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## On Entering the Field: Notes from a Neophyte Researcher

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**Abstract** Qualitative field research can capture the life worlds and definitions of the situation of informants often not reported in quantitative studies. Post hoc reflections of how more seasoned researchers define, assess, and interpret the process of entering the field and the interview dynamic between the researcher's subjectivity and the subjectivity of informants are widespread in the qualitative research literature. However, seldom are the personal stories and reflections of neophyte researchers voiced in published accounts. This article accounts for my experiences in researching the "dirty work" of front-line caseworkers and the importance of practicing empathy while managing a boundary. I emphasize the practical sense-making challenges of managing a delicate balance between under and over rapport in researching homeless shelter caseworkers as an occupational group. My experiences underscore the challenging dynamics of maintaining a professionally oriented research-role, as well as the crucial importance of boundary work and distancing as practical strategies to qualitative interviewing.

**Keywords** Qualitative Research; Dirty Work; Constructivism; Boundary Work; Casework; Stigma

In the preface of *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, Shaffir and Stebbins (1991:xi) make the claim that "reports about field research usually describe the methods and tech-

niques of the research. Less often do they tell the researchers social and emotional experiences: anxiety and frustration, as well as exhilaration and pride in achievement." Researchers doing fieldwork must be very sensitive to the impression that they exude on their informants and the connections that they make when entering the field. This critical phase of the research process establishes the groundwork for the prospective collection of data from people who have uniquely different perspectives and for maintaining relations that can help the researcher overcome problems that arise in the field, such as the anxiety of first encounters and a balance in rapport.

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This article discusses some of the practical, social, and emotional dilemmas I encountered as a novice researcher undertaking graduate work to explore the “dirty work” of frontline caseworkers in the “homelessness sector.” The fundamental aim is to heighten researcher’s awareness of their own presence in the field and the impact their presence may have on their informants. I underline the practical and emotional challenges of managing a delicate balance between under and over rapport. My experiences underscore the challenging dynamics of maintaining a professional research role, as well as the crucial importance of *boundary work* and *distancing* as strategies to avoid role confusions and the profoundly complex and emotionally-laden nature of the interview. Although recent literature on qualitative interviewing and fieldwork has overemphasized the role of emotions and intimacy, I conclude that there is a key balance to be struck between professional detachment and human emotion. Researchers have long highlighted the importance of professional distance (Lupton 1994), balance in rapport (Miller 1952; Gans 2003), and role distancing (Goffman 1981) to avoid the complex problems of both role confusion and the potentially conflict-ridden territory of researcher as “friend.” Through my field experiences, I discover that both researcher and informant negotiate boundaries through the interactive dynamic of the interview and that becoming “friends” may not be in the interest of both parties. Research informants also, interactionally, set “demarcation lines” through their own perceptions, expectations, and bodily expressions of the research encounter, conferring certain role expectations onto the researcher. There is no way to predetermine what to expect in fieldwork. The uncertainty of the field itself un-

dercuts any clear-cut how-to- guides. Because each interview encounter is contextually unique, both researcher and research negotiate a situational sense of the interview. Fieldworkers, especially neophytes new to the doings of qualitative research, must learn to think on their feet.

One underlying concern in qualitative research is the relationship between the researcher and the informant. What kind of relationship is it? Reflexivity is one way in which the quality of the data may be ensured. Moreover, I wished to avoid what Stanley and Wise (1983) term the hygienic representation of research, namely, where issues and emotional dilemmas are sanitized from accounts of the fieldwork process. I kept a journal to reflect on each interview encounter, as well as the general research process.

A focal point of the research was to examine the “dirty work” (Hughes 1962; Emerson and Pollner 1976; Sanders 2010a; Phillips, Hallgrimsdottir, and Vallance 2012) of frontline caseworkers and the ways that they sought to engage in esteem enhancing strategies to construct positive self-definitions in what they do. Frontline caseworkers frequently engage in work that involves duties against a strenuous backdrop, including a complex client base that is socially stigmatized, long hours, lack of resources and continuing themes of trauma, death, and crisis. These “dirty contexts” set the tone for frontline work. These contexts also render frontline caseworkers more susceptible to increased workplace stress and burnout.

The focus, however, was not about having my perspective frame the discussion, but about understanding

their definitions of these “dirty work” contexts. Frontline caseworkers qualify as “dirty workers” by their proximity to physical, social, and emotional dirt. These workers are exposed to infectious disease, violence, danger, and hazardous substances. Their work is also socially tainted and emotionally taxing: they must form and sustain relationships with stigmatized publics, at times having to provide care and services to ex-criminals and sex offenders. These interactions evoke a courtesy stigma (Goffman 2009). What was their “definition of the situation” of these “dirty work contexts?” How did they construct and reconstruct their understandings of the work they do? What is “dirty” is a social construction. One’s dream job can be another’s sought-for prerogative. Therefore, understanding the perspective of actors became a crucial part of this research.

Researchers within the qualitative research tradition in the social sciences are not disembodied and dispassionate observers but are actors in their own right. The researcher, as a human being (Gans 2003), attempts to make sense of the research experience. It is not possible to bracket or completely reduce, to some zero level, the researchers’ own reflections and emotions. They must be accounted for. Perhaps it is not desirable either (Tillmann-Healy and Kiesinger 2001; Perry, Thurston, and Green 2004). Even when some of the research questions cause distress for informants, researchers must necessarily respond affectively in some way. Unless we are machines. Which we are not. Thus, it is essential for researchers to manage their affective stances and their own ideas about the research experience. This involves acknowledging and integrating them into the research process itself (Mitchell and Irvine 2008). But,

it also points to an inherent dynamic between researcher and informant. By accounting for the messier parts of fieldwork, the researcher can provide the reader with a greater and more unique comprehension of the research topic and process. This reflexive process helps to underscore and illuminate the interactive elements, namely, what Wojciechowska (2018:122) calls the “interactional and interpretational contexts” involved in the research undertaking that enhances interpretation and understanding (Clingerman 2006; Watts 2008).

As Shaffir (1999:681) writes, in almost a *Garfinkel-esque* fashion, “self-reflexivity underlying the why’s and how’s of the research would yield a more honest accounting of how ethnography was actually accomplished.” The research must be accounted. Researchers are thoroughly involved in social action and as such, they must come to define the interactive reality that is presented to them. Neophyte researchers must learn the ethnographic work by doing the ethnographic work. My early fieldnotes emphasize the importance of learning on “the fly”:

I have strong convictions concerning the research process. One is to ensure that I provide an accurate representation of my informants’ work experiences. At the end of the day, the researchers must refer to analytic frameworks as theoretical instruments to help make sense of a messy social reality. I am becoming increasingly concerned about the data collection process and how the interview context is shaping this process. Verily, I wish to report comprehensively on my reflections of becoming a researcher. As all becoming is, this will be difficult. Like the frontline caseworkers I have interviewed so far, who tell me

that they learn as they go, I know that I too will have to learn on the fly.

## Establishing a Presence

I began the process of each interview by making appointments vis-à-vis email with the permission of either the director or the manager of the shelter. Upon arrival, shuffling my pocket anxiously for a cigarette, I pace the sidewalk nearby. I always made sure to be five or ten minutes early to ascertain my earnest self-presentation as a researcher. Every shelter requires the use of an intercom at the main entrance. Identifying myself and explaining that I had an appointment with a caseworker, I was permitted to enter the building. At each site, I was greeted by a worker at the front desk who was balancing various tasks at once: welcoming me as I sat on a nearby chair waiting for my informant to meet me, taking phone calls, addressing the needs of the residents, filling out papers, and answering the intercom. Quite frankly, I felt like I was intruding, considering the heavy workload caseworkers manage on a routine, daily basis.

I was a stranger to the hustle and bustle of this type of work. Guilty for taking the time out of their busy schedules who were not themselves involved in the research. Smiling awkwardly at the workers passing by, I waited patiently, composed, for my informant to arrive. I would soon be greeted by the informant and taken to either their own private office, or some other private office in the building.

“Are you Julian?” I steer my head towards the incoming voice, my informant, with soft, dainty fea-

tures, smiles. “Give me two minutes please, I just have a few things left to do.” “Is that okay?” “Absolutely! I completely understand.” My response is firm and kind. I waited for her to return, as was the case for most of my informants—they were always busy doing something. The workplace is compact, frontline caseworkers rushing past each other in a hurry. There were times when my informants were interrupted by their coworkers during the interview—work related business. I observe an area where family residents relax, their kids playing, and caseworkers making sure to entertain them, to act as company. Upon her return, we fled to a room to conduct the interview. I always made sure to introduce myself, explaining that I was interested in learning more about their work. “Act as if I know nothing!” I would say.

I took the role of the “naïve learner” to effectively grapple with a proper balance between under and over rapport. Douglas (1976) suggested distancing oneself from research participants by playing the novice role, or “play the boob.” It was difficult to be totally upfront about researching “dirty work.” The term “dirty work” may arouse a flurry of emotions. So, I decided to show “saintly submissiveness,” using various “ploys of indirection” to divert people away from the real purpose of the study. I merely convinced them that I was interested in something else, namely, in their “work experiences.” I found this to be helpful because it was general enough and workers can more freely discuss their definitions of the situation. Thus, I remained faithful to my purposes. I would say, for instance, “I am interested in doing a phenomenological study of caseworkers lived work experiences.” This remained seemingly

abstract and unthreatening. By “playing the boob,” as a tactical self-presentation, the appearance of naïveté allowed me to legitimately ask questions about taken-for-granted features of caseworker’s lives. The image of the naïve learner allowed me to ask questions that, under normal circumstances, would produce discomfort. As Adler and Adler (1987:17-18) have pointed out, “researchers may differentiate themselves demographically from their respondents, feign a novice or ignorant status over extended periods of time (‘playing the boob’; Douglas, 1976), use physical positioning to situate themselves on the periphery of the action, and communicate distance and detachment through their body language.”

These strategies allowed me to generally avoid framing the information I was receiving from informants (thus, from the field) as ethical dilemmas. I placed myself as a learner. I also realized that, being myself a novice researcher, it was easier to take on a naïve role, which helped to balance rapport. If I spoke too much to an issue, would I risk silencing them? The self-projected image of the naïve learner, therefore, prevented any kind of over-identification and closeness while simultaneously allowed informants to open themselves gladly to someone who expressed genuine interest, ignorance, yet curiosity into their work lives. Once the anxiety released me, I fell safely into my own skin. The recruitment process also became relatively more stable. My *gift from heaven* was in having readily secured access to the field. However, despite my “gift from heaven,” that is to say, my great fortune in having acquired access into the field to conduct interviews with emergency frontline caseworkers in a major Canadian city, the

process was, in fact, for me, one of great anxiety. Immediate access, I found, does not necessarily equate to acceptance, especially from the perspective of the caseworkers themselves. The bureaucratic procedures of field access—the tedium of emailing back and forth with managers, scheduling, discussing, and convincing different people from the administrative body the worthiness of this research was simply a matter of crossing my fingers. They were more straightforward. Either they liked the project, or they did not.

The research process, on entering the field and beginning my early interviews, which I considered exploratory, was doubtlessly nerve-wracking. Crazy ideas, in the beginning phases of the research, circulated madly through my head: “Why would they want to study us?” “Argh, another researcher. I am busy, stop taking up my time!” I was fraught with anxiety, envisioning embarrassments, disasters, and knowing my own shyness in interaction, the possibility of provoking awkward silence. The craft is not something passed down theoretically. The craft of field research and qualitative interviewing is a pragmatic reality. I adopted a professionally defined research role, which meant a process by which informants come to regard the researcher as earnest, relatively competent, and most importantly, committed. Active listening, body language, and projecting a sense of being personable were essential.

I knew from the get-go that these tense experiences had to be managed if I was to conduct my interviews effectively. William Shaffir (1999:680) notes that qualitative researchers should disclose “their

paranoid fantasies, embarrassments, and the like.” In other words, researchers should remain open about their personal difficulties, quandaries, and emotional experiences encountered during the research process. Introspection is neither good or bad. It has its merits. Its flaws. However, I have found that it did help me to a limited degree. It made me more conscious of foreseeing contingent field situations and at the very least, provided me with the opportunity to think-through some of the potential problems that could arise. In other words, self-reflectivity allowed me to mentally prepare for prospective burdens, tensions, disappointments, failures, and so doing, conjure up possible resolutions. Apart from keeping this tightly abreast my mind, all the way through the research process, I knew that it was crucial to engage informants, from the very beginning, amicably and develop rapport (Shaffir 1991).

My immediate priority, upon entering the field and establishing a presence, was in constituting a bounded social interaction, namely, a connection that was simultaneously distanced yet amicable, kind, and comforting. Managing one’s emotions as a researcher involves a process of acknowledging and even integrating them into the research (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001; Holland 2007). According to Sanders (2010b:112), “emotional experience is central to doing ethnography. The fieldworker is routinely confronted with the uncertainties of being a stranger in other people’s home territories and having to navigate through the field without the comforting compass of a testable hypothesis.” The reflexive practices and emotional effects on researchers, however, have been less reported (Sword 1999; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007).

I used a few tactics to promote informants’ acceptance of my situated presence. This was necessary to make informants’ more comfortable in revealing their experiences. I initiated casual conversation upon meeting the caseworkers. I wanted to project a sense of demureness. I did this by not dressing or talking too pompously. Goffman (1959) used the term impression management to describe how people consciously attempt to persuade how others think about them through their appearances and demeanor. This lends insight into how people view themselves, but also how they want to be viewed by others. When I met an informant for coffee to discuss recruitment, she had mentioned how North Street is becoming more of an artistic hub. I immediately took this as an opportunity to establish a mutual conversational milieu. We then spoke about art more generally. “Have you heard of Robert Mapplethorpe?” I asked. “There is a current exhibit at Montreal’s Musée des Beaux-Arts on Sherbrooke.” I showed her images of his photography. She then told me about some of her favorite artists, some of whom I knew, some of whom I did not. We sat for coffee and continued the conversation. This conversation began as small-talk and eventually characterized itself as a dialogue. We became more incisive. By allowing each other to exchange diverse points of view on art, into matters of cohesive understanding that illuminated new insights about each other, we enabled a space, together, to talk about experiences. Art itself is a matter of meaning-making and sense-making, in that we seek to make sense of our experiences of looking, creating deeper levels of conversation *about what matters*. I perceived this conversational interchange as a *moyen* for talking about experiences more generally, hopefully instilling

a sense of comfort in the informant to eventually talk about her work experiences. It was, in a word, a conversational means to enter the occupational social worlds of emergency frontline caseworkers, in a perhaps indirect way.

This somewhat opportunistic move also helped to ease the initial tension of first encounters. Whether we like it or not, most of us seek to distill the anxiety of first encounters by adopting taken-for-granted (and opportunistic) strategies to bring people closer together. Beginning with small-talk, finding common ground, discussing our shared affinities to make way into the bulk of the matter. It allowed me and informants to forge some mutual connection. Other times, the simple talk of dogs was useful, and so on. These conversational “opening wedges” to my mind, served as potent catalysts for a deeper inquiry into informants’ lived social reality. The self is not static, granting that doing qualitative interviewing is something that really does change the self. Like anybody you want to further get to know, you must find some common ground or shared affinity. That is, some mutual ground to make shared experience intelligible and therefore, at least, initial connection possible. People are not expected to robotically provide you with their life stories and experiences, nor should they be. They are not mechanical dispensers. In a way, you must show them why they should let you into their social worlds, one being that the project is perceived by them as worthwhile, and that you, as researcher, provide them with a sense of comfort, respect, and trust. Like any other interaction with another human being. Research is no exception. In the interviewing situation this meant finding common ground that

we could situate ourselves in, whether it was art, dogs, or something else.

Therefore, rather than crafting a thoroughly distanced approach, I was inviting informants into getting to know who I was as well, therefore not remaining too aloof, withdrawn, or cold. I was in the world with others. Yet, my role was not that of a frontline caseworker. Goode and Maskovsky (2002) have argued that there is no such thing as too close in qualitative research. Others have sought to establish friendships (Murphy and Dingwall 2001). These friendships may even last after exiting the field (Rock 2001). Being amicable with one’s research informants does not intrinsically constitute a problem. Thompson (2002), for instance, found that informants may expect researchers to take on an explicit friendship role. Bourgois (1995) attended Christmas office parties while conducting field research on crack dealers. Adler and Adler (1991:174), for instance, befriended their neighbor who happened to be a drug smuggler, they write, “over the years we became close friends with both him, his (ultimately divorced) wife, and his whole network of associates, spending frequent time together, testifying at his various trials, and taking him into our home to live for seven months after he was released from jail.” Over-rapport, however, between researcher and researched could introduce complications into the field research process and depends principally on the field context and the situational sense of the interview. I have discovered in my own research that taking on the role of friend may not be intrinsically beneficial or rewarding. I had come to reckon that the taxing and busy work worlds of caseworkers, for one thing, undercut any avenues to friendships.

They had given their time. But, they had also established firm boundaries. They allowed me to talk with them at their workplaces, but outside of that, a strong *work-life boundary* was maintained. Work remained at work and any research about their work remained at work. Caseworkers learned to compartmentalize. I accepted this and came to the realization that when researchers and their informants become exceedingly close to one another, it can compromise the researchers standing in the field. Data may be spoiled, research focuses rendered unfocused, findings may be altered (Cassell and Wax 1980; Adler and Adler 1991; Taylor 1991; Wolf 1991; Fleisher 1998; Brinkmann and Kvale 2005). I accepted this. What is taken for granted may no longer be critically evaluated, namely, overripe relationships, I believe, can prevent the researcher from being able to critically observe and assess what is being taken for granted. Thus, when relationships in fieldwork are overripe, it can obscure the kind of relationship that is being maintained. I have found that managing a delicate balance between over-rapport and under-rapport served best in my field research and interviewing.

However, this did not mean that I was not empathetic. I practiced empathy while managing a boundary: the professional and working research role. In a sense, informants increased my awareness of the responsibility I had in practicing those boundaries (Dickson-Swift et al. 2006) that Gilbert (2001:12) argues involves “maintaining a clear internal sense of difference from the other.” I could never shake off the sense of being a researcher and so my experience was in cultivating a social and emotional balance, *an attempt to be close but not too close*. This was vital in ascertaining that I did not “lose myself”

in the reality of frontline caseworkers by either becoming overly friendly or morally judging them. The likeliness for friendship arising in the field is predominantly a boundary issue (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). The purpose was to neither sympathize nor befriend, but to empathize, which is fundamental to understanding. Fieldworkers may lose sight of this fundamental difference. Ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing certainly requires empathy, but it does not necessarily impose any moral obligations for sympathy.

These experiences confirm pre-existing fieldwork literature (Kavanaugh and Ayres 1998; Shaffir 1999; Duncombe and Jessop 2002; Gans 2003; Dickson-Swift et al. 2006) that maintaining a professional research role and distance is profoundly complex, controversial, and emotionally laden. I found that maintaining this boundary in practice was not easy, especially when themes were emotive and required a reciprocal, empathic move on the part of the researcher. I realized that there is a balance to be struck between professional distance (i.e., objectivity) and human emotion, without losing sight of our compassion as fellow human beings (Goodrum and Keys 2007).

The researcher’s relationship to the researched “requires rapport combined with objectivity” (Miller 1952:98). Herbert Gans (2003:91), for instance, writes that “if one becomes too identified with the people being studied, one is likely to ignore behavior they consider undesirable or unethical, and this can lead to partial or distorted findings.” Overly identifying with the professional, working role—remaining exceedingly dispassionate, cold, and



*machine-like*—as well as overdeveloping closeness are both blind spots in fieldwork. Some connection must be made. Otherwise, the research process becomes too administrative, sapping-out the humanistic qualities, and leaving unacknowledged the social reality of the research itself. In the words of Miller (1952:98), “the researcher should not become a mere machine.” The blind spot—becoming a mere machine—of under-rapport can prevent researchers from recognizing that there is not intrinsically any difference between the social interactions in the field and other social interactions apart from our aims as researchers.

By asking the researched about their work experiences, I thought this framing would increase informants’ comfort and contribute to my credibility because it is a topic meaningful to our lives: work is an “important source of self-identification” (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003:893). From that point, I informally directed the talking of these experiences towards my research aims. These experiences would provide insight into explanations of the experience of doing “dirty work,” work meaning, competing demands, and the construction of self-definition in and through work. For the most part, when my role as researcher was established, informants readily entered dialogue with me. One even said to me, “I know how difficult it must be to get good quality data, but you were open with me and I am willing to talk freely.” They demonstrated relaxed postures and divulged quite personal information, of course, to their own recollection, suggesting that they did feel at ease with me. These experiential accounts, I believe, enhanced the quality of the data collected (Shaffir 1991).

I emphasized the importance of understanding the informants’ concerns and perspectives about issues affecting them at work and the meanings they attach to their work lives. That is, whether, and how, their work was a source of self-identification. If I used words or terms that frontline service providers found inappropriate in explaining their experiences, I used their terminologies and definitions: “You are caring for clients?” I asked. “Not just caring, validating! There is an important difference!” For frontline service providers, working in non-profit organizations, servicing disenfranchised and stigmatized publics meant understanding the past and current events of clients. By respecting and honoring their individuality, frontline workers created meaning in their interactions and discovered their true “helping” potential. The frontline case managers role is to provide a non-judgmental, empathetic environment by understanding the contextual nature of the client’s situations and to aid in the discovery of the client’s own recovery potential, ranging from addiction to independent-living, by targeting client-centered goals and supporting them to repurpose their life-situation. This was, according to frontline caseworkers, distinct from caring in that its central obligations were to facilitate relief and validate suffering to promote understanding. But, most importantly, it was about maintaining humanizing relations. Validation was not just caring. It was an attempt made on the part of the frontline caseworker to situate themselves with their clients and to honor their stories and their suffering. Namely, to respect and recognize stories that have been, in the context of the public, made invisible. In other words, validating meant making visible what was invisible. By paying close attention to the meanings

they attached to their actions, experiences, forms, and practices of care, I was able to prevent any distancing on the part of informants, towards me, by respecting their definitions of what they were doing and avoiding language that alienated them or did not align with their experiences. Otherwise, I would have appeared as insensitive, careless, and indifferent to their definitions of the situation.

Caseworkers understood that working with homeless sex offenders were stigmatizing interactions. They also understood the social costs at stake. According to Sanders (2010b:105-106), “in addition to the ‘dirt’ that may rub off on ethnographers because of their ongoing contact with unsavory social worlds, fieldworkers are involved in employing a method that is typically regarded as inferior, commonsensical, or ‘unscientific.’” Caseworkers, as well as researchers, therefore, who concentrate their efforts on deviant populations who are in jeopardy of moral castigations are themselves in jeopardy of moral judgments. Jankowski (1991:16) observed that, “before going into the field, I decided that to do this research, I would have to remain neutral to behavior that society considered criminal.” What about the behavior or work that society generally considered deviant? When caseworkers confessed to remaining non-judgmental in their services to homeless sex offenders (or present or past criminals), at first, my spontaneous reaction was one of both incredulity and repugnance, “How could you stand there and listen to them?” Like Jankowski (1991), I was aware that caseworkers dealt with a complex client base and decided that it would be best to remain neutral to the way they defined their work activities and the ideological rationalizations for why they did what

they did, despite the moral judgments that society may cast on such service. If I remained thoroughly neutral and detached, caseworkers would think me rude—like the “rest of them”—judgmental and dispassionate. But, I was not disinterested. Remaining neutral was merely a matter of expressing a degree of respect and constituting a *frame of analysis* that helped to avoid defining what was being said and done as a moral or ethical dilemma.

Goffman (2009) described how stigma spread out in waves of diminishing intensity. Those who work directly or act in association with people who are socially stigmatized may spread from the stigmatized person to those close to him or her. Caseworkers thus suffer a “courtesy stigma.” The stigma is transferable twice-removed to people who associate with the socially stigmatized (i.e., people or places). Although caseworkers bear more social costs of working with socially stigmatized clients, I discovered that researchers themselves can also bear social costs, in a diminishing intensity. Friends and family, especially, warned of the risks and dangers of doing research in a homeless shelter, “With the fentanyl crisis and drug users, why do you want to hang around them or near them? Why the hell do you want to spend your time studying those places!” “They are all criminals and drug addicts!”

My early fieldnotes reflect my edginess with hygienic issues and my general discomfort of being in a shelter:

One thing that caseworkers emphasized as a physical danger was fentanyl. Fentanyl was a major concern. One caseworker told me that, “I’ve known so

many of my clients that have died that I've started to forget their names." Most deaths resulting from fentanyl overdose. They tell me that just a bit of it can be a great danger. They tell me to be mindful. If you want to stay in the shelter, be mindful. Well, what if I come into contact with it in the shelter? It can be anywhere and it's invisible to the eye! I am actually very uncomfortable and uneasy with being here. Not only that, yesterday, while observing an intake interview, the caseworker left momentarily to print some papers and the intake client stared straight at me. He wouldn't budge. He then blurted, "What the fuck are you looking at?"

Many people outside the academy, whom I knew and frequented, could not understand why I would do this sort of research and did not see its importance. In fact, when I spoke candidly about my research during a party, my cousin said, "Okay, Julian," and walked away. Further, many ridiculed my research on "dirty work" as something not to be taken seriously and treated it as unworthy of study. It was the subject of jokes and laughter. Some were shocked and did not know how to respond. A friend of mine said after telling of my research that, "I always knew you were a little weird."

I therefore began to manage the information I would communicate about my research. This was done either through withdrawal or concealing the true nature of the study. I began to become extremely edgy and uneasy when people asked about my research, "A thesis? A thesis about what?" "Dirty work? Sociology? What about sexology? That's dirty! [laughs]." It was never taken seriously. I was constantly hassled about it. So, I began to redefine my

research more abstractly, presenting it as a "study in work and occupations," "service work," "non-governmental organizations," "the sociological nature of work," or "a phenomenological study of work" remaining both vague and general as to manage and negotiate a certain presentation of self. I was mounting a performance to display myself in a particular manner, but also to conceal the feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy, and ridicule that I felt previously through other people's reactions. I thus avoided "stigma symbols" that would spoil my self-image as a worthy academic. I then would attempt to change the topic instantly, so to avoid further questioning, "So! How are you?" Therefore, at times, I felt "silly" and "degraded" when people laughed or treated my research topic with sarcastic humor and contempt. For instance, some friends used to joke, quite aggressively, "They gave you money to write about that crap." In all, these experiences allowed me to acquire a shared understanding with caseworkers about the outside worlds relative hostility to their work. For instance, when I told a relative that caseworkers sometimes work with "sex offenders," he said, "I couldn't do that! They must be a little wack." So, this confirmed a lot of the experiences that caseworkers were describing, as I had heard them from occupational outsiders myself. It was not thought of as "legitimate research."

### **"We Don't Take Welfare Scum"**

I felt anger at many of the stories that caseworkers told me about the hardships that their clients faced: from being called "scum" by landlords, ridiculed by physicians, scornfully looked down upon by nurses, their heartbreaking stories of addiction and family

violence. Landlord stigmatization of persons experiencing homelessness and addiction affected me the most. It was also a major problem for caseworkers themselves, as they were the people responsible for mediating relations with landlords under the Canadian Housing First (HF) policy and programmatic approach to homelessness. Caseworkers directly witnessed incidences of abuse and discrimination. Landlords labeled their homeless clients as “dirty,” “irresponsible,” “all junkies,” “hopeless,” “manipulative,” and “stupid”. The following interview excerpt underscores the caseworkers’ frustrations in dealing with landlords:

We spend so much time and energy negotiating with landlords and finding housing. Trying to convince landlords why they should rent to this person...it’s really frustrating because they don’t want them really. They think they are all a bunch of dirty junkies. Untrustworthy and blameworthy. They are vilified. But, in order to meet our monthly quotas to the city, sometimes you just have to take the easiest client, which is... sort of contrary to the whole Housing First policy because priorities should be for the chronically homeless, those with the highest acuity and the highest needs. But, most of these clients have mental health problems, addictions, and an ingrained lifestyle which makes it more difficult. We end up neglecting the needs of the chronically homeless because they are too difficult to manage with the time constraints the city offers. We are burdened by the pressure of time.

Some landlords will straight up say, when you call them, what do you do for a living? “Well, I am not calling for myself, I am calling on behalf of a client”—and they are like, “Oh, well, what does your client do

for a living?” and I say, “They are on Ontario Works (OW) or ODSF.” Right away, they snap saying, “We don’t take welfare scum,” many have made these sorts of remarks to me on the phone and hung up immediately. I hate it, don’t they understand? I have also had somebody say, “They are all drug addicts!” So, that stigmatization makes our work very difficult. It’s illegal too. It takes a lot of time and energy to deal with the bureaucracy of the human rights commission or to file a claim. Most clients don’t even want to, they are scared or don’t have the means to do so. This problem is with small private landlords. The bigger ones rarely reject. Nonetheless, housing is shrinking. How can you have a Housing First policy without homes? Some have disabilities too, which prevents them from working. The government has granted them with this because they recognized their disability. How can you hold that against them?

Emergency caseworkers are constantly framing client advocacy and therefore the way in which the HF policy is implemented (Lipsky 2010). The stigmatizing discourses of the “homeless drug addict” and the “blameworthy homeless client” made caseworkers’ work much more difficult. These elements were designated by workers as some of the “dirtier” parts of their job, undermining their service ideals and helping potential. Although I experienced a variety of emotions throughout the interview interactions, from anger, sadness, to indignation, I was careful to maintain a neutral attitude about what the caseworkers told me. By managing a stance of affective neutrality, I was negotiating my role as researcher in our interaction, namely, positioning myself as a researcher. I had to deal with my embodied experiences. I had to suppress the feelings

of indignation to manage a performance that was compatible with the professional, working research role I was presenting. However, I always nodded to show understanding, but never did I express full-fledged endorsement of their frustrations. I listened and paid attention. According to Dickson-Swift and colleagues (2007:68), “active management of feelings is central to research on sensitive topics as researchers often change the way they would normally act while engaged in research.” This neutrality, nonetheless, adhered to moral principles of reciprocity, respect, and trust: treating the researched as equals in our conversation. I listened to caseworkers’ recount repeated accounts of misunderstandings their clients faced, the lack of sensitivity to their personal needs by government agencies, medical professionals, and the likes, and the minimization of their concerns. Institutions, it appeared—through the storytelling of caseworkers—truly made the homeless feel invisible. Yet, although these accounts are themselves important, I was interested in understanding the experienced subjectivity of what it meant to be on the frontline. When caseworkers spoke about their clients’ experiences—as they often did—I reframed the discussion in such a way as to have them account for their work experiences, to speak about their subjective experiences: “So, tell me, how does the stigmatization of your clients influence your work?” She responded, “Well, people begin to think that you have the same mentality as them.”

### **Capturing a Moment in Life: Interviews as Social Occasions**

My interviews were conducted in an anti-positivist way. From a positivistic interview standpoint, the

informants’ knowledge is perceived as a thing to be extracted; as simply a conduit for information. However, in my best efforts, I attempted to treat the interview as a social occasion, namely, as an event taking place in social reality. In this sense, I had to situate myself as a social actor—as an interviewer. I perceived the interview as a social event, a process whereby, through our interactions, me as a researcher and the researched were collaborating jointly in knowledge production. Certain questions had my informants take time to reflect on their own understandings of work and their experiences. They were themselves, it is true, attempting to discern and order their experiences, coherently, which is, for the most part, taken-for-granted—a natural attitude in the Husserlian (Husserl 1970; 2013; Heap and Roth 1973) and Schützian sense (Schütz 1967; 1970). But, this was not achieved on their own. Like Kubátová (2018), I saw the interview as an encounter. The conversational interchange between me and my informants allowed for certain kinds of understandings and meanings to be constructed: the way they understood my question, as well as the way I responded to their answers. This interchange produced unique conversational avenues which could only be achieved naturalistically rather than with strict, albeit aloof, adherence to a structured interview guide. I therefore saw the interview process contingently: unpredictable, spontaneous conversational instances emerging out of our interaction that would have not occurred had I stuck necessarily to my interview guide and structured the interview in a determinative way. A determinative approach would be treating knowledge as a thing; informants as mere conduits for information. But, the interview is a social dynamic. Interview informants are prac-

tioners of everyday life, which means that they themselves are constantly trying to make sense of their lived social realities.

Constructivism in qualitative research emphasizes a collaborative approach to the interview (Denzin 2001; Charmaz 2003; 2006). Constructivism correctly understands the interview context as a predominantly sense-making activity; an experience and a negotiated effort between both researcher and researched, namely, a co-construction of knowledge (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Adler and Adler 2012; Wojciechowska 2018).

In many instances, when I asked research subjects to discuss their interactions with clients, or when I asked them which clients they identified more with, my informants referred to various social roles. For example, one of my informants could identify more intensely with mothers and their stories. She would claim, “Speaking as a mother, I could identify with her more closely.” Others had identified with the situations of their clients as well. One informant recounted a story where she was easily able to identify with a client whose mother was suffering from cancer. The informant was in a similar predicament, which facilitated a process of constructing a more trustworthy relationship. My informants thus actively took on many roles. Therefore, I could not simply focus on him or her as an occupational member, although this was my purpose. I had to recognize how a variety of roles enter and blur the boundaries within and between occupational identities. In other words, the expression of a *stable occupational identity* became more difficult to discern, on my part, considering the changing relations be-

tween worker and client. Workers used various social roles (mother, daughter, etc.) in life when their relational relevancies became appropriate, in order to identify and empathize with clients as much as possible.

The occupational identities of caseworkers, therefore, were negotiated contextually, to help embolden relations and reinforce the interaction between worker and client. Their pasts, personalities, and personal experiences (i.e., as previous social service users) came to the fore when they felt that they could effectively relate to clients to better enhance the development of trust. Therefore, I thought, that to treat informants as having a stable occupational identity would be to reify the concept of occupational identity and to ignore the role-complexities involved within occupational identities. It would be misguided, considering that, truly, we act out multiple roles, contingent on and modulated by social interaction. In other words, by paying specifically close attention to informants’ narratives of how they build relations with clients at work, I sought to discern and understand the multiple roles informants enacted. Caseworkers learned to present many faces. When identification with clients became more difficult and awkward—sometimes leading to complete interactional failures—workers adapted a more professional role, where they sought to achieve a delicate balance between expressing concern for the client, while simultaneously maintaining a professional distance—a benign detachment—all in good faith. This contradictory social position also allowed caseworkers to remain emotionally sound. Role-playing, therefore, to an extent, were also strategies for emotional self-management. Therefore, the “individual

worker,” that is, the emergency caseworker, does not always act out a single role, but rather acts out roles strategically, to acquire compliance, trust, and respect from clients. His or her identity is more situational, being both shaped by the interactive processes of client-centered practice and the needs of their clientele. Interactive adaptation, namely, a keen awareness of the changing nature of social interactions, is perceptively felt among caseworkers, who must necessarily engage in various role-maneuvers to better build and sustain relationships with their clientele.

If we take strict, procedural, and structured guidelines of survey interviews, for instance, we can see that instead of producing more objective data, the structured interview and its confining, rigid rules can be understood as simply producing another version of truth; one that reflects primarily the assumptions of the researcher, as much as it tells us about real, lived experiences and attitudes. Take rigidly structured surveys that adhere to responses measured (operationalized) in accordance to categorical formats such as “Highly Agree,” “Agree,” “Neutral,” “Disagree,” and “Highly Disagree.” What does this tell us? It may tell us the likeliness or the unlikeliness of something, say our attitudes towards abortion. However, it leaves many questions unanswered. One must therefore be attentive to the ways in which interviewing, as a social occasion, takes part in *the active creation of meaning and reality*. Interviews are a part of daily life. Where my informants involved themselves in empathetic, routine understanding of their clients, I too engaged in empathetic understanding—I had to understand how caseworkers understood and per-

ceived their own interactions in the social world: Why did they do the things they did? Why that way and not another? And why was that meaningful to them?

## Reflecting on the Interview(s) and Their Dynamic

What is meant by the interview? Or more precisely, what is an interview? Doing interviews undoubtedly led me to seek an answer to this question—I was making it a part of my everyday reality, as my predominant research tool. Apart from reflecting on my interview experiences, I began to consider the rationale of interviewing, as a research method. My immediate impression was that it was effective in getting at an in-depth, profound understanding of lived experience. It was effective in capturing a moment of real social life—in its immediate situation. We read interviews in the newspaper, in celebrity magazines, in journals. A consequence of this is a tendency to simplify. Our familiarity with the interview is that there is an interviewee who answers questions posted by an interviewer. Despite this popular, commonplace understanding, the interview, from my experiences, is a much more complex and critical instrument. Interviewing goes beyond simple fact gathering—what are facts if facts are to be interpreted?

I am reminded of Max Weber’s *verstehen*: reality must be understood, and this means that the researcher attempts to construct meaning and interpretation from the empirical facts, in the context of conversation. Sure, the interviewer, the researcher, is doubtless involved in some fact-gathering pro-

cess. But, these facts do not speak for themselves. Even if the researcher were to completely ignore his informants' sense-making of these facts, he or she would also have to involve themselves in a process of sense-making. The interview thus makes sense-making interactional. In other words, the interview is an interpersonal process of sense-making. Lest not forget that Weber himself adhered to a Neo-Kantian methodology (Eliaeson 1990; Ciaffa 1998): the researcher is, despite his or her diligent and scrupulous duty to maintain objectivity, bringing something to the facts. They must be faithful to interpreting these facts objectively. The researcher goes into the field, collects data, and then interprets this data. The process of interpretation takes this data and organizes it into concepts or categories to make sense of what is going on. The human mind does this. And the human mind seeks sense. That is, the process of interpreting makes the social world *intelligible*. This process is constructive. Weber (2017) called these ideal-typical constructions, Schütz (1967; 1970), phenomenologically speaking, in a similar tone, understood these as intersubjectively constructed typifications or "everyday ideal types." But, I found that this process of *interpretive construction* does not always occur *ex post facto*, it occurs in the interview. During the interview, I had already found myself interpreting and attempting to make sense of what was going on, and this determined the way I was to pose the next question. The interaction, in other words, shaped the interview context. So, in a sense, I myself was embedded within a chain of interactions, faced with the immediacy of a social situation, attempting to grasp, interpret, and understand. Immersing oneself in these chains of interactions entails a willingness to genuinely

want to hear, to understand an individual and their lived social world.

A concern that kept on propping up in my interview experiences, as I reflected on them, was how to provide a way for my interviewee, my informant, to speak in his or her genuine voice. What kind of space, or interview milieu was I to provide to reinforce and support this? It also meant reducing the power relation between interview and interviewee. Power relation? Despite rigid, structured interviews, a power relation does occur. We are getting what we want from them, not in a mischievous exploitative sense, but rather we are trying to elicit certain kinds of responses, determining some frame whereby certain responses emerge, almost presupposed. This is not their genuine voice, or, perhaps, is it? The purpose of qualitative research, to my understanding, is to reveal the interviewees' stories, experiences, and meaning-constructions of their lived social reality, in their authentic voice. A power relation can emerge, I think, whenever we prevent this from happening. Preventing this from happening is not only an exercise of power, but it risks the fundamental premise upon which qualitative research rests: relativism and therefore objectivity. To be objective is to permit genuine participant responses. This is what it means to heed to perspective, namely, to methodological relativism and therefore to sincere social science. Charmaz's (2003; 2006) constructivist approach to grounded theory, for instance, assumes the relativism of multiple social realities. Certainly, this does not go without any mistakes: we are trying to understand another's experiences. No easy task. Despite my constant self-doubt, it has only helped to reflect on methodological issues and the very deep



complexity and labor-intensive difficulties of conducting interviews.

It is difficult to know exactly where the unstructured interview is going (Corbin and Morse 2003). Therefore, I needed to decide whether to encourage informants to talk about a particular topic, remain silent, or whether to stop the interview if I was upsetting them—to “switch gears.” According to my field notes:

There was one informant that appeared to express ambiguity about the interview experience. She also downed herself about giving the right answer. I assured her that I was interested in her experiences, not in absolute truth and that she need not worry. I also established disclosure limits. I knew that her reality was intriguing, complex, and that she had an important story to tell about her work experiences, yet, when she seemed reluctant to delve further, I did not insist on a probe, but left it as is. In a way, I had to read her non-verbal cues, to ensure participant comfort. When we discussed parts of the job that the informant did not like, she replied, “Cleaning the toilets, it’s embarrassing. I don’t get why we have to do that.” I then pressed her to explain why she thought it was embarrassing. While answering, she would tap her foot repeatedly. I read this as a message of discomfort, tension, or a sense of feeling annoyed. I would move quickly to the next question or skip it entirely. As I did, she began to appear more at ease. The foot stopped thumping and her bodily movements moved more freely. Perhaps the question was an unwanted one. At the outset of the interview I informed her that this interview is voluntary and that she had every right to refuse to

answer questions. But, sometimes we are shy or unwilling to object. So, we express ourselves indirectly. By respecting her personal boundaries, I was able to acquire a level of trust, which proved essential to gathering valid data. As the interview proceeded, by implying a level of boundary-maintenance, she was more at ease and the conversation began to flow better, more casually. The interactive dynamic of the interview, I found, is therefore fundamental to the sense-making process: who they were, how they appeared, interacted, and how they expressed themselves non-verbally.

The interview should not be used as interrogation or confession, or as a counseling session (Corbin and Morse 2003). Informants may not be interested in discussing things that the researcher may want to know. As the above example demonstrates, it was inappropriate to probe informant’s issues that appeared to upset or potentially annoy them. Researchers should listen attentively to what is being spoken. What is being spoken may not always be verbalized in words. These non-verbal cues are open to interpretation and make the interview interaction—as well as the cultivation of boundaries—complex. A level of boundary work in maintaining our respective roles works at the level of sense-making in social interaction.

Other informants were more at ease to describe some of their distressing tasks. Others also revealed their distressing pasts. According to Corbin and Morse (2003), being overly concerned about the potential risks implies that distress aroused by talking to a researcher is greater to friend or family. Contrarily, they argue that researchers may be

more willing to show interest and to empathize. Many of my informants expressed the need to have somebody listen to them. After the interview, I always asked how they thought the interview went. Gladly, most said it went well, noting that I was “attentive, calm, and soft-spoken.” Many thanked me for taking the time to speak with them. One informant claimed that, “You made me feel very comfortable, at ease.” Interviewing itself can be regarded as a kind of emotion work (Hochschild 1979; 1990). I felt myself sharing an experience with my informant. In moments, I found myself regulating and managing my own emotional reactions. I had to engage with a series of emotionally challenging situations. Caseworkers were routinely involved in markedly dirty (and distressing) activities. While caseworkers have become increasingly untroubled by feces, urine, and vomit—as something they “got used to,” to “just wear the gear”—their “death work” always remained increasingly troubling. It was something they could never get used to. Death “happens in hospitals.” According to one caseworker:

One guy was puking blood...he was shaking and saying gibberish. I was shaking also; my nerves were shot. No matter how much training, you are just so scared. I've also had a guy who had a seizure because he used. I gave him CPR...you gotta do it...you are praying and praying for the paramedics to arrive. It is not an easy thing to cope with. It was hard to see...I've worked closely with a bunch of clients who passed away. It really bothered me because they just finished their recovery program and relapsed. You can never get used to that...it breaks your heart.

The following excerpt is from my field notes:

When caseworkers discussed the deaths of some of their clients, they always lowered their heads and become both visibly sad and tearful. I would feel myself shaking up inside. My eyes softened and began to well. I realized, in that moment, that it was vital for me to maintain some critical distance and to empathize. I had to pull myself together and mount a performance I did not feel. I wasn't a stone. I knew Mark [informant] trusted me. To disclose his personal feelings the way he did...it takes a level of trust. I had demonstrated active listening and gave him the space he required—always. I regarded this as a form of empathic understanding...while remaining centered...and respecting the emotional situation and by that, I mean giving him *his space*. It was Marks moment, not mine. Even though I wanted to cry—I wished to share in his distress—it was his turn, not mine. I couldn't reverse our roles. I had to remain detached...while showing concern and understanding. In a way, that is what I imagined what was expected of me. Imagine if I broke down? Is that what he needs? It was not my story that mattered. I rationalized that caseworkers must keep it in all the time...their distress. Perhaps it was his turn to have someone listen to him. He then validated my assumptions when he told me, “Thanks for remaining solid with me. I just needed someone to listen...not to speak or say anything, just to listen.”

Harley, a research informant, also divulged her own experiences as a previous service user. She told me about her experiences with domestic violence. In those moments, I remained sensitive and empathetic. According to Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz (1980:iv), “the intensity of the fieldwork process is

typically accompanied by a psychological anxiety resulting in a continuous presentation and management of self when in the presence of those studied.” Managing self and emotions became crucial in situations where informants became tearful or expressed heavy feelings of anger. Researchers may feel uncertain about whether self-disclosure about their own experiences is helpful or even appropriate in the interview context. When informants became tearful or expressed anger during interviews, I asked them if they wished to take a break. I always made sure to acknowledge their emotions. I felt myself moved to respond to informants simply as a fellow human being (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007), demonstrating concern and empathy about the pain and difficult experiences they were describing. However, I had clearly established a research role and my job was not to be a friend. If I had shared too close of an experience, I would have caused confusion about the purpose of our meeting. To a degree, I had to manage my emotions during the interview interaction according to the feeling-rules (Hochschild 1979) that regulate appropriate research encounters, while simultaneously continuing to acknowledge their stories. In those moments, I wanted to cry. Seeing their pain was overwhelming. I had not expected it. But, as a professional researcher, I had to make sure that the interview remained an interview. My own emotional self-disclosure had to be curbed. I had to maintain the boundary between our roles, which did involve continuous emotion work to sustain an emotional equilibrium: negotiating a centered, demure, and empathic distance, while recognizing that the boundaries I carved are the contingent outcomes of our situational interactions. Verily, I felt dissonance between the performance I mounted

and the emotions I was feeling. Listening in a sensitive and empathetic manner can be emotionally draining. Often, I found myself sharing with participants’ feelings of loss, sadness, and anger (Corbin and Morse 2003). I frequently felt exhausted following the interview.

Dickson-Swift and colleagues (2007) interviewed qualitative researchers with a focus on emotion work and discovered a series of techniques that researchers used to deal with strong emotions. A common strategy was to abide to the normative feeling-rules of professionalism. As Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) argue, striking a balance between over-rapport and under-rapport in the field and within interview context (and encounter) can result from the lingering emotional challenges intrinsic to fieldwork. For me, this was an invaluable strategy, especially as a novice researcher. Further, much emotion and *boundary work* are involved in balancing over and under rapport (Miller 1952). In those instances, a neutral emotional display was required (Kleinman and Copp 1993). I had to ensure that when our conversations came to sensitive topics that I demonstrated understanding, care, and attentiveness, regardless of whether or not I actually felt these. I had to display myself in a way that showed me to be engaged when, in a deeper sense, I was not. I thought that if I shared too much of my views or emotions on a topic, I would risk silencing them. So, I was reluctant to do that. Yet if I remained too aloof, might I appear indifferent, unresponsive, or even disagreeable to their values or plights? I had to cultivate a balance. I had to at times act when I did not get it. I had to take on the role of the *keen listener*. Or, resist the temptation of overly identifying with

some of their responses. It was difficult, an instance of dread I would say, I felt, because it kept settling me in a position of ambivalence: compelled to think quickly about what to do in each specific situation, in response to each response. Field interactions and interviews, I realized, are deeply uncertain. Building rapport was one way to do this. But, this always runs the risk of being or appearing as inauthentic—and they may know it! Observing this phoniness may also create disengagement. I had to remain professionally interested, unassuming, and reticent. Remaining cool, collected, and presenting myself as professionally interested and as a keen listener was one way to overcome perceived phoniness. They knew it. I knew it. I came here to do what I had to do. They knew I was a researcher, not a caseworker. I did not share their occupational social worlds. We respected our differences and learned to respect each other's boundaries.

### Subjectivity or Machines?

The process of self-reflection, knowledge, and experience are integral to the research process and should be conceived of as fundamental to the interpretive process. Imagine a researcher without any *subjective relation* to any of the content and experience of the realities of interviewing. Could a machine do this in that case? Process all the information without being affected by it? Perhaps a machine. But, as human beings, we are not machines. There is something that it is like for me to experience these interviews. As such, I feel myself to be called to give considerable thought to my experiences, emotions, and to explicitly reflect upon the way it acts as a frame of analysis. Quite frankly, researchers who do not draw

from, or discuss, their own personal experiences and emotions during the research process, at least to some degree, in the explication of the research process, are in some ways being dishonest. They are not machines. I certainly hope not. I have felt elation and happiness, a sense of purpose and doing something worthwhile. Other times, in full disclosure, I have felt anxiety and frustration in response to informants who at times gave one- or two-word answers to some of my questions. These feelings had to be managed. I could not disclose to them my intimate feelings under certain circumstances of increased frustration. I had to remain composed and perseverant. I too engaged in some shape or form, what Hochschild (1979) calls surface-acting. However, when the interview, as an extended conversation, developed, I engaged in deep-acting to try and discern what my informants meant by some of their experiences.

When Sylvia, a research informant, spoke about her recourse to acting as an empowering agent for her clients, she said to me, "I just can't help them if they are not helping themselves. My job is to support, not to do things for them." She appeared dismal. She had pulled her head down in sadness. I could tell that it bothered her. She wanted to help clients when clients were not helping themselves, but she was also aware of the detriments of emotional overinvestment. We sat there in a moment of silence. I tried to empathize with Sylvia by attempting to situate myself in her world, not in an objective world of structure and relations. But, in her world. "I understand," I told her, "It is a strain I see, and it can be hard when caring for others and yourself seems to clash in some ways. But, remember, you are doing

good work.” In that specific moment, I sought to reaffirm the positive self-definitions Sylvia had previously ascribed to herself and her work earlier in the interview, to ensure that matters of comfort and our interview experience remained one of sincere understanding. Charmaz (1991:275) reported that, “as a researcher, I sought to have people tell me about their lives from their perspectives, rather than to force my preconceived interests and categories upon them. So, I listened.” The emotional context, therefore, establishes, to an extent, the interaction coherency of the interview relationship. Besides making sense-making and data collection an interactional process, the role of performed emotions is pivotal to the contextual framing of data collection. Like Ezzy (2010), I tried to imagine what kind of person I had to feel myself as to make the informant comfortable and willing to reveal her story. It was about locating the reality of her experiences [in the case of Sylvia], not mine. She responded with a smile, “Thank you. It is tough sometimes. But, I know I am here for a reason. That’s what it is...you don’t want to shove them away because in the end it’s all worthwhile, yet...at the same time it’s a stressor.” The interview, to my mind, had to be one of committed interaction and sincerity while simultaneously adhering to the moral principles of respect, kindness, and reciprocity. It was one of “communion,” not conquest (Ezzy 2010).

Reflecting on how Sylvia and other informants spoke about their work experiences, as well as their sense of occupational belonging, I realized that in our interactions, a major thematic and analytical focus arose: although frontline staff wanted to reduce the pressure of their work, whether that pressure

be due to their clientele or organizationally rooted, they were also reluctant to reduce their caseloads by turning clients away. I reiterated to Sylvia if, “interacting with and helping clients is what made your work both difficult and important?” By reiterating this question back to Sylvia, I hoped to cue her into confirming the meaning such a statement had to her, thereby making sense-making interactional. In a way, I was struck by the nuanced complexity of the craft of interviewing. What reality were we referring to? It can go many ways. Frontline staff were overwhelmed, but wanted to genuinely help. They managed this contradictory position by redirecting to occupational experiences of satisfaction, experiences that kept them believing that they were helping people in need and repurposed their work as necessary and vital. Certainly, their sentiments and beliefs did not reduce the reality of workloads and client-related tensions, but it did help frontline staff to redefine their dilemmas as worthwhile and moral, hence allowing them to negotiate the meaning and importance of their work. Amy, another informant, spoke quite candidly about her experience with managing such a contradictory caring role, “the interaction with the clients is what I love about this work. Yet, it is also what is the hardest to do because sometimes it really drains you...You realize eventually that it is a highly stressed environment.” In all, what I did come to recognize, thematically, was that the consequences of emotion work and its benefits, for frontline staff, were closely linked. What made their work hard also made their work meaningful.

Surface-acting became a necessary buffer when understanding had to be left to the device of data

analysis, because perhaps in that specific interview encounter, I did not quite understand what was being said. Understanding was not always immediately felt and experienced on my part. Yet, to keep the conversation relational and human, I have to give a sense that informants were being understood, so they would remain open with me, in their own voice, about their experiences. This performance is not sheer deceptive trickery. It may appear that way. But, I regarded it as a momentary façade indispensable to acquiring a richer understanding of their situations. It was a way of framing the interactions in a specific way and at least, keeping them going. But why? Because accounts are constituted interactively. Not just by the researchers thought-process, but by the very engaged interaction, which informs and modulates the development of certain kinds of talk between researcher and informant. The interactive process of the interview, I mean to say, has profound implications for both the epistemology of sociological research and the quality of the data outcomes. One must be transparent about the interview process by reconsidering their own interview experiences and interactions with informants to demonstrate precisely how knowledge-claims, or thematic focuses emerged. Even my own anxiety, to a certain extent, framed the interactive dynamic of the interviews in their early phases. I became more withdrawn, discouraging probing strategies. My anxious feelings, so to speak, limited certain kinds of interactions, henceforth setting limits on what kind of data was and could be collected and therefore influencing the construction of accounts. However, after completing two to three interviews, I became more comfortable. After each interview, I would reflect to see how my framing, through my own in-

dividual proclivities, could be altered to yield more fruitful data. Therefore, researchers should conduct themselves reflexively at all times. They should re-analyze their experiences of the context of the interview situation and reconsider their accounts of data. This self-referential frame, which I did adopt, helped to provide an increased depth on the topic studied. By approaching the interview situation through a frame of contingency—although we may become terrifyingly paranoid of the always-possible alternatives in constructing accounts—however, we may also come to the realization that contingent possibilities in the interactionism of the interview situation do exist. This self-awareness merely prompted me into recognizing that researchers and informants interactively accomplish the constructing of accounts.

Nonetheless, to have a right and privilege to construct (interpret) informants' representations of their lived realities, one must necessarily, first and foremost, make their informants feel relaxed, be natural, demonstrate empathy, understanding, and serious interest in what informants are saying or had to say. Being simply detached or objective would not get me the data I needed. I needed personal data, real-stories, and experiences. Maintaining the former only sustains one's outsider status. One must be-with rather than remain outside. Although the status, in my experience, of the *outsider looking in* can never be fully removed, it can be modified to some degree. In such cases, simple modifications can be the best thing one can do in the present moment.

Before and after the interview, I thought that engaging in an informal chat could help to raise comfort

levels. I found this very helpful. Simple changes in body language could be witnessed, as informants appeared to relax and feel more comfortable with me. I would ask them, "How their day was going?" for instance. In another instance, we laughed together (over something funny that happened) which eased tension. After the interview, some informants had described the interview as "cathartic," as a weight lifted. This helped them to infuse the interview with purpose. Therefore, informants noted that it was cathartic and beneficial to them to discuss openly about their experiences. When conducting research on death and other sensitive or distressing topics, Ansell and Van Blerk (2005:72) observe that researchers may not be causing the distress, but "merely provoking it into the open." While this can be uncomfortable for the researcher, the interviewee is not necessarily "harmed" by the experience (Ansell and Van Blerk 2005) and it may, in fact, be cathartic. After the interviews, many of my informants expressed appreciation and were thankful for being given the opportunity to share their work worlds. They saw the interview as a moment to "let everything out." Some workers also saw the interview as an opportunity to vent, especially about the "dirtier" parts of their work:

**Me:** Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences? Anything else that I missed that you would like to talk about?

**Informant:** I really enjoyed it! You got me all...it was nice to vent!

I like being given the opportunity to discuss this stuff. Not many hear our voices...so it's an opportunity to vent and reveal the real work we do here.

I always found, for the most part, that informants expressed a willingness to help me in my research understanding. Corbin and Morse (2003) point out that informants usually express willingness to participate in the study because they want something in return. People want to tell their stories. The opportunity to be interviewed, if the informant sees a potential return for him or her can make qualitative research intrinsically reciprocal. Some may want to voice concern about something, express their experiences, vent, to speak to an empathetic listener, or express an eagerness to help the researcher. In other words, researchers, informants know, will make the attempt to understand them, especially their own definitions of the less appealing parts of their work, where family and friends may not. They therefore saw the interview as a suitable time and place to "finally talk about our work without fearing the response." Many of my informants also simply wanted to help and saw the project as worthwhile. Another typical comment was, "I am just so happy I could help! I am helping someone get their degree!" They expressed gratitude and believed themselves to be caring and kind people willing to help others. Many expressed appreciations at the point of contact. Despite having at times noting the emotionally draining dimensions of their work, they expressed overall a positive experience and they said that they received many gains from involvement. For instance, one informant bluntly told me, "Thank you so much for caring!" Many expressed that they had taken-for-granted many of their experiences and that the interview helped to understand themselves better. Furthermore, many said that they never had the opportunity to be and ex-

press who they were, totally, to reveal their authentic work experiences. They also expressed appreciation that someone was giving recognition to their work and lives. That they were attempting to see how important it was for them.

### What Is an In-Depth Interview?

What is the in-depth interview? I followed an (semi)unstructured interview style. Why? Because one can never know for certain what form an interview is going to take nor what kind of form the interaction will generate. The unstructured interview style recognizes, in my view, the uniqueness of each interview. This, of course, did not mean that I did not prepare questions. It is just that I allowed the interaction to take precedence. The interaction allowed for major thematic focuses to arise. I then redirected the interaction to these focuses. This, I believe, adheres to the basic premises of grounded theory. But, I decided to integrate a phenomenological perspective by focusing emphatically on work practice and experiences. There is a world out there. But, my focus, thus far in this research, has not been on the world as such. Rather, it has been on the subjects-in-the-world, namely, on my informants' experiences of the world and in this case study, their experiences on the frontline, the meanings they derive from their work, their occupational culture, and the interactions with clients. How do my informants experience the suffering of others? Their clients? The less appealing parts of their work? How do they experience the process of work? Is it mundane, taken-for-granted? Straightforwardly unrewarding? Or positively rewarding? Why? How? This is the *social phenomenological* ten-

dency in my research. We must begin with subjective experience, with experiencing the informant as an individual, like any of us, trying to make sense, subjectively, about our own position within a kind of social reality. Take the experience of art, for instance. If I were to study this phenomenologically, I would not, however, it would not be an entirely bad idea, examine the texture or reduce a painting to its fine parts, perhaps learn about its technical construction. Rather I would try to examine how the subject has experienced the painting, or the visit to a museum. I would not focus on the museum as such. I would not be particularly interested in how many entrances the museum has, or water fountains. Or toilets. I would be more interested in knowing the way my respondent experienced these objects. Not the objects in themselves.

Most importantly, in all, such experiences express the meaningfulness of relationships. That is, they express the meaning relationships have for us. I went into the field with no preconceptions, knowing nothing at all. I was, in some ways, the "village fool." This is what piqued my interest, learning about their experiences. Early scientific and quantitative research approaches were underpinned by the positivist ontological and epistemological perspective (Becker 1996; Cheek, Onslow, and Cream 2004). This perspective viewed reality as something concrete and tangible, something that can be measured, observed, and understood as an independent reality. As objectively understood. Further, the lived intricacies of individuals and groups, in quantitative approaches, are not being captured by variables. Grills and



Prus (2008) argue this point when they claim that independent variables are fundamentally social categories that we use to define situations. They are social categories, rather than causal determinants. Independent variables thus represent social categories that leave the complex realities of “humanly engaged matters” (Grills and Prus 2008) unexamined.

I remain unconvinced by this ontological approach when confronting reality as experienced. I do not see much utility with an ontology of objective independence when the complexities of religious identification, occupational belonging, collective identity, wishes, and meanings of informants are sutured. That is not to say that there is no such thing as reality. That would be silly. It is just to say that reality is constructed rather than given, experienced as real rather than reified. Qualitative research approaches, I have come to reckon, see the nature of social reality as less tangible and more (inter)subjective. I am a qualitative researcher insofar as I was trying to discover concrete instances of the subjective. In the path of Schütz (1967; 1970), in which reality is conceptualized as socially and mentally constructed and thus fundamentally (inter)subjective (Prus 1996; Laverly 2003), my qualitative investigation began with experience of the life-world of my informants. Within this perspective, there are multiple realities that are specific to the individual or groups that create them. As Prus (1996:22) has written, “People are seen to develop (multiple) worldviews or definitions of reality as they interact with one another and attempt to incorporate particular objects of their awareness into their

activities.” This justifies a focus on the lived experience of research informants. With qualitative research especially, I do not see any other place to begin.

It is important to note that what I have demonstrated in these field notes is a largely reflective, albeit introspective exercise. I was positioned as a learner and I am still learning the “tricks of the trade.” That is what is so curious about qualitative research. Nonetheless, one should avoid being “narcissistic, overly reflexive, and not scientific” (Denzin 1997:xv). The personal experience of qualitative research should help to clarify the research process, however, it should not “result in an obsessive preoccupation” (Shaffir 1999:677). Our personal experiences must not override the process of acquainting ourselves with the perspectives of others. Field notes and field reflections provide an important bridge, I think, between field and analytical themes. In this instance, one could rightly say that I am situated in Dante’s limbo. But, a special kind of limbo; a peculiar limbo that every researcher gets him or herself caught up in. One could say that at this specific moment, I am somewhere between science and life.

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