The Interviewee and the Research Interview:
Analysing a Neglected Dimension in Research*

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L’entrevue de recherche est généralement examinée du point de vue du chercheur. Contrairement à la recherche activiste, qui accorde beaucoup d’importance à l’opinion du participant, les constructivistes ont ajouté une nouvelle perspective en démontrant comment l’entrevue de recherche est à la fois collaborative et génératrice de significations. Notre étude livre une analyse plus explicite de l’entrevue du point de vue de l’interviewé. Selon une étude portant sur les Canadiens qui migrent à l’intérieur du pays, la signification pour l’interviewé de l’entrevue qualitative est expliquée plus en détail. Nous discutons la motivation qui pousse à la participation en nous fondant sur les concepts de validation d’expériences et sur un processus appelé progression réflexive, qui met en lumière le déroulement d’une entrevue selon la perspective de l’interviewé.

The research interview is usually discussed from the vantage point of the researcher. While activist research has drawn attention to the voice of the participant, constructivists have added a new perspective by showing how the research interview is both collaborative and meaning-making. Our study provides a more explicit analysis of the interview from the perspective of the interviewee. Based on a study of internal migrants in Canada, the meaning of the qualitative interview for the interviewee is more carefully explicated. We discuss motivation for participation using the concepts of event validation and a process called reflexive progression to illuminate what happens in the interview from the interviewee’s perspective.

THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW IS A PIVOTAL SOURCE of data in social research that is primarily understood from the point of view of the researcher and the objectives of the research project. The emphasis in the literature has been on the mechanics and methods of organizing the interview to enhance the data yield from research subjects/participants. More

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recently, constructivists have taken a different approach in showing how the interview is a collaborative, meaning-making experience involving both the interviewer and the interviewee. While this approach has brought a different focus to the role of the interviewee, there has been remarkably little attention given to the meaning of the research interview from the perspective of the interviewee.

In the process of researching internal migration in Canada and attempting to understand the meanings, causes and consequences of migration through interviews with migrants to Alberta, it became clear that respondents were motivated to participate in the study for reasons beyond the formal objectives of the study and the goals of the researcher. Furthermore, it also became clear that something occurred through the process of the qualitative interview that impacted the interviewee and affected how interviewees interpreted their own behaviour. This paper attempts to analyse why participants agree to take part in a research interview through a process conceptualized as event validation. It also proposes that a process identified as reflexive progression helps to account for how participants use the interview to work through their own understanding of their behaviour. The result of this emphasis is to articulate more clearly how the qualitative research interview is perceived from the perspective of the interviewee.

Approaches to Understanding the Research Interview

The Traditional Perspective

The research methods literature typically puts most of the emphasis on the role of the researcher in the interview process. Interviewers are purported to be "instruments" in the research process (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 59), and the researcher is encouraged to build rapport and trust with the interview subjects by being an attentive listener and having a "sympathetic understanding" of, and profound respect for, their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives (Berg, 2001: 86; Dexter, 1956: 157; Lavin and Maynard, 2001; Weiss, 1994). While some have warned about the potential dangers of over-rapport, such as the lack of objectivity on the part of the researcher, others have encouraged the establishment of some type of relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Blumer, 1956; 1969; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Egan, 1986; Laslett and Rapoport, 1975). Stebbins (1972: 173–74), for example, talks of the necessity for a qualitative interview to resemble an interpersonal relationship (which he calls an incipient interpersonal interviewing style) because validity is increased by pursuing subjectivity, rather than objectivity. To the extent that the researcher is encouraged to relate to the interviewee as object, the researcher is also to look for non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, facial expressions and emotional state, deliver appropriate prompts and use follow-up questions, and nod, pause or
utilize silence (Fowler and Mangione, 1990; Kvale, 1996: 133–35; McCracken, 1988: 24–25; and Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 7–8). The focus is repeatedly on the researcher’s role in not only the development and organization of interview schedules, but also on how to carry out the interview (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Klassen and LeBlanc, 1993; Lazarsfeld, 1972; Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1990), or how to develop strategies to enhance participation (Groves, Cialdini and Couper, 1992).

The Constructivist Perspective

Perhaps the most important development away from this traditional model of the interview in recent years has been the articulation of the constructivist approach. Constructivism emphasizes the dialogic nature of the interview and the mutuality of the research experience (Denzin, 2001; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Jarvinen, 2000; Mishler, 1986). In contrast to the traditional approach in which the interviewee is viewed as a repository of answers and the interview process itself is visualized as a conduit or pipeline of information that the researcher seeks, constructivism understands the interview as a meaning-making experience and as a site for producing knowledge through the “active” collaboration of both interviewer and interviewee (thus the designation as the “active interview”). The interview is no longer defined as a question-and-answer format, social scientific prospecting, or a search-and-discovery mission (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995: 2), but a “special performance” involving interviewer and interviewee both eliciting and representing an interpretive relationship of the world (Denzin, 2001). The implication here is that the participant is not merely a container to be emptied of its relevant information but that the respondent is a real person who may not have quick and ready answers (“narrative complexity”), who may shift responses depending on the perspective taken (“multivocality” and “contextual shifts”), and who may even make new discoveries (“horizons of meaning”) as the result of participating in the research project (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The emphasis on the interviewee in this approach, however, was built from an assumption that the research interview was a conversation that reflected as much about the interviewer as it did about the interviewee. In fact, it was the interviewer whose values and perspectives were at issue that prevented the interview itself and its resultant data from being viewed in an antiseptic way. Instead of the assumption that research was neutral or objective, researchers themselves were “biographically situated” and spoke within distinct interpretive communities, such as those structured by class, race and gender. Others pointed out that it was the nature of the researcher’s own experience with the subject at hand that influenced the way the data was interpreted (e.g., midlife issues, Banister, 1999; problems of women awaiting trial, Wincup, 2001) and researchers needed to deal
with their own feelings simultaneously with encountering the feelings of the respondent (Ellis, 1991; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). Thus, it was a critique of positivist ideas of data collection, and the dilemmas of compressing complexity into neat and fixed response categories that produced the interest in a more interpretive sociology, best represented in qualitative research methods that got closer to the actor’s perspective. But the critique of the researcher’s perspective as containing its own bias and the need to produce “a co-authored narrative” (Gilbert, 2001) threatened to change the whole meaning of the research enterprise. Whether it was interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger and Tillmann-Healy, 1997), or co-constructed methods (Bochner and Ellis, 1992), or feminist methods (Smith, 1987), the interview, according to the constructivist perspective, could no longer be viewed as a data-yielding process but as a meaning-making process (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 80) that intimately involved both parties to the interview.

The Activist Perspective

Another theme that runs through the literature is that the research interview gives voice to the interviewee, especially to those who have been silenced through marginalization, oppression or some kind of harm. This might include victims of trauma like Holocaust survivors (e.g., Langer, 1991; 1995), victims of disaster (Terr, 1992), victims of sexual assault and harassment (Stewart, Dobbin and Gatowski, 1996; van Roosmalen and McDaniel, 1998), victims of collective violence (Das, 1985), as well as chronically-ill patients (Anderson, Dyck and Lynam, 1997; Axtell, 1999; Crossley, 1999), ex-psychiatric patients (Herman, 1993; Herman and Musolf, 1998), Vietnam war veterans (van der Kolk, 1985) and persons experiencing life-altering events such as perinatal death (Malacrida, 1998), to name a few. In all of these cases, it is the need to hear from those whose voices have not been heard that motivates the research agenda and participation in the research project. But hearing the voice of the participant is not the same as understanding how the interviewee perceives the research process.

Understanding the Interviewer-Interviewee Relationship: An Assessment

When the interview is understood dialogically, and when interviewees are encouraged to “tell their story,” the research interview can have much in common with the therapeutic interview (Gale, 1992; Hutchinson and Wilson, 1994; Kvale, 1999; Ortiz, 1994; Stuhlmiller, 2001). There is the need to develop trust and rapport, as well as intersubjectivity, through mutual understanding (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001). Both the researcher and the therapist are taught to listen, demonstrate empathy and respect, seek clarification, and confront the other with new thoughts. The research participant or therapy client both ideally experience similar
feelings of being valued, accepted and understood. In that sense, especially from a constructivist perspective, the research interview has many similar interpersonal dynamics with the therapeutic interview. Interviews can be long and may even continue over a series of interviews (e.g., sequential interviewing, Ortiz, 1994; 2001). It may also be difficult to obtain a sense of closure to the interview as the interviewee works through feelings, observations and evaluations. For example, the repeated shifting of narrative positions (e.g., the impact of my behaviour on my daughter rather than my husband, or how my mother perceives something as opposed to how my neighbour views something) can produce unending and unwieldy narratives that might reveal more about the narrative process itself than about the research topic at hand.

The research interview, however, is different from the therapeutic interview in that while some catharsis and empowerment—even self-awareness—may be present in both, therapy is the by-product of the research interview, rather than its object (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1994). Usually, it is the researcher that seeks out the participant, whereas in therapy, the participant seeks out the therapist. The therapist also goes beyond understanding and interpretation to intervention in a series of sessions, whereas most research interviews are restricted to understanding the other in relation to the research problem in a single session. Thus, the interactive nature of the research interview is constrained by the interests and goals of the researcher.

The constructivist approach has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of what transpires between the interviewer and interviewee in qualitative interviews. But it minimizes the fact that the centre of the interview is still the interviewee. The structure of the interview is such that the dialogue is weighted in favour of hearing out the interviewee. While the interviewer may control the direction of the interview, the stated purpose of the interview, which is confirmed through the principle of informed consent, is that the interviewer wants to hear from the interviewee on a selected topic. The principle of informed consent almost single-handedly structures in what way this will be a meaning-making occasion and it is heavily tilted towards hearing from the interviewee. The interviewee understands that he or she is an informant to the research endeavour and, however friendly the interchange may be, does not expect to dialogue with the interviewer as one might in a normal conversation.

The research interview is not only unlike a normal conversation in that the interviewee is the focus, but also in that the interview is initiated and controlled by the researcher. In other words, it is the research design that determines who will be selected for the study and potential participants must be convinced to give of their time for some broader objective. While the participant may have been selected because of some qualifying trait or experience, it is still the interests of the researcher that drives the interview. These interests affect the scheduling and timetabling of the
interviews, as well as the kind of questions that are asked and the ultimate disposition of the accumulated data. Not only is this a practical reality, but the interviewee also sees this as the researcher’s project and a researcher-driven experience. The parameters of the study determine what is discussed and the researcher controls the agenda. The interviewee only has some control over when the interview takes place and how much detail is divulged (Oakley, 1981: 49). The decision to participate in the first place may be related to exogenous factors, such as referrals or endorsements (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allan, 1993: 72), or endogenous factors, such as personality, vulnerability, availability, or some personal affinity with the project. So while the research interview is a meaning-making occasion, it is by its very nature a meaning-making occasion primarily for the interviewee. This is not to suggest that the interviewer is not directly implicated in the dialogue, but that the purpose of the interview is to understand the worldview of the interviewee on the theme of the research.

The nature of research then means that the research interview is not purely conversational, nor is it simply a dialogic encounter between interviewer and interviewee. It is an “asymmetrical encounter” established by the objectives of the researcher. The respondent may not be a “passive” vessel of answers, as the constructivists would have it (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 7), but the respondent is sought out because of the information or observations he or she has to share. The constructivists are correct to point out that this process may not yield simple and immediate responses. They are also correct to point out that the interviewer plays a formative role in how the interview unfolds and subsequently what the interviewee says. But none of this changes the fact that the interview is a meaning-making occasion that centres on the interviewee. To whatever extent the interview is collaborative, it is a unique form of collaboration that is framed by the researcher, but that still becomes the interviewee’s story.

The record of talk that is accumulated through the qualitative interview allows the researcher to describe “the complex discursive activities through which respondents produce meaning” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 80), an approach rooted in phenomenology and conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson, 1996). In contrast to a postmodernist perspective (see the critique of Charmaz, 1995; Farberman, 1991), the evolving dialogue represents the interviewee coming to terms with his or her perceptions, emotions and evaluations about the topic at hand. The answers to questions are not necessarily already formed or packaged into concise answers. While survey-based research may leave these issues out of the loop altogether, interview-based research engenders “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of experiences, observations and assessments. The quantitative project may have a personal impact on the research participant, but the nature of that impact is neither well known nor readily available (Bryman, 1984: 79). In contrast, the qualitative design truly allows the interviewee to become more active, which means that the
interviewee might unexpectedly discover that the research interview served other purposes than that foreseen or expected by the researcher. If the purpose of the research interview from the researcher’s perspective is only to further the goals of the research study, how does the interviewee come to the decision to participate?

**Understanding the Decision to Become a Research Participant**

Meeting with an interviewer to disclose information about oneself may be “time consuming, privacy endangering, and intellectually and emotionally demanding” (Benney and Hughes, 1956: 139; McCracken, 1988: 27). Several attempts have been made to explain why people agree to become participants in research projects. For example, Berg (2001: 18) proposes that interviewees agree to participate when they think the interview will be “interesting,” “rewarding,” and will provide “appropriate feedback.” Merton and Kendall (1946) identify a desire to engage in an intellectually challenging process of self-scrutiny. Ablon (1977) and Von Hoffman and Cassidy (1956) refer to the desire to make oneself the centre of another’s attention. The need for catharsis was broached by Cannell and Axelrod (1956), Ebaugh (1988) and Gorden (1956). Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allan (1993: 72) make equally conjectural statements about the participant wanting to relieve boredom or to express grievances.

Groves, Cialdini and Couper (1992) provide a good review of factors that might affect the decision to participate in surveys that include macro issues (such as the perceived legitimacy of surveys), attributes of the survey design (such as the mode of initial contact, length or topic of the survey), the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondent (such as age, gender, income or health status), the attributes of the interviewer (such as strategies of persuasion, tailoring), and even the affective or psychological state of the interviewer. Their discussion, however, is moulded by a social psychology of compliance in which the focus is on what explains the decision of a potential respondent to participate, rather than how the interviewee understands her or his own participation in the research. It is not just responding favourably to someone you like (the degree of liking), the extent to which others are participating (social validation), or whether the request comes from a constituted authority. Groves, Cialdini and Couper do open the door to something deeper on the part of the interviewee by suggesting that there might be some reciprocity present (though interpreted in terms of costs and benefits), norms of social responsibility might undergird participation, or that an appeal to personal or societal benefits might enhance participation. Oakley (1981: 49) even suggests that respondents may withhold information or disclose only certain details if they feel there is no reciprocity occurring in the interview. In sum, these are suggestions that interviewees may
indeed participate in research studies because they do expect to get something from the experience (Bloom, 1996; Hutchison, Wilson and Wilson, 1994), but it is unclear what that is.

In short, the research interview is an interviewer-driven experience and is clearly understood in that way by the interviewee. The question then is: What does this other-initiated and other-generated interview mean for the interviewee? Stripping away the external factors that have dominated the debate so far, how does the interviewee come to understand his or her own participation in the research? Not knowing exactly what to expect from a research interview, how does the interview process itself affect the interviewee and the responses given?

By definition, the qualitative interview provides an opportunity for the interviewee to discuss and reflect, which leads to the following proposition. Persons are particularly predisposed to participate in a research project, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, when: 1) the announced topic is one in which the potential participant has ego-involvement; 2) participation conceivably allows for reflection and articulation of personal experience; and 3) the potential participant possesses thoughts and feelings that have few outlets or little legitimacy in current communities of interaction, or that are difficult to express without sanctions or censorship. When the respondent enters the interview with this predisposition, the interviewee is more likely to conclude at the end of the interview that participation was an active process that advanced her or his own self-understanding. This proposition can now be examined in relation research on internal migrants.

**Method**

The data for this paper emerges from a study of domestic migration and relocation in Canada. Canada is often thought of as a nation of immigrants, due to the significant role that international migration has played throughout the country’s history (McVey and Kalbach, 1995; Li, 2003). Yet the uneven economic development of the country has produced significant metropolitan-hinterland relationships in which internal migration has been particularly strong towards Central Canada, especially southern Ontario and southern Quebec, where about 60% of the national population is located, and where most of the political, industrial and employment strength is located in what is known as the Golden Horseshoe (Beaupre, 1991). A third metropolitan node beyond Toronto and Montreal is Vancouver, which became a popular internal destination in the second half of the last century. Somewhat surprisingly, a huge wave of migration began in 1996 to the province of Alberta and its two largest cities of Edmonton and Calgary. This was the second wave of movement to this province (the first being 1975-1981, Pepperman, 1985) and seemed to reveal not only the new opportunities in energy-rich Alberta, but also shifts in the economy in
other parts of Canada, including British Columbia and Quebec, where various forms of decline had set in. From 1996–2001, only two provinces in Canada (Ontario and Alberta) were experiencing net gains through interprovincial migration, whereas all other provinces were experiencing net losses through internal migration (Statistics Canada, 2002). Consequently, this internal redistribution of the Canadian population was a significant societal issue. While Ontario had long been the recipient of internal migration shifts, the fact that Alberta became a new destination of choice required more careful scrutiny.

Although the dominant approach to understanding internal migration has been to analyse statistical aggregates at the macro level (Frey and Alden, 1988; Frey, 1996; Newbold, 1998), our goal was to understand more clearly why people decided to relocate, how people came to the decision to relocate, how migrants linked place of origin with destination in the adjustment process and, more broadly, how migration reflected important dynamics in Canadian society. In short, statistical data were readily available about how many people were moving. What was missing, however, was why people accepted the necessity of moving and how they came to interpret their relocation experience.

The study had two parts. One part focussed on migration prompted by corporate relocation, which involved persons whose migration decision was supported by all the trappings of company perks. The second part of the study attempted to understand the relocation decisions of independent or unsponsored migrants, who made the move largely on speculation. In total, 400 in-depth interviews were conducted among migrants all over the province, but with the largest number in the Calgary metropolitan area. From the point of view of the objectives of this paper, the responses of both study groups can be blended, as our focus here is primarily on the interview process itself. Since the purpose of the research was on the migration experience, there was initially no strategy to obtain post-interview assessments from interviewees. However, spontaneous comments soon emerged that reflected how the interviewee evaluated the interview experience. As it became clear that such comments occurred quite frequently, notes were made about what was said, and a strategy developed for the last third of the interviews to more consistently ask interviewees to reflect on how they reacted to being a participant in the study. In some instances, a callback to the interviewee occurred several days later to allow more time for reflection. It is largely this data that serves as the backbone for this paper.

The usual explanation of migration as employment-based (Pandit and Withers, 1999) fit the Alberta government’s lofty goals for economic growth, as expressed in its slogan “The Alberta Advantage.” Yet low taxation and an economic environment “good for business” seemed to simplify a much more complex process that, indeed, our interviews confirmed. For example, what differentiated a mover from a non-mover in the same economic environment in the region of origin? What leads people to make
relocation choices? Was it structural factors that “pulled” or individual factors that “pushed,” or vice versa? As the interview process began, it was expected that questions about a respondent’s own biographical experience would produce straightforward answers. What was striking from the beginning, however, was that first responses to questions were either shallow or misleading or both, and that, as the interview proceeded, something was transpiring that required more careful analysis.

The Interview as Front Stage—Back Stage

The interview begins, as Goffman (1959) would have it in the dramaturgical model, as front stage behaviour. Both interviewer and interviewee have roles to play. The interviewer must appear cordial and yet must also be in charge of the interview. The interviewee should appear co-operative but can elect with what depth to answer questions and determine how intimate and personal to be in her response. The interview normally begins at a rather superficial level according to “the rules of co-operative conversational conduct” (Schwarz, 1999). Deeper feelings and observations may be hidden from view as the interviewee remains guarded about revealing too much, and unclear about what the expectations are. It is also possible that the interviewee may be quite content with keeping the discussion throughout the interview at the surface. While relocating obviously involves some adjustment, it might be expected that the logistics of the move would dominate the discussion, which would ensure that the interview would remain essentially front stage behaviour. What is critical, however, is whether the interviewee will allow the researcher to see the more hidden, less straightforward, more personally intimate and perhaps less flattering aspects of the issue, i.e., the back stage.

The literature suggests that, rather than being just facts and process, relocation is often a heavily emotion-laden experience with a gamut of feelings ranging from excitement to adventure, to fear and apprehension, regret and loss (Brett, 1982; De Cieri, Dowling and Taylor, 1991; Hendershott, 1995; Levin, Groves and Lurie, 1980). There are alternating moods of questioning whether the move was indeed the right decision and sometimes bewilderment over whether the costs outweighed the benefits. Corporate movers often had limited choices and were constrained by obligations to the company, career investments and financial considerations (Brett and Reilly, 1988; Brett, Stroh and Reilly, 1993; Mann, 1973; Munton, Forster, Altman and Greenbury, 1993). Un-sponsored migrants often also had little choice because of unemployment or underemployment and had to deal with the risks and uncertainties of relocating. Moves across the country meant uprooting from social networks of family and friends, and tore at personal identities of region and place (Gieryn, 2000; Harvey, 1995; Luo and Cooper, 1990; Munton, 1990; Tiger, 1974; Weiss, 1969). Nevertheless, the demands of daily living required that people move on with their lives in the new envi-
ronment with minimal public discussion of the decision, because internal migration was supposed to be devoid of the culture shock adjustments of external migration. Thus, emotions had to be suppressed and dilemmas about the move retained as a private matter or shared only with close friends. In short, the traumatic aspects of internal migration appeared to have been privatized and there was little legitimacy for dealing with this matter as a personal problem in society at large. Thus, while this was not the goal of the study, submerged feelings often surfaced under interview conditions of acceptance. In some cases, it was even pre-interview struggles that seemed to predispose the interviewee to participate in the study in the first place, as the following examples illustrate.

I said to my husband that participating in the study would be just like having our own therapy session. After all, nobody here wants to talk to us about our move. And at home, everybody has their own reasons for discussing it with us so that we’ll come back. We need someone to listen to us because we miss our family. We have been promoted in our jobs but sometimes we wonder what we are doing here.

I did not want to miss [the interview] for the world. My parents called and told me about the study from back home. Nobody else wants to talk about this here and they knew what I went through, and every question you asked me were things I have struggled with. Too bad we had to quit after one hour. I needed to talk because it has been a difficult experience. In some ways, I was made to feel that leaving was betraying. But I guess I am also angry that I had to leave.

These two illustrations point out how the interests of the researcher and the interests of the study participant may be both mutually beneficial and yet also at considerable cross-purposes. Like Ortiz (2001), who serendipitously found himself cast in the role of “therapist” by the wives of professional athletes whom he was studying, we often walked away from our in-depth interviews with the same impression. The need to acknowledge that research participants also have their own reasons for taking part in a research project is a very important matter that deserves further attention.

How the Interview is Perceived by the Interviewee: Event Validation

Upon hearing these post-interview reflections, it became clear that the interview was perceived by respondents in a much different way than we had anticipated and that participation in the study was not just a benevolent offer to support a research endeavour. Participants were volunteers and were not remunerated for their participation in the study. Yet it was clear that they were receiving their own rewards for being a respondent. On the face of it, it is not surprising that there should be some rewards,
whether it is civic duty or just a desire to be congenial. Yet at a deeper level, it became clear that participation was motivated, consciously or unconsciously, by the desire to verbalize a profound personal experience. The topic of the interview had not suggested to the research team that respondents were likely to be attracted to participate in what could ultimately be perceived as a form of therapy, and no respondents made any suggestion that they needed therapy. Yet it became clear that one of the rewards or benefits of participating in the study was the opportunity to talk about an experience that had great personal impact. What is it about the interview that allows this to happen? Three reasons will be discussed that relate to the existence of the study itself; the way the nature of the interview encourages the expression of feelings and not just facts, and the way the structure of the interview focuses on the interviewee. We end this section with the proposal of a concept called event validation to account for how and why the interview plays the unique role that it does for the interviewee.

In the first place, the mere existence of the study in itself served as a validating fact to the respondent that their experience was significant and worthy of attention. As one respondent put it:

Moving was a real tough thing to do and yet it was also exciting. I had so many mixed emotions and I had to keep them all bottled up because everyone thinks that moving is just a matter of adjustment. Maybe that is why being part of this study struck me as a good thing to do.

Another participant put it differently:

When I arrived, I had no idea that there were so many others that had moved here too, and I had no idea that our decision to move out West was going to be of such interest to people here . . . . It's kinda cool to be sought out for this study . . . . You almost feel like a celebrity.”

Whether the experience is benign or traumatic, there is a sense of the participant feeling flattered that his story or experience is considered important by someone else. And the fact that there even exists a research project to study that experience validates it further. In that sense, the research interview legitimizes the experience and, in its own way, is “empowering,” much like Mishler (1986) had suggested, albeit for different reasons. To discover that someone else thinks that “what happened to me is important” indeed is a form of legitimation. In our own study, the interview seemed to enhance the significance of migration from merely an idiosyncratic and personal episode to something that was both shared and recognized by others. Many respondents commented that the study provided the first opportunity to talk about their experience to a third party, and it is likely that this may have been a more powerful motivator for participation in the study than even participants were willing to admit prior to the interview. So, from the point of view of the interviewee, the existence of the study val-
idates her experience as significant in someone else’s eyes besides her own, and suggests that the problems or dilemmas that the respondent has faced are also shared with many others who are also participants in the study.

The second reason why the research interview takes on added significance for the interviewee that the researcher may not have expected is that the interviewee cannot discuss facts and issues without strong personal and emotional overtones and associations. Merely reliving pieces of the relocation experience through the interview raises all kinds of feelings, again suggesting that the interview is not just a mechanism for unloading data (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 27–28). Consequently, the interview can take on an unexpected cathartic role, because it allows the respondent to talk about both fact and feeling with someone who is listening very attentively and has made the interviewee the centre of his attention (Gorden, 1956; Ortiz, 2001). The point is that, especially when the researcher is tapping an experience that has not been deemed traumatic enough to warrant professional support or intervention and the respondent feels that no one has taken the time to really listen to her, the interview provides the unexpected occasion to discuss these feelings, even when they may not be the primary item on the researcher’s agenda.

One respondent in our research noted that she had wanted to “vent” for a long time and, in retrospect, she could see how the interview provided an opportunity to purge herself of the sentiments she had been feeling, but had repressed for a long time. Another respondent mentioned how she had written a grieving letter to her parents shortly after her departure—a letter she never mailed and never told anyone that she had written until the interview. Sometimes the need for catharsis was masked by saying that participation in the study was motivated by wanting to see if others “felt lonely like I did.” After the interview, respondents often looked for some kind of personal validation or feedback by asking whether their experience was “normal” or “typical.” “Well, is my experience pretty normal?” “Have you heard similar things from others?” One participant interpreted the interviewer’s interest in his experience as “understanding,” “sympathetic,” and as “a consolation,” even though the interviewer had not thought she was acting in such a way as to encourage that kind of interpretation. In other words, each interviewee defined or redefined the meaning of the interview in terms of his or her own personal needs and in light of how the interview proceeded. Of course, those who ensured that the interview stayed at the level of “facts only” defined the interview in a more arm’s-length manner.

Another way of making this point about how the interview draws the respondent in emotionally is that the recounting of events or observations sequentially (at the request of the interviewer) provides a format that fosters the retelling and revisiting of feelings, perceptions and reactions. Even for the migrant for whom relocation was a rather smooth experience, recounting the move was a form of reminiscence about the past that both
highlighted it and, in other instances, brought closure to it or, conversely, stirred up old emotions. Without the interviewer being prepared for it, the interview provoked both old and unresolved feelings as the intensity of the interview increased. It seemed to interviewers that some participants went out of their way to hide their feelings, thinking that any display of emotion was considered inappropriate, while others revealed some emotion by shedding a few tears or avoiding eye contact. Thus, as Ortiz (1994; 2001) also discovered, not only may the cathartic role of the interview be unexpected by the researcher, it may also be an unexpected consequence for the interviewee. Our data, however, suggests that some respondents may have volunteered for the study precisely because they hoped for some kind of cathartic outcome, whether they were consciously aware of this or not.

The third reason why the interview itself personally impacts the interviewee is that the eagerness of the researcher to learn about the experience in question provides an unexpected one-on-one intimacy and a concerted focus on the interviewee that is seldom part of everyday life. Spending an hour or so with a study participant in which there is not the normal interchange between two people engaged in a conversation (in spite of those who advocate the idea that the interview is analogous to a conversation), but in which the object of the interview is to hear primarily from the respondent, ensures that, almost unavoidably, the interview will be an intensely personal experience. Many of our respondents expected that the interview would stay at a superficial or non-emotional level because they were indeed a participant in a study and not a patient in a therapy session (Kvale, 1999). Often respondents answered somewhat stoically, without elaborating too much on their feelings, which ensured that the interview remained at a surface level. However, after the interview was over, several offered comments that implied that the systematic procedure of the interview and continued probing by the interviewer rendered the interview more rigorous, personally focussed and thought-provoking than they had expected. Some used terms like “exhausting,” while others used the term “exhilarating,” because of the recall that took place during the interview. Still others used the term “fun” to describe how the interchange in the interview enabled them to laugh and make light of things that happened, because they were now in the safety of retrospective distance. The interview provided the forum to laugh at things that were difficult at the time and often enabled the participant to reflect on her or his own behaviour, often producing new insights.

While constructivists might react to the notion of a study participant as subject because it detracts from the dialogic nature of the interview, the interviewee feels like a subject because all attention is focussed on that person, conveying to him that his thoughts and observations are important. The researcher takes on the role of being, at minimum, “a professional listener,” and the signing of consent forms ensuring privacy creates a clear sense of safety and confidentiality. Almost inadvertently, then, the researcher has
potentially transformed the research interview into something more than either dialogue or a simple exchange of data. Furthermore, what began as “front stage” interaction as the interview commenced has the potential of being transformed as the interview proceeds to “back stage” interaction, where deep feelings, ambiguities and conflicts are revealed.

This analysis suggests that researchers need to be aware of how the structure of the interview itself may result in the interview having a very different meaning for the interviewee than for the interviewer/researcher. Furthermore, volunteering to be a participant in a research study, whether consciously or unconsciously, may have a different meaning for the participant than the researcher expects. As noted earlier, there are clear cases when the focus of research involves people who have been traumatized by highly negative experiences, where these concerns appear obvious. However, there is a wider range of experiences, from mate selection to work environments, where research interviews may arouse intense personal feelings, even when these feelings per se are not the object of the study.

Our data suggest that people often volunteer for research interviews and, therefore, benefit from them, because in some way the research taps into their own personal experience and validates it. This linkage can be conceptualized as event validation. Event validation refers to the role that the interview plays for the interviewee in confirming the significance of the respondent’s experience as not only important on a personal level, but also of wider significance to warrant closer examination across a broader number of cases by a researcher. In some ways, while the research project is someone else’s study, a process of self-recruitment occurs when the potential respondent identifies with the topic of the study as his or her own experience. And when “the research study” is internalized as “my experience,” not only is participation in the study more likely, but so also is the intensity and depth of that participation, which, coincidentally, can transform the meaning of the interview beyond the researcher’s objectives. Moreover, rather than having a therapeutic conclusion, it is also possible that the research interview may unexpectedly leave the interviewee feeling unsettled and, perhaps, even disconcerted, because the interview ends when the interviewer has fulfilled the research objectives.

The Unfolding Interview: Reflexive Progression

One of the central themes in qualitative research is that the interview represents an occasion for storytelling (Mishler, 1986; Myerhoff, 1992; Riessman, 1993). Interviewees are invited to participate in the study by recounting their own experiences or telling their own stories. Even when interviews are more structured, there is still an element of storytelling, i.e., respondents are invited to share from their own experience. From an interviewee’s perspective, such an invitation is often considerably flattering at
the same time that it treads on personal space. In fact, if potential interviewees are told in advance that telling their story is an important component of the interview, or even the essence of the interview, it is possible that framing the interview in this way may indeed attract respondents who want or need to talk about their experiences, heightening the therapeutic role of the interview. Given the fact that the interviewee has very unclear expectations about what the interview will accomplish and how it will affect her personally, it should not be surprising that, while sharing one’s story is rather straightforward at one level, it is also a story that requires time to unfold, as the interviewee gauges what the interviewer is looking for and searches for an appropriate degree of disclosure (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982).

From the constructivist perspective, Holstein and Gubrium (1995; see also Gubrium and Holstein, 2002) argue that the interview is an “improvisational narrative” in which the interviewee actively composes responses from “stocks of knowledge” that are “substantive, reflexive, and emergent,” usually as a result of “conditioning talk” by the interviewer. Because they argue that both interviewee and interviewer are “narratively active,” there is a clear expectation that interviews are not wooden experiences, but that the story changes or at least has different components. Our research with migrants suggested that it was true that things changed over the course of the interview, but that it was not so much as a result of “positional shifts,” but more as the result of the progressive nature of the interview process itself. Because of the unfolding nature of the interview, respondents were able to reflect more deeply about what they wanted to say, often coming to a new understanding of their own behaviour, as they clarified and articulated their positions more precisely than their initial statements would suggest. We have labelled this process, whereby early responses to questions are modified, elaborated or altered by further reflection on the part of the interviewee, reflexive progression. Reflexive progression is the complex discursive activity whereby the respondent, on the encouragement of the interviewer, refines thoughts and observations as the interview unfolds. The presupposition here is that reflexive progression is almost a necessary process, because initial statements or first responses often obfuscate more complex realities. There are several reasons why this may be so.

First, answers to questions in the initial stages of the interview are almost invariably guarded and superficial. In Goffman’s terms, this is essentially front stage behaviour and the “etiquette barrier” (Gorden, 1956: 163) means that it takes some time for the relationship between interviewer and interviewee to warm up. Only as trust develops is the respondent likely to open up, particularly about the more sensitive aspects of the experience (McCracken, 1988; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The interviewee seeks to define the situation, determine at what level the interview will be conducted, and needs to determine how much and what type of
information to disclose. This is not something that occurs just at one point in time, but is constantly being re-evaluated throughout the interview, in what could be called a disclosure continuum from a guarded to a potentially more open position.

Our migration interviews demonstrated how this “deepening” process occurred. Often it was the attempt to understand the chronology of events that played a major role in moving from front stage to back stage, or from what is more publicly known to what is more private. As one respondent candidly stated:

This is the first time that I have ever really levelled with anyone about this move. It was always easier to just say what people expect to hear, and that way I didn’t have to deal with it myself. But you asked me about all the details, who said what, and what happened when. People don’t really care enough to want to hear all that, but you seemed to want to hear it and that kind of forced me to say it like it really was.

The researcher becomes aware that the story is virtually unfolding and, to the extent that the interviewee is made to feel comfortable participating in that unfolding process, new and more detailed information is provided.

Second, it is the probing by the interviewer that invites the interviewee to be more precise and accurate. The interviewee may at first respond in a manner that is either simpler to articulate, more palatable, more socially acceptable, or less painful. The interviewee may even say those things initially that he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear (Schwarz, 1999). But, in response to the researcher’s attempt to understand and clarify all the details, the participant may be forced to deal more directly with what he is trying to say, and perhaps even to admit things he had never verbalized before to another person. The intensity of the personal focus may even force the respondent to deal with the matter more deeply than he has ever done before, particularly when probed so directly. It is also likely that the interviewer, as a neutral, inquisitive outsider, may ask questions in a new way and push further for linkages, motivations and clarifications that lead to new discoveries by the interviewee. No one may have ever asked those questions before, and the attempt to describe all aspects of the situation to the interviewer may put the experience in some kind of order that was previously unclear, even to the interviewee.

Migration is complex behaviour and our study clearly illustrated this process. Responses to the initial question “How did you come to the decision to relocate?” fit the expectations obtained from other studies (particularly quantitative ones) that migration is intimately related to employment considerations (Brett, 1982; Munton, Forster, Altman and Greenbury, 1993; Munton, 1990). Unless it is migration for retirement or political reasons, such as in the case of refugees, the anticipation of economic betterment as represented by employment is always a critical factor in relocation. Such an interpretation also represented a focus on pull factors that made it obvious
that people move where jobs are more likely to be found. What it ignored were push factors that were even more powerful in releasing people from their region of origin and prompted them to consider relocation in the first instance. In that regard, we discovered that there was considerable legitimacy and social acceptance in saying to friends and family that relocation was motivated by employment factors. Stating work as the rationale for moving seemed so obvious that it initially seemed to make follow-up questions redundant. Yet, upon further probing, people began to offer other explanations that were far more powerful in explaining their behaviour. For example, a Quebec francophone talked about her driving ambition to prove that she could make it in an anglophone business environment. While work was a factor (though she did have work in Quebec), it was clearly that the idea of proving oneself in a different language setting was the personal challenge and primary motivation behind the move. A migrant from Ontario volunteered that, while he had never admitted this to himself before and, indeed, it was not something that he could talk about publicly, down deep the “real” reason he wanted to move was to get away from an interfering mother-in-law. Another migrant from the Atlantic provinces spoke about the desire to relocate away from a region of considerable seasonal employment and underemployment, which had created a culture of dependency that stifled personal ambition. One by one, respondents talked of subsurface, hidden or subconscious reasons for their actions that the simple response of migrating for employment reasons would have merely camouflaged. Young adult migrants often would say that they came to Alberta for a job, but that underlining their move was their desire “to grow up,” “to learn to be independent,” or “to be my own person.”

The critical issue here is that the dominant reason for relocation was essentially personal, but that a socially acceptable façade had been developed that made employment the easy answer. In most cases, this was the answer they not only used with others, but was also that which they used in the first instance with the researcher. And it was only as the interview proceeded with more depth that the respondent acknowledged other motivations that were, perhaps, even more compelling. Among other personal issues that would seldom be offered as the initial rationale for migration were family conflicts, personal disasters, restlessness, or “the desire to start over.” In some cases, these were motivations that the respondent had never consciously admitted before. As one interviewee claimed:

I couldn’t admit to my parents that I really needed to get away from their influence, so I dressed up my reason in all kinds of other things, like I needed to get a job that would give me experience in my field, reasons that were more acceptable to them and their friends. In fact, I think that this is the first time that I have even admitted this to myself—because I do love my parents.
Note how all of these rationales were intensely personal and, in most cases, required both a "safe" context and a lengthy, interactive interview to plumb these depths. It was only as the respondent realized that the superficial but socially acceptable answer did not really explain the move, and that the researcher may have provided an opportunity to explore the decision more fully, that the underlying reason for migration was expressed.

Third, as the interview proceeds, it provides an opportunity for the interviewee to critically evaluate her own logic and behavior. In that sense, the interview can serve as a form of self-discovery and even enlightenment for the respondent, as the interviewer contributes to a form of guided reflection. Statements like "I had never thought of it that way before" or "I think I downplayed this factor in my own thinking because of ..." revealed that new linkages and new explanations occurred as a result of the interview. Furthermore, respondents may not even be aware of inconsistencies in either their behavior or their interpretations of their behavior, and the interview may provide the opportunity to reflect more carefully, particularly when the interviewer asks questions of clarification. A migrant from Saskatchewan started re-evaluating her own behavior in this fashion:

I realize now that there is a contradiction in what I said and it is because I never thought about it before explicitly. It is true that the primary reason we moved is because of the needs of our disabled child and the facilities are better here. But I guess I was predisposed to move because there is a different attitude here. I wanted a more entrepreneurial environment that supported ambitious thinking, and I guess that explains why we moved and others with similar problems did not. But I don't think I ever admitted that outwardly to myself or to others. It was just easier to say that it was because of our daughter and people could accept that better. And it's sort of startling to put that on the table now because it was just lurking in the background before.

In these situations, people often left the interview feeling that the interview had changed them in some ways, as the result of a new perspective that they had developed or things that they had admitted for the first time. Corporate movers had things they wanted to hide from the company, spouses had feelings or observations about the move that they were reluctant to share with their partners, in order to spare them any unpleasant feelings, and the hyperactivity of moving had often left many things unsaid. For that reason, as new meanings and interpretations resulted, the interview often led the interviewee to feel "changed" in some way.

Conclusion

The conventional view of the research interview is to understand the interview from the point of view of the researcher. The researcher has both an objective and an agenda that drive the process of the interview and make a
single interview one of a series to be held with others, which form the “research project.” The researcher often has goals, deadlines, reports and a bank of literature with its interpretations, which frame the project. The interviewee, on the other hand, has a different focus.

Why interviewees agree to participate in a research project is less clear (Ablon, 1977; Berg, 2001; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993; Merton and Kendall, 1946), but the evidence presented here suggests that research projects involving in-depth interviews appeal to volunteers because they provide the opportunity to share matters of personal experience through a process of event validation. In other words, the research project confirms the significance of the interviewee’s experience, relates it to a wider field of persons with similar experiences, and allows the interviewee to talk about that experience. Talking about the experience adds a whole new dimension to the meaning of the research interview for the interviewee that moves considerably beyond the objectives of the researcher.

The constructivist view of the interview reveals what happens when the interviewer and interviewee interact and how meaning is constructed. In stressing the collaborative nature of the interview, however, it ignores the differences in perceptions and roles of the collaborators to the process. The interviewer largely controls the direction, length and focus of the interview and the interviewee, by definition, acquiesces to these objectives. The interviewee, on the other hand, has to give order and meaning to her or his experience through the interview, in what Denzin (2001: 25) calls “interpretive practice.” Thus, both the interviewer and interviewee are active, but they are active in different ways.

The concept of reflexivity is certainly well understood and documented (Banister, 1999; Cox and Lyddon, 1997; Denzin, 2001), but its application to the research interview is particularly useful when focussed on the interviewee. It demonstrates the importance of helping the respondents understand and interpret their own behaviour. It raises questions about the adequacy of first statements, which may be affected by the respondents’ degree of comfort, the respondents’ initial definition of the situation, the protection of self and privacy, perceptions of what is socially acceptable and socially expected, and points out why, from a research perspective, initial responses may be half-truths or superficial. It also shows how a process of self-discovery can occur that can make the interview an intense experience for the interviewee, which not only affects the data that are gathered but also has a personal impact on the respondent to which the data gatherer may not be attuned. Above all, the interview allows the interviewee to shape his or her own discourse and interpretation, rather than viewing the interview as a fully collaborative process. This is not to minimize the role of the researcher, but does place the emphasis on the purpose of the interview in the first instance.
The discovery of the process of reflexive progression in interviewing is very important for social research. It raises questions about how to obtain complex social data within the parameters of the active interview, and raises considerable doubt about the reliability of all quick answers to research questions, whether of a quantitative or qualitative nature (Charmaz, 1995; Miller and Glassner, 1997). Given the unfolding nature of the response, it is very important to probe, in order to allow the respondent to fully explore her or his answer. It is also clear that interviewers need to be prepared for the fact that interviews on apparently straightforward topics may unexpectedly stir feelings and emotions in the interviewee. The purposes of the interview may have been fulfilled from the researcher’s perspective but, to the interviewee, the interview may lay bare many things that have been repressed and remain unresolved.

Finally, it is still to be determined whether all respondents experience reflexive progression. Our interviews suggested that some persons are more likely to have matter-of-fact interpretations of their lives and are quite resistant to reflective thinking. Perhaps the conditions were not right for back stage thinking, but they resisted positional changes, provided relatively short explanations, and tended to avoid other possible interpretations. Within the context of what should have been an hour-long interview, their answers were much more abbreviated than those of others, who were more open to discussing the complexities of relocation behaviour. Qualitative research, then, may be biased towards those who are more articulate and reflective and provide more interesting data (Finch and Mason, 1990). What is important, though, is that the interviewee who is open to discussing his or her behaviour can find in the interview the opportunity to explain, refine and reorganize an experience in all its complexity, thereby providing the researcher with a better window on the behaviour under examination.

References


