
Methodological Appendix

A Note on Sociological Reflexivity and “Situated Interviews”

The Question of Reciprocity

I am always concerned with the question of reciprocity. When people agree to do interviews with me, I get a couple of hours of their time and a piece of their story that I fashion into a publishable work product. What do my respondents get? They get to spend time with someone who cares to hear their story but who will not have an ongoing reciprocal relationship with them. Robert Weiss (1994) suggests that people are eager to talk about themselves, that they get satisfaction from having an eager audience, and that they may experience some relief or gratification by reflecting on their lives (Weiss 1994: 122). True to Weiss’s assessment, interviewees told me that they benefited from and appreciated an interviewer with a sympathetic ear who provides an atmosphere for self-reflection.

In the interview situation, I provide my respondents an opportunity to talk about themselves in an unselfish way. I believe there is a self-building or revising function to the self-telling that occurs in the interview. Interviews are a free space in which people are afforded the time and encouragement to reflect on their lives. While some respondents found the interview difficult to the extent that it brought up sensitive topics, most ended their encounter with me with an expression of neutral or positive emotion. Interviewee Albert Schultz seemed to appreciate reflecting on his own life with an interested listener. While an interview situation and a therapy session have very different goals (and listeners with very different professional training), they both hinge on atmospheres of active listening. Albert Schultz observed, “Wow, this is like therapy. I haven’t been this open with anyone besides my close friends in a long time.” I took that to be a compliment toward the atmosphere of trust and confidence that I try to foster in the interviewer-interviewee interaction.

Manny Medina reflected on his interview experience with me this way: “I really don’t think of this stuff all that much so it was a good chance to think about new things.” Manny finished the interview with a renewed appreciation of his parents’ support and contribution to his life. While I was not pushing any perspective (either assimilationist or pluralistic), Manny’s deliberation during the course of the interview about what it means to be an American with Mexican heritage led him to consider how to strike a balance that suits him and his ideals. He commented at the end, “Wow, you’ve really got me thinking that when I go to college I really should start or join a club that is with and for Latinos. Just to keep it up. But definitely not to overdo it and have it be to the exclusion of my American identity.” It is this quality of thoughtfulness that I hope my respondents engage in and find productive as a consequence of our brief time together.

I hope this study benefits the public and provides a way for people (not just members of the group studied) to better understand themselves and each other. Regarding the issue of my reciprocity with high schools for their assistance in my recruitment process, I was asked by a vice principal of one of the high schools to give a speech at the MEChA (Latino student organization) graduation awards ceremony, which I accepted. In a few cases, parents of teenagers asked for my input on their children’s college options. Seen as an educational resource, I was asked for advice on the application process, school selection, and financial aid. Throughout the research and writing process, I desired to give back to my respondents and the community because there would be no book without their participation. I sent all interviewees a personalized thank-you card within a week of the interview.

Mirroring or Fueling an Interest in Family

It is interesting that—as many of my respondents have indicated—my research asks questions that interviewees themselves enjoy pondering. Either they have mused on these questions beforehand or my investigation prompts a new quest for them. One woman who was too geographically distant to take part in the study wrote over email, “It’s interesting that your e-mail was forwarded to me . . . as I was recently thinking of my family (parent, aunts & uncles) who have passed away and who have taken our family history to their graves. I have been hoping that me and my generation of cousins asked enough questions and know our history.”

Similarly, interviewee Michael Jimenez phoned me after the interview to say that he wanted to use my family-based interview project as an opportu-

nity to open up his family history. He wished to gain more knowledge about his family and ethnic roots. As much interest as he expressed in his family history during the interview, he lacked detailed family stories. It is unclear whether my questions made him realize his deficiency of familial knowledge or whether he craved a more in-depth family history before my interview with him. Regardless, *he saw a way to use the interview with me as a tool for accomplishing his own goals.* I felt cheered by this because the question of reciprocity always looms for me; it is easier to see what my interviewees provide me than the other way around. While I walk away with a tape-recorded narrative that I will eventually craft into a publishable piece of scholarship, my respondents have shared two hours and a part of their life story with me, and the benefit to them is less obvious. Perhaps my interviewees experience some emotional or psychological relief by talking to me—but there is the alternative possibility of the interview dredging up buried and best-forgotten histories. Further, I am trained as a sociologist, not a psychologist or a social worker, and so my ability to aid my interviewees is severely limited. Given these concerns and constraints, I was always heartened to hear that my interviewees could see ways to use their interviews with me for their own personal goals and benefit. I would certainly be glad to be seen as a vehicle for family communication and memory transmission.

Assertions of Solidarity

In response to my email advertisements, many people chose to express solidarity with me and my work. While I drafted the email content in English, some people responded in Spanish for a flare of camaraderie (even though they would have no way of knowing my level of Spanish knowledge). A typical email reads, “I would be honored to help you with your data & would enjoy contributing to such a much needed body of knowledge. Please let me know how I can help an Hermana [sister] out!!!! Paz [peace], [Signed].” A couple of things are noteworthy here. First is the claim that my research area is a “needed body of knowledge,” which I think prompted a number of volunteers. Potential interviewees see themselves as interesting, important, and understudied. Second is the imagined sisterhood/brotherhood indicated by the writer’s use of “*hermana*.” I am certain that I benefited from a sense of “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). Insofar as potential respondents envision me as part of a community to which they belong (especially if they view it as marginalized, understudied, or threatened) they are more inclined to “help a [sister] out.” Third is the code switching into Spanish. This inter-

mingling of Spanish words into a primarily English text further buttresses the idea of an imagined community, one that is braced by language. Other sign-offs at the ends of emails offering interest or assistance included, “Siempre para nuestra gente . . .” [Always for our people.] and “Buena suerte y adelante mujer!” [Good luck and keep going, woman!]. I received many “congratulations” for conducting my research, people often thanking me for doing the work that I am doing because they believe it to be necessary.

Recruitment

“I’m a Researcher, Not a Telemarketer”

When calling families that had been referred to me as possible interview subjects, I generally tried to introduce myself quickly before I was mistaken for a telemarketer. Indeed, as I introduced myself over the phone to the husband of a woman I had been trying to reach, I explained that a member in a community organization referred me to her and that I was a researcher affiliated with the University of California–Berkeley. The husband chuckled and said, “In other words, you are not a telemarketer.”

This presumption was not unusual. When I worked with the Montes/Rosenberg family highlighted in chapter 2, Tamara and Jillian needed to cajole Maria into doing the interview. Maria’s family reported her to be a very “strong” woman but “shy,” and probably not prone to think that her narrative was of “use” to a social science researcher. It no doubt helped that I conducted interviews with her other family members first and that they were able to report neutral or positive experiences with me to her. They assured her that I would not ask embarrassingly personal questions—or that if I did she could skip them—and that it was an “easy” conversation with a young woman doing a “school project.” She—like other initially reluctant older interviewees—warmed up to the idea of assisting me in my education.

At the end of the interview with Maria, which had gone smoothly, Maria’s fifty-something-year-old niece came into the house for a visit. Maria had earlier invited me to speak to the niece about whether she and her family might participate in my project. Maria introduced me and I explained that we had just finished an interview for a project I was doing and asked if she would consider doing the same. She immediately and curtly said, “No.” I said “thanks anyway” and dropped the subject. Then Maria interjected that “she had been afraid I would ask lots of personal questions, but I didn’t, it was just about her, her opinions, her stories and history.” “Plus,” she added with emphasis, “it’s for a big school project she’s doing, so I wanted to help out.”

The niece's icy tone and demeanor melted and she said, "Oh, sorry about that, that was just my automatic reaction. I thought you were a reporter or something, so I slipped into my mode I get into with telemarketers where you just say 'no' off the bat." She softened after Maria backed up my request with her own positive experience—Maria said she "enjoyed talking to me." The niece ultimately still declined, this time saying that she didn't think her mother would like to participate. The emphasis on people "helping me with my education" was unexpectedly important in securing interviewees. It was also useful to do an interview with a younger-generation respondent first and have them report their experience to the older generation so they could make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

Well-Intentioned High School Administrators Using Stereotypes

In my attempts to gain access to high school students, I was most struck by the mental short-circuiting that would happen even among well-intentioned administrators: when I asked about third-generation Mexican American students, they routinely routed me to English as a Second Language classes. In several over-the-phone attempts to get directed to the appropriate administrator at a high school in the Bay Area, school employees would consistently route my call in the direction of English as a Second Language/Limited English Proficient, Spanish for Spanish Speakers, bilingual liaisons, immigrant family coordinators, or bilingual education teachers. I explained each time that I was looking for "third-generation Mexican American students"—meaning that grandparent(s) rather than parent(s) emigrated from Mexico. Despite my specificity, I was routinely funneled to a population that was too close to the immigrant generation (1.5 or second) to be useful for this project. Revealing stereotypes in action, administrators easily translated "third-generation Mexican American students" into "immigrants," "children of immigrants," or "Spanish speaking."

Familism in Hispanic Chambers of Commerce

I was warmly received by most of the Hispanic chambers of commerce that I contacted for recruitment purposes. I attended the mixers to which I was invited, connecting with my initial contact, and then was informally introduced to his/her friends and associates. The introduction flow was much like a game of dominoes: as one person would get excited about my project, he or she would introduce me to someone else they thought might

be able to directly or indirectly help me. Certainly, I did not get a 100 percent response rate from the Hispanic chambers of commerce I contacted, but those who did respond were enthusiastic. When I remarked on this openness and enthusiasm about my project, someone in the crowd to whom I was talking at a mixer remarked, “Of course! Because, after all, the Hispanic chamber of commerce is all about community.” I definitely had not considered this angle as a benefit to my recruitment tactic with the chambers. Because they are voluntary organizations built around racial and ethnic solidarity and common purpose, my own part-Latina identity and my Latino topic facilitated a bond with the people involved with the Hispanic chambers of commerce that allowed me to be quickly embraced. In my late twenties at the time, I was associating with chamber members who were between forty-five and sixty-five years old, so they perhaps slipped into a paternal (most mixer attendees were men) or mentor role with me. This paternalistic/mentor role was facilitated by the fact that I was (or felt like I was) in a subservient position as I asked for their help, advice, and social connections. To this point, at least one person cooed over me and my project, referring to me as “*mija*” (a Spanish endearment meaning literally “my daughter” and loosely “darling”).

Interview Format

Triangulation among Three Generations

One of the strengths of interviewing several people from different generations in the same family was the way I could parse out similarities and differences among the narratives. This way, I achieved an understanding of both common experiences within the family and points of departure. For instance, in the Vargas family, I interviewed the first- and second-generation women who were very strongly identified as Mexican and immersed in the Mexican community. To my surprise, the third-generation descendant had virtually nothing to report in the way of family stories or events that highlighted her Mexican identity. Her mother made it sound as though they “lived and breathed” Mexican culture and yet the third-generation woman came up blank when I asked questions about Mexican cultural practices. Here, the third-generation interview contradicted the assessments of the earlier two generations. I treat all interviewee narratives as explaining their social worlds the way they see and experience them. Therefore, perspective—in this case generational perspective—matters. The differences between generations were stark in this example; yet that is valuable data that is a benefit of conducting interviews with multiple family members about the same

topic. This is a lesson of the maxim in qualitative methodology that different people in the same family may have vastly different experiences within and regarding the same family.

Balancing Active Listening and My Interview Schedule

Several years ago in a methods class, Arlie Hochschild commented, “Sometimes the interviewer’s questions are interruptions.” In the course of an interview, I would juggle peering down periodically at my interview schedule while at the same time listening to the interviewee’s narrative for thematic leads to follow. As I became comfortable with interviewing and my interview schedule became seared into my memory, I realized that I was conversationally delivering my questions. I was playing the game of mentally checking off the questions the interviewee had answered while still keeping an ear open for attention-grabbing pieces of narrative to curiously follow. As Jewel, a pop musical artist, remarked in an interview with a radio disk jockey, “I dislike it when I am in interviews with people and they are looking down at their papers for the next question rather than listening to what I am saying.”¹ Hearing this comment from a much-interviewed popular culture star, I thought about how minimizing my reliance on an interview schedule could ease an interviewee’s concern over not being heard. By practicing active listening, and periodically rather than constantly referring to a list of questions or topics, interviewers acknowledge their interviewees. Attention to the flow of the interview and following leads when they appear allows the interviewee to talk in a guided, semi-organic fashion. The interviewer continues to steer the conversation to address points of interest yet the interview moves forward with attention to how the narrative naturally develops.

My task as a social science researcher is to look beyond what meets the eye of the naïve observer. This penetration entails figuring out how interviewees conceive of themselves and experience their place within the world. To do this, some interviewees required a stream of questions to guide their narrative, while others took more assertive control in telling their story. While the latter style required fewer prompts from me, I would occasionally use questions as guideposts to keep the conversation on topic. Due to the unfolding of the interview process that is built on a rapport with the interviewee that encourages his/her participation as well as the interviewer’s active listening skills, each interview takes on its own shape. Even with an interview schedule, some questions were covered in depth while others were briefly touched on. Depending on interviewer-interviewee dynamic

and rapport, an interviewee's life history, and personal style, the interview takes on its own form. Beginning with the same recipe, each interview is unique. Given these flexible contingencies plus a life story and perspective that can be told from myriad angles at any time, I believe that all interviews are the result of an interviewee's story that is told *in interaction with* the interviewer.

On Being a "Gendered" Interviewer: Interviewee Surveillance

True to Simone de Beauvoir's revolutionary statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1978), I found that I was not just an interviewer but a woman interviewer. Of course, I was not just a woman interviewer but an unmarried, American-born, educated, middle-class, mixed-ethnicity (European mix and Mexican), light-skinned, dark-haired, Spanish-surnamed, heterosexual, and young interviewer. The social location of all interviewers bears on the interview dynamic, so this is not new. What is of interest to me here is the ways in which I was constituted as a "woman" in the context of some interviews.

My unmarried status was jarring to a few older-generation respondents who expected a 28-year-old woman like myself to be married. This is probably due to their youthful experience of seeing marriages occur at a relatively early age, in combination with their racialized expectation that a Mexican American woman should be married by thirty. This is illustrated in my interview with 84-year-old, first-generation immigrant Juan Ramos. To my surprise, as I was packing up to leave during the "wind down" after-interview conversation, Juan asked if I was married. He sounded shocked when I stated, "No." He came back with, "What?! No?! But you are so pretty!" He is of an older generation, and yet he was stunned that I upset his expectation that a woman in her late twenties would/should be married. In making sense of me, he had to reconfigure—if briefly—his notion of gender in the world around him. I, on the other hand, was momentarily gendered as he stereotyped me as a woman who should be married.

An interview with second-generation Lee Morelos echoed this theme of a respondent surveilling my marital status and policing my gender. Unlike Juan, Lee was not shocked by my unmarried status, because he is a businessman used to seeing women delay marriage for the sake of education or a profession. Lee took on a paternalistic voice as he offered up his gender-making advice. Lee asked near the end of the interview, "Have you ever been married?" I said, "No." He replied, "Wow, well, I'd have thought that someone

should have snatched you up by now.” I smiled slightly, knowing it was a compliment. Lee’s wife was easy with the exchange and as they both walked me outside they asked me more questions about my experience and background. In the context of a discussion of marriage, Lee boisterously laughed and said, “What you need is a big Anglo man!” He slapped my back and said, “Oh, I’m just kidding.” Just then his wife was chiming in loudly, “No, she just needs a good man. That’s what counts, she wants a good man.” Lee continued, “Well, in my day, people got married young. In my children’s day they got married in their mid to late twenties. Now it seems like if a woman wants a career she puts off having a husband and having children. What has been your experience? Are you putting marriage off till after school or have you not found the right man yet?” After I provided a brief answer, Lee offered some unsolicited counsel:

If I can offer you some advice: stay choosy. You also don’t want to marry someone who is not as educated as you. You don’t want him to always have that sense of insecurity with you. So you shouldn’t marry a farmhand—not that they’re not good people—but he wouldn’t be able to understand you and you are going to need that. So don’t marry down, if you can help it. You want someone who is at your level and can be there with you and understand you. Plus you just don’t want to put that insecurity in someone and have that be an issue, have that always be there and have him feel like he’s not enough for you.

I nodded, listening. He followed up, “So it’s good to be choosy, but don’t be too choosy!”

Lee was enforcing gender roles through his well-intentioned paternalistic advice. He cautioned me against being overeducated in comparison to a future spouse, lest I intimidate him. I should not partner with someone below my educational station because I might emasculate him. If a man is not the “head of the house”—or perhaps one of two nearly equal heads of household—in terms of breadwinning and education level, then an unhappy union would ensue. In this gendering process, I was told to stay within certain gender bounds for the good of my future relationship. I claim this is part of a gendering process, for I certainly cannot imagine him telling a *man* not be more educated than his future female partner—this would be *expected* and there would be no alarm over a highly educated man making his wife insecure about her lesser level of educational attainment. In the spirit of looking out for me, Lee finally advised me to strike a balance between being

“choosy” but not “too choosy,” for assertiveness on the marriage market has been traditionally less the business of women than of men.

Apart from marital expectations and advice that were cast in my direction, another way in which I “became” a woman was through the act of interviewing itself. Listening has long been considered a particularly feminine virtue. While “equality feminism”² sociologists have long battled the socially constructed quality of such sex-typed traits, it is still popularly held that women are “better” at listening than men. As a female interviewer, I sometimes fell victim to this sex-typed role of listener. While I actively engaged the interviewee with questions, I still spoke less often and was thus the more passive of the interlocutors. Understanding listening as a traditional female trait—one that perhaps men select as they search for heterosexual partners—sheds an interesting light on an exchange I had with Moises Ramos (Juan Ramos’s grandson) at the end of my interview with him. I interviewed Moises first and we arranged that I would return on another day to the home that he shared with his grandfather, Juan, for an interview with the older man.

At the end of our interview, Moises looked up at me and started chuckling. I asked why and he said, “Well, I was going to ask you when I can see you again.” He bowed and shook his head in mild embarrassment. Shrugging his shoulders he added, “I don’t know, that’s just what you say to a woman.” I don’t know if this question was meant to refer to the fact that I would be returning to interview his grandfather or whether he in fact wanted to see me in a social situation. He had laughed self-effacingly at his impulse but what I found interesting was the impulse itself. If listening is coded as feminine and I, as a female interviewer, engage this behavior as professional conduct, then the confusion of professional versus personal is fascinating. This dynamic of the man being revealing and the woman being in the position of the “empathetic listener” mimics traditional gender scripts of an “active” man and a “passive” woman. Further, traditional gender roles would expect the woman to be emotionally sensitive, to elicit emotion and sharing from the man, and to respond sympathetically to him. Such gendered expectations are relevant here, as in the professional capacity of interviewer I end up fitting in the role of an empathetic female with whom males can discuss emotional topics. My inquisitiveness and responsiveness could have fostered the illusion of a nonprofessional relationship. Additionally, the content of the interviews themselves was of a personal nature. This furthered the conceit of the interview situation bordering on a gender-typed social situation.

Insider Dilemma

Patricia Zavella, a Chicana feminist sociologist, instructs, “we [researchers] should realize that we are almost always simultaneous insiders and outsiders” (Zavella 1993). She points out that studying one’s own population (be it race, class, gender, etc.) and being an “insider” carries advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it can facilitate access to that population. On the other hand, it can amplify feelings of responsibility to the population that exceeds the researcher’s abilities or resources.

I have wondered if my subject matter impelled highly positively identified Mexican Americans to participate in my research project. For example, activists in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s may be inclined to agree to participate in my study because they believe that their involvement may further the cause of Chicano representation. I can be seen as furthering this cause in two ways: (1) through academic work that raises consciousness about Chicano history and presence; and (2) as an educator who is Mexican American herself and concerned with representing her bicultural background. Speaking to this point, interviewees would periodically refer to me as a “good example of a successful Latino/a.” For example, Tina Acevedo made it clear she was interested in helping out because she thought my book was worthwhile and because she is always in support of “*nuestra gente*” (our people). There is a way in which my insider status (at least by Mexican heritage, if not gender in this case as well) helps me gain access to respondents. Some respondents saw my work as important and, above that, appreciated “one of us” doing something to understand “our” culture. While this is somewhat reductionist—because I am not only of Mexican descent but of European heritage as well, a woman, educated, middle class, and so on—being an “insider” lets me pass the first test of authenticity and prompts acquiescence to the interview. While I cannot guess at the myriad motivations respondents had for participating in my research, I suspect that my being an “insider” on some axes of social position facilitated participation.

This page intentionally left blank