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14

RACE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

◆ **Christopher Dunbar, Jr.**
Dalia Rodriguez
Laurence Parker

The only ethic I can find that you can hang your hat on says:
Now that I have the material, how do I treat my subjects? Do I accord
them all the humanity they deserve or do I write a crude and simplistic exposé?

David Simon, June 2000

David Simon, former reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, goes directly to the heart of the interview process when he pointedly asks, "How do I treat my subjects?" (quoted in Scott 2000). This question focuses our attention on the subject that is taken to lie behind the interview respondent. Does the researcher/interviewer approach the respondent as if he or she were simply a vessel of answers—a mere interviewee—who can provide the information needed for a particular story or the data for a research project, or does the in-

terviewer treat the respondent as a subject replete with a full complement of historical, biographical, and social sensibilities (see Holstein and Gubrium 1995; see also Gubrium and Holstein, Chapter 1, this volume)? Where interpretations of interview data are concerned, are we merely to report our findings and write our stories as if what we have heard is "objective" fact, or are we obligated, as C. Wright Mills (1959) passionately argues, to link the personally biographical with the social and historical?

In this chapter, we argue and present case material to show that the interview process and the interpretation of interview material must take into account how social and historical factors—especially those associated with race—mediate both the meanings of questions that are asked and how those questions are answered. Responsibility lies primarily with the interviewer and his or her sponsor, but all participants in the interview process are ultimately implicated in these concerns.

Although there is always an envisioned subject behind an interview respondent, this subjectivity—the subject or agent who produces meaningful, contextualized interview responses—becomes especially problematic when the respondent is a member of a "nonmainstream" group or population. If there are myriad assumptions made about mainstream respondents, they commonly emanate from presumed similarities between interviewer and interviewee. For nonmainstream respondents—whether they are persons of color, members of culturally distinct or enigmatic groups, or persons of nonconformist political persuasions or lifestyles, for example—the complications and uncertainties of how such subjects will be constituted virtually multiply. A common consequence, as Simon implies in the remarks quoted above, is that "crude and simplistic" portrayals of complex and nuanced experience emerge, because subjects are not accorded their due respect as distinctly situated individuals.

Here we focus on race as a distinct dimension of subjectivity. In the contemporary context of American and Western European society, being "white" is the unreflected-upon standard from which all other racial identities vary. But the meaning and consequence of that variation itself often goes unnoted. Frequently, persons of color are thought of as nonmainstream subjects in relation to a white standard—people whose social and/or personal characteristics do not reflect those that are taken for granted as "conventional" in the general population. What this might possi-

bly mean is glossed over by attempts to standardize or normalize research perspectives and procedures.

As subjects, persons of color share the experience of other groups who have not traditionally been accorded viable subjectivities in their own right. For example, until recently, few interviewers figured that when interviewing women, they needed to take account of these respondents as special subjects distinct from the population at large (see Reinharz and Chase, Chapter 11, this volume). This was also true of interviewing men (see Schwalbe and Wolkomir, Chapter 10, this volume). Interviewers viewed both men and women simply as "respondents" for the most part, and proceeded to interview them as such, not particularly formulating questions in terms of special social or historical experiences that distinguished them as subjects. The rise of feminist consciousness and, in turn, the emergence of gender self-consciousness for men transformed female and male subjects from being generic mainstream respondents into subjects with considerable distinctions. The upshot for research, and especially interviewing, is that we are now increasingly procedurally conscious of femaleness and maleness as subject positions from which respondents may or may not speak in interview situations; we take this into account in relating to both the interview process and the interpretation of interview material. (For a discussion of "queering" as a further specification of gendered subjectivity, see Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer, Chapter 12, this volume.) We argue for a similar procedural consciousness with regard to race.

It is our view that such a sensibility as it applies to the subjectivity of racialized populations requires very special attention and needs to be heightened throughout the research process. Researchers and interviewers cannot simply apply technical skills and be straightforwardly "objective," as if respondents were people whose subjectivity could be taken for granted. Race is a category of the subject that has traditionally

struck so many negative social and historical resonances that interviewers must always be vigilant for the ways it becomes insinuated into all aspects of identity and self-presentation, either by assertion or through silence. Once again following Simon, we suggest that the only *ethic* that properly applies in interviewing is one that accords the subject all the humanity he or she deserves. As we will show, it is an ethic that necessarily directs us to the racialized subject behind the respondent. Knowledge of this subject is immeasurably significant for an interviewer's understanding of what the respondent is saying, why he or she might remain silent in relation to particular interview topics, and how the interviewer might proceed to influence the context for openness and the respondent's willingness to speak honestly about his or her experiences.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. The first is a brief overview of literature on race and the interview process. It is not exhaustive; rather, we present this overview to show how a procedural consciousness in the matter of a racialized research subject has emerged. The second part of the chapter draws from Dalia Rodriguez's field research on interviewing nonwhite subjects in educational settings. As Rodriguez shows, the everyday, noninterview contexts surrounding an interview situation can help a researcher to gain deep insight into what he or she needs to take into account in approaching and interacting with respondents behind whom racialized subjects are to be found. A central proposition that emerges is that interviewing nonwhite subjects may require a researcher to conduct extensive ethnographic fieldwork, both before and during the interview process. This fieldwork should center on how the lived experiences of the members of the particular subject category under consideration can inform participants' conversation in the interview situation. Rodriguez is quite proactive in articulating an ethic of procedural consciousness as she turns methodological matters into concerted, re-

flexive practice that has direct implications for the meaning of being a subject/respondent.

The third part of the chapter builds on these themes to offer insights into, and suggestions for, the interviewing of persons of color. Using as a point of departure some of the experiences Christopher Dunbar, Jr., has had in his research with African American youth, we propose some special sensibilities that might inform interview research where race is concerned. Among other things, Dunbar's experience as an African American male researcher attempting to study younger African American males suggests that the simple common ground of race provides no guarantee that the expressed subjects behind these respondents will honestly relate their experiences as black youth. The lesson, as we will show, is that respondents themselves recognize the subtleties and complexities of identity—of race and other subject positions—and this affects the kinds of subjects/respondents they will be if they choose to be interviewed.

◆ Interviewing and Race

Interviewing has always been a major methodological component of both qualitative and quantitative social research and of journalistic reporting. The art and science of hearing data has been at the center of how researchers obtain information, get the story right, and offer readers with insights into the social world of interviewees (Casey 1996; Rubin and Rubin 1995). However, the interview process, especially interviewing using "standardized" methods, has always been problematic with respect to nonmainstream subjects, especially in the area of race. Discussions of race currently center on how it plays out as a social construct, either in color-blind discourse and whiteness or from critical race perspectives and interpretations such as critical race theory, critical race feminism, Latina/o

critical race theory (LatCrit), Asian/Pacific Islander positions, Tribal Nation perspectives, and race's intersections with other aspects of identity and issues of power (see, for example, Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lipsitz 1998; Omi and Winant 1994; Tate 1997). The debates in this area mirror conflicts in qualitative and quantitative research regarding the interview process and race. Historically, researchers have asked why interviews are done on "racial- ized" populations, for what purpose, and by whom (Andersen 1993; Stanfield 1993; Foster 1994).

HORIZONS OF RACIAL INTERVIEWING

The types of interviews related to race range from polls that are conducted to determine racial attitudes to in-depth focus groups and oral life histories. For example, a recent survey of racial perceptions in the United States gathered many of its data on race from organizations such as the National Opinion Research Center and the Institute for Social Research (Schuman et al. 1998). A *New York Times* poll measuring race relations in the United States (Sack and Elder 2000) was conducted through telephone interviews with 2,165 adults, with African Americans sampled at a higher rate than normal to permit analysis of black attitudes in greater depth. The results of these interviews indicated that both whites and blacks see some progress in the area of race relations. Many whites who were interviewed, however, expressed fatigue with race as an issue and said that they thought too much time and energy are devoted to it. This finding corresponds with the findings of other interview research conducted on the racial attitudes of white European Americans, in which whites indicated that they believed racism to be a thing of the past (Berger 1999). White respondents said they themselves were not racist, and very few respondents revealed honest, in-depth,

or self-critical feelings about race. However, in the *New York Times* poll and other interview studies (see, for example, Feagin 1992), African Americans in general have said that they see race as a determining factor in their lives, especially in the areas of education, housing, and employment.

These views on race have focused on the "black/white" paradigm that has been central to race-based discourse, law, and social policy. However, some have called for a broader discussion of race that includes perspectives and intersections with ethnicity. Critical race theory and its progressions into LatCrit and Asian American critical legal perspectives have been helpful with respect to providing a legal, social policy, and culturally sensitive framework from which to view race, power, and authority in the 21st century. For example, Cheryl Harris (1993) examined the role of law in shaping how white, as a race, is associated with property and power, over and against Native Americans and African Americans. The connection of "whiteness" to property rights has been used against Native Americans in the confiscation of Native lands and the relegation of indigenous populations to reservations and subordinate status. Harris notes how the connection of "whiteness" to property also has been used legally against African Americans with regard to slavery and white ownership of African chattel.

Another example of the expanding perspectives on race is the work of Robert Chang (1994) and others featured in a 1994 special issue of the *Asian Law Journal* of the *California Law Review* devoted to critical Asian American legal scholarship. Some of the articles in this issue examine the "honorary white" status of Asian Americans at various points in U.S. legal history, juxtaposing this status with discriminatory actions taken at other times, such as the forced relocation and internment of Japanese during World War II. Edward Park and John Park (1999) have called for new perspectives on race theory not just to be inclusive, but to alter fundamentally the lens through which researchers analyze Asian

American and Latino racial realities. A critical race theory position here would account for their differences related to Asian American/Pacific Islander American ethnicity, culture, and language and how this is also linked to transnational issues and racial status. It would also consider how the concepts of race and racial groups are constructed by the larger society, taking factors such as immigration and U.S. foreign policy into account in the monolithic ways Asian American populations are viewed and treated in the United States. Finally, the LatCrit movement has been important in shaping theory and documenting the racialization of Latino/a and Chicano/a groups. It has shown how the myth of assimilation has been held out to these groups, but also how they, in turn, have had to face the reality of laws and social hostility directed at them through such anti-immigration and affirmative action measures as Propositions 187 and 209 in California ("LatCrit Theory" 1997; Martinez 1999).

Interviews have emerged as one of the main ways of documenting the lived experience undergirding critical race theory. Topical oral histories, life histories, and evaluation interviews show that racism and racial discrimination play important roles in recent challenges to the prevailing notion of legal neutrality and race in the civil rights desegregation era. The thick descriptions and interviews characteristic of case study research not only serve illuminative purposes, but can be used to document institutional racism as well as stories of overt personal racism. The interviewing process yields narratives that can be used in building cases against racially biased policies and discriminatory practices, as shown in the historical and personal testimonies of African American expert witnesses in *Knight v. State of Alabama* (1991). In that case, the court found the state of Alabama guilty of perpetuating a dual, and racially discriminatory, segregated higher-education system. Interviews related to race can serve important purposes in that descriptions of discrimination can form an integral and in-

valuable part of the historical and current legal evidence in such cases.

REFLEXIVITY AND RACE

Another issue related to the interview process and race involves reflexivity in research (Pillow 2000). Too often, qualitative researchers have neglected discussions of the subjective lenses through which they view their research (Van Maanen 1988). But that has begun to change as qualitative researchers and ethnographers in particular are making efforts to write about the researcher's position and how the researcher is affected by the fieldwork and field relationships. This is especially noteworthy regarding how race and race relations shape the research and its implications (see Behar 1995; Cochran-Smith 2000). Yet this too is not without controversy, as some reflexive accounts have been criticized for being too focused on the personal tales of the researcher or for dealing too much with self-therapy as the researcher engages in ethnic or racial narcissism and confessional tales related to mistakes made in the field, rather than more directly addressing matters related to race, representation, and the reporting of data or its implications for social justice and validity (Buford and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Deyhle and Swisher 1997).[1]

John Stanfield (1993, 1994) and Michelle Foster (1994) have criticized the use of interview data as narratives in research with respect to how they are used to describe various aspects of black life and the African American community. Both of these authors argue that narrative descriptions by white European American researchers are fraught with problems of subject exploitation. They assert that white researchers often neglect diverse discourse styles in their interview protocols and fail to deal with the plethora of power struggles that can take place between the researchers and "subjects" of color (see also Briggs, Chapter 44, this volume). Part of this criti-

cism has led researchers to try to paint more nuanced portraits of African American life (e.g., Anderson 1990) and the experiences of other groups of color. For example, John Langston Gwaltney's (1980) interviews with African Americans reveal complexities of urban life and depths of black experience not previously told by most white researchers.

Many ethnographies have reflexively elaborated how the researchers have conducted their interviews to reflect the racial reality of aspirations and expectations concerning how to address racism in everyday life (see MacLeod 1995; Noblit 1999).[2] Nevertheless, researchers' reflections on the nuances of subject-interviewer interaction have often failed to identify important factors that revolve around race. For example, it is likely that white researchers have frequently been deliberately misled by the "trickster" discourse of African Americans and Native Americans as well (Vizenor 1988; Jeffries 1994). The trickster is an imagined amalgamative figure who uses comic discourse and language as a game to tell stories that challenge conformity and existing norms with multiple meanings. Some groups have typically used trickster discourse in relating to outsiders. For example, Native Americans have used such discourse to fool traditional anthropologists who have tried to interpret the meanings of tribal nation folklore; during slavery, the trickster was the defiant representative of African Americans against the oppression of the masters. The trickster disrupts the idea that we can know another group if we are outsiders (or, in some cases, insiders). The trickster can play a significant role in interview dialogue and data surrounding the experiences of members of groups of color and what they say about their racial experiences (Buendia 2000).

Other reflexive concerns are decidedly epistemological. Much recent research builds on the work of Maxine Baca Zinn (1979) and her insights related to insider-outsider qualitative studies with women of color. A related Chicana feminist episte-mology underpins a wave of new research into the postcolonial identities that emerge as young women struggle with race, class, and gender issues growing up in Mexico and the United States (see Delgado Bernal 1998; Gonzalez 1998; Pizarro 1998; Villenas 1996).

Matters of social context and interviewing have moved in varied directions. For example, issues of race and reflexivity bear on sexual nonconformity. When analysis of race has been combined with sexual orientation, the use of narrative has been problematic for gays and lesbians of color because their stories have been used against them within homophobic institutional/political structures (Tanaka and Cruz 1998). Other issues relate to researchers of color studying and interviewing whites and examining their perspectives on race and racism (Parker 1998; Roediger 1998). Another concern for researchers is how formal interview settings may restrict more idiomatic forms of racial/cultural expression, leading to considerations of how researchers can conduct interviews in a group format/setting to facilitate talk among the participants, including the interviewer (Meacham 2000). The emerging critical race perspective and its connection, through interviews, to qualitative research has created powerful frameworks from which researchers can analyze and illustrate the larger context of the social construction of race.

◆ Understanding the Racialized Subject

Given the growing sensitivity to race in interview research, it is imperative that we examine how the racialized subject can be understood by way of interviews. The social context of racialized experience provides the backdrop against which the interview subject is constituted and understood as the interviewer attempts to elicit a full

and authentic version of the interviewee's story. But what subject will be activated by interview questions? Whose voice might be heard or silenced? And how can the interviewer anticipate the narratives that will emerge and what they mean in the ongoing lives of respondents?

Dalia Rodriguez, a Latina graduate student from a working-class family in the U.S. Midwest, conducted a field study of overt and perceived racism encountered by students of color on a college campus and at the annual professional and student development conference held by the professional group Latinos in Higher Education. In the following subsections, Rodriguez presents both informal interview narratives and ethnographic descriptions of the social contexts that inform her understanding of what she hears her respondents say. In the process, she provides readers with information that gives shape to the subject behind the interview respondent. Her first-person accounts display the reflexive interplay between background knowledge derived ethnographically and experientially and the personal narratives generated by way of interview questions. This interplay fleshes out the subjects of her research; in documenting her related research experiences, Rodriguez adds rich and significant social detail as it relates to what her respondents could mean by what they say.

PROCEDURAL UNDERSTANDING

I run down the hall with my bag half open, frantically double-checking to see whether I have extra batteries for my tape recorder, extra tapes, and my interview guide. I rush into the "dungeon," the graduate student T.A. office, filled with rows of battered desks piled with old exams and papers. Okay, he's not here yet. I sit in front of my desk deciding whether or not to start grading my students' papers. Just as I pick up my pen, in walks J.R., an African American undergraduate student; he is about six feet tall, muscular, with long dreadlocks. I start by asking him about what he's studying and about his future plans. He has come back to school after taking a few years off and plans to finish his bachelor's degree in December.

We then move on to the meat of the interview, and I ask him about his experience as an African American on campus. He responds:

> When I first came to this campus . . . it's just a shame that I was grouped into a group that had to prove that I belonged here. It wasn't like I was accepted with open arms by professors. Ya know, they see me . . . as a big black guy. Just having to prove myself to people, constantly . . . [I want to] start a rebellion against the status quo. Like my rhetoric professor, I used to hate going to that class. She used to dog me out about how I talk, cuz I was just fresh out of high school, and I used to speak a lot of slang then and I would turn papers in and she would say things were wrong with the paper. She told us we could pick any subject we wanted and then I wrote about my relationship with my girlfriend versus my friend. One time I was five minutes late for her class, and she marked my paper an entire grade. Since that experience I questioned myself and thought, "Man, maybe I don't belong in school." . . . You do end up second guessing yourself.

Hearing J.R. express self-doubts reminds me of my own trepidations. I think about my first year in graduate school and the constant doubting. No "hellos" in the hallway from professors, no "How ya doing?" When a professor did speak to me, it was to say, "Your work isn't good enough," or "Why is that [studying race] significant? Everyone studies race, do something different." I was constantly doubting myself, my abilities, and feeling like perhaps I'm not cut out to be an academic. I recall Jonathan, a graduate student, asking me one day, "Notice that there aren't any American ra-

cial/ethnic minorities in this new year's co-hort?" Yes, I had heard through another graduate student of the many reasons that African Americans and Latinas/os were not being admitted that year, because the department was trying to improve its national ranking and admitting racial/ethnic minorities who were "doomed to fail" would only bring down the reputation of the program. After all, Latinos represent such a small percentage of Ph.D. recipients. Surprised to see myself and two other minorities in the program come back to finish our second year, one professor said, "Oh! You guys are back?!?! That's a surprise." I know they expected me to fail.

Hearing J.R. doubt himself angers me because I know that he deserves better, and I make every effort to encourage J.R. to continue his education. I ask him, "What are you planning on doing after you get your degree?" He responds, "I was thinking about graduate school . . . but, I don't know. . . . I don't think I have that great of a GPA, I mean I'm no A student." I can hear some confidence, along with doubt—doubt that I know he shouldn't have.

Breaking the methodological "rule" of not giving an interviewee your own personal views, I tell J.R., "I have also doubted myself . . . a lot. . . . Ya know, I study race/ethnicity issues, not simply because it's an interesting topic but also because of my personal experiences." He deserves to hear that he can make it. "You don't have to be an all-A student to apply to graduate school. That's great that you want to attend graduate school, you should still apply. . . . I'm sure that you already know this, but as an African American male, you will encounter so much more racism at every level, and don't *ever* let anyone tell you that you're not good enough. When you get ready to apply to graduate school, please call me, we'll work on your application, okay?" I scribble down my number as well as my e-mail address and tell him to contact me.

* * *

This instance of empathy and self-disclosure might be viewed in conventional research terms as "contamination," but one could also argue that, in this case, it further encouraged the respondent—now conceived as a capable and deserving subject—to elaborate on the racialized aspects of his student experience. Employing an approach similar to what Jack Douglas (1985) calls "creative interviewing," the interviewer forges common ground to share with the respondent, so that the subjects behind both interviewee and interviewer share a familiar, if sometimes uncomfortable, narrative space (see also in this volume Eder and Fingerson, Chapter 9; Reinharz and Chase, Chapter 11). In order to cultivate a climate of mutual disclosure, Douglas suggests to the researcher, "know thyself" (p. 51).

By reflexively constituting and engaging a racialized subject with whom she shares an appreciation for what it means to be a student of color, the interviewer provides empirical grounds for elaboration on the respondent's narrative. She thus forms a relevant procedural understanding of the respondent. J.R. continues:

> A lot of times when I walk into an administrative office, they [administrators] keep asking me if I'm in a "special program," an assisting type of program, and I have never seen them ask a white student that. There will be a white student in front of me and they ask him, "Your name, social security number, college you belong to" and that's it. Whereas every time I go up there I gotta be in some special program.

J.R. goes on to tell about constantly being questioned and having administrators and professors make assumptions about him as a black student, about how they constantly assume that he's "not good enough."

> I even had a professor tell me something about my hair, cuz ya know, I have dreadlocks. My professor told me, "I

> like your hair, but a lot of professors can be intimidated by that and that maybe when you go talk to a professor, maybe you should dress up." I'm thinking, "I'm in college and everyone dresses in T-shirts and jeans and it's not like I'm at a conference, where I would dress accordingly."

Reflexively playing off her own experiences and feelings about what she is being told, the interviewer interactively crafts the subject of her interview into one to be appreciated rather than trivialized, compartmentalized, or derided. In this form of active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), she conveys a personal appreciation for the subject's racialized experience, which in turn cultivates further narrative disclosure. Although the interviewer's building J.R.'s confidence with respect to graduate school may reap long-term benefits for J.R., the more immediate research consequence is that he continues to be forthcoming in the context of the interview; J.R. poignantly elaborates the details of how considerations of race infuse his university experience—even though race may only hover in the background of research conversations.

In this instance, the interviewer draws upon her own experience as a person of color and minority student—her autobiography and autoethnography, so to speak—to fill in some of the "humanity" that is necessary for a nuanced portrayal of the subject. Moreover, she uses her general sensitivities to racial issues—acquired experientially and ethnographically—to provide a framework for asking about, listening to, and understanding stories about the impact of race on the lives of students of color. Not only does she empathize with the respondent, she "activates" a racialized subject behind the respondent, inciting narratives that reveal the implications of race that might not otherwise become available. Following a proactive research ethic that aims to empower the racialized subject, Rodriguez is well aware of the need to support

the formation of a respondent who will forthrightly speak to his racialized experiences. She attempts to introduce a kind of procedural consciousness to the interview process. Although her active engagement in the interview interaction may violate strictures of standardization, the anticipated trade-off is the likelihood of deeper and more complete, meaningful disclosure.

SPEAKING OUT AND BEING SILENCED

Being attuned to both the lived and procedural complexities of a racialized subject can help an interviewer to draw that subject out in the course of an interview. Why do some respondents nonetheless remain silent or inarticulate regarding race? Is it that they have nothing to say? Do they have no relevant experience to recount? Rodriguez's experiences with other students of color tell us that there are alternative explanations, as we hear in the following narrative and in her interactions in other educational settings.

* * *

> Whenever students discussed issues in class, they, including the professor, would turn to me and ask, "What do Latinos think?" I tried to tell them, hey, yeah, sure . . . I'm Mexican, but I'm also a true cowboy! My home consists of horses and a ranch back at home—so, there's a lot more to me than being Mexican.

Although I understand the importance of speaking out, I can't help but think about one semester when I assisted in an "Introduction to Women's Studies" course. An African American student approached me about feeling exactly the same way. The prior week we had a discussion about *Skin Deep* (Hoffman 1995), a documentary film about college students of color who get together for a retreat to confront each other's

attitudes about issues of race/ethnicity. I started the discussion by announcing the many events and symposia offered on campus. Because we had been discussing body image issues the previous week, I decided to offer extra credit to anyone who would attend the Latina body image issues workshop held at La Casa, the Latina/o cultural center on campus. As I continued with the announcements, I heard Linda and Jen, both sitting in the front row, right in front of me, whispering something. Linda, blonde with bright red lipstick, covered her mouth with one hand, but I distinctly heard her tell Linda, "Well, if we go you know that we'll be the only white people there," laughing underneath her breath. "Umhhh. . . . Do you have something you'd like to share with the class?" I asked, trying not to sound angry. "No," they responded. Linda and Jen looked at each other and began to laugh, while I looked at them intently and inquiringly. "No, never mind."

The task for the day was to get students to open up about issues of race, an all-too-familiar challenge I meet every single semester in every class I teach. However, I felt confident that my students would eventually talk about these sensitive issues, because we had spent weeks repeatedly discussing theoretical paradigms and sociological concepts: social conflict theory, structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, internalized racism, and blaming the victim. I began by asking them what their initial reactions were to the film they had seen. One student commented that she really enjoyed the film and that she felt that she could relate to it because the setting was on a college campus. Others nodded in agreement.

But the students still seemed hesitant to "really talk." I kept hearing "Yes, great film," over and over again, but no one offered any specific thoughts about *why* it was a good film. Keeping in mind my pedagogical rules for getting people to "talk more," I did not ask, "Why?" but instead asked, "What about the film did you like, specifically?" Dead silence. Hesitantly, Es-

ther, an incoming freshman who usually sat quietly in the front row, said, "Well, I thought it was interesting to see how white students feel when they're the only ones in the room. I mean, it's more common to hear that from racial/ethnic minorities, but not from white students."

"Yes!" Tracy jumped in. "One time I was in a fashion show for an Asian American cultural event and I just remember feeling as if everyone there kept staring at me. I mean, I know they were wondering, 'How did this white girl get into this fashion show? What is *she* doing here?' "

"Yes!" other white female students chimed in. "It is alienating being the only white person in a room, you feel like everyone's staring at you." Esther again expressed how glad she was to have seen the film, because she had never "thought about how it would be to be the only white person in a room. I never realized this before but you [indicating me], Ana, and Lindsay are the only minorities in this room." All 23 white female students stared at me, waiting for me to reply.

As Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) has noted, "Fear is a powerful emotion, one that immobilizes, traps words in our throats, and stills our tongues" (p. 194). People do not speak out about issues of race and racism for many reasons: fear of isolation from friends and family, fear of being ostracized, fear of rejection by those who are offended by what they have to say, fear of the loss of privilege that may come with speaking in support of the marginalized (Tatum 1997). Some are afraid of their own ignorance.

Karla, another student, mentioned that there was something about the film that she couldn't understand: "I couldn't understand why all of those people of color were so angry." I noticed that none of my students of color responded, nor did any of my white students. The students continued talking about being the only white students in certain situations. I finally decided that we had to address the issue of anger. I know that the reality on a predominantly white

campus is that students of color are often "the only ones" in classes, at talks, and in most facets of university life. The only thing that came to mind was bell hooks's (1995) insight into how black rage has been pathologized, that there's no room even to think that African Americans (or other people of color) can feel anger because of the racism and discrimination they experience. "Rage is not necessarily pathological nor are we victims if we choose to become enraged," hooks says. "In fact, denying that rage . . . can create a cultural climate where the psychological impact of racism can be ignored and where race and racism become topics that are de-politicized" (p. 26).

"Let's go back to the issue Karla brought up, the issue of anger—what about that anger? Why do you think that the students of color were so angry?" Linda responded:

> Well, I don't know, I thought that the only thing the students of color wanted was an apology from the white students. They were so angry and I just didn't think it was fair that they yell like that. And, when they didn't get it they were pissed off. I thought that was uncalled for. Personally, I think it's ridiculous that I have to apologize for being white. I can't help it that I have what I have. I have no problem recognizing my white skin privilege, but I refuse to apologize to *anyone* for the position I'm in.

No one else seemed to want to talk about it; students began to look down at their feet or at the wall, avoiding the issue altogether. Then, one of my white liberal students spoke up:

> Well, I just don't see why people of color aren't more pissed off. I mean, really, they have every right to be. To be treated so horribly, in the past and now even, if I were them I would've done a lot more than just yell at white students. You guys were talking about being the

only white person in a group; can you imagine what people of color feel like *every day* at this university?

After our discussion of the film, one of my students who is African American thanked me for establishing a comfortable class environment. She apologized profusely for not speaking very much in class, adding that she was simply "tired of being expected to represent all black people." It is clear that "speaking up" and "representing my racial group" are big burdens that many members of racial/ethnic minority groups carry. I can understand why students of color don't want to speak up.

* * *

Active, thoughtful subjects lurk behind even the most taciturn respondents. What we make of the silent (or silenced) respondent, however, involves more than recording "no opinion" on an interview code sheet. Rodriguez shows us how her own experiences with public discussions involving persons of color and topics of race shape her understanding of why respondents might be less than forthcoming in interview situations. In light of such experience, the interviewer must be especially conscious of the implications of what potential respondents might or might not say when asked interview questions. An interviewer's experiences outside the interview situation inform what he or she might hear (or not hear) within it. Equally important, they can cast experiential light on the broader social meanings of silence and speaking out on topics of race. Again, a proactive research ethic would aim to empower the subject to "speak up" concerning these matters, even when the "natural" impulse is to remain silent. The result is that the sensitive and astute researcher tries to look past and into the silences that greet interview questions in order to understand the possible categorical sources of silence.

◆ Procedural Sensibilities

Taken together, the preceding observations suggest that interviewers must be deeply familiar with the lives of potential respondents in order to cultivate and activate fully the subjects that figuratively stand behind them. Indeed, one might infer that interviewers need to be "insiders" in order to conduct productive, insightful, nuanced, and revealing interviews. Ethnographic fieldwork might provide researchers with the sorts of background knowledge they need to establish this familiarity, but actual membership in the subject groups under consideration is another avenue to the sorts of human portrayals that interview researchers often seek. This clearly implies the often-heard argument that only members of a group or a race are capable of truly understanding and representing the experiences of members of that group or race.

In this section we take issue with that view, suggesting some procedural sensibilities that even members need to take into account in seeking to know and recognize racialized subjects. Christopher Dunbar, Jr., adds to the accounts Dalia Rodriguez presents above by presenting some of his research experiences with young African American males, revealing further complexities in the study of race. Dunbar, an African American, has conducted ethnographic and interview research in a rural community in the Midwest for several years. His study focuses on school-aged African American males' encounters with schools and the criminal justice system. His insights echo Rodriguez's in many respects, and they also propel our considerations of race and the interview process in new directions, revealing the interactive subtleties of interviewing and race.

*   *   *

Education is like, for a black man you have to fight to stay free, you have to fight to have freedom, you got you fight

to stay out of jail, you got to fight to get your education. That's for a black man. For a white man you don't got to do nothing but do it. (Bobby, quoted in Dunbar 1999:138)

Bobby, a 14-year-old African American male and a student in an alternative school, sat up from a slouched position on the floor to respond to a question about what education means to him. His analysis of his environment and perceived plight prompted him to stand up as he articulated his assessment of what it was like for him to be black and male and to live in America. He articulated his belief that success and education are inextricably linked and that a litany of obstacles stand in the way of his effort to obtain an education. His response also suggests his perception that racism is the leading cause of these blockages.

Two thoughts come to mind as I reflect on this response. First, would Bobby have responded the same way if I were someone other than an African American male? Second, could someone other than an African American male understand how profound a statement this young boy had made and its implications for him, a student who had been expelled from school?

SUBJECTS NEED TO
KNOW THE RESEARCHER

I recently told a white colleague that I had been asked to coauthor a chapter on interviewing people of color. He responded jokingly that the first thing you have to do is "be a person of color." He went on to tell me a story about another professor who had attempted to interview African American students. The professor, it seems, was unable to penetrate cultural barriers despite his best efforts. The circumstances that surround this situation are unknown to me, but it has been my experience when I interview African Americans students that, in order to have a meaningful dialogue, I have to spend time in the school so that stu-

dents get to know me. That is, I need to spend time to develop and subsequently nurture a relationship with the students.

Too often, the emphasis in research efforts is disproportionately placed on the researcher's getting information from the interviewee. The greater effort is given over to uncovering or discovering some aspect of the individuals being studied. The problem with this approach is that it includes little or no exchange or disclosure about the life of the researcher. The researcher enters a situation wanting to learn everything about the interviewees without disclosing anything about him- or herself. Being approached by someone with such intentions would make many of us suspicious, yet it is the practice of many researchers. I think it is important to the success of the interview for the researcher to disclose something about him- or herself to the interviewees. This is foundation work; that is, it tells the interviewee where the researcher is coming from (see Douglas 1985).

Self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer is especially important when he or she is interviewing people of color, because, like other marginalized individuals, people of color tend to regard outsiders with suspicion. Years of misrepresentation and misinterpretation have legitimated skepticism and distrust. The question most often asked of interviewers by interviewees of color is "Who are you?" The second most frequently asked question is "Why should I talk to you?" This is clearly understandable if the researcher has not provided interviewees with any reason they should psychologically disrobe in front of strangers.

While in schools as a participant observer, I would often notice students watching me closely and listening to me. It was important for them to gauge my reactions and interactions with their peers and teachers so that they could assess whether I was someone they would talk with. For some students, it was important to determine if they could "shake me." For example, I asked one student his name, and he re-

sponded, "Eatdees." Thinking the name unusual, I asked "Eatdees what?" The student replied, "Eatdees [expletive]," referring to parts of his anatomy. I retorted, "You don't have any." The student and his peers laughed, surprised at my response. Had I responded any other way, my credibility may have gone out the window. This middle school student and his cohort determined at that moment that I was "straight" (translation: I was okay to talk with). The student immediately apologized, stopped what he was doing, and became my tour guide and informant throughout the study. From that moment on, I became an ally rather than a foe. The student took me directly to the computer room and began to pull up information on rap star Tupac Shakur, who had recently been killed. This was his effort to show me two things. First, he wanted to show off his computer skills, which he had acquired despite the fact that he was enrolled in an alternative school, where students are not typically considered to be academically inclined. Second, it was another way of saying that I was okay. This episode broke the ice, so to speak. When his peers saw him spending time with me, it provided a virtual stamp of approval.

Did my prior knowledge of the "tough-guy image" played out by these boys help me know how to respond in the situation? Did the fact that I was African American, male, and inextricably linked to "the black experience" prepare me to respond appropriately to the test imposed by these youngsters? I address these questions below.

SHARING THE SUBJECT'S
EXPERIENCES

As an African American male, I shared the same race and gender as the students I interviewed. Apparently, race would not be an issue. However, it quickly became apparent that the students were deeply concerned with "who I was," well beyond my demographic characteristics. I came to the alternative school as a graduate student

from a campus where many of these students had been barred. (It seems that any student placed on probation was forbidden from entering the campus unsupervised. This was a condition of probation. Most of the students in the study were on probation and therefore were barred from the campus.) So, here I was, an African American from the campus that was off-limits to them.

Many were suspicious of me; that was only reasonable. As far as many of them were concerned, I represented someone who probably did not have their interests at heart. I was simply another of the many researchers who had come and gone in their lives, intruding into their affairs until I got what I wanted. They suspected that I would eventually leave without showing a hint of gratitude for their temporary unpacking of layers of protection against further abuse (Dunbar 1999). Why would I be any different from the rest? Yes, I was indeed African American, but they were convinced that their experiences were completely different from mine. That is, our cultural and class experiences were different. In this instance, by *culture and class* I mean "the way we do things around here." Even if we were racially similar, the students had no good reason to believe that I would appreciate "the way they do things." I was a stranger to their way of life.

In fact, I grew up in a "traditional" working-class family, where I observed my parents waking up on time every day and going to work. My sisters and I went to school every day, too. That is how things were done around our house. Many of the students I interviewed were living in "non-traditional" family structures. For example, some students were being reared by grandparents or other extended family members. Others were being raised in foster homes. The ways things were done in their respective homes were often very different from my own experiences. This posed a quandary for me. It was incumbent upon me to acknowledge these "real" differences, yet I also wanted to hold on to the

notion that "we" (African Americans) are all the same, that we all suffer the same indignities.

My self-perceptions have been shaped by my social and political experiences, which are not dissimilar to those that my subject, Bobby, has experienced. His words rang loud in my ear. Bobby heard what I heard as a child. Words from my grandma —"You must work twice as hard as the white man in order to succeed"—rang in concert with Bobby's predilection.

Different family structures often result in different cultural experiences. However, some social and political influences cross cultural barriers. Do you have to share the same race to understand the nuances of differences that exist among different cultures? In many instances, probably not; however, it can work to your advantage.

LISTENING, OBSERVING, AND COMMUNICATING

Most of the literature on interviewing techniques discusses the art of asking and listening but stops short of considering the use of personal reflections and experiences as these relate to the research (but see in this volume Johnson, Chapter 5; Fontana, Chapter 8; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, Chapter 10; Kong et al., Chapter 12; Adler and Adler, Chapter 25; Ellis and Berger, Chapter 41). Being "objective" is a major tenet of most interviewing techniques. My experience in interviewing people of color conflicts with this. The notion that the researcher should shelve his or her experiences, values, and beliefs to maintain objectivity does not always serve us well in the pursuit of rich interview data.

The notion of objectivity is problematic for me on two counts. First, my passion and interest for the subject matter of my research makes it difficult for me to sever my beliefs and values from my convictions. I do, however, maintain the capacity to check them. Second, especially when I have interviewed African American educators, I

have found many of them looking to me to share *my* perceptions because they view me as a former teacher (this information I share early on) as well as a researcher. My providing this information opens opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Educators want to know if others in like positions face similar situations. They look to me not only as a researcher but as a resource. There is an expected exchange. Otherwise, it becomes a situation of "all give and no get." Mutual disclosure is often a more productive strategy (see Douglas 1985; see also in this volume Warren, Chapter 4; Johnson, Chapter 5; Eder and Fingerson, Chapter 9; Reinharz and Chase, Chapter 11).

Sometimes when I interview persons of color, there seems to exist an unstated expectation that because I am a researcher —even though I am an African American— I will not understand the messages my subjects convey. I think some of this has to do with the fact that I am "the researcher" and therefore respondents think that I am "out of touch" with circumstances that exist in "their" communities. They seem to assume automatically that there are social and economic differences between us. They view me as someone "outside the loop."

To counteract this, I usually try to relate some aspect of my own experiences to potential respondents, to establish common experiential ground. Discerning what that common ground might possibly be requires close listening on the part of both interviewer and interviewee. I listen to respondents' answers to my inquiries not just for informational purposes but for procedural purposes as well. I listen to pick up the colloquial. I also listen for implicit nuances and respond accordingly, in order to indicate my understanding of what has been said. What subjects reveal conveys their perception of who they think I am and how they think I am receiving their response. They listen and watch in order to discern the way I understand their messages. When I pull from my own experience as it relates to the subject, it conveys to them the message that I "really" understand. This two-

way communication process within the interview suggests that respondents themselves recognize the subtleties of identity— of race as a subject position, not as a fixed demographic category. This, in turn, affects the kinds of subjects they will be, as well as what kind of subject they take me to be as the interviewer.

TAKING NOTE OF SUBTLE CUES

Observing facial expressions, vernacular voice intonations, nonverbal cues, and other forms of body language is an important part of interviewing African Americans. Important cues may come from a respondent's nodding his or her head or changing facial expressions that convey a look that says "I don't understand" or "I disagree," or from verbal expressions that use few words yet convey much meaning. Also, when an interviewer nods and says, "I hear ya" or, in today's vernacular, "I'm feelin' you," this can go a long way toward communicating to the respondent that the interviewer understands the point being made. It also displays a circumscribed degree of cultural familiarity without making it appear that the interviewer is "trying too hard" to fit in.

It has been my experience in interviewing African Americans that when some respondents become excited, their voices become louder. This does not signal anger; it simply means that the interview has touched on a point that is especially important to them. When Bobby began to explain what education meant to him, his voice became louder because he became excited about being asked to express himself about something of consequence to him. When he began saying, "A black man has to . . . ," I could hear the rhythm and intonation in his voice. This was an issue important to him and one that warranted further probing. His excitement indicated the importance of the question to him.

BEING AWARE OF CULTURALLY SENSITIVE QUESTIONS

When interviewees offer only short responses, it may indicate several problems. First, the question may seem too simple to the interviewee. It may appear rhetorical, or it may have been asked in a way that does not conform to the way the interviewee is accustomed to being asked such a question. The interviewer's charge is not only to ask culturally sensitive questions, but to ask questions in a culturally relevant and explicit manner.

"Wat yu trying to say, Mr. Dunbar, dat dare's somtin' wrong with my family?" This was Bobby's response when I asked him if there was anyone at home to help him do his homework and to make sure he was in bed at a reasonable hour. Many poor African American children have been interviewed, tested, incarcerated, restrained, denied, abused, lied to, and misled so often that they have developed a keen ear for that they are being asked *implicitly* (Dunbar 1999:138). Some will respond accordingly —that is, they may tell the interviewer what they think he or she wants to hear—and others will question the question. Some children have developed savvy that far exceeds their age. The art of interviewing entails framing questions in a way that allows interviewees (in this case children) to maintain their dignity while they tell the stories that are important to them. This means allowing subjects their humanity.

CAPTURING AND PRESENTING THE STORY

Had I not listened to Bobby as he lamented his educational plight, and had I not acquired prior knowledge of his cultural experiences, which were influenced by both social and political forces, and had I paid less attention to Bobby's body language as he sat up to begin his story, and were I not an African American male, perhaps I would have walked out of this interview thinking not only that Bobby was angry, but that he was particularly angry with me. However, having developed some useful sensibilities with respect to interviewing persons of color, I came away feeling excited—excited that I had struck an important chord with Bobby as a thoughtfully engaged subject. The interview ceased to be an interview. It became a conversation. It evolved into a dialogue. It became the story of a rich, nuanced, and important life.

When I set out to learn about the experiences of African American males in an alternative school, I didn't figure on writing stories. I set out to write a traditional ethnography. I planned to collect data, code themes, conduct an analysis, and write up my findings. Instead, as stories began to surface, they illuminated new dimensions of the lives of these students. I spent time with them as they were shuffled from detention center to foster care, to extended family members and back home, only to repeat the cycle. This, in turn, enriched my understanding of their interview narratives. My observations and experiences with the students reflexively informed, and were informed by, what the students themselves told me.

Stories and performance texts helped me to represent these experiences in an evocative way (see in this volume Ellis and Berger, Chapter 41; Richardson, Chapter 42). This approach allowed me to rework the data so that they highlighted the triumphs and tragedies that constituted the lives of these children. My intent was to bring their experiences to life for the reader rather than simply attempt to explain them. Turning simple tales of suffering, loss, pain, and victory into evocative performances sometimes moves audiences beyond just emotional catharsis, to reflective critical action (Denzin 1997). I wrote collective stories from the data in an effort "to give voice to silenced people to represent them as historical actors" (Richardson 1997:15).

Dramatic and nondramatic performances also emerged from the data that in-terrogated the meanings of the lived experiences of these students (Denzin 1997). The dramatic text evolved into poems and plays, and the nondramatic texts evolved from conversations turned into natural performances (Denzin 1997). These were simply recountings of events, tellings, and interpretations from the field. Performance texts allowed me to expose and challenge conventional understandings that are underpinned by systems of realistic interpretation and meaning. They provided me with a way "to turn the chaotic, unstructured, spontaneous moments of students into evocative performances" (Denzin 1997:94).

Using this approach to represent the experiences of these students allowed me to put faces on these children and to provide an enlightened glimpse into their lives. It further gave me an opportunity to present a critical view of alternative education that is filled with sociological implications without ostentatiously parading them as such, doing more to obfuscate than to reveal.

◆ Conclusion

The accounts of interviewing people of color presented in this chapter are just the tip of a social and historical iceberg. The biographical material expressed in interviews draws from, and is mediated by, experiences from well beyond the interview situation and any one respondent's life. These experiences vary from overt racism to subtle racism. Students of color face a constant struggle as they routinely must work to overcome obstacles—in the classroom, with other students, with professors, administrators, law enforcement officers, and judges. To do justice to their experience, interviews must reflexively engage subjects in terms that can capture these complexities of their lives.

The perspective on interviewing that we have tried to present in this chapter focuses

on the connections that can form between lived experiences and interview activities, which in traditional interviewing and conventional representation remain hidden behind shields of research practice. Emerging critical theoretical perspectives on racialized subjectivity have done much to reveal the actual, lived, racialized experiences of persons of all colors by providing both the procedural pretext for interviewing differently and an ethic to support such actions.

We have focused here on racialized youth cultures, but we believe it is important for researchers to have prior knowledge when studying racialized cultures of any kind. As we enter the field, we now find ourselves at the intersection of social class, gender, race, and other subjective sensibilities; the task is now to describe this intersection in all its complexity, not gloss it in tired and trite conventional terms. The operating principle here should be, "Do not assume that the subject behind the respondent is merely there for the asking." Rather, we must take the subject to have a biography that is socially and historically mediated, and proceed accordingly.

Equally important, as we have tried to illustrate, research practices that ostensibly only report "what's there" and ignore matters of procedural consciousness—or nonconsciousness, as the case has traditionally been—serve to suppress nonmainstream (often racialized) subjectivities. Conceiving of a "standardized" subject behind the respondent casts the subject as a mere vessel of answers that can be expressed only in conventional terms, in relation to the standards that are assumed to be in place. This cheats the experiences of those whose lives are not lived in accord with, or may even be lived against, the standard. Research practices that respect and reveal the social world of the lived subject are an important procedural step toward decomposing "standards" into the variety of historically and socially relevant experiences that characterize a diverse society.

■ Notes

1. Donna Deyhle and Karen Swisher (1997:183) argue for research validity with regard to methods seriously grounded in social justice on tribal nation terms and long-term commitment to and involvement in challenging white supremacy over Native American affairs.

2. Jay MacLeod (1995:300) notes in his appendix how in some ways the "brothers" wanted to "look good" in terms of what they would and would not reveal about their status; he speculates that this may have been due to these interviewees' trying to put the best possible face on bad situations related to racism.

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15

INTERVIEWING ELITES

◆ **Teresa Odendahl**
Aileen M. Shaw

lite individuals and groups occupy the top echelons of society. They are integral to every community, government, occupation, and religion, as well as to other institutional spheres (Mills 1956; Pareto 1935). Elites generally have more knowledge, money, and status and assume a higher position than others in the population. The privileges and responsibilities of elites are often not tangible or transparent, making their world difficult to penetrate. Sometimes, a cloak of privacy, or even secrecy, masks their activities. The composition of many elite groups is relatively fluid and changes over time. Moreover, there are important intersections among different types of elites, as well as between elites and other groups (Keller 1963; Marcus 1983).

Social scientists commonly acknowledge elites but less frequently study them, opting instead to investigate those without influ- ence, over whom power is exercised rather than society's decision makers. There are practical reasons for this preference. Elites are difficult to identify and often are inaccessible, much less open to being the subjects of scrutiny. They ably protect themselves from outsiders. Barriers to reaching elites are real and include the difficulty of identifying who they are; getting past gatekeepers such as personal assistants, advisers, lawyers, and security guards; and accessing exclusive physical spaces including boardrooms, clubs, and domiciles surrounded by walls.

Underlying any study dealing with elites is a particular understanding of wealth and power in society. Our discussion in this chapter is based on our own extensive experiences in studying elites in the nonprofit or philanthropic sector. Our focus is on interviewing wealthy elites, who are identifi-