet they can always find a way not to give me anything valuable or anything at all. (2)

Wang describes how it took him over a week in China to get personal information from a school principal that, in the United States, he would have received in less time. He states:

Modesty is still a virtue of the nation. This fact makes it very difficult when a researcher tries to find out about the interviewee's roles in an organization. The interviewee talks about other's contributions without talking about him or herself. (3)

Part of your role as researcher is to learn the culturally appropriate ways to develop and maintain rapport and to make the necessary cultural bridges in your own expectations and behavior.

Building Trust. Rapport does not always lead to trusted relationships, but building trust tends to begin with establishing rapport. When asked, "How do you know when you have rapport," students in my qualitative research course replied:

- The way the interview goes shows rapport. When the interviewee keeps looking at her watch, you know you have not achieved good rapport.
- Rapport comes when the interviewee gets something out of the interview. One person told me, "No one has asked me this before." In good interview situations, people get to think about things that they have not put together before. They learn about themselves in the process. Another person told me, "I think I got more out of this than you did." You feel good then.

The first student describes how being attuned to the nonverbal language of participants can inform you about your research relationship, although people do check the time for reasons other than boredom. The second student introduces the concept of reciprocity into the relationship. Rapport and trust is more easily achieved if both parties get something out of the interaction. Research participants often find being part of a study interesting and will welcome the opportunity to reflect on matters of importance to them.

This willingness can be found where least expected. Andrea received a letter from one of her interviewees after their first meeting. The interviewee expressed sincere desire to get together again, sent information relevant to their discussion, apologized for being too enthusiastic, and complimented Andrea on the approach she was taking to investigating change in a small rural community. The interviewee was a developer with whom Andrea had postponed talking because she doubted her ability to keep an open, interested, learner perspective. Ironically, she found herself fascinated both by what he had to say and by his clear, logical, sensitive way of expressing his point of view. Rapport, obviously, had been achieved.

Generally, people will talk more willingly about personal or sensitive issues once they know you, once rapport has morphed into trust. In most cases, this means giving the participant time to learn that you are the sort of person who is reliable, honest, and willing to carefully listen and engage with another. Dick tells of doing an interview with a teacher aspiring to be a principal. Dick had a single, one-and-one-half hour interview scheduled and felt dismayed going into it. "These people," he said beforehand, "will never tell a stranger all this information." But the interviewee was someone who talked easily, and Dick responded appropriately. After forty-five minutes, during which Dick thought he was getting good information, the interviewee asked, "Now that I know you, can we go back to one of the earlier questions?" Dick was delighted that he had been able to develop rapport sufficient for the interviewee to reveal deeper layers of information comfortably. He also learned that many layers of data existed and that, even though his single-session interviews might give him enough data for his purposes, he was getting "thinner" data than he could through multiple interviews.

Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003, 36–38) discuss how what they term *commitment acts* can foster trust. Commitment acts are those activities in which you, as researcher, offer time or energy to the community you are researching. What you do can range from the mundane (chaperoning a school fieldtrip) to the global (creating a video to share previously silenced perspectives of a group). The acts “provide an opportunity to create a stronger web of trust, openness, and rapport between researcher and informants” (37). Through commitment acts, you demonstrate that you value time and interactions with participants and you create the opportunities to get to know each other as people. Although contact over a long period of time does not assure the development of trust, time may prove to be a determining condition. Time allows you to substantiate that you will keep the promises you made when you were negotiating access and time allows you and participants to grow in relationship to each other.

Developing and maintaining rapport and trust with children and adolescents adds extra dimensions to the research process. The role (supervisor, leader, observer, friend) the researcher takes in relationship to children affects the kind of information gathered and the development of rapport and trust. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) distinguish researcher relationships with children on the dimensions of extent of positive contact between child and adult and extent to which the adult has direct authority over the child (14). In particular, they explore what it means for an adult to be a “friend” with a child.

Rebecca, in her dissertation research with adolescent girls and the role of friendship in their lives, found herself in a “friendly” role with the girls. The contact with them was highly positive. She arrived at their homes with art supplies, drove them to ice cream shops, and engaged them in talk that led to their requests for personal advice from her. Although responsible for the girls when with them, Rebecca did not have authority over them. Her evolving connection to the girls led



Research relationships often involve doing things together that do not focus on the research topic.

her to realize that she could not simply say “goodbye” when her data collection was through. Rebecca maintained contact after the study.

Taking Breaks. “Once we feel connected to the people we study, we think we must consistently feel good about them” (Kleinman and Copp 1993, 28). Always feeling good about your participants, however, may not be the case. Given the stress of fieldwork, maintaining relationships sometimes requires taking breaks. Immersed in a life that is not your normal one, you may periodically need to get away to be with people you know or to talk to those who have similar beliefs and ideas if not shared in the research site. You may need to blow off steam or simply disappear for a few days so that you do not destroy the rapport that has been developed.

Fieldwork accounts do not always address this need, but field notes or journals do. Malinowski’s (1967) diary while among the Trobriand Islanders is a well-known example. It became the place for him to vent his feelings and make statements that would not have endeared him to his host community. Immersion is valued, but it can be overdone. Taking breaks promotes your ability to mindfully make the multitude of daily decisions needed in your work. Gaining distance by whatever means—trips, reading, personal journals—is sometimes necessary. Remember, as well, that you do not need to like or be liked by all research participants, although your work is apt to be more rewarding for all parties if mutual liking occurs. As Wax (1971, 373) states, “One can learn a great deal from people one dislikes or from people who dislike one.”

Complicating and Enriching Dynamics in Field Relations

Friendship, connection, and issues of power are aspects of field relations that can complicate and enrich research interactions and interpretations. The following sections address problems and possibilities associated with research friendships and power relationships.

Friendship in the Field

It is not indifference, but care, concern and involvement that sustains a continuous discourse with people and prepares the ground for the legitimacy of an inquiry.

(Savyasaachi 1998, 110)

When a distinction between rapport and friendship was made in qualitative literature, the overwhelming tendency in the past was to warn against forming friendships because of the hazards of sample bias and loss of objectivity. These hazards were linked to overidentification, also called *over-rapport* and *going native* (Gold 1969; Miller 1952; Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz 1980; Van Maanen 1983). As Tedlock (2000, 457) writes, researchers were “to cultivate rapport, not friendship; compassion, not sympathy; respect, not belief; understanding, not identification; admiration, not love.”

Friendship was linked to biased data selection and decreased objectivity in three different ways (Gans 1982; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Pelto and Pelto 1978; Zigarmi and Zigarmi 1978). First, data bias could result from a somewhat unconscious subjective selection process. Researchers might be tempted to talk primarily with people they liked or found politically sympathetic. If they followed such impulses, "the pleasure of participant observation [would] increase significantly, but the sampling of people and situations . . . may become badly distorted" (Gans 1982, 52). Or it could be that researchers would talk to a variety of people, but overidentify with one group. They then would hear what this group had to tell them, but less fully what other groups told them. Therefore, they might censor their own questioning process to avoid alienating those with whom they were overidentifying.

In the second situation, researchers could be consciously aware of their best data sources but denied access to some of them because of their friendship with others. "Every firm social relationship with a particular individual or group carries with it the possibility of closed doors and social rebuffs from competing segments of the community" (Pelto and Pelto 1978, 184). In the Caribbean, I attempted to maintain access simultaneously to alienated young adults, to unalienated young adults, to government officials, and to estate owners. I found myself frequently explaining to those of the unalienated group my time with the more alienated.

In the third situation, research participants overidentify with the researchers. In doing so, they act in ways that they perceive the researchers want them to act or in ways that impress them. Van Maanen (1983) cites the example of police he studied who used overly aggressive patrol tactics in an effort to increase their worth in the eyes of the observer. In sum, friendship was perceived as something that could affect the behavior of researchers or research participants, with consequences for data collection and analysis. It appeared, therefore, that researchers should avoid friendships in the research setting or, at least, with research participants.

With the conventional concern for detachment and objectivity made problematic, friendship is now seen, by some, as a research ideal. Tedlock (2000, 458) suggests that the prescription against friendship was more than Western science's obsession with objectivity. She locates it in a colonial context where crossing from rapport to friendship and love was viewed as a kind of cultural and racial "degeneration," referred to as "going native." Throughout history, some researchers have formed friendships, fallen in love, and become "complete members" of a new society. They just didn't write about it as freely as they can now.

Feminist researchers have been at the forefront of advocating research relationships that include reciprocity, empathy, equality, and friendship if possible. Nonetheless, most recognize that a truly nonhierarchical relationship is difficult to create unless engaged in collaborative work. As Behar (1993) states,

Feminist ethnographers have found themselves caught inside webs of betrayal they themselves have spun; with stark clarity, they realize that they are seeking out intimacy and friendship with subjects on whose backs, ultimately, the books will be written upon which their productivity as scholars in the academic marketplace will be assessed. (297)

Wincup (2001, 28) reflects upon her research with women awaiting trial and how she had different kinds of relationships with different people in her research site:

Although I established rapport and empathy with some women and formed close research relationships with others, I also had negative feelings toward some during the fieldwork. Most women who appeared in courts were charged with minor property offences, however, I met women charged with crimes of violence, child abuse, and murder. I also saw women bullying and victimizing other women.

Henry (1992) discusses what happened to an eighteen-year friendship when she hired her Japanese friend as her research assistant. She traces her confusion as the friendship became strained due to competing demands of friendship and the research. Although she felt that the situation ultimately contributed to a deeper understanding of the people studied, she lost a good relationship in the process.

Friendship and intimacy is messy, emotional, and vital. No matter how much you try to practice "relational ethics" (Flinders 1992) with research participants, no matter how much your friendships go beyond the inquiry, feelings of exploitation or betrayal may erupt from time to time in either researcher or participant. Yet, friendships in themselves are not always without pain, nor do they always last forever.

Field Relations and Power.

We are most likely to abuse our power when we least feel we have it.
(Kendall 2009, 115)

Power poses different challenges in conventional approaches to qualitative inquiry than in collaborative research. This section first addresses power in researcher or institutional driven projects and then in more collaborative approaches.

Conventional qualitative researchers are not always in positions of authority, particularly if studying "up," inquiring into the lives and behavior of the elite or politically powerful. Generally speaking, however, if researchers are making most of the research decisions regarding with whom they talk, what they observe, and how and for whom they analyze and write up the data, they are in a position of power relative to research participants. One of the ways in which researchers address the power imbalance is through various modes of reciprocity. If interviews are meaningful to research participants and conducted well, they may assist interviewees in better understanding aspects of their own lives. Some repeat and group interviews can support not only individual reflection, but also empowerment. Researchers can also help out in a variety of ways, giving of their time or labor.

Leslie Bloom (1998, 35) notes that power is not necessarily something that you have or don't have, but rather "power is situated and contextualized within particular intersubjective relationships." She goes on to make the useful observation that some of the controversies that derive from discussing researcher power results from conflating power with researcher responsibility and then from conflating researcher responsibility with researcher exploitation: "It suggests that having the authority to collect data, interpret it, and produce a text is inherently an

act of exploitation or even violence done by the researcher to the almost victimized respondent" (Bloom 1998, 36). The point she makes is that a difference exists between the researcher's power to use the research for academic gains and the researcher's power to be responsible and responsive to the research participant and to the researcher-participant relationship.

Collaborative approaches to fieldwork often involve both community insiders and outsiders. In collaborative inquiry, the issue of power shifts, and power is often shared more equitably or sometimes lies more in the hands of the community that is the focus of study. Research purposes and questions are identified by and focused to assist, in some way, those participating in the research. As people work together toward a common goal or purpose, particularly when addressing issues of injustice or inequities which marginalize, co-researchers from various cultural and racial backgrounds become partners in a research struggle that can take their relationship beyond that of insider/outsider. Alan Wieder (2004, 25) reflects upon the oral history work in which he participated with teachers in South Africa:

While my position as an American academic, an outsider, appeared to help facilitate interviews initially, my relationships with South African colleagues, the teachers I interviewed, and living in Cape Town, moved me on an unwritten continuum towards insider status because we connected as educators and human beings. . . .

He recognizes that cultural, political, and personal factors help to create insider and outsider differences, but urges researchers to

be open to the possibility of the insider/outsider binary breaking down as the witness/oral historian relationship becomes closer and the oral historian facilitates the witnesses' voice by producing testimony that combines experience and a deeper meaning and becomes part of the counter narrative. (Wieder 2004, 25).

Connecting. Similar to Weider's reflections on connecting as human beings with South African teachers, Marleen Pugach (personal correspondence, 1995) writes of a research relationship that reminds us that connection and care in our relationships is often of great importance:

Last March first I drove north, ate my last green chile cheeseburger at the Owl Bar, and headed east, away from the mountains and toward my other home in Wisconsin. Today, my former landlady called to tell me, a year to the day after I left, that a good friend of mine had died. . . . The shock is enormous—I am not ready for Carmen to be gone. She was the one who would not let me tape record our conversations, but she shared the most phenomenal stories about the old "Hispanic" community from up on the river. . . .

She told me that living "out of town" would be fine for the kids, that she had raised one in the city and one in the country. That comment gave me the confidence to rent our house amidst the yucca, mesquite, roadrunners and rattlesnakes. I don't think she knew that. We used to meet for breakfast or lunch at my favorite hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant. . . . I'm sure I never was able to get down

enough of her real words; our meetings crossed the line between research and friendship. . . .

We talked last in November, just before her son's wedding. I sent a Christmas card, I never found out if she read the copy of *Animal Dreams* I sent as a thank-you gift for having us all there in August. This is not a research relationship. I went to Havens to learn enough to tell a story, but the real story is that you can't separate yourself from the people who welcomed you for all those months. What do I say about Lisa, who called to tell me that Carmen had died? This is not a research obligation, born out of my need to know about life on the border. . . . I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that spending time in a place you want to study is a real liability if you're inclined to build relationships. It's not a case of collaborative research for the purpose of action. . . . It's a case of friendship, not cultivated over long years, but with depth because you recognize that you were meant to be friends even if the study had never happened; it was simply the occasion for a friendship that already should have been.

Bringing qualitative research into what is already your home territory releases you from this potential liability; you keep your friends, your social context, and you tiptoe only a little distance from where you always have been. Intensive fieldwork in a new location pushes the question. It is not an issue of power relationships that I'm trying to understand here. Instead, it echoes the things I've been wondering about for months: can you do ethnography without making wonderful, lifelong friends? Would you want to? . . . Carmen helped me, to be sure, and it is only if I write well that I can properly acknowledge her contributions. But what I really wish is that she would still be there, on the ranch, telling me that whenever I return to Havens, my room there is ready. No one told me about this part of it.

Marleen's reflections demonstrate how research relationships can transcend the public realm into the private. Her story moves us to consider how we want to experience the multiple kinds of relationships that might enter into research. She suggests that we interact with openness, honesty, and respect; not with the masks that rapport can provide or with the walls of professional distancing. In effect, Marleen urges us to be authentic in interactions and to honor the consequences of acting with genuineness.

Postmodern arguments work to complicate the notion of authenticity, however, raising questions about the possibility of transparency or genuineness in a world where fluid, partial, and unstable subjectivities of researcher and participant interact. This is part of the discussion on reflexivity in the next section.

REFLEXIVITY

Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing.

(Reason 1994, 327)

Reflexivity is an awareness of the self in the situation of action and of the role of the self in constructing that situation.

(Bloor and Wood 2006, 145)

Reflexivity grew in importance in the 1980s, through challenges to conventional research by feminist scholars and others who work out of emancipatory theories as well as some poststructuralists who raised questions about the authority of textual representations (Bloor and Wood 2006). Although used in multiple ways for differing reasons in qualitative writing (see Pillow, 2003), reflexivity generally involves critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other. This includes "examining one's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways . . . and for developing particular interpretations" (Schwandt 1997, 136). You ask questions of your research interactions all along the way, from embarking on an inquiry project to sharing the "findings." You ask these questions of yourself and record your reflections in your field log. You ask questions of others about the research process and listen carefully to what they say, noting their answers, and perhaps changing the course of inquiry. You listen to the questions asked of you by research participants and consider how the questions may indicate certain concerns or expectations. You answer as fully as you can and then examine why you answered in the way you did. You ask questions of the sociocultural-political context in which you ask your questions. In a sense, you conduct two research projects at the same time: one into your topic and the other into your "self" and, paraphrasing Reason (1994), the ground on which you stand.

Researchers tend to discuss reflexivity by inquiring into either their own biases, subjectivity, and value-laden perspectives or into the appropriateness of their research methodology and methods, including concerns regarding data collected, interpretations made, and representations produced (Madison 2005, 124–125; Potter 1996, 188). They frequently do so with the goal of making their research more accurate, legitimate, or valid, although this purpose is a matter of contention in postmodern thought. Even though reflexivity is not a "cure" and even though one can never know oneself well enough to critique oneself, the work of reflexivity is useful. This chapter addresses reflexivity with a discussion of the personal dimensions of subjectivity, emotion work, positions, and positionality.

Subjectivity

Any study of "an other" is also a study of "a self."

(Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2002, xiii)

We cross borders, but we don't erase them; we take our borders with us.

(Behar 1993, 320)

In the positivist paradigm, objectivity is a goal and subjectivity, an undesired state of affairs. *Subjectivity*, in this sense, is equated with bias and seen as something to control against and to mitigate its influence in research. The term has long held negative connotations. In more recent times, many, especially poststructural scholars, have explained that the binary opposition, objective/subjective, is no longer useful

because no person can get rid of the subjective and thereby achieve objectivity. Objectivity is viewed as neither possible, nor desirable. Further, feminists have long pointed out that it is usually women who are defined as subjective against the more objective "man of reason."

In the 1980s and early 1990s, researchers based in the interpretivist paradigm began to dispute the notion of subjectivity as something negative (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Oleson 2000; Peshkin 1988b; Wolcott 1995). These researchers recognized subjectivity as an integral part of interpretivist research from deciding on the research topic to selecting frames of analysis. Rather than bias, they saw subjectivity as the personal selves created historically and began to claim the term. Peshkin (1988a, 1988b), for example, titled one article "Virtuous Subjectivity: In the Participant–Observer's I's," and another "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own." The perspective among qualitative researchers at that point in time was that subjectivity, in terms of bias, should be monitored for more trustworthy research, and also that subjectivity, in terms of personal history and passions, could contribute to research. It was perceived as impossible for qualitative researchers to escape themselves, nor would they want to. Peshkin was one of the first qualitative researchers to try to make explicit the different ways in which he was present in his research.

Peshkin¹ viewed subjectivity as autobiographical, emotional states that were engaged by different research situations. He began to reflect upon his various research projects and the various subjective lenses they elicited. When he did his study in Mansfield, a small Midwestern rural town, he became entranced by the sense of community there. He liked Mansfield and its people, and he did not want them to lose their community feeling. His next school-community study was in the fundamentalist Christian setting of Bethany Baptist Church and Bethany Baptist Academy. While there, he did not feel moved to admire their sense of community because other emotions were on high alert. He wrote,

I knew that I was annoyed by my personal (as opposed to research) experience at BBA. I soon became sharply aware that my annoyance was pervasively present, that I was writing out of pique and vexation. Accordingly, I was not celebrating community at Bethany, and community prevailed there no less robustly than it had at Mansfield. Why not? I was more than annoyed in Bethany; my ox had been gored. The consequence was that the story I was feeling drawn to tell had its origins in my personal sense of threat. I was not at Bethany as a cool, dispassionate observer (are there any?); I was there as a Jew whose otherness was dramatized directly and indirectly during 18 months of fieldwork.

As Peshkin entered his next school-community study in urban Riverview, where he planned to learn how ethnicity operated in the lives of students and parents in the school and community, he resolved to look for instances of his own subjectivity, noting feeling and circumstances. He incorporated his reflections into what he described as a set of "Subjective I's." As in Mansfield, the "Community–Maintenance I" was present, but the Riverview research situation

called forth emotional states that previous studies had not, such as what he termed his "Pedagogical-Meliorist I":

This . . . is a defensive self. It is directed toward students, generally minorities, whom I observed getting nowhere in their classrooms. They were being taught by teachers who had not learned enough, often did not care enough, to make a difference in their students' lives. Class time for both students and teachers was an occasion for little more than marking time until the bell released both from their meaningless engagement. This circumstance, regrettably common, disturbed me more than I had ever been disturbed by the ineffective teachers I had observed at other schools. The difference at Riverview High School was that the students in such classes were usually minorities, those who came to school with two strikes against them. I found myself doing what I never before had done as I sat in the back of classrooms: hatching schemes that would alter the classrooms I was watching, schemes that were calculated to reorient instruction and make a difference in the lives of the students. .

Tracing your subjective selves, as Peshkin described them, shows points on a map of yourself. These points do not create a complete map because no research evokes all of your strong emotions and positions. Some perspectives surely will appear again in other studies; just as surely, new ones will appear in other studies. And most likely, no two people doing the same study would have the same personal responses, although many educators and social service professionals have identified a "Justice I" and a "Caring I" when, using Peshkin's work, they reflected upon the emotional reactions triggered by their own research projects. Lorrie provides an example:

I view my inquiry into how physical therapists work with elders with dementia through several lenses. First, and most connected to me, is the *personal lens*. The personal lens comes from my past, derived from the relationship I had with my maternal grandmother. Second, I view this topic through a *justice lens*. I have seen elders treated unfairly by healthcare providers; they don't receive the same quality of treatment as younger people, even when they have the same problems. Third, I am looking at this research through a *caring lens*. I have a strong interest in having the elders in our society treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. I want everyone in society to know what resources exist in our elderly community members.

To address the *personal lens*, I must return to my experience as a child. My parents were older when I was born—the age of my peers' grandparents. Essentially, I skipped a generation. Consequently, I found myself surrounded by elderly people on both sides of the family. The most influential person was my grandmother. My grandmother had multi-infarct dementia. She was treated very poorly by an underqualified and undereducated staff in one of the local facilities. After she died, I knew that I had to work specifically with elders; it was something that I could not ignore, a calling.

The basis of my personal interest in geriatrics stems from my relationship with my grandmother and my observations of the care she received at the most vulnerable point in her life. However, I also see the personal lens linked with the

justice lens. I have always been sensitive to people who are oppressed or underprivileged. I believe that the elderly, especially those without financial resources and without advocates, are the most vulnerable members of our society. In many ways they are more vulnerable than children because most children have strong advocates, parents. Elders have multiple needs; far too often, they are neglected or taken advantage of.

Finally, I see my *caring lens* connected to both the personal lens and justice lens. Having spent many hours with elderly individuals, I am well aware of what they have to offer. I value elders. I see them as wise, interesting people with rich experiences. Elders deserve to be treated with a special dignity.

Keeping track of your subjective selves and then inquiring into their origins, as Laurie did, can make you aware not only of your own perspectives, but also how those perspectives might lead you to ask certain questions (and not others) and to make certain interpretations (and not others) of interactions within the research setting. Poststructural scholars and others, since Peshkin's early work, have complicated his understanding of the work of subjectivity in qualitative research. They assert that subjectivity is not composed of "lenses" that you can put on and take off but rather that each of us live at the complex and shifting intersections of identity categories such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, wellness, nationality, and so on. In some research situations, a person's gender, for example, may seem more significant; in others, one's age. In any case, neither the researcher's nor participants' subjectivities are stable.

Emotion Work

Part of being attuned to your personal views and perspectives is being attuned to your emotions. Instead of trying to suppress your feelings, you use them to inquire into your assumptions and to shape new questions through re-examining previous perspectives. "Ignoring or suppressing feelings are emotion work strategies that divert our attention from the cues that ultimately help us understand those we study" (Kleinman and Copp 1993, 33). For example, Tsing (1993, 68) reports how she learned from her emotions, which flared when a research participant suggested that she did not work:

Once Ma Salam's mother tried to flatter me by saying that I didn't work (*bagawi*) but only "traveled" (*bajalan*). My first thought was to take offense and argue for my industriousness; in the United States, to do no work is to be worthless. But I soon realized my mistake: for Meratus to "work" is to do repetitive caretaking activity, while to "travel" is a process of personal and material enrichment.

It is when you feel angry, irritable, gleeful, excited, or sad that you can be sure that your personal views are at work. The goal is to explore such feelings to become aware of what they are telling you about who you are in relationship to your actions, reactions, and interactions with research participants and to what you are learning and what you may be keeping yourself from learning or perceiving.

Wincup (2001, 29) described how, during analysis and writing, she made use of emotions evoked in her research with women awaiting trial:

Gradually, I began to realize that my own emotions could be used constructively to enhance the research without compromising the ability to step back and offer analysis and interpretation. Reliving my fieldwork experiences brought my data alive. My emotional awareness encouraged me to listen more closely to the accounts of the women I interviewed, and to think carefully about the ways I could do justice to the women's stories as I created my ethnographic account.

By taking notes, you can become aware of how your personal history is being engaged in your research. You can get hints about which perspectives might be called into play during your research by reflecting on how your research is autobiographical. When I ask students to do this, I stress that I don't want their life story, but I want to know *how* their research topic intersects with their life. What does their approach to research say about them and why is their research statement, of all the research statements they could pose, of interest to them?

Kristina, whose interview questions were discussed in Chapter 4, planned to interview women from Africa about their perspectives on women's legal rights related to marriage, divorce, and property. At first, she thought she had chosen her topic because she was preparing to move with her husband to East Africa for several years and wanted to use her thesis requirement as an opportunity to learn something about the lives of African women. As she considered how her topic was autobiographical, however, she realized that her choice had deeper roots:

My interest in women's rights began in ninth grade with a talk by a women's rights activist that I attended with my mother. The activist told her life story of being raised in the Mormon Church and her struggle to support the Equal Rights Amendment which eventually resulted in her excommunication from the Church of Latter Day Saints and her divorce. Until that evening, I had believed that discrimination against women was part of the past. I distinctly remember my mother saying to me, "You think that there aren't any more barriers for women, but you'll see." Her statement caught me off guard. I was a successful student; I was planning on going to a competitive college and pursuing a career in law or business. But I began to pay more attention to women's issues, especially those which highlighted inequalities between men and women.

My parents' divorce a year after this event dramatically shaped my ideas about women and marriage forever. They had been married for 20 years and while both of my parents struggled after the divorce, my father recovered much more quickly, both financially and emotionally. My mother had somehow "invested" more of herself in the marriage and at the end found herself "bankrupt" with fewer resources to help her start her life over. I think the unequal responsibilities between my parents (Mom being primarily responsible for me, my brother, and the house), as well as her limited work experience, made it more difficult for her to create a new life. Since this time I have been acutely aware of the increased burdens women generally carry in many family situations and I think this awareness has helped me to focus my interests on African women's legal rights around marriage, divorce, and property.

By understanding the ways in which her topic was autobiographical, Kristina could become more aware of her own attitudes toward and emotional investment in issues of marriage, divorce, property, and women's rights as she began her interviews with African women.

Noting and reflecting upon your emotional reactions and the way in which they connect to who you are, your history, and experiences is important. Monitoring these subjective feelings is not the same as controlling for them. When you track your emotions, you learn more about your own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and needs. You learn that your history and experiences are the basis for your behaviors and interpretations in interactions and thus, for the story that you are able to tell. They are the strengths on which you build. They make you who you are as a person and as a researcher, equipping you with the perspectives and insights that shape all that you do as a researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphases you make in your writing.

Mark describes how tracking his emotions helped him to see in new ways. He was researching attitudes of officers in corrective facilities toward the schooling of their wards:

The most unexpected event during the research process was that I changed my mind. Several field log entries identify my concern over my judgmental stance regarding officers. I recognized that I must be cognizant of this and had to be careful to place "no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be" (Patton 1990, 41). In the field log, I reminded myself "that during this research I am not a reformer." What surprises me now is that I have come to respect more what the officers do in their day-to-day routines in the cellblocks. By their sharing their thoughts and experiences with me, I have been informed, and consequently reformed. In their own way, they are also involved in helping a rather difficult clientele overcome massive barriers and become better people. I am delighted.

To the best of your ability, try to acknowledge your theoretical and personal attachments during the course of your research. Although it is not possible to be complete in documenting your values, emotions, and perspectives, you can become tuned to the selves generated in particular research situations. You can reflect upon, inquire into, and responsibly convey those "selves" to the readers of your work. You can do this in direct or indirect ways. For example, you may clearly state the theories you used to interpret data and the kinds of relationships in which you engaged, or, more indirectly, you may write in any number of creative analytical ways (see Chapter 9) that indicate to the reader your personal persuasions and turmoils.

In recent times, the language of subjectivity has become subsumed into discussions of reflexivity, with an emphasis on tracking, questioning, and sharing ways in which we shape and are shaped by the research process. For example, Guba and Lincoln (2008, 278) state that "Reflexivity forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with our selves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting." They refer here to the different kinds of

research-related selves identified by Shulamit Reinharz (cited in Guba and Lincoln 2008, 279): “research-based selves, brought selves (the selves that historically, socially, and personally create our standpoints), and situationally created selves.” They go on to say that reflexivity “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives” (279).

Embodiment, Positions, and Positionality

Each of us has fixed attributes that affect, in conjunction with the socio-cultural-historical context, how we act in the world and how others respond. These fixed personal factors that are either impossible or difficult to change are referred to as *identity categories* or as *embodiment* and include attributes such as skin color, gender, age, size, and physical disability (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2002). These identity categories should not be viewed as having an essential meaning, as being true everywhere for all people, or as being solely responsible for particular actions or reactions. Rather, they interact in complex ways with other attributes, histories, and contexts—the *positions* we inhabit.

Positions tends to refer to aspects of one’s person that are not necessarily embodied in the person and include both ascribed characteristics (nationality, ancestry) and achieved characteristics (educational level, economic level, institutional affiliation, etc.). By simply looking at a person, you cannot necessarily determine the person’s educational level, for example. *Subjective positions* include aspects of your life history and personal experiences that help to form your values (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2002). Coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement could be a subjective position that is an important part of how you see the world no matter what your skin color. Yet, most likely, this subjective position would interact with skin color in different ways. Thus, embodiment and positions interact, as they do with *positionality*, or to the researcher’s “social, locational, and ideological placement relative to the research project or to other participants in it” (Hay 2005, 290).

Researchers have little control over embodied factors and limited control over their positions (some, such as nationality or educational level could be—unethically—misrepresented or not disclosed). Researchers cannot control positionality in that it is determined in relation with others, but they can make certain choices that affect those relationships. For example, entering into research with a mindset of openness, curiosity, and desire and willingness to interact in collaborative ways is likely to result in a different positionality than one in which the researcher maintains a mindset of entitlement, self-centeredness, and control. Madison (2005, 9) states, “positionality requires that we direct our attention beyond our individual or subjective selves. Instead, we attend to how our subjectivity in relation to the Other informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of the Other.” Positionality is not fixed and, perhaps, should be plural, since relationships vary between and among people and change over time.

Being attuned to positionality is being attuned to intersubjectivity, how the subjectivities of all involved guide the research process, content, and, ideally, the interpretations. As Myerhoff (1979, 26–27) indicates in the following quote, her observations and interviews with Jewish elders activated emotions within her participants that, in turn, shaped their behavior:

The old people were genuinely proud of me, generous, and affectionate, but at times their resentment spilled over. My presence was a continual reminder of many painful facts: that it should have been their own children there listening to their stories; that I had combined family and a career, opportunities that the women had longed for and never been allowed.

In another example, Lather and Smithies (1997) observed HIV/AIDS support groups and conducted interviews with women in the groups. Their work, which spanned several years, became important to many of the participants, as the following quotations indicate:

I'm really excited about you guys writing this book and I want you to get it published right away. . . . Going through the interviews and hearing everyone's story, a lot of this stuff, we don't talk about in group, we don't talk about like how do you really feel about that stuff. (xxvii)

When are you guys going to publish? Some of us are on deadline, you know. (169)

Lather, Smithies, and the women living with HIV/AIDS formed relationships, laughed, cried, and re-examined their lives through the project. And the women's urgency to get their story told pushed Lather and Smithies to desktop publish an early version of their book, *Troubling the Angels*.

As research relationships develop, the negotiation of subjectivities is ongoing, with the potential for values, attitudes, and understandings of both researcher and participants to be changed through the research process. Reflecting upon the interplay between researcher and researched is essential for understanding how research relationships influence fieldwork and interpretation. As Welch (1994, 41) states, "We create our own stories, but only as coauthors."

Thinking about the interplay of subjectivity, embodiment, and positioning of yourself with that of research participants assists in data interpretation and representation. In fact, how you position yourself within the text is yet another positioning, a "textual positioning" (Madison 2005). Ask yourself how those in the research site would react to your interpretations, to your words. Is your interpretation paternalistic at times? Are participants coming across as one-dimensional, perhaps as oppressed, powerless victims? Or, does it romanticize, leading to the possibility that you have overlooked "deep-seated contradictions, detailed symbolic meanings and troubling questions" (Madison 2005, 126)? How is the representation missing the complexity of the lives studied? Try to take on the position of a research participant and read your words thinking about their impact and meaning to you as someone who has been "researched." Rather than

the voice of the expert who authoritatively presents “results,” the reflexive stance involves honestly and openly locating your positions and positionalities in the research, reflecting upon how they interacted with your observations and interpretations.

CONCLUSIONS

Why is so much attention focused on field relations and reflexivity? What if you just want to get on with the business of doing research? Why engage in what some have described as potentially devolving into “navel gazing?” Sultana (2007, 376), a Bangladeshi researcher, states of her fieldwork on water resources management, “I do not believe that being reflexive about one’s own positionality is to self-indulge but to reflect on how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production. . . .” Ultimately, this thoughtfulness about and critical engagement with the personal dimensions of research can lead to more ethical work, the topic of the next chapter. Reflexive thought assists in understanding ways in which your personal characteristics, values, and positions interact with others in the research situation to influence the methodological approach you take, the methods you use, and the interpretations you make. It forces you to think more about how you want to be in relation to research participants. It can help you make use of personal passions and strengths while better understanding the ways in which the knowledge you produce is co-constructed and only partial. Pillow (2003) argues for “reflexivities of discomfort” (188) that “do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” (193).

Michael Patton (2002, 66) provides a diagram titled *Reflexive Questions: Triangulated Inquiry*. It suggests kinds of reflexive questions one could ask of oneself, of research participants, and of the audience. The diagram illustrates that each person is situated in a sociocultural context of embodiment and positions (“culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, political praxis, language, values”) that interact and provide “screens” for differing perspectives. Using Patton’s categories, the following questions draw from and expand upon his questions:

Inquirer

- What are my theoretical and philosophical beliefs about doing research, and how do they guide me to do this kind of research?
- What in my autobiography led me to this topic?
- Why did I select each particular person who is in the study?
- Why did I form the particular interview questions I use?
- Why do I observe where I observe?
- What kind of relationships have I developed with research participants and why?

- What kind of relationships do I desire and for what purposes?
- What do I think I know and how did I come to know it?
- What values and experiences shape my perspectives and my research decisions?
- As I analyze and interpret the data, what do I choose to include and what do I choose to omit and why?
- What became the important analytical themes and why was I able to think of those themes?
- With what voice do I share my perspectives?
- How much do I inscribe myself into the text and how do I present myself when I do?
- What do I do with what I have found?
- What are the consequences of my choices?

Participants

- How do they know what they know?
- What shapes and has shaped their worldview?
- How do they perceive me? Why? How do I know?
- What stories do they tell about me?
- What stories do they tell others of the research process?
- How do/would they respond to what I am writing?

Audience

- How do they make sense of what I give them?
- What perspectives do they bring to my presentations?
- How do they perceive me?
- How do I perceive them?
- How do these perceptions affect what I say and how I say it?

The previous questions are guides for questions you may want to address in your field notebook. Most likely, neither you (nor your readers) would want to dwell upon answers to each question in a final report. At the least, however, you need to provide background to the decisions you make so that the reader can better understand (and question) the interpretations you make. Ideally, you also demonstrate clearly your own belief systems (social, political, ideological, theoretical) and how they link to the actions you take. Interpretivists often claim "understanding others' perspectives" as a research purpose. Reflexivity challenges your ability to ever "know" the other. Perhaps a more attainable goal is to understand the self in relationship to those with whom you interact.

Reading here about research relations and reflexivity is like reading about other aspects of the research process: It may represent the beginning of understanding the place of each in your research. For you to make your positionality explicit, however, you have to engage in personal encounters with self and others throughout the research process. Aware that there is something to seek, to uncover, and to question, you are ready to be informed through the research experience.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Pillow, W. 2003. Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196.

EXERCISES

1. Reflect upon the nature of the optimal research relationships in your study. What implications do such relationships have for developing and maintaining rapport? For developing and maintaining trust?
2. Write a few pages in your field journal about the ways in which your research topic is autobiographical. Think deeply about this—why did you choose the research questions, of all possible questions, that you did? What do those questions say about you?
3. Reading ethnographies is a good way to expand your thinking about doing and writing-up fieldwork. In this activity, divide into groups of four or five, with each group taking a different ethnography to read. Plan to meet several times as you read the book to discuss specific aspects of the book (you could also do periodic in-class reports). You might, for example, focus one discussion group on how the author incorporates observations and interviews into the text and another discussion group on the organization of the ethnography. Accompanying this chapter's topics, reflect upon how the researchers position themselves in the work. What do you learn about the author? What do you learn about field relations? What other things would you like to know? Why?

ENDNOTE

1. Peshkin's reflections on subjectivity that are presented here are taken from the first edition of *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* and drawn from Peshkin 1982b, 1988a, and 1988b.