

Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing*

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Abstract

Reflexivity has gained paramount status in qualitative inquiry. It is central to debates on subjectivity, objectivity, and, ultimately, the scientific foundation of social science knowledge and research. Although much work on doing reflexivity by researchers and practitioners has been published, scholars have only recently begun to explore how one goes about teaching reflexivity in qualitative research. This paper contributes to the endeavour by first identifying challenges of teaching reflexivity. It then describes how I use an existing data set and hands-on learning as complementary strategies to teach reflexivity in a course on qualitative interviewing. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of teaching reflexivity in sociology, in general, and in qualitative research methods, in particular.

Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing*

Reflexivity has gained a vital role in qualitative research. It is central to debates on subjectivity, objectivity and, ultimately, the scientific foundation of social science knowledge and research (Burawoy, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Harding, 1991). It is one of the most fundamental concepts and practices that differentiate qualitative from quantitative research. Much work on doing reflexivity by researchers and practitioners has been published. Yet, scholars have only recently begun to explore how one goes about teaching reflexivity in qualitative research. This work contributes to the endeavor since teaching reflexivity specifically in the context of qualitative interviewing has largely been overlooked in the literature. Such neglect perpetuates a conceptual proposition that overlooks the roles of interviewer/researcher in qualitative interviewing, and does a disservice to the next generation of researchers, who will need skills and reflective insights to develop into mature and independent qualitative researchers.

This paper discusses how to effectively use the analysis of pre-existing interview data and hands-on learning through mock interviewing as complementary strategies to teach reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. My endeavor in the classroom is to bridge the divide between doing and teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. The pedagogical premises I adhere to are derived from: (a) a review of pedagogical strategies in sociology that incorporate reflexivity into teaching of ethnographic observation and data analysis; (b) doing reflexivity in feminist oral history; and (c) how reflexivity is used to train practitioners in the applied fields of counseling and social work.

I begin with a review of the relevant literature related to doing and teaching reflexivity. I then describe three pedagogical insights derived from the literature that I used in the development of my graduate

seminar, followed by a brief description of the design of the course. Next, I elaborate on how I use an existing data set to acquaint students with characteristics of rich narratives, interview techniques, and the epistemological basis of interview techniques. I then discuss the interview practicum where students first take turns being interviewed and then reflect on their interviewing experiences on methodological and epistemological grounds. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my pedagogical strategies and the unique challenges inherent in teaching qualitative research. This paper illustrates how teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing entails teaching epistemologically informed interview techniques and making conceptual baggage visible. My analysis further shows how students are able to acquire qualitative interview skills with transformed subjective insights.

Bridging the divide between doing and teaching reflexivity

Reflexivity is a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research. It is imperative for qualitative inquiry because it conceptualizes the researcher as an active participant in knowledge (re)production rather than as a neutral bystander (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Smith, 1987). This conceptualization premises an interactive, relational research process that recognizes the presence of the informant and challenges a directive, researcher-centered epistemological proposition. The main objective of doing reflexivity in qualitative research is to acknowledge and interrogate the constitutive role of the researcher in research design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge production. Because doing reflexivity requires researchers to examine any pre-conceived perceptions they may hold, reflexivity cannot be learned passively. Largely because of this need for active self-examination, teaching students to practice reflexivity poses a number of challenges. Students often feel personally threatened by, and are resistant to, the prospect of critically

examining their own positions and experiences (Borochowitz, 2005). Unless students are actively encouraged to be reflexive, they are unlikely to welcome the vulnerability of admitting to errors or imperfections that reflexivity requires. Thus, teaching reflexivity calls for a pedagogical design that effectively facilitates an examination of students' experiences and "conceptual baggage." I borrow the term conceptual baggage from Kirby and McKenna (1987) to emphasize the inter-connections between a researcher's intellectual assumptions; subject location(s) in relation to class, race, sexuality, gender etc.; and beliefs or emotions – all of which combine to impact on the nature and outcome of a qualitative interview. Since becoming aware of conceptual baggage and practicing reflexivity take time, conventional approaches to teaching qualitative research methods in an academic term rarely provide enough time for thorough reflexivity. The time crunch is compounded by the basic prerequisite of teaching fundamental technical research skills, such as interview techniques, ethnographic observation, field note writing, and coding, that students need before they can begin to learn reflexivity.

Sociologists who incorporate reflexivity into teaching ethnographic observation and data analysis have developed various strategies to address these challenges and successfully bridge the divide between doing and teaching reflexivity in these aspects of qualitative research. With respect to qualitative interviewing, however, little attempt has been made within the social sciences to teach reflexivity. Thus, in designing my own pedagogical strategy to teach reflexivity in this context, I turned to pioneering work from the fields of social work and counseling. Below, I discuss existing pedagogical strategies to incorporate reflexivity in ethnographic observation and data analysis and then describe the pedagogical premises on which I based my own course design.

Reflexivity in ethnographic observation and data analysis

Doing reflexivity entails arriving at a critical turning point where the researcher turns the investigative lens away from others and toward him or herself. The first and most crucial steps toward this point come when interviewers become aware of their assumptions and locations, as well as their emotional responses in an interview when these are in direct conflict with those of the informant (Blee, 1998; Wasserfall, 1993). Incorporating reflexivity into teaching ethnographic observation, requires a specific pedagogical design that will lead students through these steps, making them conscious of: (a) the lenses they wear as they carry out their observations; and (b) how their field notes are not observations concerning interactions of others, but are rather their interpretations of such interactions (Tan and Ko, 2004).

Various pedagogical techniques can help bring students to an awareness of their own assumptions, locations, and feelings. For example, Tan and Ko (2004) innovatively use feature films to teach ethnographic observation, making apparent students' assumptions and demonstrating how they become data as students mistake their interpretations for observations. Hellowell uses an insider–outsider continuum as a heuristic device to engage his students in practicing reflexivity in their ethnographic projects (Hellowell, 2006). As students account for their positions and locations along the insider–outsider continuum, they become aware of the strengths and potential pitfalls of their research and are compelled to develop more sophisticated observation and field note writing skills. Hellowell maintains that their ability to gradually replace shallow, over-generalized writing styles with thicker, more nuanced field notes hinges on their capacity for reflexivity.

Teaching reflexivity in data analysis is particularly challenging because practicing reflexivity in data analysis involves a painstaking process of examination and re-examination, in addition to a

researcher's scholarly maturation. For example, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) describe a process of deliberate retrospection in acquiring reflexivity in data analysis. Their process of retrospection involved revisiting data analyses they had conducted several years previously in order to examine how their subjective insights were either suppressed or overshadowed by institutional, epistemological, and ontological influences operating at the time. Their own intellectual growth since originally analyzing the data allowed them to reveal new "truths" about the data, which were previously invisible to them.

In another instance, Stalp and Grant (2001) use a published journal article on gender differences in personal ads to introduce students to the necessary distance implied in a reflexive approach to data analysis. Although they do not use the term "reflexivity," their pedagogical objective is to reveal the hidden roles of the researcher in data analysis. The authors' approach entails breaking down the data analysis process into specific steps, and demonstrating the nature and parameters of each step in the meaning making process. By making the process visible, students come to see how researchers make judgments and interpretations, and at the same time grow more comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in qualitative data. As they turn an investigative lens to themselves, the students learn how to describe and defend the choices they make in data analysis. Students realize that they must carefully consider the theoretical assumptions and positions they bring to the research when they make decisions in data analysis.

Reflexivity in qualitative interviewing: lessons from oral history, social work, and counseling

In the field of oral history, feminist scholars have moved beyond a simple celebration of women's experiences to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of doing oral history. Problematizing "women's voices" compels scholars to examine their own intellectual agendas, personal locations, and research practices (Gluck and Patai, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz and Chase, 2001; Riessman, 1987).

Reflexivity has demonstrated the interactive, co-constructed nature of the qualitative interview in which the interviewer's and informant's perceptions of each other and their respective subject locations may have a bearing on the nature and outcome of the interview (Jorgenson, 1991; Lewin, 1998; Nicolson, 2003). Although social scientists have directed much attention to the medium and processes through which women's voices are raised, with the exception of the fields of counseling and social work, this commitment to doing reflexivity in qualitative interviewing has yet to be incorporated into teaching reflexivity.

Perhaps due to their applied nature, schools of counseling and social work have integrated an interrogation of the role of the interviewer into professional training (Yip, 2006). Failure on the part of clinicians to become aware of, and critically scrutinize, their own locations and conceptual filters, may result in the pathologizing of clients' narratives (Georgaca, 2003). Such misunderstanding is particularly detrimental to the patient/informant because the practitioner/interviewer influences the course of intervention. Within these fields, methodologies and pedagogies have been developed to reveal a practitioner/researcher's theoretical assumptions and conscious lenses, and also, critically, their unconscious agenda and emotional responses in an interview (Rolls and Relf, 2006).

Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing

Three interrelated pedagogical insights arise out of this literature, which I used as a guide to teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. First, doing reflexivity involves an epistemological paradigm shift. It is a painstaking process wherein the researcher makes a conscious and deliberate effort to interrogate his/her subjective self in relation to the research subject. Teaching this requires instructors to provide epistemologically informed instruction on the technical skills, rather than just aiming for technical competence. An epistemologically informed pedagogical approach adequately addresses the

interwoven premises of methodology and epistemology in qualitative research. Teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing, therefore, requires a deliberate pedagogical intervention that challenges the tendency to privilege the technical aspects of interview skills, while overlooking their epistemological foundation.ⁱ

Second, although learning the doing of reflexivity is not possible without actual practice, using published works and other media can be an effective means to begin teaching reflexivity. Such approaches echo the deliberate attempts of instructors who have creatively used non-conventional resources to teach qualitative methods in recent years (Leblanc, 1997; Prendergast, 2004; Whyte, 1981). Using existing material marks a significant departure from the apprenticeship styles of teaching qualitative methods that date back to the Chicago School, and which have continued to be championed by prominent scholars in the field (Nyden, 1991; Strauss, 1988). The use of previously transcribed and/or published materials is effective since doing reflexivity in practice is facilitated and mediated through text, whether in the form of a personal journal, ethnographic field notes, or an interview transcript. The text captures the situational research context, which could otherwise be lost or easily ignored. To bridge doing and teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing, I use pre-existing data set and hands-on learning as mutually reinforcing strategies.

Third, teaching reflexivity in qualitative research requires adjustment in course design. As discussed, doing reflexivity implies that researchers/practitioners make room for conscious, deliberate examination of one's theoretical assumptions and subjective position in research and practice. To transfer doing to teaching reflexivity, the instructor must foster the practice of self-reflection in each student. This goes beyond much of the literature on teaching qualitative methods, which largely focuses on how to take students through the entire research process in the midst of decreasing

institutional support and increasing enrolment (Bogdan, 1983; Keen, 1996; Lofland and Lofland, 1983; Schmid, 1992; Snyder, 1995; Tierney and Lincoln, 1994; Webb and Glesne, 1992).

Graduate seminar and pedagogical design

I have offered the graduate seminar, *Qualitative Interviewing*, in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto since 2004. Total enrollment in the course has been 21 students over four years (2004–07). The majority of students have come from graduate programs in sociology, education, library science, and physical education; and from medical fields such as nursing, pharmacy, and public health. As noted, I use the analysis of pre-existing interview data combined with hands-on interviewing experiences to help students reflect on their own positions as they develop into qualitative interviewers. I drew the interview data from a large data set on the family demography of immigrant groups in Canada.ⁱⁱ

I use the data to first show that interview techniques and conceptual baggage are two distinct, but interwoven components critical to doing reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. Although more of a methodological issue, I believe that interview techniques are connected with, and so have implications for, epistemological issues relevant to conceptual baggage. Examples from the data are used to acquaint students with characteristics of rich narratives, interview techniques, and the epistemological basis of interview techniques. Specifically, I use excerpts to show: (a) how to detect conceptual baggage in an interview encounter; and (b) how unexamined conceptual baggage can hinder the interviewer's ability to hear what the informant has to say. This step provides the necessary foundation for students to complete the interview practicum, in which they take turns being interviewer and informant. Finally, students are asked to reflect on their interviewing experiences in a reflective essay.

Feedback from students has been unanimously positive over the years. Students at an early stage of

their dissertation research often comment that they will apply the course to their proposal design, while more advanced students generally express the wish that they had taken the course earlier in their academic careers.

In the discussion below I use examples from the data set used in class, students' assignments, and field notes to illustrate the teaching and learning of reflexivity in qualitative interviewing.ⁱⁱⁱ I also draw on my experiences teaching general qualitative methods courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels over the past decade.

Teaching Reflexivity through Pre-existing Data Set

Using examples from the data set of the family demography of immigrant groups in Canada, I first illustrate characteristics of rich, thick narratives by contrasting such examples with narrative-thin data, as illustrated below.

Narrative-rich data—Italian Interview #10

Interviewer: What did you do [when you first arrived] in Canada?

Domenico: I came here on a work contract. Canadian immigration promised me the same type of work that I was doing in France. In France I worked in a factory, working with steel. When I got here, they did not have this work for me. There was no work. I had to go work in a mine, in a small town in northern Quebec, at the age of 19. Two weeks after my arrival to Canada, I started working in the mines. In France it was very warm, so I had on a pair of running shoes. That was the only pair of shoes I owned. When I reached Northern Quebec, there was six feet of snow. I had no money to buy shoes, so I had to accept work in the mines. I worked for 15 days before I had any money to buy my shoes, and anything else that I needed. I made 65 cents per hour. It was hard and dangerous

work, but in four years after my wedding, I had managed to save \$8,000. With that money, my family and I moved to Toronto.

Narrative-thin data—Italian Interview #1

Interviewer: How do you feel about divorce? Under what circumstances is it acceptable?

Marco: I feel that divorce is good and bad. If there are children involved, divorce is bad. If there are no children involved and the two do not get along, I must admit, I think divorce is a very good thing.

I point out the differences between Domenico's detailed, first person narratives and Marco's general, second person description. My pedagogical aim is to show students the quality of data needed in order to derive analytical concepts and/or sociological themes inductively, so that they can aim for this quality in their own interviews.^{iv}

Teaching epistemologically informed interview skills

Once students gain an understanding of what rich data looks like, I work with them to analyze interview excerpts to gain a comprehensive picture of mistakes often made in qualitative interviews that result non-narrative data. For example, students come to learn how a "yes/no" question leads to a "yes/no" answer; how using a "why" question (i.e., "Why did you leave your country?") can put an informant in an awkward, defensive position; and by contrast, how a "how" question ("How was your decision made?") makes it possible for an informant to narrate his/her story. I categorize these mistakes as "good mistakes" to infuse acknowledgement and appreciation of having access to, and being able to learn from, this data. This categorization is conducive to teaching/learning reflexivity because it fosters a forgiving ethos in which mistakes are understood as learning opportunities rather than punitive incidents. This prepares students to later acknowledge their own errors.^v Substantively, I

use many of the “good mistakes” to explain how they are not conducive to the inductive epistemology of qualitative interviewing. Although a “yes/no” question/answer leads to a straightforward quantifiable coding scheme, it yields qualitatively poor narratives. The “why” question mirrors a causally laden logic that is essential to quantitative epistemology. I point out that by looking closely it is usually possible to uncover the interviewer’s unchecked disposition hidden in a leading question. On the other hand, a multiple-choice question, which is typical in survey questionnaire, obliges the informant to choose from answers pre-determined by the interviewer/researcher.

I select “good examples” from the data set to illustrate essential elements to qualitative interviewing including what exploring and active listening entail, how to handle sensitive issues, and how to ask specific, but open-ended questions. By comparing and contrasting the “good mistakes” and “good examples,” students learn that framing interview questions is not a purely technical skill, solely within the methodological realm. Instead, it has epistemological implications for the quality and validity of interview data. This prepares students to engage in epistemological discussions about conceptual baggage in qualitative interviewing.

Making conceptual baggage visible

Making conceptual baggage visible is the epistemological core of teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. I rely on transcripts from the data set to help to make conceptual baggage visible, both substantively and methodologically. Substantively, I demonstrate how, when an interviewer follows the interview guide too closely in semi-structured qualitative interview, he or she is likely to be blinded by unchecked assumptions, locations, and/or beliefs. For example, in one excerpt from the data set, an interviewer who relied on the interview guide’s conceptualization of “work” and “occupation” as paid labor, could not hear when the woman he was interviewing said that she had

“never worked” apart from having done housework all her life. Instead of probing the informant’s response to uncover the meaning of housework, the interviewer followed the guide’s categorization of work and moved on to the next question. In another example, an interviewer who assumed a heterosexual nuclear family as the norm was caught off guard when recent Caribbean immigrants talked about relationships, familial lives, and childrearing arrangements involving local and transnational non-marital and extended family networks (Hsiung & Raddon, manuscript).

The following two excerpts show the working of conceptual baggage on topics related to integration and ethnic identity. The interviewers are exploring the extent to which recent Caribbean immigrants to Canada have participated in the “dominant” groups’ institutions, and to what extent they remain in their own “ethnic” enclave. These excerpts highlight how the researcher’s assumptions and positions often act as a blueprint for the formulation of the qualitative interview questions. Many “technical problems,” such as asking yes/no, multiple-choice, or leading questions, are epistemologically based.

Interviewer #4: Are you a member of any Canadian clubs, like the Rotary, or political parties?

Paul: No, no, definitely not. Most of these associations want to have an African Canadian as a token person. These groups use us as tokens. They don’t want to give you a role on the basis of your qualifications. People who become tokens may do well for themselves, but they can’t do anything for their community from that position.

Interviewer #5: What kind of newspapers do you read?

Judy: We read everything, the Gazette, my daughter picks up the French paper, I read the West Island paper, all the free papers like the Monitor..., the African Canadian... My friends get papers from St. Vincent, and they pass them.

These excerpts show that dichotomous conceptualizations of assimilation and integration are assumed

in the interview questions. The dichotomy between the “Canadian” and St. Vincentian organizations and newspapers is rooted in an assimilationist theoretical position: Caribbean immigrants’ association with non-dominant institutions and mass-media is conceptualized as being “non-Canadian.” In both cases the informants clearly refute such a dichotomy: Paul challenges the validity of a paradigm that measures new immigrants’ integration by membership in “Canadian” clubs or politics, while Judy demonstrates that the “Canadian” and “ethnic” newspapers are not mutually exclusive categories in immigrant’s daily life.

Detecting the working of conceptual baggage in interview encounters can be accomplished either by focusing on how the informants answers questions, or on the impact of answers on the interviewers. In the first instance, when informants are asked questions that do not resonate with their experiences, they may resort to a very short reply, or they may provide an alternative view in great detail. Searching for patterned rebuffs, clashes, and disjunctions between interviewers’ questions and informants’ answers is, therefore, an effective way to expose hidden conceptual baggage. In the latter case, when conceptual baggage makes it impossible for interviewers to hear and understand what informants have to say, they are often completely lost. Without knowing how to ask meaningful follow-up questions, interviewers often quickly switch from one topic to another. The following excerpt is a typical example:

Interviewer: What kind of newspapers do you read?

Diane: I read Parents Magazine, and child care magazines, and I read my newspaper from St.

Vincent [which I get] every week so I know what’s going on.

Interviewer: Who belongs to your ethnic community? Is there anyone not from St. Vincent that is accepted among you, or anyone from St. Vincent that is not accepted by the group, and why?

Diane: For our association we accept non-Vincentians.

Interviewer: Whom do you look toward for leadership of your community? Internationally, nationally?

Diane: My minister because he's there most of the time and you know politicians they go in and out. Also I look for an older adult for inspiration [interview #2]

In this case we can see how the interviewer's presumption that reading ethnic newspapers is an indication of ethnic retention, while reading Canadian newspapers is an indication of assimilation blinds her to aspects of the informant's identity that do not conform. In this excerpt, Diane, mother to a 14-year-old son, revealed the centrality of motherhood to her identity through her choice of reading material; yet, instead of paying attention to Diane's answers and asking her to elaborate on her choices, the interviewer "chases the data" on ethnic identity by swiftly switching the topic to ethnic community. When Diane's answer suggests a non-segregationist orientation, the interviewer changes the topic a third time to community leadership. Although the abrupt shift apparently leads to rather brief exchange and ultimately thin data, I remind my students that interviewers should not be discouraged after a rocky interview. On the contrary, as informants destabilize the categories or conceptual framework on which interview questions are based, it is imperative for interviewers to explore alternative conceptual frameworks.

After some reflection and careful examination, it is not difficult for students to see that informants' answers provide abundant clues to alternative conceptualizations. For example, in the case of paid and unpaid labor, the informant's answer echoes feminist scholarship on unpaid housework. Kinship networks, marital and non-marital relationships, and translational family ties of the Caribbean immigrants in Canada point to an alternative conceptual framework that is very different from

heterosexual nuclear family model that dominates in North America. Further, answers provided by Caribbean informants about their immigration experiences correspond with scholarship critical of assimilationist propositions. Making sense of alternative conceptualizations within the framework of the original research intent takes careful consideration, however. Students need to learn that being able to hear and sensitively probe what an informant is really telling them, even if it does not seem to ‘fit’ within the scope of the research, can add depth and richness to the research. For example, asking Diane a follow-up question about parenting magazines may have allowed the interviewer to explore her experience of mothering in Canada, which could have led to questions about her sense of community belonging.

To conclude, making conceptual baggage visible is the central part of teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. Interviews that have gone badly are of great pedagogical value, and provide an excellent opportunity for reflection. When questions fall flat, inappropriate assumptions come to light. When researcher and informant have difficulty engaging in a meaningful exchange, the researcher should explore the reasons for failure with humility and a strong spirit of inquiry. After the interview, a researcher’s reflection can be guided by questions such as “At what point was a seamless co-construction of meaning lost?” “How did differences arise?” “What was the basis of the tension and conflict?” “What was needed to bridge the differences conceptually and technically in this particular interview?”

Limits of intellectual knowing

In my experience, students have no difficulty understanding how the researchers in the excerpts could be blinded by their assumptions, locations, and/or personal beliefs; however, the students’ level of understanding at this stage is still very superficial. This becomes evident when I ask them to use Table

1, “The Conceptual Baggage Inventory Chart,” to analyze their respective locations in relation to their own research interests: Almost without fail, they quickly slip back into a non-sensitized mode.

(Table 1 here)

Using a study of intergenerational experiences as an example, Table 2 presents a composite of students’ self-disclosures to illustrate the general, abstract nature of their initial attempt with the inventory. When students reflect on their own locations and positions, they often resort to abstract categories, such as class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Such formalistic itemization reveals limitations of “intellectual” knowing in the absence of hands-on learning.

(Table 2 here)

The composite illustrates that students perceive examples from interview transcripts as simply mistakes made by “others.” In order to become aware of their own conceptual baggage, students must learn firsthand through their own process of interviewing. Being able to perceive the interactive relationship between interviewer and informant in qualitative interviewing is critical in this regard. In addition, in order to gain an understanding of the craft of qualitative interviewing, the content of the interview must be context specific (Burawoy, 1998), and the best way to generate relevant material is through personal interviewing. This is also critical since the dynamics of research relationships must be personally experienced in order to come to grips with the interplay between interview technique and conceptual baggage in qualitative interviewing.

Learning/Doing Reflexivity in the Interview Practicum

Following their work with the data set, students complete an interview practicum in which pairs of students take turns as interviewer and informant. Each student completes four components: (1) designing a qualitative interview; (2) conducting a 40–50 minute tape-recorded interview; (3)

transcribing the interview in which s/he was the interviewer; and (4) reflecting on his/her interview experiences as informant and interviewer in an essay. Students prepare their interview guides based on an agreed upon topic (general topics are generation through class discussion). At this stage, students often become quite anxious and feel that they do not have enough control over the process. Their questions primarily focus on technical aspects of qualitative interviewing such as “How many questions do I need to have for a 40–minute interview?” “Would 20 questions be too many? Would 10 questions be too few?” and, “What if I run out of questions before the time is up?” When I offer no definite answers, their anxieties only increase. They wonder, for example, “What if the informant ends up talking about something completely irrelevant?” and “What happens if I don’t get to cover all the questions I want to cover?”

Instead of providing clear-cut answers to the seemingly technical questions, I reiterate the epistemological aspects of qualitative interviewing, stressing that the narratives are co-constructed by the interviewer and informant. In order for this to happen, it is important for the interviewer to mindfully engage in active listening. In semi-structured qualitative interviewing, although the interviewer does develop an interview guide according to predetermined research themes, the guide should be treated as a stepping-stone. It is problematic to adopt a directive, interviewer-driven predisposition. Rather than covering every question in the interview guide faithfully, the interviewer needs to enter an interview dialogue with an open mind so that there is sufficient room for the interviewer and informant to explore the subject matter collaboratively. I remind them of examples from the data set, such as Diane from above, which demonstrate that a researcher needs to be willing to discard the interview guide when it becomes a straitjacket at the interview. My comments seldom ease students’ anxiety; but do serve to relay the knowledge that there are no simple answers.

The interviews take place during one class session. Students double-check their batteries and tape recorders before each interview team finds a quiet, private room to carry out their interview. The class comes together immediately after students have completed their interviews. Intense emotions of excitement, relief, and fulfillment permeate the atmosphere. Comments such as “I caught myself asking so many ‘why’ and ‘yes/no’ questions,” “I never knew how it felt to be interviewed,” and “It’s much harder than I thought” capture the overall post-interview sentiment. Students then transcribe and analyze their interview and reflect on their experiences. The most salient learning experiences identified by students in their reflective essays are presented next.

Being interviewed

Over the four years that the course has been offered students have unanimously considered being interviewed the most valuable aspect of the interview practicum. Although some had conducted interviews for their own class projects or as a research assistant, almost none had been an informant. The experience made them keenly aware of the relational, interactive relationship between interviewer and informant in a qualitative interview. Being at the receiving end of inquiries allows student informants to experience the power dynamics of qualitative interviewing firsthand. Some described this as resembling “receiving an oral examination,” others as “being carefully scrutinized.” One student wrote:

I found that I wanted to please the interviewer, give the right answers, and give informative, interesting information. Although I enjoyed the experience overall, I found being interviewed quite intense and exhausting, as I was not used to being asked my feelings and thoughts for so long in such an official setting (Student #20).

As informants, students come to realize that the interviewer defines the agenda and that the agenda might deviate from, and become foreign to, their own experiences. The interview experience not only makes such mismatches vividly apparent to the student informant, but allows them to personally experience the emotional impact of these mismatches. When an interviewer did not ask follow-up questions, one informant wondered “whether or not she comprehended anything I shared.” When another interviewer changed the subject partway through an informant’s narrative, the informant felt cut off. Reflecting on the frustration, student informants came to understand that probing and active listening were not only interview techniques used to establish rapport with an informant. Active listening requires the interviewer to quiet his/her busy mind, stop attending only to his/her agenda or preoccupations, and give the respondent time to expand on their views.

As interviewers, students noted that probing came naturally after they heard and developed a genuine curiosity about what the respondent had to say. This realization enables them to understand that in-depth interviews entail much more than a mechanical set of techniques divorced from the epistemological principles of qualitative interviewing. Students are also compelled to examine and re-position their roles as interviewers from knowing how they want to be treated as informants. They come to see the role of the interviewer in a completely new light and develop an understanding of the informant’s perspective on the objectified notion of “getting the right data,” and its implications for data collection.

Knowing what it was like to be interviewed, one student, for example, came to realize “how arrogant I was as an interviewer. All I cared about was what kind of data they would give to me. I hate to admit, but it never occurred to me that they had feelings too; not until I was interviewed” (Student #6). For this student, the interview was no longer a pragmatic means to “scoop up the data and be done with

it.” The informant came alive as a subject with feelings and subjective knowledge, someone who should not be objectified. Another student, this one a veteran interviewer, confessed that she would never treat an informant the way she had done before. As a research assistant she used to ignore signs of reluctance from informants in order to “go after the data” for the project she was assigned to. During her turn as informant in the practicum, she came to appreciate what it entailed to handle sensitive issues skillfully by noticing how the interviewer took cues from her own hesitation to discuss specific details of her family affairs. Yet another student informant revealed strong feelings of resentment when presented with questions that implied that her relationship with her mother was negatively affected by a disagreement. In her reflective essay, she recalled being asked how the conflict with her mother had affected their relationship:

I remember thinking that the conflict did not adversely affect my relationship with my mother, nor did it profoundly affect the relationship at all; so I resented the assumption that it did (Student #20).

This experience inspired her to review interview questions she had used as an interviewer. She came to realize that she had made “the same mistakes, and many more,” and that asking leading questions or asking for explanations was not only problematic technically, but could be “irritating and perhaps hurtful” to an informant.

The interview practicum provides students with a firsthand opportunity to understand what it is like to be interviewed. Their thoughts and emotions as an informant allow them to understand the complex roles of interviewer in a qualitative interview. Students learn that interviewers’ presumptions can lead to the objectification of informants and can, therefore, have serious ethical implications. These interactive, relational dynamics of qualitative interviews are generally most evident in issues related to

conceptual baggage.

Conceptual baggage

The interview practicum compels students to interrogate their own assumptions, biography, and worldview, and see how these unchecked matters filter through the interview questions. As they review their transcripts, many students are utterly surprised by their own positions, experiences, and/or conceptual frameworks. Their unexamined assumptions, beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings, experiences and, especially, unconscious agenda become apparent. They come to see how such conceptual baggage directly affects the substantive direction and content of an interview, and compromises their ability to be an attentive, active listener.

Several students acknowledged that during the interview, they became aware of their disappointment when the informant didn't provide "expected answers." In many cases the anticipation of certain answers hindered the interviewer's ability to hear what the informant had to say. In such cases, when an informant rejected a particular pre-conceived, perceptual framework, the interviewer ignored it, pressed on, or simply switched to a different topic. In contrast, some students were disturbed by the fact that many informants structured their stories (consciously or otherwise) to fit the perceptual framework employed by them, the interviewer. Others were shocked that mistakes or mismatches did not become conspicuous until they reviewed the interview transcript for a third or, even, a fourth time. They learned the hard lesson that "the boxes you bring into the interview will determine what you hear and find."

For students who had been trained in quantitative traditions, adopting the inductive logic in qualitative interviewing was extremely challenging. They found themselves framing their research questions to test a hypothesis, or constructing the interview questions to solicit quantifiable answers rather than

personal narratives. Instead of asking the informant to articulate his own experiences of stress, for example, one student interviewer was more concerned with “quantifying stress (e.g., how much stress and how many stressors), statistical testing (e.g., significant associations and differences), and predicting, controlling, describing, and confirming stress related hypotheses” (Student #11). During the interview, when the informant did not provide answers that confirmed the interviewer’s conceptual and methodological understanding of stress, he was caught off guard and even became discouraged and agitated. Throughout the interview, rather than being an effective facilitator and allowing the informant to define and interpret his experiences in his own words, the student interviewer found himself “waiting to hear precise, narrow instances of stress” (Student #11). Only after carefully examining the transcript did he realize that its lack of thick narratives derived, at least in part, from his own conceptual baggage.

Another student identified gender and work as a theme to explore with the informant in discussing her mother-daughter relationship. After the interview, she was initially pleased because the topic was raised by the informant without prompting: the interviewer found herself in the position of simply having to ask follow-up questions. It was only after reviewing the transcript repeatedly that she realized that because of her own theoretical training and personal interest, she had zeroed-in on gender and work issues and had ignored all other threads mentioned by the informant in the same discussion. In her reflective essay, this student categorized such a realization as “quite frightening because it suggested to me that my own unconscious interests shaped the interview in a significant way” (Student #20).

The interview practicum created a learning opportunity for students to recognize barriers in their own thinking and/or ways of knowing that had prevented them from hearing and interpreting the social

reality of their subjects. Without going through such a transformative process, interviewers in a qualitative interview cannot hear what informants have to say, nor are informants provided with a secure space in which to voice their stories. For students in my course, critical self-examination of conceptual baggage facilitates a process of awakening, acknowledgement, and transformation that goes beyond their earlier preoccupation with interview techniques.

Beyond interview techniques

Many students noted that during the interview they realized that their interview guide was flawed because the informant's experiences did not fit their pre-designed questions, which were often predicated by their subjective experiences. One ethnic minority student based his interview guide on the incorrect assumption that his informant, like himself, would have grown up in an immigrant family. He stated, "I didn't know how, but I thought everyone in Toronto grew up in immigrant families." His informant's white Canadian heritage forced him to discard his prepared interview guide. Even though he made many technical mistakes in his effort to generate interview questions on the spot, the interview practicum allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of the epistemological foundations of qualitative interviewing.

As students reflect on how they can be caught off guard because of their subjective locations and preoccupations, they come to a new appreciation of active listening and of my perennial comment, "the interview guide is there to be discarded." A sociology student, who had experienced changes in his network of friends in his graduate study years, assumed that this experience applies to others. During the interview, he had difficulty letting go of this assumption. He "kept coming back and asking questions that assumed that the relationships had changed," even after his respondent had told him that her network had not changed. In his reflexive essay, he wrote:

[Initially] I was relying too much on my interview guide. I found that I was only really able to move forward once I took the chance to discard the interview guide; unfortunately, by then I had lost a lot of time. Once I did let go of the interview guide I found that I really stopped thinking so much about my next question. This allowed me to relax and to really focus on what the respondent was saying (Student #12).

As students carefully examined their transcripts, many realized in retrospect that they rushed through the interview in order to cover prepared themes. Their preconceived notions of what was important and relevant had prevented them hearing what the informant has to say. They also missed golden opportunities to explore issues that had emerged from the interview. This became particularly apparent when students transcribed and analyzed their transcripts. “Her answer begged for more follow-up questions,” a third-year Ph.D. student from the public health field remarked; “unfortunately, I could not hear it. I was too preoccupied by my own questions. Questions I had prepared” (Student #17)

Being an interviewer makes students realize how challenging it is to formulate specific but open-ended questions while the interview is in progress. Many find it trying to simultaneously engage in active listening, while at the same time develop questions that encourage thick narratives. In retrospect, students often admit that they caught themselves asking dead-end questions. The interview practicum gives them a laboratory in which to hone their interview skills and by the time they review their transcripts, they are reasonably competent at identifying good mistakes in interview questions. Critically, the practicum allows students to understand that interview techniques cannot be divorced from epistemological theory in qualitative interviewing. Although it is important to strive for technical excellence in interview skills, their epistemological foundations should not be lost sight of.

Conclusion

Informed by the literature on teaching reflexivity in ethnographic observation and data analysis and on doing reflexivity in qualitative interviewing, this paper illustrates that teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing entails teaching epistemologically informed interview techniques and making conceptual baggage visible. The former requires a pedagogical design that problematizes a procedural, technical conceptualization of interview skills, and the latter examines the researcher's assumptions and destabilizes the researcher's subject position(s) and location. Together, these point to the interactive, relational attribute of qualitative interviewing. Teaching/learning reflexivity in qualitative interviewing leads to transformative insights wherein students adhere to critical self-examination.

My discussion of using an existing data set and hands-on learning as complementary strategies highlights particular challenges in teaching qualitative methods. Instructors teaching qualitative methods are at a disadvantage compared with those who teach quantitative methods since they lack standardized, readily available data sets with which to teach students research skills. In recent years, scholars have shown a growing interest in using non-conventional materials to teach qualitative methods; yet scholars rarely explore how instructors could effectively combine hands-on learning with other teaching strategies. Effectively teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing is critical, especially in light of mounting institutional constraints and ethics concerns that make it difficult and risky to naively send novice students into the field to "sink or swim."

This paper demonstrates the need to supplement pre-existing data with hands-on experiences in order to move students' understanding of reflexivity beyond an abstract, superficial level. Hands-on learning harnesses intellectual knowing. The interview practicum allows students to apply technical know-how as they construct their own interview guide. It also compels students to go beyond a formalistic acknowledgement of the hidden assumptions one often brings to research. Being informants in the

interview practicum, students learn the power an interviewer exercises, and how easily this power could be misused. Active listening and other interview skills become appreciated as more than techniques to “get the data,” and are instead understood as an integral part of inductive epistemology that requires meticulous reflection and critical interrogation. By examining their own interview transcripts, students become aware of how their conceptual baggage has worked its way into the research process. Students often categorize this as the eye-opening, “Ah-hah!” moment of my course. In their reflexive essays, they often revise their interview questions, and reflect on what they have learned. Teaching/learning reflexivity in qualitative interviewing is attained by a pedagogical approach that addresses the interwoven nature of interview techniques and epistemological principles.

Although this paper focuses on reflexivity in qualitative interviewing, teaching reflexivity is relevant to other subject areas in sociology. For example, instructors of critical sociological theories could explore how to encourage students to turn a critical lens to their own assumptions, personal histories, and socio-political locations. Integrating teaching/learning reflexivity into other subjects entails an intellectual knowing and personal transformation that is similar to teaching reflexivity in qualitative interviewing. Since reflexivity is a practice that will continue throughout a researcher’s career, one course cannot complete the experience. Students will likely continue to carry conceptual baggage as they conduct their dissertation research. Learning the fundamentals of reflexivity in a course such as my graduate seminar, however, can provide students with a necessary tool for qualitative research in much the same way that learning the fundamentals of statistical analysis provides necessary tools for quantitative research. A course like this cannot replace the apprenticeship style of learning that happens during dissertation research; it does, however, provide students with the resources to engage in it productively.

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ⁱ This view is widely shared. Over the years, many graduate students have been encouraged to enroll in my class by their thesis supervisors or principal investigators of research projects so that they can acquire "interviewing skills".

ⁱⁱ The interviews were conducted in 1993 by graduate student researchers at the University of Toronto under the direction of principle investigator, Dr. N. Howell. In 2001, Dr. Howell kindly contributed the data for instructional use in the manuscript, *Lives and Legacies: A Guide to Qualitative Interviewing* (Hsiung & Raddon, unpublished manuscript). We replaced names with pseudonyms and, where possible, removed institutional affiliations. Because the interviews have such educational and historical value, we are most thankful to the respondents for offering to make known their experiences

and perspectives.

ⁱⁱⁱ Use of these materials was approved by the ethics review board at University of Toronto (#20398).

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all students are referred to by an assigned number. Instead of citing specific incidents, whenever appropriate, I use composites to illustrate recurrent themes and common mistakes. I received informed consent from students whose writings are included in this paper.

^{iv} This is based upon my teaching experiences of qualitative methods over the years. In ethnographic fieldwork course, for example, students often do not understand nor appreciate why I insist that they must write detailed, thick fieldnotes until they are at the stage of data analysis. By that time, it is too late for those students who do not have rich enough data to carry out adequate analysis.

^v I appreciate Jan Angus's comment that encouraged me to tease out the pedagogical value of "good mistakes."