

**MAKING SENSE OF *THE OTHER*: THE EVOLUTION OF THE
INTERVIEW METHOD IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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Introduction

Is an interview more than a magnified conversation? Can the dialogue between two strangers spew the raw material of which science is made? There are at least two ways to address these questions. The first one encompasses a recapitulation of the procedures by which social scientists—anthropologists and sociologists in particular—have obtained information from a selected number of individuals or *subjects* as part of the study of larger populations. In that case, the task is mostly descriptive entailing a summary of techniques and interpretations. The second, more difficult endeavor, includes a series of considerations about the evolving relationship between professional observers and those observed as part of a contested process to pinpoint meanings, establish cognitive boundaries, and develop internally plausible narratives. In this respect, any assessment of the interview method requires a critique of the pathways that lead to knowledge.

In this paper I first provide a synthesis of changes in approach affecting the interview method since the early twentieth century as a preamble for a discussion of substantive issues. Of a multitude of related concerns, I broach only two: one is the allegation that the interview method contradicts objectivity, therefore violating the fundamental precondition of scientific research. Another is the claim that interviewing yields only idiosyncratic or *anecdotal* information of trivial interest to the understanding of larger populations. Throughout the paper I maintain that interviews are a pivotal aspect of systematic research and thus indivisible from a broader methodological approach that includes participant observation, fieldwork, and the elaboration of ethnographic narratives. For that reason, the contentions surrounding the interview method extend to qualitative research as a whole.

Although a time-honored tradition in the social sciences, qualitative methodologies lost some recognition in the wake of procedures that centered on the large-scale manipulation of quantifiable data made possible by computer technology. Nevertheless, I maintain that qualitative and quantitative research strategies are not mutually exclusive. Quantifiable data, especially when

derived from randomly selected samples, are most appropriate when the purpose of research is to generalize findings to larger populations. Those data, however, conceal processes occurring at the micro-level. The strength of qualitative methods lies in the ability to explore meanings and sequences of interrelated events that may not be evident at the aggregate level, and to raise questions that can be pursued subsequently by quantitative research. To paraphrase Michael H. Agar, quantitative strategies can be used to discern the extent to which a phenomenon occurs in a larger universe; qualitative research is most appropriate to elucidate what the phenomenon means or, in fact, whether it exists at all. The purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize but to create internally plausible explanations about specific areas of experience.¹

I give some attention to the use of life narratives as *texts that express people's understanding of their own circumstances*.² Case histories and personal narratives require that we view the statements of informants as constructions emerging from singular social, economic and political experiences. Such constructions give *voice* to *subjects* in their own terms, allowing them to reflect upon personal and collective culture. Whether meaning is of any interest for the development of theory and policy is a question to which I return in the third section of this paper. At this time, I merely note my agreement with John Van Maanen's retelling of Clifford Geertz's proposition: *It is not enough to observe how social actors behave but also necessary to understand what they think*

¹ Agar, Michael H. 1986. *Speaking of Ethnography*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

² See Leiter, Kenneth. 1980. *A Primer on Ethnomethodology*. New York: Oxford University Press; Van Maanen, John (editor). 1983. *Qualitative Methodology*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications; Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; Miles, Matthew B. and A. Michael Huberman. 1984. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications; McCracken, Grant. 1988. *The Long Interview*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications; Van Maanen, John. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *Interpretive Biography*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications; Gladwin, Christina H. 1989. *Ethnographic Decision Tree Modeling*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications; Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman. 1989. *Designing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

*they are doing.*³

Anthropological Research and the Interview Method

The history of anthropology has been marked by two major shifts since the middle half of the 19th Century. The first one, coterminous with the emergence of anthropology as a demarcated discipline, entailed a move away from panhuman questions, evolutionary theory and race. That trend culminated with the work of Franz Boas in the early 1900s, who abandoned grand theory in favor of historical particularism, that is, the painstaking description of cultural details and material artifacts. A second, more elusive, shift entailed a gradual obliteration of the line dividing observers from the observed and the conceptualization of knowledge as the product of structured inter-subjective exchanges. Below, I pause to examine in more detail the two shifts and their relationship to the interview method.

The modern roots of anthropology are found in the period of Great Discoveries that brought to inquisitive Europeans both accurate and distorted reports about previously unknown races, cultures and languages. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 1450s allowed for the unequaled spread of information originating in many parts of the globe. New compendia and encyclopedias delineated human variations and generated debate among philosophers and social observers about the origins and development of humanity. Museums and private cabinets of curiosities began to appear throughout centers of higher learning. Military and commercial victories fueled Europeans' belief in their own superiority working through the labors of explorers, colonizers and settlers. Bewilderment about the multiplicity of human phenotypes, colorations and ways of life was filtered through the optic of colonial domination.⁴

³ 1988, *op. cit.*

⁴ For a fuller explanation see Gould, Stephen Jay. 1981. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

By the eighteenth century, rationalism and secularism extensively pervaded intellectual life in Europe gradually substituting religious by secular explanations about genetic and cultural inequalities. Philosophers and aspiring social scientists sought *laws of nature* to account for human differences. Some invested their explanations with the concept of progress equating the physical and cultural characteristics of *primitive* groups with evolutionary phases that had been superseded by Europeans. Others like Montesquieu noted how little was known of the social world, and called for more observation and study convinced that riddles could only be solved through the patient accumulation of reliable data.

By the nineteenth century, hundreds of institutions dedicated to the pursuit of general knowledge, or the advancement of specialized studies, had appeared in Europe and North America. Propelled by humanism, new journals and universities expressed a belief, of growing importance for the emerging field of anthropology, that science could eradicate disease and uplift the human condition, especially among the *primitive* races. A resurgence of anatomical and medical studies, the discovery of common roots between the languages of Europe and India, and the opening of prehistoric research by advances in geology all contributed data or posed new problems concerning human nature. As a result, the initial phases of anthropology centered on the origins and differentiation of humanity, with evolutionary theory providing a central paradigm.

In Europe, North America, and Australia associations for the advancement of science provided the organizational context for innovative reports and speculations. Founded in Paris in 1839, the first specifically anthropological society was soon emulated in other countries. Hallmarks of the future such as the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Thomas H. Huxley and Alfred Wallace were published in the 1850s. By 1865 Lewis Henry Morgan, the founder of social anthropology, had sent out the first world wide questionnaire to procure information about systems of descent and affinity.⁵ Others began to make systematic inquiries into the beliefs,

⁵ The well-known product of this monumental effort was *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human family* published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1870.

languages, and practices of non-European peoples. Meanwhile accounts of varying reliability poured in from missionaries, colonial administrators, travelers, and merchants.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the advent of a narrower discipline of anthropology. Led by Franz Boas, a number of scholars broke away from the focus on panhuman questions to advocate a program of research based upon detailed and local studies of artifacts, languages, societies, and cultures. They justified their endeavor on the grounds that precise outlines of local systems and their changes were necessary before regional or world evolutionary schemes could be constructed.⁶ More importantly, the new approach was a reaction against three features of the preceding period: (a) the elaboration of grand speculative theories with little empirical foundation; (b) the dependence of those theories on evolution as a single theoretical model; and (c) the focus on race with its related characterization of *primitive* societies as early developmental stages long surpassed by European civilization. Boas's emphasis on *historical particularism* was thus as much a search for scientific rigor as a denunciation of sociopolitical doctrines masquerading as science.

Throughout his tenure at Columbia University from 1896 to his death in 1941, Boas maintained sovereign control over the anthropological field and had a powerful impact on luminaries like Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and M.F. Ashley Montagu. According to Alfred Kroeber, one of his most distinguished disciples, "Boas brought into anthropology a sense of definiteness of problems, of exact rigor of method, and of highly critical objectivity; with him anthropology came of age."⁷ In the words of another renowned follower,

⁶ For different reasons, British and other European anthropologists also advocated intensive local studies--in this case to understand the relation of institutions, or how social systems worked; their interest in change and evolution was minimal. As a result of these intentional ventures into the unknown social world, the collection of original data, generally through direct contact with the people being studied, came to be--and remains--a crucial component distinguishing anthropology from most humanistic and social science disciplines.

⁷ Kroeber, Alfred. 1935. "History and Science in Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 37:540.

Margaret Mead, Boas was "the man who made anthropology into a science."⁸ Under his influence theoretical approaches and research techniques from sociology and psychology were drawn into an eclectic body whose only aim was empirical accuracy.

The repudiation of conjectural evolutionary schemes created new requirements for the collection of data through immersion in *the field* and face-to-face interaction with individuals and groups outside the anthropologist's immediate milieu. The interview emerged as a method to gain a more precise approximation to observable realities. The image of "Franz Boas stepping off the boat in an Eskimo village with his suitcase in hand, preparing for a long stay in residence"⁹ provided a powerful new paradigm in the Kuhnian sense that dislodged a tradition of library scholarship and of uncritical use of the comparative method.¹⁰ While *primitives* and *natives* had been used in the nineteenth century as silent illustrations of imperial theory, interviews made *subjects* visible and their voices audible. Paradoxically in the light of more recent criticisms, interviews emerged in the social sciences as a tool to advance objective observation and to contest ideological pronouncements.

Most agreed that Boas and his disciples had a salutary effect in ousting "the amateurs and charlatans with their snake-oil evolutionary formula."¹¹ Nevertheless, the ejection of a theoretical center in anthropology raised new quandaries. Skeptics denied that accumulated facts are equal to the expansion of scientific knowledge. As a result, they characterized Boas's work as that of a collector unable to do what scientists must do: explain and generalize findings. Anthropology began to be perceived as a method in search of a coherent theory.

⁸ Mead, Margaret. 1959. "Apprenticeship under Boas." W. Goldschmidt, ed., *The Anthropology of Franz Boas*. New York: American Anthropological Association Memoir # 89:35.

⁹ Wallace, Anthony F.C. 1972. "Paradigmatic Processes in Culture Change," *American Anthropologist*, 74:469.

¹⁰ Sanday, Peggy Reeves. 1979. "The Ethographic Paradigm(s)." In John Van Maanen (Editor), *Qualitative Methodology*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications:19.

¹¹ Harris, Marvin. 1968. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company:261.

Those criticisms notwithstanding, Boas's yearning for accuracy and rigor was shared by sociology, a discipline almost completely devoid of systematic methodologies during the nineteenth century. The early attempts of sociologists to obtain verifiable information were crude and unfruitful with some exceptions. Such broad surveyors as Charles Booth, who produced a monumental series on London, relied mainly on the copious but nonsystematic gathering of facts.¹² Frédéric Le Play in France made extensive studies of family budgets and contributed to the development of statistical sampling through his *monographic method* of collating data obtained by field research.¹³ Herbert Spencer assembled vast amounts of observations conducted by other people, and used them to illustrate and support his own conjectures.¹⁴

After the turn of the century, the determination to achieve greater precision in sociological analysis intensified. The *Methodological Note* comprising the greater portion of a volume in Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant in Europe and America* marked a turning point in the pursuit of rigorous research.¹⁵ Unencumbered by anthropology's penchant for the exotic, sociologists were mostly concerned with processes of urbanization and modernity. Early community studies relied on, and were used to refine, the interview method especially as part of surveys.¹⁶ In the 1920s, at the University of Chicago, an influential group of sociologists headed by Robert E. Park and E.W. Burgess promoted direct contact with immigrants and workers in the new

¹² Booth, Charles. *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 17 vol. (1889-91,1892-97,1902).

¹³ Le Play, Frédéric. 1870. *L'Organisation du Travail*.

¹⁴ Spencer, Herbert. *Descriptive Sociology*, 19 vol. 1873-1934.

¹⁵ Thomas, William I. and Florian Znaniecki. 1918-1920. *The Polish Peasant: Monograph of an Immigrant Group*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ See, for example, Lynd, Robert Staughton. 1929. *Middletown, a Study in American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

American metropolis.¹⁷ By the 1940s Robert K. Merton had perfected the focus interview and used it as part of his investigation of patterns of social life.¹⁸

Anthropologists systematized the interview as part of broader approaches that included participant observation, oral histories, ethnographic description and, in some cases, ethnological comparisons. Sociologists drew elements from the same repertory but also used the interview to collect aggregate data susceptible of quantitative analysis.¹⁹ While in anthropology, the dividing line between observers and the observed was assumed to be culture, in sociology, class—as well as culture—constituted a main demarcation. In both cases the interview relied on the inductive method, offering an analogue to controlled observation and experimental manipulation.

The very comparison to the physical sciences exposes the central problem of qualitative research, that is, controlling for subjective interferences that may distort observation, warp description and render explanation useless. Partly in response to those problems, there arose in the 1950s a movement dedicated to the improvement of standards of ethnographic research and analysis inspired by the field of linguistics. This *new ethnography* originated at Yale University and spread rapidly throughout the United States. Known variously as *ethnolinguistics*, *ethnoscience*, or *ethnosemantics*, its appeal stemmed from the possibility of achieving precise and highly operational renderings of cultural manifestations.

The new ethnography relied on a distinction between the *emic* and the *etic*, two notions coined by the missionary linguist Kenneth Pike.²⁰ According to him, emic accounts are those

¹⁷ See Park, Robert E. and Ernest W. Burgess. 1921. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*; and Burgess, Ernest W. 1925. "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project." In Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Editors), *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Merton, Robert K., Patricia S. West and Marie Jahoda. 1948. "Patterns of Social Life: Explorations in the Sociology and Social Psychology of Housing." New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.

¹⁹ Blau, Peter M. and Otis D. Duncan. 1967. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: John Wiley.

²⁰ See Pike, Kenneth. 1954. *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human*

perceived as significant, meaningful, real or accurate by actors themselves. Etic statements, by contrast, are those constructed by, and from the perspective of, external observers. While the first were said to represent *the native's point of view*, the latter embodied interpretations on the part of professional researchers.

Although the emic/etic distinction never gained widespread acceptance, it manifested an enduring concern in the social sciences about the extent to which trained interviewers can capture the singularity of alien cultures with any degree of objectivity. I explore this point in greater detail in the next section.

Crossing Boundaries: Academic Rituals, the Interview Method, and the Problem of Objectivity

As the preceding historical sketch makes clear, since the 19th Century, anthropologists have endured a split identity; at the same time partaking of the glamour of voyagers or explorers but suffering the intimation that their labor may not be truly scientific. Although face-to-face interaction emerged as a tool to forward accuracy, it was the reliance on participant observation, fieldwork and interviewing that eventually made the work of anthropologists suspect. To the extent that sociologists have depended on anthropological methods, they too have confronted similar misgivings. In this section I argue that the causes of this paradoxical outcome are only partly related to the limitations of qualitative research; also important have been the conventions of western science—especially those associated with the notion of objectivity—and the institutional context where those conventions have evolved.

An ability to deal with facts without distortion by personal feelings or prejudices developed consistently in Europe since the eighteenth century side by side with an understanding of the person as a divided entity within which the mind contends with the body and reason wrestles with emotion. In that scheme, knowledge is attained through the systematic suppression of value judgments, the

abatement of subjectivity, and the triumph of the intellect. Fueled by the Enlightenment's faith in rationality and its repudiation of dogma, objectivity became the aim as well as the trademark of the scientist. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, positivist ideology and the application of mathematical models embodied a similar aspiration.

The cognitive blueprint outlined above had a powerful impact on the social sciences. A classification evolved and persists today in which economics reigns supreme partly because of its reliance on minimalist concepts and elegant mathematical constructs. Sociology, with episodic ambivalence, has deployed qualitative and quantitative strategies, and thus occupies a subordinate position to economics and one of disputed prominence vis-à-vis anthropology. All along there has been an inverse correlation between the degree of scientific credibility attributed to each discipline and its dependence on qualitative research. The question is whether this ranking is largely arbitrary, or whether approaches based on one-to-one contact are, in actuality, less objective—and therefore less effective in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. In addressing that question, I compare some of the practices and assumptions associated first with fieldwork and then with quantitative analysis.

The anthropological endeavor begins with a period of training at the end of which the student is assumed to be endowed with a repertory of tools for systematic inquiry in an alien context, *the field*. Leaving the comfort of libraries and academic settings, the initiate must then cross spatial and social boundaries to demonstrate competence by collecting data through participant observation and interviews. Fieldwork becomes a rite of passage. By confronting *the other*, the anthropologist earns induction into a community of professionals. Her journey is that of a lesser hero in a mythopoetic sense; it involves departure into a foreign territory, the fulfillment of a mission, and the return to a familiar environment.

In its classic form, the field was conceived as a relatively bounded space where inhabitants share a distinctive system of beliefs and patterned behaviors—that is, a culture. Research entails an attempt to accurately describe and interpret cultural features embedded in oral tradition and material

production. The result of the inquiry is the elaboration of accounts susceptible of comparison with other similarly produced reports. Theories are informed by the explication of regularities and variations emanating from that comparison.

Throughout the 19th century and even in the 1940s, it was possible to envision the field as an alien milieu. Nevertheless, as nations became more and more intertwined through processes of globalization, the limits of research fields began to wear away. Intensified capital investment in less developed countries, the extension of market behaviors and western modes of thought, as well as the diffusion of technology and rapid transportation diluted the distinction between observers and the observed. Increasing urbanization throughout the world and the assimilation of rural and *primitive* populations into modern ways of life had an effect as well. Social scientists turned their attention to socio-economic development and increasingly focused on impoverished, immigrant and marginal groups. It soon became a matter of contention whether sociologists and anthropologists had been symbolically reproducing patterns of colonial domination all along, and whether they were now imposing fictitious *cultural* demarcations upon what were in actuality class differences.

Against the backdrop created by changing economic and political realities fieldwork raised new questions without resolving the enduring problem of objectivity. The acquisition and interpretation of information presents risks whether the imaginary line circumscribing the field is drawn around New Guinean aborigines or around factory workers in a modern metropolis. Anthropologists themselves agree that linguistic, cultural and class differences between interviewers and interviewed can cloud understanding. Personal involvement in fieldwork over extended periods of time saps energy and may impair the researcher's ability to make unbiased assessments. Participant observation and in-depth interviewing cannot be applied to large, statistically representative samples and thus their findings cannot be generalized without difficulty. Finally, the selectivity and interpretative capacity required in their production has led to the portrayal of ethnographic narratives as little more than aggrandized journalism. From that vantage point,

qualitative approaches are said to provide but a series of idiosyncratic or anecdotal illustrations revealing more about the observer than about the observed.

The problems and rituals surrounding fieldwork are plain to see but there are parallels associated with quantitative analysis. While the conventions of qualitative research seek to reduce cognitive distance between observers and the observed, the formulas behind quantitative approaches attempt precisely the opposite. In both instances the final aim is accuracy through the collection of verifiable information but in the second case the presumption is that detached observation and data manipulation are more effective ways to reduce subjective interferences. Discussed below is whether that assumption is warranted.

In sociological research, the survey follows from the premise that quantifiable data yield impartial findings. By contrast to the in-depth interview which depends on open-ended questions, a survey will typically include pointed questions followed by a limited number of answers from which a person must select the most satisfactory. Given their narrow scope, surveys can be applied to stochastic samples thus allowing for the generalization of results to large populations. Repeated surveys producing analogous information reduce the danger of bias. Variations of this method—focus interviews and elite interviews, for example—can be used to supplement surveys or to attain depth with respect to particular issues.

Surveys and other related methods yield quantifiable data through the assignment of numerical values to answers from which respondents must choose. Demographic and statistical information—age, marital status, number of children, occupation, etc.—is also susceptible of quantification. To explore various relationships between the characteristics of a population and its behaviors or experiences, the sociologist can construct variables and apply yet another set of quantitative techniques. The discovery of significant correlations between dependent and independent variables may also provide an approximation to issues of causality. Finally, the use of

probabilistic formulas strengthens the predictive potential of sociological studies.²¹

I suggested earlier that the rite of passage or the heroic voyage are metaphors appropriate to depict anthropological conventions. An equivalent representation, in the case of quantitative analysis, is that of the laboratory experiment. The reduction of empirical facts to numerical values is consistent with positivistic norms of understanding according to which sensory perceptions must be disciplined to achieve higher degrees of neutrality. That idea is largely indebted to August Comte and his successors who strove to systematize sociology as a scientific discipline based on the rigorous, objective, and value-free techniques of the physical sciences. Quantitative methods thus provide measurements and detailed descriptions, although limited explanations and predictions can also be advanced through the same means.²²

The extent to which quantitative analysis yields objective information was contested even by Comte's contemporaries. Max Weber, in particular, opposed the conservative character of positivist ideologies and emphasized theoretical reasoning to make sense of subjective meanings and interactions among groups and individuals.²³ More recent critics influenced by post-modernist currents of thought, including feminists, have exposed other limitations.²⁴ A major question concerns the assumed link between cognitive distance and higher degrees of objectivity. The opposite case can be made by arguing that immersion, familiarity, and discursiveness allow for greater precision in observation and interpretation.

²¹ See Rossi, Peter H. 1988. "On Sociological Data." In Smelser, Neil J. (Editor), *Handbook of Sociology*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications; Armingier, Gehard and George W. Borhnstedt. 1987. "Making it Count Even more: A Review and Critique of Stanley Lieberman's 'Making it Count: The Improvement of Social Theory and Research.'" In C.C. Clogg (Editor), *Sociological Methodology*. Washington D.C.: American Sociological Association.

²² See Berk, Richard A. 1988. "Causal Inference for Sociological Data." In Smelser, Neil J. (Editor), *Handbook of Sociology*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications;

²³ Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe, Il.: Free Press.

²⁴ See Harding, Sandra (Editor). 1987. *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington and Stony Stratford: Indiana University Press and open University Press; Jagggar, Alison M., and Paula S. Rothenberg. 1984. *Feminist Frameworks*. New York: McGraw-Hill; Jagggar, Alison M. 1983. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld.

As in the case of qualitative techniques, the indeterminacy of language is also a problem in quantitative analysis.²⁵ Predetermined answers in surveys, for example, can create distortions. And, while qualitative strategies allow for the elucidation of meanings as part of extended one-to-one dialogues, surveys offer reduced latitude in that respect. In this critique, the equation of numerical values with neutrality and discursive language with subjectivity is not self-evident; instead, it is a choice influenced by tradition.

Another problem of quantitative approaches is that, although they have high descriptive potential, they have limited capacity to clarify sequences of events leading to specific behavioral outcomes or the significance that social actors assign to those behaviors. Indeed, an argument may be advanced, without breaching logical integrity, that by reducing sensory perception and expanding cognitive distance, quantitative methods produce as much subjective distortion as improperly applied qualitative techniques. Data obtained through detached observation in controlled environments and mathematical manipulation cannot reveal dimensions of experience that can only be tapped through close approximations.

Thus, the issue has been wrongly framed when attributing higher degrees of bias to quantitative analysis. More plausible is to assert that different, but equally hazardous, types of subjective interference can be associated with each of the two methodologies. Both qualitative *and* quantitative strategies have potentials and limitations; advantages and disadvantages. Knowledge is advanced through a complementary, not mutually exclusive, approach. In the next section, I illustrate this proposition on the basis of my own research.

Making Sense: The Construction of Oral Histories Through the Interview Method

Uncovering the limits of qualitative and quantitative methodologies should not lead to the bleak conclusion that social scientific knowledge is unfeasible. Between the radical belief, promoted

²⁵ See Schoenberger, Erica. 1991. "The Corporate Interview as a Research Method in Economic Geography." *Professional Geographer*. 43 2:180-189.

by post-modernist conjecture, that all attempts to know lapse into subjectivity, and the equally extreme assumption that true understanding derives solely from objective criteria, another possibility exists; the conceptualization of scientific knowledge as a product of contestation, iteration, and inter-subjective exchanges. In this scheme, the premise is not that subjectivity must necessarily interfere with scientific knowledge but that it can be harnessed to attain a fuller understanding of empirical realities. The question then becomes how to manage—rather than to evict—subjectivity in the service of objective analysis.

The most expeditious way to accomplish that end is by combining the strengths of different methodologies. Research normally begins with a question (or problem) relevant to a specific body of theory, followed by the articulation of provisional answers susceptible of formalization (hypotheses) and variously supported by existing evidence. Through the complementary deployment of quantitative and qualitative methods, the researcher can collect and organize materials to be subsequently poured into plausible accounts about particular areas of experience. Partiality and interpretative excesses are reduced through *triangulation*, that is, the repeated comparison of qualitative and quantitative findings to identify consistencies, discrepancies and areas of ignorance.²⁶ Those, in turn, elicit new explanatory attempts fulfilling the understanding of science as an open-ended product subject to continuous refinement.

In that design, the interview—as part of surveys and ethnographic studies—becomes the centerpiece of a learning process in which cognitive distance and proximity reinforce one another. The perspective gained from quantitative analysis is supplemented by the depth achieved through

²⁶ Triangulation is defined by Norman K. Denzin as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon." (*The Research Act*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1978:291). According to Todd D. Jick "The triangulation metaphor is from navigation and military strategy that use multiple reference points to locate an object's exact position. Given basic principles of geometry, multiple viewpoints allow for greater accuracy. Similarly...researchers can improve the accuracy of their judgments by collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon." ("Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action." In Van Maanen, John (Editor). 1979. *Qualitative Methodology*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publishers: 136).

qualitative methodologies. Quantitative methodologies are best suited to describe the characteristics of a population, the frequency and character of behaviors and the correlation between constructed variables. As part of ethnographic research, the interview can be used to elucidate the patterned sequence that connects those related variables. The purpose of quantitative analysis is to generate reliable and generalizable data. The aim of ethnographic research is to make sense of those data.

Participant observation demands complete commitment to the task of understanding.²⁷ This in turn requires the cultivation of empathy, that is, the ability to see things the way individuals and groups see them who are removed from the observer's immediate environment. "What interviews can reveal is not a set of specific answers to specific questions...[but] *patterns* of responses. Each answer, whether true or false, is a piece of that pattern. Individual responses cannot be interpreted in isolation."²⁸ Thus, even in small samples, motifs emerge that cannot be attributed to personal idiosyncrasies. In-depth interviews allow for those motifs to surface.

A small wonder occurs every time individuals belonging to different worlds establish a dialogue: cognitive barriers give way to the recognition of commonalities and divergences of experience. Because the human condition entails a series of similar challenges regardless of cultural, national and social class distinctions, the ethnographer cannot help but repeatedly compare his experience and that of his group with the experience of those she is interviewing. Bits and pieces of new information are yielded through this structured inter-subjective exchange. Likewise, purposive observation and dialogue place the ethnographer in a privileged position to discern singularities that would otherwise remain submerged.

The ethnographer may resort to an iterative exercise of comparison to ascertain whether emerging findings are idiosyncratic. Every interview produces traits unique to the person being interviewed but also themes that recur as other members of the same group are brought into the

²⁷ See Sanday, Peggy Reeves, op. cit.

²⁸ Piore, Michael J. 1978. "Qualitative Research Techniques in Economics." In Van Maanen, John (Editor). 1979. *Qualitative Methodology*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publishers: 81.

conversation. By identifying and recording those salient themes, the researcher will soon come into contact with significant configurations. Below, I offer an illustration.

To understand the conditions surrounding impoverished African-Americans in West Baltimore, as well as the interrelated sequences of events that lead girls to become mothers, I conducted an ethnographic research project, partly sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Resources. Between 1990 and 1996, I interviewed the members of 50 families—approximately 250 individuals. A sample of 20 families was first drawn from a pool of applicants to a new social service delivery program created under the 1988 Comprehensive Child Development Act. That core was augmented through snow-balling procedures and, in a few cases, through random encounters. Ten families from the larger sample were especially important to the project. Interviews varied in length. Some were concluded at the end of an hour, others ensued for several days.

The individuals with whom I came into contact were and continue to be an enduring object of curiosity, alarm and even disdain on the part of the public at large. For that reason, a particular kind of discomfort encircled my research. The belief that young women bear children to receive a welfare check is deeply rooted in the American ethos. Images of wantonness at the expense of the taxpayer permeate liberal and conservative appraisals. Interviews thus occurred against a backdrop of bewilderment and condemnation voiced daily in television and radio programming. The attempt to understand *others*, in this case adolescent mothers and their motives, was constantly punctuated by collective stereotypes. To fulfill the ethnographic task, it was necessary to take seriously those images *as well as* the alternative interpretations offered by those interviewed. Even then, I found that some of the women appeared to voice reasons strikingly similar to those imputed to them by critics.

As fieldwork progressed, I began to give attention to a small sub-sample formed by 27 adolescent mothers, found in my original pool of informants, whose ages ranged between fourteen and nineteen. I was especially impressed by one, Towanda Forrest, who was twelve years old when I first met her. A gorgeous woman-child with a grainy inflection and eyes full of dare, she told me:

Only fools get pregnant. They be thinking they so smart but they is
fools 'cause you don't gain nothing by having a baby. I tell the
other girls, Towanda's smart, she will never get pregnant; never!
Just wait and see.²⁹

In December, 1991, two months shy of her fifteenth birthday, Towanda was delivered of her first child, a boy named Reggie Shantell Brown. She had pondered the baby's name for several months but, sadly, she couldn't spell it. Despite almost seven years of instruction, Towanda was almost illiterate. By the time Reggie Shantell was born, she had abandoned school. When I chided her about her earlier resolve not to become pregnant, she retorted, "some things are just meant to be." In the spring of 1993, Towanda was expecting her second child. She was just seventeen.

Viewed jointly with other interviews, Towanda's statement expressed a pivotal theme: the determination not to "screw up" followed by a series of behaviors that contradicted the original intent. What were the circumstances that connected the two moments? To answer that question, I had to take stock of liberal and conservative perspectives. Did Towanda's behavior illustrate the conservative belief that welfare programs encourage dependence and sexual misbehavior? Was she otherwise the pliant victim of situations over which she has no control, as liberals maintain? Repeated interviews suggested that neither of the two interpretations was accurate.

²⁹ The ethnographic account in these pages condenses ideas published in my article entitled "Towanda's Triumph: Social and Cultural Capital in the Urban Ghetto." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 18 1:88-111. The names of individuals are pseudonyms.

An alternative plot began to emerge from similarities in the narratives constructed by young mothers as they reflected on their own experience. At seventeen, Latanya Williams was expecting her second child when I met her in 1990. She was an outspoken girl who lived with her mother and five siblings in one of several skyscrapers that form the *George Murphy Homes*, a well known publicly-subsidized housing project. Her mother, a quiet and religious woman, had depended on public assistance for almost twenty years. While nibbling pumpkin seeds in the yard of a neighboring house, one hot summer day, Latanya put forth a typical view:

I waited for a long time before I had my baby. Anyone can tell you, all my girl-friends had babies before me and I was jealous 'cause when you don't have a child to call your own, you's nothing; you got nothing to be proud of. I couldn't wait. What's there to wait for?

The perceptions illustrated by the statement above posed several problems. How could a young girl state that she had "waited for a long time" before becoming a mother? Equally puzzling was to hear Latanya judging her experience by reference to her peer group and not in relation to the standards imposed by the larger society. Finally, the inability to perceive reasons to defer motherhood suggested an experience far removed from the experience of young women for whom pregnancy entails the unfortunate prospect of abandoning alternative goals. When I asked whether she had considered finishing high school as a way to improve her chances for a better life, Latanya looked at me with skepticism and said:

It's not like I don't want to get an education but it's not so easy...
And besides, I don't know no one, I tell you no one, who has a good job by finishing high school. That's a lie, just a fucking lie!

So why waste time to end up at the 7-Eleven? It ain't worth it. What I want is to have my own apartment, my own place...

Again, the statement merits deconstruction. Latanya is stating a fact shared by many like her and confirmed by demographic and statistical data: completing high-school in a ghetto school seldom leads to a better position in the labor market.

As the conversation continued, I ventured further: was Latanya hoping to marry the father of her children?

I don't know about that... I like my independence and you can't trust men, they go crazy on you. First, I have to see that he really wants to take care of my babies, test him, you know...cause no crazy boy's gonna boss me around, no way!

By the time we got around to the delicate subject of contraceptives, Latanya had achieved momentum:

What's yo talking about? Man, just because I'm seventeen, it don't mean I don't know nothing. Look, the pill's bad for your health, swells you all up and everything. Rubbers? They's gross; my old man don't like 'em, and abortion, that's a sin, to kill a poor baby.

I love my baby. I'm gonna raise him good.

Although typical, the views expressed by Latanya were not shared by all the young women with whom I discussed motherhood. Latishia Marvin, a heavy-set girl was facing the arrival of her first baby with trepidation in 1990. She was eighteen years old:

I didn't know I could get pregnant, you know, 'cause the doctor said I had a lopsided uterus. But I did and I'm scared but I can't do nothing now.

Her fears were tempered with hope. She told me the arrival of the baby would give her a "new chance." According to her mother, she had held a steady job at the local food store since she was 14 and was struggling to graduate from a school where teachers spent more time trying to quiet down riotous students than teaching. Latishia had lukewarm expectations about going to college but was having difficulty getting a passing grade in "her English subject." Close to the arrival of Byron, her first son, she was able to graduate from high-school. Unfortunately, a doctor recommended that she quit her job because the pregnancy had caused her feet to distend. In one stroke, she had completed the requirements to apply for college and moved from membership among the *working poor* to full dependency on public assistance.

Although Latishia's mother had mixed feelings about her daughter's pregnancy, she didn't see anything extraordinary about the event. She too had become a mother at an early age. "God sends the babies," she told me, "they are our greatest joy."

And then there was Towanda Forrest whose comments were recorded at the beginning of this section. Melinda Jordan, her 10-year old cousin also yearned to have her own baby. "That way," she said, "I can move in with Towanda when she gets her apartment, and we can have our own home."

These testimonies appeared to voice calculations about public aid as a means of increasing economic benefits and reducing energy expenditure, thus confirming the indictment of welfare critics. Nevertheless, calculations require the assessment of information about, and the weighing of, competing alternatives. I had to ask, is a ten-year old child—any child of the same age—choosing government subsidy over productive employment when yearning for pregnancy and motherhood?

What do children dream about when longing for babies of their own?

Answering those questions required a more detailed examination of the narratives obtained through in-depth interviewing. As with the statements quoted above, they revealed several commonalities. First, they manifested skepticism about the rewards of education. The girls I interviewed distinguished between educational achievement as an ideal and the reality of the schools they attended. No one saw schooling with indifference. They agreed that educated—"smart"—people got all the advantages but they did not believe that their academic records or the schools they were attending would unlock opportunities. Their classrooms were crowded and noisy. Instructional materials were unavailable or antiquated and, typically, all of them had started school with major deficits that had only grown over time.³⁰ Ten-year old Melinda Jordan had suffered meningitis when she was a toddler. Shuffled between relatives and foster parents, she had ended up living with an affable but alcoholic aunt. Her standardized test scores placed her at the bottom of the national norm group. Eighteen-year old Latishia Marvin had displayed excellent behavior while growing up but she had struggled with grades all along. Towanda Forrest was almost illiterate at twelve and a consummate high-school drop-out by the age of 14, only months before she became pregnant.

The young women I interviewed had no reason to see education as a path to success. As a result, they perceived schools as social, not educational, arenas where they participated in the small dramas that children of all types are wont to enact. They gossiped, picked friends and adversaries, defied instructors, competed for each other's attention and, especially, they struggled for self-affirmation. When Towanda was Melinda's age, she started receiving suspensions for fighting in school—just like Melinda did later. Both offered the same justification: "You can't let people walk all over you; you got to get some respect."³¹

³⁰ An account of conditions prevailing in some inner-city public schools may be found in Kozol, Jonathan, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown Publishers (1991).

³¹ Recent works stress the importance of *respect* as a theme in the lives of the poor. See Burgois, Philippe, "In Search of Respect: The New Service Economy and the Crack Alternative in Spanish

The frequency with which respect emerged in the interviews led me to consider the corresponding experience of more affluent children. The quest for respect is commonplace among adolescents of all class, race and ethnic backgrounds. However, varying outcomes hinge on the attributes of social networks.³² Among middle-class youngsters, the search for respect depends on an ample pool of resources and potential benefits made available by adults who maintain a distinct position with respect to the young. In impoverished environments, where grown-ups often compete for the same kinds of jobs available to adolescents, the search for respect traverses other avenues; it tends to focus mainly on physical force, the defense of turfs, and corporal adornment. Images of power are thus constructed where other alternatives are not easily accessible.³³

Second, the young women I interviewed expressed mistrust about the qualifications of men as mates and parents. Other researchers have noticed the clashing interpretations of impoverished African-American men and women about each other.³⁴ Those views, in turn, are widespread in settings characterized by high levels of male unemployment and underemployment, regardless of race or ethnicity. In environments where men have difficulties in securing jobs, the prospects of

Harlem." Paper presented at the Conference on Poverty, Immigration, and Urban Marginality in Advanced Societies, Maison Suger, Paris (1991). See also Taub, Richard, "Differing Conceptions of Honor and Orientations Toward Work and Marriage Among Low-Income African-Americans and Mexican-Americans." Paper prepared for presentation at the Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Conference. Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago (1991).

³² See Gouldner, Alvin, "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review*, 25: 161-179 (1960); Granovetter, Mark, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (3):481-510 (1985); Coleman, James S., "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* (Supplement): S95-121 (1988); Granovetter Mark, "The Old and the New Economic Sociology: A History and an Agenda," in Friedland, Roger. and A.F. Robertson (editors), *Beyond the Marketplace*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter (1990).

³³ The work of Pierre Bourdieu is germane to this point. See "Les Trois Etats du Capital Culturel," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 30 (November): 3-5 (1979).

³⁴ Hannerz, Ulf, op.cit.; Wacquant, Loic J.D. and William J. Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501: 8-26 (1989); Taub, Richard P., op.cit.

marriage and family take a distinctive form. Moreover, men and women alike see important differences between available jobs and jobs they deem desirable. Gender plays an important role in that respect. Because, in accord with mainstream norms, male identity strongly depends on the characteristics of employment, men are starkly aware of their inability to fulfill their prescribed role as *providers*. Their perceptions about work and jobs influence their orientations towards marriage. Men as well as women may say they don't get married because they wish to protect their independence. It is also the case that they feel they can't afford marriage.

Furthermore, the relative incomes of prospective spouses have clearly-felt consequences for the balance of power in their relationships. Those who have jobs fear exploitation. Those who are jobless fear domination. Conflicting perceptions emerge from this predicament. The women see the men as untrustworthy, exploitative, flighty, and undeserving of respect. The men, in turn, speak of the women as materialistic hags who have forgotten how to be respectful and whose only interest is in long-term financial security. The debasement of women by reducing them to "bitches" and "hos" conceals a correlative attempt at redefining the locus of power in gender relations. The skepticism of women and their determination to preserve personal autonomy by shunning marriage represent the flip side of the same process.

Third, for the most part, the narratives presented motherhood as a desirable condition, not as a calamity. In the light of expert judgments to the contrary, this was perplexing. To unfurl the meaning of motherhood among impoverished adolescents, I found it necessary to move away from the statements of the young women—who might be seeking an ex post facto justification—o note the fascination with which even younger children view babies. Terrell Jones, a boy atop wiry limbs, who was only eight in 1991, condensed a familiar perception:

Babies, they so cute; when Lisa [his sixteen-year old sister] had
Shatiareia you could tell it made everybody happy...'cause you could
see she was so pretty and smart. She makes you feel like you something

special and you don't have to worry about other things when she's around. She pays attention; you just have to teach her...she's a good baby.

There is abuse and neglect in the ghetto—as in other, less dispiriting, environs populated by wealthier families—but also a striking appreciation for infants. The arrival of a new baby draws the interest of youngsters and adults alike because, to put it bluntly, there are few milestones in poor neighborhoods that people can call upon to separate stages in their life-cycles. Hardly any of the events that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood in richer areas exist in the ghetto. Savings accounts, extracurricular activities, hopes of getting a driver's license, prospects of well-paying jobs—all middle-class perquisites of the journey towards maturity—are rare in poor neighborhoods. Infants galvanize attention and offer possibilities for self-distinction. The logic embedded in the stories told by adolescent mothers became apparent—having babies was about reaching adulthood. In other words, having babies was about the articulation of meaning not solely the consequence of careless behavior.

If pregnancy and motherhood entailed calculations about future prospects, then it was important to consider notions about time. The extent to which social time differs from chronological or astronomical time is a venerable theme in the social sciences but one that has been under-theorized with respect to impoverished populations. Bearing directly on this point was Robert K. Merton's concept of socially expected durations (SEDs): "socially prescribed or collectively patterned expectations about temporal intervals imbedded in social structures of various kinds."³⁵ He distinguished between structural or institutionalized durations, collectively expected durations and patterned temporal expectations found in various kinds of interpersonal and social relations. He also observed that SEDs "constitute a fundamental class of patterned expectations linking social

³⁵ Merton, Robert K. 1984. "Socially Expected Durations: A Case Study of concept Formation in Sociology," in *Conflict and Consensus: A Festschrift for Lewis A. Coser*. W.W. Powell and Richard Robbins (editors). New York: The Free Press: 266.

structures and individual action.³⁶ Socially expected durations affect anticipatory social behavior.

In accord with those concepts, my analysis suggested that impoverishment combined with spatial segregation foreshortened time and socially expected durations. Poverty and exclusion flatten and compress temporal rhythms. Alex Kotlowitz recounts the experience of African-American boys in a Chicago housing project who, in response to the question "what do you want to be as an adult?" preface their answers with the conditional clause "if I grow up..." *If*, not when.³⁷ Familiarity with violence and death influences their perception about the probable duration of life and guides behavior appropriate to constricted phases.

Ethnographic research among ethnic and racial minorities further detailed the extent to which accelerated development characterizes the experience of impoverished youth.³⁸ Older children shoulder parental responsibilities for their siblings when adults are unable or unwilling to assume them. More frequently than in middle-class groups, impoverished adolescents maintain lateral relationships with parents and older relatives not only because age differences tend to be smaller but because poor adults occupy with their children a similar position vis-à-vis labor market alternatives. Those ideas provided an optical device to reexamine the women's statements. For them, motherhood represented the extension of responsibilities assumed at an early age and expressed a specific relationship with the labor market. That partly explained why, at seventeen, Latanya Williams could state with conviction "I waited for a long time before I had my baby." That's why she could ask "What's there to wait for?"

Those perceptions were in contrast with the experience of more prosperous groups for whom

³⁶ Ibid., 266.

³⁷ Kotlowitz, Alex, *There are no Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing up in the Other America*. New York: Doubleday (1991).

³⁸ For a comprehensive treatment of this point see Jarrett, Robin L. 1993, op. cit. See also Elder, Glen H. Jr., "Families, Kin, and the Life Course: a Sociological Perspective." In *Advances in Child Development Research and the Family*, Ross Parke (Editor). Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1984). See also Burton, Linda M. and Robin L. Jarrett, "Studying African-American Family Structure and Process in Underclass Neighborhoods: Conceptual Considerations." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. Cincinnati, Ohio (1991).

parenthood is also associated with the fulfillment of manhood and womanhood but who dispose of a larger stockpile of resources to achieve the same purpose. The irony is that, in impoverished environments, the absence of resources deemed desirable leads to the perception of newborns as unqualified assets rather than handicaps. Partly for the same reason, there is a link throughout the world between poverty and early pregnancy. In most of those settings, public assistance and welfare programs are unavailable and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for providing the "wrong" incentives.³⁹ Even when removed from the insular confines of the U.S. policy-debate the situational connection between adolescent pregnancies and poverty persists. Pressures exerted by predatory men seeking their own affirmation, further complicate matters. Bereft of actual power, young men and women seek stature through the use of their bodies.

Therefore, when ten-year old Melinda Jordan spoke about her desire to have a baby, a family of her own, an apartment, she was identifying the attributes of personal autonomy and hoping for circumstances different from those that had surrounded her agitated life in the past. Her perceptions and goals were shaped by previous experience as a member of a social network distinguished by impoverishment and isolation, not by reference to the dictates of an abstract morality. Her attempts were likely to fail, of course, but they did not represent a calculated effort to burden the taxpayer.

All this made understandable another feature in the narratives collected from adolescent mothers: although they revealed various areas of ignorance, a lack of familiarity with contraceptives was not one of them. None of the twenty-seven women I interviewed was unaware—or unable to avail herself—of the means for birth-control. They attended schools where attention was given to reproductive “health” and where counselors habitually distributed informational booklets and made referrals. Furthermore, in those cases where pregnancy had been involuntary, girls still chose to

³⁹ Germane to this point is a comparison of Sweden, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Canada, France and the United States conducted by the New York-based Gutmacher Institute. The United States has the highest adolescent pregnancy rates but in the other five countries the overall level of support for unwed mothers is more generous. This raises questions about the extent to which teenagers are lured into having babies by the chance to collect a welfare stipend.

deliver rather than abort. This puts in question the liberal insight that births to adolescents can be prevented through education alone. My interpretation points to a configuration of events, lessons and situations that make motherhood a desirable option when other alternatives to define adulthood are unavailable. With this, I arrived at a preliminary conclusion: it is not early pregnancy that causes poverty but the circumstances of poverty that lead to accelerated development and, therefore, to motherhood at an early age.

By making sense of the factors leading to early motherhood, the limitations in the perceptions of the larger society were exposed. If there is a durable correlation between poverty, social isolation and early motherhood it follows that, in addition to better instruction regarding contraception, improved opportunities in education and in the labor market are required. The meanings attached to motherhood in a deprived environment are therefore of interest to theory as well as to policy.

I offer no explanation of the reasons why other equally impoverished adolescents choose not to become mothers. There lies a subject for future research.

Conclusion

In this paper I have recorded some pivotal moments in the evolution of the interview as part of the methodological repertory of the social sciences. I described the interview as part of an effort to gain a more precise understanding of empirical realities concealed first by purely theoretical speculations and, more recently, by quantitative analyses. Paradoxical in this development has been the recurrent suspicion that qualitative approaches reduce the degree of objectivity required by scientific research. In that respect, I have argued that quantitative procedures introduce different, but nonetheless real, forms of subjective interference. In questioning the conventions of anthropology and sociology, I sought to affirm the complementary character of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

In the third section of this paper, I provided an abridged account of an ethnographic narrative concerning a specific area of experience—early motherhood among impoverished African-American adolescents. The account illustrates a manner of reasoning. It also represents a procedure to collect and interpret information based on a continued dialogue between sociological ideas and chronicles elicited by a purposive dialogue. The interpretations of scholars and the testimonies of adolescent mothers were approached with a similar mixture of skepticism and empathy. Distilled from that process was an alternative interpretation of behaviors and of the meanings assigned to those behaviors by social actors.

The interview represents a focal moment in the pursuit of knowledge, not as a method designed to evict subjectivity, but as a course to knowledge through structured inter-subjective exchanges. The capacity for selection and interpretation is part and parcel of that process. While the findings of ethnographic research cannot be generalized, those of quantitative analyses are often generalized without any attention to meaning. The risk in the first case is anecdotal babble; in the second it is the blind accumulation of generalities with only a flimsy connection to fact.

As I ponder my enduring commitment to ethnographic research, I look back upon the history of the interview method and its curious setbacks. Were it not for the interview, our understanding of ourselves and of *others* would be diminished. How else are we to *know* but by asking those whose experience concerns us? Perhaps the sole posing of that question is the best way to justify the interview method as part of the pathway leading to scientific knowledge.