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THE RELUCTANT RESPONDENT

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Although it is nearly a sociological maxim that people like to talk about themselves, researchers occasionally find that potential respondents are reluctant to be interviewed. This may have nothing to do with the character of the social scientist or the intended subject, but may be rooted in social patterns that are understandable and analyzable. Researchers generally encounter two types of reluctance, involving issues of access and resistance. These are lodged in different stages of the data gathering enterprise. Individuals who are reluctant to grant access will withdraw, be reticent, or demur when the interview is initially requested. They may be hard to find and even harder to secure for permission to study. Other people may agree to be interviewed, but then resist opening up or discussing certain kinds of topics. They may not be forthcoming during part or all of the interview.

The reluctance of respondents has been noted since the **earliest days of recorded** reflections on **social scientific interviewing**. More than 30 years ago, Howard Becker and Blanche Geer (1969) addressed respondents' inability or unwillingness to discuss certain matters:

Frequently, people do not tell an interviewer all the things he might want to know. This may be because they do not want to, feeling that to speak of some particular subject would be impolitic, impolite, or insensitive, because they do not think to and because the interviewer does not have enough information to inquire into the matter, or because they are not able to. (P. 326)

Becker and Geer noted that social scientists had already begun to devise strategies to overcome such resistance, from experi-

menting with different approaches during the interview to probing for inconsistencies or illogicalities, to reacting to submerged data, when unearthed, in a matter-of-fact manner (see Becker 1954; Rose 1945). When resistance is not detected and overcome, they remarked, it is likely to result in significant data gaps. Further, other problems and areas of potential interest may remain undiscovered, and this can damage scholars' understanding of empirical issues and the theoretical extrapolations deriving from this base.

♦ Social Context

Now, more than ever, the reluctance of respondents may have developed into a problem of great magnitude. American society, as Jack Douglas (1971) long ago noted, is immense, highly complex, and pluralistic, composed of myriad different subgroups and subcultures, each having its cohesion and loyalty focused inward, away from the dominant, overarching society. Functioning in society's mass bureaucracy involves navigating through rules and regulations that are often more profitably skirted. Many groups operate within the context of opposition groups or movements, those who would critique, oppose, or eliminate their actions. This necessitates researchers' moving beyond the simplistic cooperation model of research to grapple with some of the characteristics of a conflictful view of social order (Douglas 1976). As a result, groups separate their terrain and knowledge into that which is publicly accessible—available to outsiders—and that which is accessible only to select companies of insiders. This may be the case for even the most seemingly innocuous groups, from informal collectives to formal organizations.

The rise of secrecy in U.S. society has been exacerbated by the expansion of litigation, as people increasingly use lawsuits as tools to force disclosures and redress grievances. To protect themselves against

such damaging intrusions and costs, groups have become even more hidden. This has been made more difficult by advances in technology, which enable ever-greater surveillance over citizens (Marx 1988). Concealed audio and video devices record behavior, phone calls may be monitored and taped, Internet communication may be invaded, and secure documents and systems hacked. Records of individuals' lives, in this information age, are readily accessible to those with the necessary technological expertise, and privacy consequently has been diminished. All of these factors exacerbate individuals' reluctance to reveal too many aspects of their selves to others.

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING RELUCTANCE

In past times, research codes of ethics, both those informally taught and those formally codified by professional social science associations, privileged researchers' protection of the human subjects they studied. Scholars in training were taught through rhetoric and example that they should give careful regard to the welfare of the populations they studied. Social scientists routinely employed rules of confidentiality, safeguarding the identities of respondents in their published work. They widely practiced self-censorship (see Adler and Adler 1993), withholding information that could identify or harm respondents. They held strong loyalty tenets that allied them with the people who had opened up their lives to them and shared intimate details and experiences through their research relationships. They resisted pressures to reveal information that could threaten those relationships. For example, during John Van Maanen's (1983) study of the police, an incident occurred on a night when Van Maanen was doing a ride-along in a patrol car: A black man, in the course of being arrested, was beaten up. A dispute arose in which the man claimed he had been

a victim of police brutality and the officers involved claimed he had resisted arrest. Investigators turned to Van Maanen, wanting to see if his field notes could shed some light on the competing charges. But Van Maanen withheld his notes, feeling that the loyalty bonds between his subjects and himself overrode other concerns. The research community sided with Van Maanen, and he safeguarded his subjects and data. Of course, such dilemmas can end up being quite complicated, because all sorts of legal, ethical, and moral concerns enter into the picture when researchers observe actions that are reprehensible. There may be times, therefore, when appeals to higher loyalties must supersede the protection of the people being researched.

Yet other research in the past exploited subjects for the gain of expanding scientific knowledge. Classic horror stories surfaced that generated alarm about the unchecked behavior of scientists. Among the most infamous examples are the U.S. government's medical experiments on the progression of syphilis, in which treatments that became known during the course of the research that could have reversed the fatal effects of the disease were withheld in order to preserve the original experimental design (Jones 1981), and psychological experiments on college students in which researchers tested compliance to authority by ordering subjects to administer (secretly fake) electric shocks to others strapped into electrode chairs to see how far people could be pushed to (allegedly) harm or kill others (Milgram 1965). These cases led a tide of change in public opinion, and the government sought to intervene into research behavior, turning formerly private decisions into public ones. Institutional review boards (IRBs), groups of individuals assigned to review research proposals with the intent of protecting human subjects, began to be formed in the 1970s, but this practice did not really take hold until the 1990s, when many universities mandated that all proposed research be approved by committee. IRBs privileged the moral good

of the country, the power of the law, and the protection of institutions sponsoring research (universities) from lawsuits over the informal loyalty ties between researchers and subjects. As a result, subjects could no longer be protected in the same ways as before (on the problems of protecting respondent confidentiality, see Picou 1996).

Some of the first test cases that came to national prominence in sociology shocked the research community. Mario Brajuha, a graduate student at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, was studying a restaurant when it burned down because of a fire of suspicious origin. When the police subpoenaed Brajuha's field notes, he refused to turn them over (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986). Rik Scarce, a graduate student at Washington State University, was studying animal rights activists when an animal research laboratory was invaded, equipment destroyed, and the animals "liberated." When the police subpoenaed Scarce's field notes, he refused to comply (Scarce 1994). In both of these cases, the researchers were denied the ability to shield their subjects from police inquiry, and the IRBs sided with the law. Brajuha was stripped of all rights, endured lengthy and expensive court battles, lost all his money as well as his family, and quit the field of sociology. Scarce, who was found to be in contempt of court, also experienced lengthy and expensive court battles and spent six months in jail.

A wave of concern washed over the research community as the new guidelines took effect. Researchers were mandated to place the public good over their moral obligations to respondents and deputized as agents of the state, required to report illegal and immoral behavior. As a result, when Eleanor Hubbard undertook an interview study of battered women who resisted their abuse by fighting back, she was clearly instructed that she should be vigilant in observing these "violent" women's behaviors; if they could strike their husbands, they might strike their children. She was ordered to report them to social service agen-

cies should she see any indications of such tendencies. She was also instructed that she had to caution potential respondents, prior to obtaining their permission for interviews, that if they said anything that indicated they had taken part in illegal or immoral behavior, she was required to report them (Hubbard 1992).

Like Hubbard, all researchers now must caution respondents that the researchers' first loyalty lies with the state, and that respondents should regard researchers as deputized agents of the state. This declaration has a potentially chilling effect on research. It cannot help but exacerbate the reluctance of respondents who worry that their revelations might be used against them or their friends, colleagues, or family members. As a result, access to such respondents has been significantly diminished (Hamm and Ferrell 1998).

♦ *The Spectrum of Reluctance*

The variety of respondents who may feel some reluctance to be interviewed can be seen as falling along a spectrum of degrees of aversion to revealing aspects of self and/or being part of social scientific research. Depending upon their needs for secrecy or privacy, their fear of detection, and a host of other factors, individuals may want to guard themselves from talking to researchers, journalists, and a variety of other inquirers. Below, we discuss the range of respondents who might be particularly hesitant to be interviewed.

At the most anxious end of the spectrum of reluctance, more unwilling respondents, those we address specifically in this chapter, are scattered throughout society. They tend to cluster, however, around the top and bottom of the power, prestige, and socioeconomic hierarchies. In a cogent review of people who research "sensitive" topics, Claire Renzetti and Raymond Lee (1993) state:

It is probably possible for *any* topic, depending on context, to be a sensitive one. Experience suggests, however, that there are a number of areas in which research is more likely to be threatening than in others. These include (a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some personal experience, (b) where the study is concerned with deviance and social control, (c) where it impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination, and (d) where it deals with things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned. (P. 6)

SECRETIVE RESPONDENTS

Some causes of reluctance can be found in individuals scattered across the wider spectrum of society. Especially fearful of being researched are people with secrets. Omnipresent in society, people with secrets live in fear that what they are hiding will be revealed to public attention. Despite the near-universal edict among social scientists that the identities of those they study must be protected, respondents who hold secrets are concerned about information leaking out. Most obvious among these are people who belong to secret societies (see Bellman 1984). This has often been an issue for anthropologists, who venture into indigenous cultures and sometimes find themselves among clandestine groups. For instance, Pamela Brink (1993) discusses the problems she encountered in studying the Annang, a covert women's cohort in a small, isolated African community. Like most secret societies, the Annang imposed sanctions against persons who revealed their secrets. This put Brink's respondents as well as Brink herself at personal risk of being "punished" several times for revealing the group's private matters.

Researchers need not venture onto foreign soil to confront such situations, however. Renée Anspach (1993) refers to the

physicians in the neonatal intensive care unit she studied as members of a "closed" society. Much like a secret tribe, Anspach observes, these doctors had their own language, customs, and decisions that they sought to protect. Given the life-and-death judgments they were constantly making, these specialists feared retribution, lawsuits, or public humiliation if Anspach revealed information that was sensitive in nature. Even more radical in their secrecy were the Roman Catholic nuns who were the subjects of a study by Mary Anne Wichroski (1997). Wichroski had the challenging task of penetrating female monastic communities that practice codes of silence in truly cloistered societies. Beyond these extreme cases, many ordinary people hold secrets about themselves and others that they guard carefully, and that might be damaging to reveal.

SENSITIVE RESPONDENTS

Respondents who are being asked about delicate or sensitive topics may also display reluctance. Any personal issue that might cause embarrassment could fall into the "delicate or sensitive" category. Traditionally, people have been loath to discuss with interviewers their financial matters, health or disease issues, sexual conduct, drug use, and relational problems. Interestingly, Robert Weiss (1994:76) notes that survey researchers claim that income is, surprisingly, even more difficult to ask about than sex. Raquel Bergen (1993) endeavored to study marital rape, a highly sensitive topic about which women do not like to speak. Because obtaining access to women who had been raped in their marriages demanded that Bergen go through institutional channels, she had to obtain permission from the directors of appropriate women's organizations to do her research. Despite her gender and her background as a rape counselor, she was rejected by the vast majority of the institutions she contacted. Ironically, once she

finally gained access to women for the interviews, she had little trouble getting them to open up. Similarly, Rosalind Edwards (1993) found that asking women about their private family lives was difficult. She referred to her respondents as putting "invisible walls" around their family lives (p. 186).

In our own research on upper-level drug dealers and smugglers (Adler 1985), we would not have been able to get these people to talk about their drug use had we not admitted (and, in fact, shared with them) our own patterns of use. Because of the illicit nature of the activity under study, respondents had an obvious mistrust of anyone prying into their business. However, as K. J. Day (1985; cited in Renzetti and Lee 1993:6) avers, there is no fixed private sphere. Areas of social life commonly shielded from others include sexual and financial matters. Concerning the former, a number of researchers have attempted to uncover the sexual proclivities of Americans. In the most recent major study, Edward Laumann and his colleagues (1994) included numerous checks and balances to try to ease the way for respondents to discuss the intimacies of their bedroom behavior. Despite such assurances, surveys concerning sexual practices have repeatedly been attacked or questioned by others regarding respondents' veracity (see, especially, Erickson 1999). Particularly disturbing to social researchers is the notion that all people, not just members of certain groups or people discussing specific subjects, have confidences that they would prefer remain unrevealed. In this regard, almost all potential respondents should be treated as reluctant.

THE ADVANTAGED

Yet another group of people who have commonly been difficult for social scientists to access are the advantaged, those in positions of wealth, status, and power. As Rosanna Hertz and Jonathan Imber (1995)

note: "Few social researchers study elites because elites are by their very nature difficult to penetrate. Elites establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society" (p. viii).

Susan Ostrander (1984, 1995a) is one of the few sociologists who has successfully studied the upper class. Despite her success in this area, she has described in detail the arduous steps she has had to take to accomplish her various studies of elites (Ostrander 1995b). Because of their privileged position in society, upper-class individuals can parry the forays of social scientists trying to infiltrate their midst. Unlike members of downtrodden populations, who can often muster few protections to prevent people from intruding on and studying them, aristocrats in American society have many layers of shields that can keep social scientists at bay. Ostrander has proved that there are ways around these, but the relative paucity of research on the upper class serves as testimony to the difficulties researchers encounter in the field. Louis Corsino (1987) experienced some problems while he was trying to study the inner workings of political campaigns. With the knowledge and permission of the campaign managers, he researched the mayoral campaigns of Kevin White in Boston and Pete Wilson in San Diego. Despite his initial entrée, he was constantly under intense scrutiny regarding his political and research motives. Politicians, too, have been a group underresearched by sociologists, mainly because they have maintained the sanctity of access to their inner circles.

Celebrities. Another group of advantaged individuals who have traditionally been reluctant to be studied is made up of people with high visibility, such as celebrities, athletes, and opinion leaders. Used to being in the public eye and fearful of media exploitation or tabloid sensationalism, these people assiduously work to avoid being interviewed or portrayed in a negative light. This makes gaining access to them ex-

tremely trying for social scientists. Joshua Gamson (1994), one of the few relatively successful researchers into this domain, has studied entertainment industry elites (entertainers, agents, managers). Hollywood types such as these are so wary of publicity seekers that they may see the social scientist merely as another gossipmonger. Our own research on a major college basketball team offers another example (Adler and Adler 1991). Entering the scene before the team's success and celebrity had struck, we were able to gain access and full insider status. At the same time, Peter gained celebrity status during the course of the research through his membership role with the team (Adler 1984). So necessary was it for us to establish a role that approximated the lifestyle of the players and coaches that Peter became swept up in the media attention, popularity, and stardom that was bestowed on other members of this scene, and he had to work to shield himself from the prying eyes and questions of outsiders.

Malcolm Spector (1980) has also discussed a similar problem: researching public figures. In his case, he was in the midst of two public controversies involving psychiatry in which the respondents drew the attention of the media. Because of the notoriety these people had accrued, they were wary of any incursion into their lives or opinions. People in the center of a well-publicized storm are not likely to give access to social scientists or others. We noted this as residents of Boulder, Colorado, in the 1990s, when swarms of media personnel descended on the community in relation to the JonBenet Ramsey murder case and the Columbine High School killings.

Organizations and corporations. Other powerful groups in society that desire to protect themselves from social researchers are organizations and corporations. Because corporate managers must safeguard organizational goals, they serve as gatekeepers, effectively keeping out unknown or nosy intruders. Robert Thomas (1995), who has conducted several studies of cor-

porate executives, makes the point that, even though these elites are highly visible to their shareholders and employees, this visibility is not the same as accessibility: "Gaining access can be a tough proposition, even when the point of getting in is innocuous, well-intentioned, or attractive to key people in the organization itself. One reason is that business elites are quite good at insulating themselves from unwanted disturbances" (p. 4). Thus, through a variety of methods, corporate executives strive to keep in place the kinds of shields that will keep social researchers at bay.

Michael Useem (1995) also discusses the difficult times he had in trying to interview corporate executives. Many people he wanted to interview declined to receive him, were "unavailable" when he was able to see them, or were simply not very responsive to his questions. Years ago, we attempted to study a professional football team about momentum in sport, in the wake of having done interviews with the local professional baseball team (Adler 1981). Despite the fact that we had some people on the inside who could vouch for us, the football team denied us access because another author (not a social scientist) had previously written an exposé about drug use among team members. With corporate espionage, paranoid management, and industrial takeovers so prevalent in organizational life in the global business community today, social scientists are at a disadvantage in trying to study the elite circles of large companies.

Those vulnerable to litigation. The final group of elites who are wary of social scientific researchers are people with exposure to lawsuits. For example, one of Anspach's (1993) doctors in the neonatal ward said to her: "And for your notes, this is a very difficult ethical problem, iatrogenesis. I'm not particularly anxious to be called into court, and it is not in my self-interest to have this baby survive" (p. 185). Obviously, he was well aware of her presence, afraid of the ramifications of her report, and careful to

warn her that she had better protect his interests. In our ethnography of a Hawaiian resort hotel, we worked for a year and a half to get management permission to conduct research (Adler and Adler 1999). After several years in the setting, however, two lawsuits were brought by employees against the resort. After that, our research access was systematically diminished, with approval being required for management interviews and that approval increasingly denied. Many of the kinds of elites discussed above, such as public figures, "deep-pockets" corporations, people under restraining orders, and those fearful of libel suits may be equally circumspect about allowing themselves to be interviewed or to become part of a research project.

THE DISADVANTAGED

The disadvantaged make up the final group in which reluctant respondents are likely to be found. These people, who lack the power to withdraw from researchers, may simply distrust the intentions and meanings of academic research. The poor, for instance, who may be more accessible and easier to find than the rich, still have many reasons to be careful about what social scientists discover about them. One particular group of people who have frequently come under the scrutiny of sociologists are those engaged in illegal activities, such as criminals and revolutionaries, and other "hidden" populations. W. Wayne Weibel (1990) defines these individuals: "The term 'hidden populations' refers here to a subset of the general population whose membership is not readily distinguished or enumerated based on existing knowledge and/or sampling capabilities" (p. 4). Most often associated with research on deviant groups, studies of such hidden populations are characterized by the difficulty involved in locating subjects (but for discussions of the facilitative aspects of gaining access to deviant groups, see Anderson and Calhoun 1992; Tewksbury and Gagné 1997). Ralph Weisheit (1998) discusses how difficult it

was for him to locate marijuana growers in rural areas. Not only were these people secretive about their activities, they were extremely scattered, living in remote locations.

Much criminological research is conducted with incarcerated populations, in part because active offenders are, as John Irwin (1972) notes, "hard to locate because they find it necessary to lead clandestine lives. Once located, they are *reluctant*, for similar reasons, to give accurate and truthful information about themselves" (p. 117; emphasis added). Bruce Jacobs (1998) describes how much difficulty he had in locating urban crack dealers. We encountered similar problems in our study of upper-level drug dealers and smugglers (Adler 1985). Although we were fortunate to have a next-door neighbor who became our key informant, we virtually had no other way to meet people than through the associates to whom we were introduced. Whenever respondents sense that the research might be threatening to them, they are likely to be cautious about allowing the inquiry to continue. Whether this is because much research deals with private aspects of people's lives, because of the possibility for information released to be incriminating, or because research impinges on political alignments in the community, social scientists can normally expect that people engaged in illegal activities will be loath to offer access (Lee 1993).

In contrast to elites who worry about lawsuits, less powerful people may be afraid of exposure to censure if they reveal too much to researchers. Subordinates in organizations who are bringing lawsuits against their employers might want to discuss their situations, but they may be under "gag orders" that prohibit them from engaging in this kind of disclosure. For example, in our study of a resort hotel, we interviewed a chef who was charging the resort with racial discrimination. While the lawsuit was pending, he could not discuss any aspects of the case or the treatment he received from the hotel's management. Less

powerful people suing large corporations or governments may be concerned about getting "SLAPped" (Pring and Canan 1996) back—that is, being sued by the organization for defamation, libel, or any action that they bring to make the group look bad. These people also need to be careful in talking to outsiders such as researchers. Thus disgruntled employees, angry citizens, and other people dissatisfied with the status quo might make interesting respondents, but they are frequently not allowed to be interviewed about their involvement.

Finally, people who may be at risk, especially because of their subordinate status, are likely to be reluctant respondents. Ramona Asher encountered this problem in her study of women married to alcoholics. Although the wives often wanted to talk about the emotional traumas they faced, the husbands, paranoid that something unseen by them might be revealed, attempted to block these interviews (see Asher and Fine 1991). Similarly, a lower-level pastry chef at our resort, referred to us by mutual friends, declined our request for an interview because he had heard at work that talking to us might not be good for his job. Whenever employees are in a vulnerable position because of fear about losing their jobs, they may be disinclined to grant interviews. People who have been victimized may also be afraid to talk to researchers for fear of retaliation. Julia Brannen (1988:560) provides a number of examples in which her respondents feared negative reactions from their husbands in her study of marital difficulties. Finally, as Lee (1995) points out, potential subjects who are in dangerous situations—whether physical, financial, emotional, or relational—may be well-advised to keep their mouths shut.

NONWARY RESPONDENTS

Lest readers come away with the mistaken impression that all respondents are reluctant, we should point out that John Dean, Robert Eichhorn, and Lois Dean

(1969) provide a useful guide of types of respondents at the other end of the reluctance spectrum—those who are not reticent to talk to researchers. The "nouveau-statused," for instance, are people who have just been promoted or changed positions and are likely to want to open up about their experiences. "Old-timers" are respondents who no longer have a stake in the operations of the setting or who are so secure that they do not feel they will be jeopardized by what they say. "Frustrated" people may be rebels or malcontents who want to vent about their positions or the ill treatment they are receiving. "Rookies," or naive informants, may not even realize that they are revealing intimacies of the setting. They may be so new to the place that they have inadequate knowledge of and stake in the system to protect it. "Outsiders" may be people who are somewhat connected to a scene, but have a unique vantage point external to the culture or community. "Needy" members of a scene may fasten onto researchers because they crave attention or support and will talk to any sympathetic ear. "Subordinates," although discussed above as wary respondents, may sometimes be so hostile that they are willing to speak no matter the consequences. Finally, individuals on the "outs" are people who have lost power but may still be "in the know." Members of any of these groups of people may be particularly open to being interviewed.

♦ Overcoming Reluctance

In an attempt to provide some guidelines for researchers who need to overcome reluctance on the part of respondents, we outline various strategies below. Basically, these techniques are related to the two types of reluctance noted earlier: access and resistance. Problems related to getting access to subjects have plagued social scientists since formal research procedures were established. There is a wide range of possi-

ble conditions, and different researchers have arrived at some divergent, opposing viewpoints on how to overcome reluctance.

APPROACHING RESPONDENTS

Brannen (1988) asserts that researchers' success in attaining interviews, especially about sensitive topics, may be influenced by *the relationship between researchers and respondents*. She argues that researchers may facilitate their access to respondents if they cast the interviews within a "one-off" relationship (a transitory, as opposed to in-depth association, which assures anonymity). Respondents will have less fear, and therefore will be more forthcoming, if they believe they will never cross paths with the researchers again. According to this view, there is an ironic security in detachment, which creates anonymity and more likelihood for self-disclosure on the respondents' part. Irving Seidman (1991), too, asserts that the easier the access to interviewees, the more complicated the interview. This builds on the assumption in psychiatry that people can more openly disclose to others who are uninvolved in their lives. However, this opinion goes against the philosophy of other researchers, who believe that trust is best forged between a researcher and a respondent when a more personal relationship is established. Barbara Laslett and Rhona Rapoport (1975) suggest that repeated interviews will yield the best results, because this allows for the establishment of such relationships.

By returning to the same respondents several times, researchers may be able to broach more sensitive topics, and deeper intimacy may result. Some postmodern ethnographers have advocated interactive interviewing, in which respondents and researchers share personal and social experiences in a collaborative communication process that involves multiple interview situations (see Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-

Healy 1997; see also Ellis and Berger, Chapter 23, this volume). Almost all current practitioners of ethnography have now adopted similar ideas about the importance of membership roles, contact with subjects, and in-depth involvement in subjects' lives (Adler and Adler 1987).

Feminist researchers have been at the forefront of the call to *empower respondents*. Criticizing the passive role of respondents in traditional interview situations, Ann Oakley (1981) asserts that methods such as coauthorship and collective consciousness-raising between researchers and respondents can give subjects more of a stake in the research process. Many researchers are now experimenting with various types of collaborative research ventures in which respondents are brought into the planning and analysis phases of the research (Clough 1994; Collins 1992; Smith 1989). Researchers may reduce problems of access to difficult-to-penetrate groups by entrusting group members with a say in what is written. As Bergen (1993) notes, "Research participants are empowered because they understand that their personal experiences are no longer raw material for the data mill but that they are active in sharing their stories with others and evoking change" (p. 202).

Heeding a similar cry, postmodern ethnographers believe that respondents should be given "voice" in their own stories (Denzin 1997). Merging notions of poststructuralism, feminism, and new journalism, these authors join with their respondents to produce polyvocal, subjective, poetic, and dramatic prose that incorporates equally the lives of researchers and respondents (see in this volume Ellis and Berger, Chapter 23). Central to all of these studies is the self, squarely situated in the research and openly available for inspection by those being studied (Clough 1992; Denzin 1997; Richardson 1997). Respondents are also given an opportunity to see what the researcher has written, to respond to it, and to change what gets reported (Duell Klein 1983; Ellis et al. 1997;

Tripp 1983). Elliot Liebow (1993), for instance, went to great trouble to include what the homeless women he studied thought of his analysis, even to the extent of omitting materials to which they objected. Thus, through a variety of methods, postmodern ethnographers are bringing researchers into closer proximity to respondents, providing more mutual trust and intensifying the relationships between them. The expectation is, then, that problems of access are reduced in the process.

On a more traditional front, researchers have been debating for years the benefits of *providing goods, services, payments, or gifts* to respondents in order to gain access to them. Particularly important in research about organizations, payoffs can serve to cement the commitment that gatekeepers have to the continuation of a research project. According to Peter Yeager and Kathy Kram (1995), "The research must have an identifiable 'payoff' for the organization, and it must be presented in terms neither threatening to the organization's purpose nor foreign to its culture" (p. 46). Without some identifiable "profit," Yeager and Kram argue, organizations are not likely to welcome researchers. In studying deviant groups, often the *only way researchers can get interviews is by making some monetary payoffs*. Much of the research done on inner-city drug use, for instance, has relied on researchers' offering small pecuniary incentives to respondents (Hamid 1990; Johnson et al. 1985; Dunlap et al. 1990).

Survey researchers have long favored the use of incentive fees to gain the cooperation of reluctant respondents. For example, in their comprehensive study of the sexual practices of Americans, Laumann et al. (1994) found that "the judicious use of incentive is cost efficient since so much of the expense is due to interviewer travel time and costs incurred returning to residences" (p. 56).

Exchanges can be other than financial, however. For instance, Irwin (1972) frequently provided loans, transportation, accommodations, and other favors to the

nonincarcerated criminals he studied. We, too, were often in the position of offering our services as baby-sitters to the drug dealers we studied to secure the research bargain (Adler 1985). By putting ourselves out and going beyond the standard relationship, we enhanced our ability to get access to dealers. In studying children, Gary Fine felt that, at times, there were benefits to be gained by offering services, such as companionship, educational expertise, praise, food, and monetary loans, to child informants (Fine and Sandstrom 1988:24). We did the same in our study of college athletes, feeding them, helping them with their studies, and providing short-term loans (Adler and Adler 1991).

However, there is not universal agreement that providing goods and services to respondents is advantageous to research projects (see Lee 1993). William Yancey and Lee Rainwater (1970) have argued that gifts or loans from affluent researchers to poor respondents can reinforce paternalistic roles and feelings of inequality. Richard Berk and Joseph Adams (1970) have warned that researchers who provide gifts to respondents may be getting "suckered." As Gary Fine and Kent Sandstrom (1988) express it: "A danger exists in providing services, even those that are not monetary. Researchers may become accepted for what they provide, not for what they are. The relationship may become commodified and instrumental" (p. 25). Thus the tying of respondents to researchers by payoffs of any kind may not necessarily produce the most trusting relationships. This issue remains highly controversial among social scientists today.

There are a number of *practical strategies* that interviewers can use to assure access to respondents. In most qualitative interviewing situations, the interviewer's goal is to be informal, nondirective, and freewheeling, because most qualitative researchers believe that a less structured atmosphere enhances rapport with subjects. They argue that it is especially important not to hurry respondents into interview sit-

uations prematurely. We made this mistake in our study of drug dealers and smugglers. Having thought that we had established a trusting relationship with one dealer's "old lady," we asked if we could interview her. Although we had not been overly specific about the scope of our research interests, we thought that she liked and trusted us and that, as a graduate student in cultural anthropology, she understood and respected academic research. However, as soon as the interview began, we realized that she felt uncomfortable discussing the drug trafficking of her friends: She ducked our questions, feigned sleepiness, and avoided direct answers. We politely left and lost all future access to her. Similarly, if researchers are too aggressive in their requests, they may scare or threaten respondents.

In order to counteract this problem, some authors have suggested that interviewers use "shallow cover" (Fine and Sandstrom 1988:19), or the "sin" of omission. Here, researchers are overt about their intentions but remain oblique or vague about their specific purpose. In Fine's (1987) case, he told the Little Leaguers he studied only that he was interested in observing the behavior of preadolescents; he did not go into any further detail about the exact nature of his study. Although this kind of approach did not work for us, it allowed Fine to remain more flexible in the research bargain and prevented him from possibly scaring off some of the children or their parents.

SPONSORSHIP

Perhaps the strategy researchers most commonly use to gain access to diffident groups is sponsorship. Made famous in sociology by such notables as Doc in *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943), the eponymous Tally (Liebow 1967), and Herman, the janitor whom Elijah Anderson (1976) met at Jelly's (the bar-liquor store he studied), sponsors act "in a bridging or a guid-

ing role, serv[ing] indirectly to facilitate acceptance of the researcher" (Lee 1993: 131). One function a sponsor can serve is as a referral to others in the setting, vouching for the researcher. For instance, in our research with drug dealers, Dave, our key informant, introduced us to a wide spectrum of his associates and guaranteed our trustworthiness. Because we had housed Dave after he was imprisoned, his colleagues trusted us. These referrals were priceless, as there would have been no other way for us to gain access to members of such a concealed group. Having the backing of trusted individuals in the setting can greatly ease researchers' access. For example, Jeffrey Sluka (1990) had relatively little problem getting into a Catholic enclave in Belfast (despite the highly political and violent nature of the setting) because he initially contacted a local and trusted priest who vouched for him. Yeager and Kram (1995) found that developing a number of liaison relationships with internal groups of managers early on in their research allowed them the necessary access to sites in the banking and high-technology industries because these people referred them to others who were aware of their relationships with the sponsors.

Among some groups that are very difficult to penetrate, it may be tantamount to professional suicide for researchers not to have sponsorship networks to exploit. In explaining how he gained access to dignitaries in Hollywood, for example, Gamson (1995) states that "an outside researcher who does not tap into a relationship network, and one with a powerful individual at its center, is going to have terribly restricted access to the higher-ups in the industry elite" (p. 86). Similarly, Joan Hoffman (1980) used the sponsorship of her social ties, people she knew personally or who knew members of her family, to gain access to hospital boards of directors and their upper-class members. Without these connections, she never would have been granted permission to interview the people she did.

If all else fails, and access is either not forthcoming or summarily denied, researchers may need to "send out feelers" (Henslin 1972:63) to establish contact with the groups they want to study. Using his role as a college professor, for example, Henslin (1972) recommended that students in his classes conduct research on abortion, a highly secretive practice at the time. He encouraged anyone who had a friend or acquaintance who had had an abortion to pursue these lines. In this way, he found respondents who otherwise would have been closed off to him.

RELATIONAL GROUNDWORK

A chief difference between ethnographers and those who practice survey research or qualitative interviewing unsupported by participant observation is the kind of groundwork that ethnographers can lay in their settings. Jennifer Platt (1981) suggests that researchers interview peers with whom they already have established relationships, and Robert Burgess (1991) urges researchers to develop friendships to gain access to the groups in which they are interested. In his studies of educational settings, he became friendly with administrators and teachers in various schools. He notes that, rather than causing problems in the collection of data,

these friendships facilitated entry to groups that would otherwise have been difficult to enter. Secondly, these friendships provided access to a different range of perspectives on the school. Thirdly, my acknowledged friendships with particular individuals gave rise to a situation where other teachers wanted to give me their views on particular matters. (P. 51)

Ethnographers have long argued that they have a greater likelihood of securing interviews if they take the time to get to know the people they are studying, to develop relationships with them, and to build

trust between respondents and themselves. Ethnographers believe that laying the relational groundwork for future interviews not only enhances their access to study populations, but, based on depth, commitment, and trust, these longitudinal associations may lead to research that yields richer portraits of the subjects. Long-term, meaningful, in-depth involvement with subjects, these researchers argue, yields a greater likelihood that respondents will be available, honest, and soul-searching in discussing the research topic.

JOINT MEMBERSHIP

Finally, we and others have argued that having a membership role in a setting increases a researcher's likelihood of gaining interview access (see, e.g., Adler and Adler 1987). Ethnographers have practiced this technique for decades, but Jeffrey Riemer (1977) was the first to highlight it in his discussion of "opportunistic" research sites. Many studies have been conducted by researchers who have had access to particular groups because they were already members. For example, researchers can *take advantage of unique circumstances or timely events* to select their topics of study. Lawrence Ouellet (1994) carried out his study of truck drivers while he drove a cross-country truck route to pay his bills during graduate school. Julius Roth's (1963) research on long-term medical patients was the result of his own hospitalization. Our own work on young children's car pools began when we found ourselves ferrying kids back and forth to preschool (Adler and Adler 1984).

Researchers can also *take advantage of familiar situations* to select topics for research. In studying preadolescents, we began by observing our own children and their friends (Adler and Adler 1996). As parents in the community, we already were interested in the lives of these children. Turning this into a research setting was a natural outgrowth of our parental roles. We

were accepted and trusted by many in the setting because, as parents, we had a natural reason to be there and shared membership-related concerns and interests.

Similarly, researchers may *take advantage of their own special expertise* in selecting their research topics. Ned Polsky (1967) was an avid billiards player when he began his study of pool hustlers, and Marvin Scott (1968) was a frequent visitor at horse-racing tracks, leading him to study that world. Some autoethnographers focus primarily on their own experiences. Examples include Carolyn Ellis's (1995) study of the death of her husband, as both she and he chronicled the last months before he died of emphysema; David Karp's (1996) study of people who suffer from manic depression, a condition with which he was afflicted; and Carol Ronai's (1995) poignant study of incest survivors, of which she was one. The advantage of all such opportunistic approaches is that they facilitate entry into the setting, because the researcher already has a legitimate purpose for being there.

Not all ethnographers, of course, "exploit" their own biographies to expedite access to a research population. Often, researchers do not establish their membership in a setting until well after they have arrived there. One of the most creative examples of this is Nancy Mandell's (1988) "least-adult" role. In order to study preschool children, Mandell minimized the physical, cognitive, intellectual, and social differences between herself and the children by literally getting into the sandbox with them, putting herself eyeball to eyeball with them, ignoring their deviances and transgressions, and generally approximating, as best she could, the stance of a child. Although distrustful at first, the children came to see Mandell as much closer to them than other adults. Her observations and discussions with the youngsters were thus greatly enhanced.

At times, researchers who study social movements or proselytizing religious groups may be recruited by members

(Grills 1994; Rochford 1985). Although such recruitment may ease the researcher's entry into the group, it may also prohibit the researcher from gaining access to respondents other than through being seen as a potential convert.

♦ Overcoming Resistance

Once a researcher has gained entrée to a group, the arduous task of actually conducting the interviews ensues. There are a host of problems that may arise once interviews are granted, particularly with respondents who are reluctant to talk in the first place. Researchers hope for full and complete disclosure on the part of respondents, but there may be many reasons respondents are not forthcoming with information. Below, we outline some of the typical problems interviewers face and some strategies they might use to overcome these obstacles.

SETUP ISSUES

In arranging and negotiating interviews, interviewers' *demographic characteristics* may serve as an important link to respondents (Weiss 1994). Thus if there is an overlap between the interviewer and the interviewee in such areas as age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and general appearance, a reluctant respondent may be more prone to openness during the interview. Bergen (1993), for instance, found that her gender was a major advantage in her interviewing women about marital rape. Martin Weinberg, Colin Williams, and Douglas Pryor (1994) recruited volunteers from the Bisexual Center and the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality to conduct the interviews in their San Francisco study of bisexuals. They had hoped that this would make their respondents more comfortable with talking about their sexual orientations. However, as they note, this approach is not without its drawbacks:

The danger of having organizational members conduct the interviews lay in the possible *reluctance* of people being interviewed to disclose something negative about being bisexual, the Bisexual Center itself, a mutual acquaintance, and the like. Similarly, there was always the chance that persons being interviewed might exaggerate their sexual history to impress a bisexual interviewer or provide acceptable responses with perceived interviewer effects. (P. 24; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, Weinberg et al. found that their respondents did prefer to discuss these intimate issues with like-minded people.

The *location* of the interview is another factor that can be important in assuring that reluctant respondents will feel comfortable. When interviews deal with highly emotional, sensitive, or private topics, it is often best if they can be conducted in places that are as secluded as possible, such as the respondents' homes. Bergen (1993) found this to be the case in her study of marital rape; she notes that "interviewing women in their homes was an important aspect of establishing a relationship and fully understanding the emotional and physical trauma that these women have suffered" (p. 207). Interviewing in a respondent's home casts a guest ambience over the researcher's presence and imbues the researcher with an aura of friendship. Other topics are best brought up in the workplace, particularly when respondents do not want to talk around other people in their homes, or when they are used to entertaining reporters at their places of business. Most critically, it is essential that researchers meet respondents at the times and places that are convenient to the respondents (Thomas 1995). For instance, in his study of Hollywood elites, Gamson (1994) conducted most interviews at respondents' workplaces, but others felt more comfortable at public meeting places, such as cafés or restaurants.

CONDUCT

The conduct of the interviewer during the course of the interview is a crucial determinant of how comfortable the respondent will be. Interviewers who are assiduous in providing reassurances can make even reluctant respondents feel at ease. John Brewer (1993) used humor, ribaldry, and self-deprecation to court and relax the police he studied in Northern Ireland. The interviewer's phrasing of the questions, too, is important; carefully worded questions can make a respondent feel less threatened, especially when the interview concerns hard-to-discuss topics such as sex. Numerous rape researchers, for example, have found that women are more likely to be willing to respond to questions about "forced or unwanted sexual intercourse" than to discuss "rape" (see Bergen 1993; Finkelhor and Yllo 1985; Russell 1990; Walker 1989). Richard Tewksbury and Patricia Gagné (1997) found that by reminding their transgendered respondents that they were not being seen as "freaks," they could greatly enhance their interviews with these respondents: "During interviews and other interactions when our research motives have been questioned or respondents have become defensive or reticent, we have been able to reestablish empathy by explaining that we believe gender is socially constructed and exists along a continuum" (p. 143).

In a similar vein, Hoffman (1980) found that "deflection" was a useful technique to use with subjects who were anxious about personal exposure. That is, although they were uncomfortable when they perceived themselves to be the objects of study, they talked more freely on generic or "external" topics. Marsha Rosenbaum (personal communication, 1999) has told us that in interviewing drug users about their behavior, she always started the conversation by asking, "Say, what sort of drugs do people use around here?" rather than asking them their drugs of choice. Anything that deflects attention away from respondents as

the main target of study can be useful for promoting conversation. Using plural and personal pronouns with respondents is yet another way to facilitate rapport and break down barriers. John Johnson (1975:108) suggests that an interviewer's using words such as *we*, *us*, *they*, and *them* can convince respondents that the interviewer is actually *of* them, not apart from them.

A common ploy that interviewers use involves "normalizing perceived deviance" (Johnson 1975). That is, interviewers are well-advised not to raise their eyebrows, change their tone of voice, or seem dismayed when respondents discuss deviant activities. For instance, in our study of preadolescents, we were frequently in a position to hear about the transgressions of young teenagers, such as cigarette smoking, cutting school, and early sexual exploits. Rather than expressing moral indignation, we either nodded affirmatively or seemingly ignored the situation. If we had reacted any differently, these youngsters would not have felt comfortable telling us about these activities.

Qualitative interviews are, by definition, flexible. Researchers are permitted to allow respondents to shape the contours of the interview. At times, this may mean that respondents ask questions about the intimate lives of interviewers; this can result in appropriate and beneficial transactions that can ease respondent reluctance (but see Weiss 1994, who questions whether self-disclosure is an effective facilitative technique). The practice of postmodern and feminist ethnographers suggests that when respondents and researchers share information, the interview context is more comfortable and the hierarchical gap between researchers and respondents is diminished (Cook and Fonow 1986; Ellis et al. 1997). Rosalind Edwards (1993), for instance, was asked to "self-disclose" about her own family life in her study of mature mother-students seeking higher education. She felt that her own revelations aided the respondents in telling her their life stories. In our study of drug dealers, we often talked about

the one day that Peter had spent in jail. Although this was a rather fleeting stay, we were able to milk this piece of our history to get respondents to open up about their own prison experiences or fears about arrest. With any sensitive topic, the more researchers can indicate that they share respondents' pain or have experienced similar feelings, the more likely it is that respondents will open up (Daniels 1983).

Lee (1995), in a useful manual about dangerous fieldwork, suggests that conducting open and *simultaneous fieldwork* with other, even opposing, parties may be helpful to researchers studying controversial topics. For instance, in their study of a nude beach, Jack Douglas and Paul Rasmussen (1977) found that their talking openly to all participants in disputes concerning the beach—such as nudists, police, and property owners—made those on each side want to tell their story. So as not to be left out or misunderstood, divided factions in disagreements may become less reluctant to talk. David Gilmore (1991) refers to this as the “competition of communication,” wherein each side tries to convince the researchers of the justice of its cause, increasing the amount of data made available.

Ostrander (1995b) describes several ploys that she has found to be beneficial in getting elites to let their guard down. It is easy to feel intimidated by these people, she notes, especially given that they are used to being in charge of most social situations. However, counterintuitively, she recommends that interviewers not be too deferential or overly concerned about establishing positive rapport with elite respondents; rather, interviewers should take some visible control over the situation. In one example from her studies, she was invited to breakfast at a fancy restaurant selected by a respondent. She arrived early, before he did, and although this immediately put him off guard, he eventually deferred to her. Another simple strategy she has employed

is to choose a particular spot to place her tape recorder, so that this gives her an excuse to take charge of where she and the respondent sit during the interview. Finally, Ostrander recommends that interviewers give elites the opportunity to respond directly to criticisms others have of them, thereby allowing them to express frustrations or to defend themselves.

RELATIONSHIPS

Similar to their role in affecting research access, researchers' relationships with respondents may overcome resistance during the course of interviews. “One-off” advocates continue to maintain that detachment fosters the greatest reduction of resistance, whereas those who believe that researchers should conduct multiple interviews with the same respondents and that researchers should forge relationships with respondents prior to interviewing champion greater intimacy and connection.

Researchers may also lessen respondent resistance by trying to equalize the status differentials and power inequalities between themselves and their respondents. In the difficult task of “studying up,” Hoffman (1980) notes, the onus is on researchers to elevate their status and power. This earns them greater respect from respondents and a greater feeling of ease. Conversely, researchers who investigate the downtrodden and powerless should balance differences as well. In trying to get reluctant respondents to talk, interviewers should try not to appear overly above or below them. Researchers should avoid obvious displays of affluence or position and should look for areas of other personal overlap between respondents and themselves where they might forge rapport. Thus in our study of college athletes we tried to minimize the differences between our often black, inner-city, young, and inexperienced respondents and ourselves. They initially felt extremely deferential to-

ward us, in part because of our age, race, social class, education, and position as faculty members; they called Peter “Coach” and Patti “Miss Patti.” After a while, our unpretentious and unconventional behavior, and our clear desire to support them in the setting, led them to relax and treat us more as friends. They then felt more comfortable cursing in our presence, revealing their behavior and relationships, and expressing their feelings about others in the setting to us. Although many researchers agree that such status equalization diminishes interview reluctance, it cannot be overlooked that researchers can also purposely use their greater status and power in the interview setting to steamroll respondents, pushing them into answering questions without giving them the opportunity to be reticent. This occurs rarely, however.

♦ Conclusion

The litigious nature of U.S. society today and the politicization of research have influenced the core, basic character of interviewing. Compared with the past, there are now many more reasons, organizational and individual, for people to be wary of being studied. In particular, formal factors have been added to informal ones, escalating people's reluctance. As a result, some groups may be entirely lost to researchers'

views, and aspects of the lives of some others may remain hidden. Still, thoughtful and sensitive researchers can still accomplish much fruitful research. Interviews, especially when they are deep and unstructured, fundamentally remain a potentially enjoyable medium of interaction and exchange, where social scientists' interests in people and their lives can stimulate respondents to share their experiences and insights in a way that leaves all participants mutually enriched.

As society changes, it is possible that the nature of resistance might change as well. With increasing degrees of protection built into the research relationship and the increasing education of the populace, perhaps respondents in the future will be better assured that their interests will be protected. It is more likely, however, that researchers will have to continue to deal with reluctant respondents, no matter the sociohistorical times or the context of the research. Although we do not envision a time when respondent reluctance will disappear entirely, we can hope that, for the future of social science, informed respondents will be less taciturn than they are in the fairly paranoid environment in which we currently live. Thus, although the strategies described in this chapter might need to be amended in the future, researchers will always need to be aware of the cautionary feelings of the people they study.

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