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ARTICLE

## Qualifying the Qualitative Social Work Interview

A Linguistic Anthropological Approach

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### ABSTRACT

As a methodological proposal, this article proposes an approach to interview analysis that connects the *content* of interview data with (1) the immediate context of the interview, (2) the way context emerges and changes during an interview, (3) the relationship between the interviewee, the interviewer, and other less immediate parties who elicit and evaluate what said, and (4) the cultural conventions that shape what counts as a meaningful speech in the first place. The article continues on to delineate the importance of accounting for (5) the relationship of the interview to previous occasions of speaking, and (6) the relevant stakes of speaking and interests of speakers. The potential import of each principle is illustrated in reference to methodological challenges encountered during an ethnographic study of an intensive outpatient drug treatment program, a multi-method evaluation of the same program, and relevant practice experiences. In conclusion, the paper discusses how to make the most of data collected in ‘interview intensive’ (Padgett, 2008) qualitative social work research.

### KEY WORDS:

interviewing  
language  
language ideology  
methodology  
social work research

## INTRODUCTION

Interviewing plays a significant role in social work research and practice. In practice settings, social workers engage clients in intake procedures, needs assessments, and clinical interviews, all of which involve interrogatory routines. Various factors structure such interviews and therefore affect what kind of data they yield. Most obviously, interview protocols affect the information social workers glean from client-interviewees. For instance, a homeless shelter may require that workers ask a specific set of questions during intake interviews to determine if interviewees are technically 'homeless', and to establish their eligibility for services. Mental health workers who use DSM-IV categories in documenting and reporting their work may conduct and analyze clinical interviews with such categories in mind. Significantly, professional social work interviewing not only involves collecting needed information from clients, but also entails using that information to evaluate clients' circumstances and make decisions about how to intervene. Although social workers commonly use their discretion in undertaking evaluative tasks (Lipsky, 1980), complicated professional dynamics influence how clients are interviewed and, in turn, how treatment plans and decisions are made.

In social work practice settings, interview data are also inflected by the immediate circumstances of the actual interview, which are often circumstances of crisis and need. In attempts to meet these needs, social workers often seek information that is conventionally considered 'private', differentiating the professional social work interview from everyday talk between acquaintances and powerfully loading the interaction. In addition, professional social work interviews commonly involve participants with unequal access to basic goods and resources (i.e. shelter, health care, a means of employment). This means that clients may answer social workers' questions in the most effective rather than the most accurate way. In other words, client interviewees may reasonably approach the interview as a strategic opportunity to secure resources – a phenomenon with which seasoned social workers are familiar and which renders the resulting interview data difficult to interpret.

As social work scholars, the dynamics of professional social work interviews may be readily apparent to us. It may seem less obvious that similar forces influence the qualitative interviews that we conduct in the course of our research. The aim of this article is to show how the dynamics that shape qualitative research interviews as a method of data collection can be systematically accounted for in researchers' analysis. As a methodological proposal, the article suggests an approach to interview analysis that connects the *content* of interview data with (1) the immediate context of the interview, (2) the way context emerges and changes during an interview, (3) the relationship between the interviewee, the interviewer, and other less immediate parties who elicit and evaluate

what is said, (4) the cultural conventions that shape what counts as a meaningful speech in the first place, (5) the relationship of the interview to previous occasions of speaking, and (6) the relevant stakes of speaking and interests of speakers.

In laying out these methodological principles, this article follows the lead of other social work scholars. For instance, Catherine Riessman (1993) has influentially suggested that the nature of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee influences the data yielded; this dynamic, Riessman further notes, necessitates that researchers maintain a reflexive attitude while collecting and analyzing data. In her work with Lee Quinney, Riessman has more recently warned against an approach to qualitative research in which ‘snippets of talk (mostly non-narrative, stripped of sequence and consequence) [are] presented to illustrate common thematic elements across interviews’ (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 397), and advocates scholarly attention to the contexts of narrative production (see also Padgett, 2008: 80). Along similar lines, Jerry Floersch (1999, 2000, 2002) demonstrates the importance of linking written texts (like case records) to spoken texts (such as interviews with workers who compile those records, and with clients who are portrayed in them). He adds that analyses of social work practices that rely only on written data ‘exaggerate the role of disciplinary knowledge in social work’ (Floersch, 2002: 4) and overlook the situated and productive nature of everyday case management discourse. More generally, a number of excellent books on qualitative social work methodology now serve as resources for thoughtfully designing, conducting, and analyzing qualitative interviews (e.g. Martin, 1995; Padgett, 2008; Riessman, 1994; Shaw and Gould, 2002; Sherman and Reid, 1994; see also Patton, 2002).

### **Toward an Awareness of Qualitative Interviewing as Metalinguistic Methodology**

In calling for ‘methodological awareness’, Clive Seale (2002) encourages qualitative social work researchers to connect the technical aspects of our research endeavors to the implicit assumptions about the nature and accessibility of knowledge (cf. Bernard, 2000; Briggs, 1986, 2007; Fernandez and Herzfeld, 2000). Interviewing methodology can be understood as the technical and utilitarian translation of highly abstract and implicit epistemologies of language. Specifically, interviewing methodologies involve deep-seated assumptions about the relationship between language and subjectivity (i.e. what we can know about someone by eliciting verbal responses to our questions), language and material reality (i.e. what we can learn about some empirical entity by asking people about it), and language and meaning (i.e. what that entity means in the social worlds where interviewees interact). Accordingly, this article makes a unique contribution to the growing literature on qualitative social work research by

drawing on linguistic anthropology, a field that specializes in analyzing the relationship of language use, subjectivity, and social context.

In the broader qualitative literature, of course, there has been ample discussion about the very same relationship. Less frequently noted is the fact that those we study have their very own ideas about the nature of language. Significantly, those we study also have various and conflicting ideas about the nature of language and narrative. Linguistic anthropology takes these ideas about language to be important data in their own right, using the term *language ideology* to denote informants' theories or rationalizations about language (e.g. Irvine, 1989; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000; Silverstein, 1979, 1996; Woolard, 1998). A linguistic anthropological approach to qualitative interviewing, then, assumes that it is necessary to track what informants think about the nature and function of language (Briggs, 1986, 2007). Indeed, linguistic anthropology presupposes that the 'truth' of language lies in how a community of speakers understands and uses language to do things in the world.

Following from this epistemological principle, this article distills six key principles from the linguistic anthropological literature that are useful in analyzing qualitative interview data, especially for researchers studying clinical and social service encounters and contexts.

### **Table 1 PROPOSED PRINCIPLES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA**

**CONTEXT:** How do the contexts in which people speak influence what they say? How does the context of the interview inflect interviewees' reports?

**CONTEXTUALIZATION:** How do people build context through linguistic interaction? How do interview participants build context in the course of an interview?

**INTERACTION:** How does the relationship between speakers affect what is said? How does the relationship between the interviewee, the interviewer, and other relevant parties shape interview data?

**CONVENTION:** How do linguistic conventions — or genres — influence what people say? Are interviewees speaking within the conventions of a specific genre (like a therapeutic genre) during the course of an interview?

**INTERTEXTUALITY:** How is a person's speech on one occasion related to the same or similar speech on another occasion? How are the interviewee's statements connected to other occasions in which similar statements were made by the interviewee or others?

**STAKES AND STRATEGIES:** What are people trying to do by saying particular things? How do the stakes and strategic intentions of interview participants shape interview data?

I illustrate the potential import of each principle by drawing on methodological challenges I encountered during an ethnographic study of an intensive outpatient drug treatment program, an evaluation of the same program, and relevant practice experiences. Significantly, addiction counselors in this program operated according to a particular – if hardly unique – language ideology. They tended to take clients' statements – whether spoken during an assessment or a therapy session – as transparent signs of their inner states. Elsewhere, I have described this belief about language as 'the ideology of inner reference' (2006, in press), suggesting that it is both widely held in the United States and has particular cache in American clinical settings. This is not to say that all clinical practitioners, such as those who practice narrative therapy and motivational interviewing, adhere to this idea. These approaches tend to understand what clients say as an interactional product of the clinical encounter. With these differences in mind, the analytic principles proposed in this article allow social work researchers to trace interactional, contextual, and conventional dimensions of interview data, no matter the language ideology or the particular professional province of our interviewees.

By critically reviewing three scenes from my own social work research and practice, I show how engaging each of the six principles enhanced my interpretation of the interview data I collected and can be useful to other social work researchers who conduct qualitative interviews with clients, clinicians, and other social work professionals. In conclusion, I discuss how to make the most of data collected in 'interview intensive' (Padgett, 2008) qualitative social work research.

## **SCENES FROM A QUALITATIVE SOCIAL WORK PROJECT**

### **Scene One**

In 1996, as a neophyte social worker – white, 20-something, and idealistic – I took on an internship at a newly established drug treatment program called 'Fresh Beginnings',<sup>1</sup> where almost 90 percent of the clients were African American. I was interested in establishing organizational mechanisms for clients to participate in program development and render their feedback to program staff. After a somewhat bumbling start, Fresh Beginnings clients and I finally succeeded in establishing a client representative position on the program's advisory board, but not without some resistance from program administrators.

Six months into our work, I convened our weekly client meeting. We crammed ourselves into three worn but cushy loveseats lining the 'group room' where clients also met for group therapy everyday. Two therapists milled around in the hall, behind a closed door, at far enough distance that I felt safe to pose a loaded question: 'So what's going on here in terms of race? Any problems with staff or anything along those lines?' My question was greeted with silent

stares, a few exchanged, seemingly surprised glances, and a bowed head with a barely detectable smirk. Then, a pronouncement from a senior client, 'don't you worry your head, honey. No problems here along those lines'. My follow-up questions were met with unequivocal statements that the program was as 'culturally-sensitive' as it had concertedly set out to be. Although I was not entirely convinced, knowing that institutional racism can persist despite the best intentions of individual actors, my social work training had emphasized the importance of listening and respecting clients' reports of their feelings and experiences. And, since my questions yielded no evidence that the program suffered from negative racial dynamics, I moved on with other business.

### Scene Two

Months later, I was still working as a client organizer. But now, in my new role as a researcher and anthropologist-in-training, I had returned to the treatment program as my field of study. Through my organizing work, I positioned myself as a participant observer, the core of the ethnographic methodology in which I was being trained. I had also begun conducting oral history, semi-structured, and small group interviews with staff and clients, collecting program documents, and familiarizing myself with the vast literature on American drug treatment.

On the day in question, I was chatting with five clients on the porch of the treatment program, a gathering spot during breaks between therapy groups. Amidst the usual chatting about unruly kids, unsuspecting passersby, and gossip-worthy common acquaintances, I picked up on three black clients' discussion about Annie, a white client who had not shown up to group for several days. One of the women remarked, 'They keep letting her by; don't matter *how many* times she goes back out. How many groups she miss. Always one more chance for her'. Exasperated agreement seemed to filter through the hanging cigarette smoke. 'You know that's right . . . the way it *always* is'.

Curious, I casually traveled three feet across the cold porch, asked for a light, and inquired, softly, 'What are you all talking about?' Shauna replied in a noticeably hushed tone,

'Oh, you know, how it is . . . that girl done messed up so many times. And those therapists, they keep lettin' her back in . . . the white ones always get second chances'.

'And third and forth' another client laughed.

The trio's gaze settled on me as I worked to square what I had heard on the same topic months earlier with this new report.

### Scene Three

Later that *very same* day, the women on the porch were transported by van to a focus group held at a nearby university. Treatment program administrators had hired a cadre of seasoned researchers from the university's school of social work

to evaluate whether the treatment program was meeting its mission. The focus group was central to the evaluation. Although I had been working with program evaluators, I was not chosen as a focus group moderator. The evaluation team had reasoned that considering my ongoing, intimate work with clients, my presence could bias the results. Though I was present immediately before and afterwards, the focus group interviews proceeded without me.

Many weeks later, when reviewing focus group transcripts, I was struck by what appeared a telling discrepancy – one that turned the question of bias inside-out. In response to the group moderator's questions about race and culture, the *very same* clients with whom I had been talking on the porch earlier that afternoon were now steadfast in their insistence that the program was consummately culturally sensitive (M = Moderator; R = Respondents; b = black; w = white):

- 1 M (w): What ways is the program helpful to women of different races and cultures?
- 2 R1 (b): It's never been an issue/
- 3 R2 (w): I mean maybe on a rare occasion/
- 4 R3 (b): Yeah, rare. *Very rare*/
- 5 R4 (b): We're all in the *same* boat. And we're all going down the same stream.
- 6 R3 (b): Hm-mm. We're all treated the same, which makes it really nice.
- 7 M (w): But the question is *supposed* to find out if the program suits the needs of women from different/
- 8 R4 (b): It's all the *same*!
- 9 R5 (b): Grrrrlll [?? . . . inaudible/whispered].
- 10 R1 (b): I think that um, the therapists themselves seem to be uhm, aware of cultural differences and different . . . and they are aware of them. It's *not* a big issue.

The moderator, faced with consensus, moved on with other questions and away from the critical topic of race.

## QUALIFYING INTERVIEW DATA AS DYNAMIC ACTS OF SPEECH

What did I, as the social work intern in Scene One, and the seasoned program evaluators, who conducted the focus group in Scene Three, have in common?

### Context

First, the program evaluators and I were both confronted with the limitations of what our questions yield about racial relations in the program. In both cases, we are told by clients that there are no racial 'issues' (line 2) in the program, statements quite contrary to what I had learned on the porch, after many months of participant observation. In my initial efforts to carefully and respectfully listen

to clients' thoughts and feelings, I was unable to account for the important fact that the actual setting of the group room, and its proximity to program therapists, may make clients less willing to talk about race relations in the program. To the extent that my method of inquiry relied solely on what clients said to me in that setting, I was left with only two viable options to understand clients' words: either there *really were* no problems pertaining to race in the program or the clients were suffering from a case of false consciousness.

The seasoned social work evaluators, working in a context far removed from the everyday life of the treatment program, were nonetheless in a similar predicament. If they could not connect the content of focus group participants' reports about racial issues in the program with the circumstances of the focus group, program evaluators were unable to systematically account for something they surely already knew: clients in social services often approach program evaluators as affiliates of program staff. Despite researchers' pledges to guard confidentiality, research subjects may edit their words in fear that their critiques will be passed along to program staff who evaluate and treat them. Thus, participants may not view the focus group as a place to safely continue their earlier conversation on the porch.

For these reasons, we might be tempted to privilege the conversation on the porch as a more accurate expression of clients' thoughts about racial relations in the program. This would be erroneous: such 'naturally-occurring' discourse is inflected by context as much as interviews are, albeit in different ways. However, because of the longitudinal nature of ethnographic research, I had a distinct advantage in my ability to qualify clients' reports about race. Namely, I was able to compare the data I gleaned on the porch that day, as part of my work as a participant observer, with other data about race relations that I had collected over time. As I will argue in conclusion, this suggests the importance of designing qualitative social work research projects that allow systematic comparison of clients' reports across relevant contexts (such as group interview contexts vs. individual interview contexts; on a familiar porch vs. in an unfamiliar room where a focus group is held) (see Figure 1).

**CONTEXT:**

Example: The *setting* of the therapy room, the porch, and the focus group room, as well as their respective *proximity* to program therapists and other powerful parties, may make clients more or less willing to talk about racism in the program.

Key Questions: How do the contexts in which people speak influence what they say? How does the context of the interview inflect interviewees' reports?

**Figure 1** CONTEXT

### From Context to Contextualization

Contexts are not simply pre-established stages on which acts of speech unfold; contexts are actively shaped in the course of verbal interchange (e.g. Bauman and Briggs, 1992; Briggs, 1986, 2007; Gumperz, 1982; Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Hymes, 1975; Silverstein, 1976; 2005; Silverstein and Urban, 1996). Thus, as Charles Briggs (1986) notes, it is essential that we attend to how contexts are *produced* by participants in the course of an interview. In this light, we might reconsider the focus group excerpt above. In doing so, we can see that of the eight contributions made by the five focus group participants, there is tremendous assent, though notably the moderator's question (line 1) is never directly answered. While R1's unequivocal comment that racial and cultural differences have 'never been an issue' (line 2) is somewhat qualified by R2 (line 3), that qualification is emphatically corrected by R3. R3 later underscores (line 6) R4's metaphorical offering of a therapy 'boat', in which everyone travels toward the same goal, assured of their similar standing (line 5). And, when the moderator reiterates her question, trying to elicit a more diverse range of statements, she is emphatically interrupted with 'more-of-the-same' from R1 and R4 (line 7–10).

Even if acknowledging R2's hedge that racial and cultural concerns have 'maybe' been of issue on a 'rare occasion' (line 3) and R5's barely audible detraction (line 9), the focus group analyst may be tempted to charge focus group participants with what is known as 'group think'. However, while the transcript might be readily analyzed as transparent representation of collective opinion, participants' comments can also be read as active attempts to gauge and cue each other on how best to interpret their immediate context. Specifically, in telling the moderator that the treatment program is a place where race is not 'an issue', participants may be simultaneously *telling each other* how wise it is to continue their critical discussion of this very same issue as it was conducted earlier that day on the porch. As is likely indicated by the whisper of R5,<sup>2</sup> the results of this collective communicative labor is the establishment of the focus group as a context where it is not safe to discuss institutional racism. Indeed, the fact that the only audible dissent to the otherwise glowingly culturally-sensitive portrait of the program was issued by a white participant (line 3) – who after all is not likely to be directly negatively affected by the program practices in question – gives us more reason to suspect that participants' statements are as much an attempt to *build* context in the focus group interview, as they are an effort to *represent* the context of their treatment program. More specifically talk about race, which has been established in previous interactions between focus group participants, is accommodated to the focus group interview, thereby helping to establish for participants what *kind* of context it is (see Figure 2).

**CONTEXTUALIZATION:**

Example: Focus group participants collectively create the focus group venue as one that is more or less 'safe' to discuss racial relations in the program.

Key Questions: How do people build context through linguistic interaction?  
How do interview participants build context in the course of an interview?

**Figure 2 CONTEXTUALIZATION**

**Interviews as Interactions:**

Because they host naturalistic interaction between peers, focus groups have been described as an intermediary between participant-observation and semi-structured interviews (Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Myers, 1998; Vaughn, 1996). Yet, although focus groups capture the rich data that emerges from group interaction, focus group analysis typically pays 'little attention to either the micro-dynamics of the interaction process or the constraints of the focus group setting' (Morgan, 1997: 26). That is, analysis of focus group transcripts is generally limited to content analysis. As Myers (1998: 242) notes, 'The hundreds of pages of transcripts routinely produced by any focus group study are left as a black box; we have to take the output without asking too much about the machinery that has produced them'. Part of this 'machinery' is how focus group participants influence each other to produce what is said and how.

Indeed, a particularly salient feature of any speech context is the interaction of people within it. The interview entertains an interaction of its own – most obviously between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the interactional influences on what people say always exceed the confines of a particular context to include the audiences that interview participants anticipate or imagine will eventually be privy to their words. Thus, actors who are not immediately involved in the interview may also influence what is said. After all, focus group participants' reports were likely not only intended for the moderator's ears, but also were aligned with the less obvious interlocutors who they suspected might eventually be party to their words, including therapists, parole officers, CPS workers, and housing authorities with whom their therapists were in regular contact. For clients whose success was contingent upon the evaluations of these same interlocutors, complaining about racial preferences in the program was a risk that they likely felt they could not afford, a probability totally lost if the focus group transcripts had been simply coded for content. Indeed, such editorializing practices arguably tell us much more about racial relations in the program than the 'content' of clients' statements. As Susan Gal (1991: 191), notes: 'analyses of the interview as a speech event suggest it is the ethnographers' task to discover the conditions under which informants can talk'.

**INTERACTION:**

Example: Clients' reports in a focus group interview may not only be intended for the moderator's ears, but also are aligned with the less obvious interlocutors who the clients suspect might be party to their words, such as therapists or parole officers.

Key Question: How does the relationship between speakers affect what is said? How does the relationship between the interviewee, the interviewer, and other relevant parties shape interview data?

**Figure 3 INTERACTION**

No matter the skill of the focus group moderators in orchestrating interaction between participants, and the trust they inspire in interviewees, how are they to control for these exogenous influences on participants' reports? Again, in order to make sense of what focus group members report about racial relations in the program, it seems that focus group transcripts must be analyzed alongside other data that give a sense of the institutional context – and loaded interactions within that context – of which focus group participants speak (see Figure 3).

**Interviews and Conventions of Speaking**

Lest one think the dynamics I address are specific to focus group interviewing, I turn now to examples of interviewing taken from my own ethnographic research at Fresh Beginnings. In the course of my research, I employed an open-ended interviewing method, called oral history, to elicit story-like accounts from program clients. Oral historians generally inquire into life history, with an interest in gaining insight into historical events of which the interviewee has some experiential knowledge. Furthermore, oral history interviews seek not only the facts of one's life, but also the ways that life is remembered, organized, and relayed as narrators arrange narrative materials. Oral historians recognize that narratives gleaned in oral history tell us not only about events themselves, but also about the meanings people attach to those events (Hart, 1996; Martin, 1995; Portelli, 1997).

Despite my intentions in conducting them, much of my oral history interview data bore an uncanny resemblance to the clinical data derived by program therapists in their attempts to assess and treat Fresh Beginnings clients. After all, in both clinical treatment and oral history interviews, clients were asked to relay personal history in terms of transformative life events. Drug rehabilitation in the contemporary U.S. commonly involves the oral accounting of personal history. The familiar prelude – 'Hi, my name is X and I am an

**CONVENTION:**

Example: The narratives elicited in oral history interviews were often highly predictable, taking on the conventional contours of recovery discourse.

Key Questions: How do linguistic conventions – or genres – influence what people say? Are interviewees speaking within the conventions of a specific genre (like a therapeutic genre) during the course of an interview?

**Figure 4 CONVENTION**

addict’ – and the structured tale that follows are staples of a drug treatment practice in which clients, adopting therapeutic discourse conventions, relay their histories in ways meant to account for their drug use. Considering their proximity to these clinical conventions of speaking, perhaps it is not surprising that the narratives I elicited in the course of my oral history interviews with Fresh Beginnings clients were often highly predictable, taking on the conventional contours of contemporary American recovery discourse.

Faced with interview transcripts structured in conventionally clinical terms, my first methodological challenge was to account for why so many of clients’ ‘personal’ narratives sounded so alike. Without reflexively attending to my own questioning structure, I could not be sure that the content of the transcripts reflected what was in the ‘heads’ of the informants, or was merely a residue of my externally imposed discourse convention (see Urban, 1996: 24; see also Briggs, 1986; Dick, 2006) – in this case, my semi-structured questions about clients’ personal history, which sounded, to interviewees, a lot like the questions posed by their therapists. Had I not accounted for this confluence (see Figure 4), I might have concluded that all Fresh Beginnings clients’ lives were indeed naturally and perfectly plotted along the clinical lines.

**Interviews as Intertextual**

In addition to oral history interviews with Fresh Beginnings clients, my research entailed semi-structured interviews, which were focused on clinical and organizational dynamics. In conducting multiple interviews with clients and staff, I found that there could be many voices speaking in an individual interviewee’s report. For example, one client named Mabel recounted her time in the program by saying, ‘. . . once I started talkin’ about what was goin’ on with *me* every time I came to group, and I started to feel *better* about myself, I started to feel more like I could *open up*’. Just as Mabel explained that narrative helped her to ‘open up’ and ‘feel better about [her]self’, one interviewed therapist exhorted, ‘talking in group helps clients to *open up* . . . talk about their problems. Finally feel better about *themselves*’.

**INTERTEXTUALITY:**

Example: Mabel's report of how therapy helps her bears an uncanny resemblance to that of her therapist.

Key Questions: How is a person's speech on one occasion related to the same or similar speech on another occasion? How are the interviewee's statements connected to other occasions in which similar statements were made by the interviewee or others?

**Figure 5 INTERTEXTUALITY**

How do we account for such likenesses across different occasions of speaking, such as therapy sessions and oral history interviews? Linguistic anthropologists suggest that speech can be understood as text that travels from place to place, connecting and aligning different groups of speakers (Agha, 2007; Irvine, 1996; Silverstein, 2005; Urban, 1996; see also Bahktin, 1981). Intertextuality is generated by participants across speech events, who may – for instance – work to mobilize the authority of powerful others by citing them. As Erving Goffman (1981) pointed out, the one who animates (or actually voices) an utterance may not be the same as the one who authors (or composes or creates) it. Perhaps in ‘animating’ a statement of her therapist, Mabel is aligning herself with therapeutic authority as much as she is stating how she ‘really feels’ about group therapy. Considering the many occasions when therapists relayed their ideas about the function of group therapy to clients, it is no surprise that Mabel's individual report had intertextual qualities (see Figure 5).

**The Stakes and Strategies of Interviews**

Interviewing the same client multiple times, I learned that interview data had to be understood as having its own social history. More specifically, content, as well as the tone and tenor, of what interviewees said was correlated to their proximity to the program. For example, told while still a client at Fresh Beginnings, Nikki's first interview oscillated between tales told seemingly to elicit shock and moving accounts of surviving life's many blows. The second chapter of her interview, told during probation from the program, was highly confessional, laden with clinical explanations and replete with the kind of religious sentiment that commonly characterizes contemporary American recovery discourse.

Several months after her termination from the program, Nikki, recovering from a crack binge, met me for the final chapter of her interview, conducted in a fast-food restaurant. Seeking to start where we had left off, I reminded her of a touching anecdote she told me in the previous interview about a

recovering alcoholic John-turned-lover who helped her to ‘pierce’ through her ‘denial’ and ‘transform’ her life. Her response to my query was unnerving, but highly instructive:

- 1 I: So that’s where we left off.
- 2 N: (long pause . . . laughter). Oh my. (laughter).
- 3 I: What? *What?*
- 4 N: I told you *that*. (laughter)
- 5 I: Yeah (nervous giggle) . . . don’t you remember?
- 6 N: You knew that didn’t happen, right? (laughter). Please tell me/
- 7 I: What?
- 8 N: Oh, poor ol’ Summerson . . . *Girl*, don’t you know, I flipped a
- 9 *script* on you?!

Nikki’s revelation that she had ‘flipped a script’ – that is, anticipated and perfectly replicated therapeutic expectations about how she should speak (Carr, 2004, 2009, in press) – was telling in several regards. First, Nikki’s position in the program (as active and in ‘good standing’, to ‘on probation’, to ‘terminated’) influenced the way she relayed life events. While on probation, wanting to convince me of her newly found faith in recovery, perhaps hoping I would relay it to program therapists who could reinstate her, her second interview was fervent, confessional, and provocative, replicating clinical conventions of speaking. After termination, Nikki had nothing to lose, at least from an institutional point of reference, and perhaps mostly out of pity, tells her duped interviewer of her strategy.

In her attunement to the interview as a social event, Nikki offers a lesson to qualitative social work researchers who, in our focus on the content of interviews, can overlook the ways interviewees’ reports are built and edited over time – not only in relation to the processes of narrative construction that Riessman and others have traced so brilliantly – but also in relation to meaningful events in interviewees’ lives. A mode of analysis that isolates the *content* of what interviewees, like Nikki, say in an interview without considering the pressing reasons *why* they say what they do fails to consider why interviewees might ‘strategically manipulate[s] the truth claims of seemingly fixed symbols to satisfy her own interests’ (Fernandez and Herzfeld, 2000: 99).

Notably, Nikki does not directly explain during her final interview why she flipped the script in the previous interview. I failed to ask her at the time, though I am unsure that I would have gotten a ‘straight’ answer considering the loaded nature of such a query. It was only in considering Nikki’s interviews in relation to the other data I collected during my fieldwork, including other clients’ interpretations of script flipping and Nikki’s explication of the practice on another occasion, that I came to a confident conclusion – one that began by taking account of how the complex interactional dynamics of the interview related to the even more complex interactional dynamics of Fresh Beginnings

**STAKES AND STRATEGIES:**

Example: Nikki 'edits' her oral history interview while on probation, perhaps in the hopes that I will pass along positive evaluations of her therapeutic progress to her therapist.

Key Question: What are people trying to do by saying particular things? How do the stakes and strategic intentions of interview participants shape interview data?

**Figure 6 STAKES AND STRATEGIES**

as an institution. Arguably, at the time of the second interview, I had not yet established the kind of trust with Nikki that would lead her to believe that I would not leak her interview answers to program therapists, despite the consent forms she signed to the contrary. Further research made clear that Nikki, like most mothers, would say and do most anything to keep the state from taking her children, including convincing her therapists (and a researcher who she might imagine to be in communication with those therapists) to refrain from setting this process in motion. Already on program probation for relapsing while pregnant, she geared her answers to my questions accordingly.

In the end, Nikki reminds us that oral presentations of the self are strategically performed depending on who is talking to whom, where, why, and when. She demonstrates that people's words are complex and require a methodology attentive to these complexities – including the ways that interviewees strategically align their answers to those who ask them questions (see Figure 6).

## **CONCLUSIONS: QUALIFYING QUALITATIVE SOCIAL WORK INTERVIEWS**

Deborah Padgett warns against 'interview-only' research, suggesting that 'confining a study to one source of data deprives it of the broader interpretive power that comes from observation' (Padgett, 2008: 81; see also Agar and MacDonald, 1995). She suggests that qualitative social work researchers should not only carefully account for the context of the interview, but also find ways to 'shadow participants and enter their worlds naturalistically' (Padgett, 2008: 81). There is no doubt that my research at Fresh Beginnings benefited from prolonged participant observation. For instance, I learned much about what clients thought about race by listening to them on the treatment program's porch, as well as during their group interview with program evaluators. Aside from observing that each of these contexts elicited vastly different accounts about racial relations in the program from the very same people, I also learned much about what the clients thought about the program itself by observing when, where, and with whom

they talked about race and in what way. This information would be difficult to garner without engaging in the kind of shadowing Padgett advocates.

Importantly, Padgett also cautions against combining social work practice and social work research – a caution this social work researcher did not heed in this study. While I find Padgett's rationale a sound one, considering the context in which I worked, I simply would not have been able to effectively 'shadow' my informants as a researcher had I not first established trust and rapport with them as a practitioner. For instance, both staff with whom I once worked and clients with whom I had once helped organize a second-hand shop grew to like me and – often years later – invited me to their kids' birthday parties, called to shoot the breeze, or readily accepted invitations to do interviews. Such practical matters aside, there are enduring epistemological considerations involved in taking more than one role in any research setting, including social work settings. On the one hand, the assumption of being an active participant in the settings one observes is part and parcel of ethnographic research, as the term 'participant observation' clearly relays. And, immersing oneself in scenes of social practice almost always entails taking on multiple roles, or roles that one otherwise might not (Lave and Wenger, 1991). On the other hand, my work as a program intern and client organizer sometimes made matters muddy. Not only did I have to make informants – whether clients or staff – continuously aware that I observed as well as participated at Fresh Beginnings, I also had to track how my history of interactions affected what others said and did. This means that when 'shadowing' research participants involves taking on more than one role in a research setting, as is inevitably the case in ethnography, the work of maintaining a reflexive stance should be approached as a continuous challenge.

However, one need not conduct ethnographic research in order to engage in the kind of systematic analysis this article promotes. For example, conducting interviews with the same interviewee over time allows researchers to account for strategic nature of what interviewees say, as Nikki's case demonstrates. Similarly, comparing the transcripts of interviews with multiple participants with an attention to intertextuality can tell us much more than the simple coding of common themes. Through long-term participant observation, I knew that Mabel had many conversations with her therapists about the therapeutic value of 'opening up', and therefore was able to trace the institutional roots of her individual responses to interview questions. But we can also learn more about why a particular point of view becomes salient if our interviewing schedules include questions about with whom and in what capacity our interviewees interact. Finally, by maintaining a reflexive attention to our own questioning strategies, we are not only able to examine our own assumptions about the relationship of language, reality, and truth – ideas that can sometimes inhibit our analyses; we also take an important step in analyzing how the 'content' of qualitative interview data is shaped by the dynamics of context, contextualization,

**Table 2 A CHECKLIST FOR THE ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA**

- ✓ **CONTEXT:** How do the contexts in which people speak influence what they say? How does the context of the interview inflect interviewees' reports?

Example: The *setting* of the therapy room, the porch, and the focus group room, as well as their respective *proximity* to program therapists and other powerful parties, may make clients more or less willing to talk about racism in the program.

- ✓ **CONTEXTUALIZATION:** How do people build context through linguistic interaction? How do interview participants build context in the course of an interview?

Example: Focus group participants collectively create the focus group venue as one that is more or less "safe" to discuss racial relations in the program.

- ✓ **INTERACTION:** How does the relationship between speakers affect what is said? How does the relationship between the interviewee, the interviewer, and other relevant parties shape interview data?

Example: Clients' reports in a focus interview may not only be intended for the moderator's ears, may also be aligned with the less obvious interlocutors who the clients suspected might be party to their words, such as therapists or parole officers.

- ✓ **CONVENTION:** How do linguistic conventions — or genres — influence what people say? Are interviewees speaking within the conventions of a specific genre (like a therapeutic genre) during the course of an interview?

Example: The narratives elicited in oral history interviews were often highly predictable, taking on the conventional contours of recovery discourse.

- ✓ **INTERTEXTUALITY:** How is a person's speech on one occasion related to the same or similar speech on another occasion? How are the interviewee's statements connected to other occasions in which similar statements were made by the interviewee or others?

Example: Mabel's report of how therapy helps her bears an uncanny resemblance to that of her therapist.

- ✓ **STAKES AND STRATEGIES:** What are people trying *to do* by saying particular things? How do the stakes and strategic intentions of interview participants shape interview data?

Example: Nikki edits her oral history interview while on probation, perhaps in the hopes that I will pass along positive evaluations of her therapeutic progress to her therapist.

and convention. Indeed, the analytic principles delineated above can be applied in conducting most interview-intensive qualitative social work research projects (Padgett, 2008), regardless of their scale and mixture of methods.

Notably, these principles can be applied to international social work research. As Charles Briggs (1986) has explicitly demonstrated, it is especially important when conducting interviews cross-culturally to understand that 'context' includes local ideologies of language, including ideas about what cultural concepts can or should be talked about, whether in particular situations (like an interview) or more generally.

At a moment when more social work scholars are turning to qualitative research, it is important to cultivate what Seale (2002) calls 'methodological awareness' in relation to a central research modality: the qualitative interview. The principles illustrated here are an effort to systematize, to the degree possible, the analysis of interview data and therefore realize the awareness Seale advocates.

Quality qualitative social work research demands that we account for how our methods, assumptions, and categories affect the actions and words of research subjects, whether during a research interview or during a therapy session. Considering social work's historical commitment to the person-in-environment on the one hand, and qualitative researchers' attention to the socially embedded nature of social science data on the other, the challenge for qualitative social work research is to connect content to context – both in the sociohistorical contexts in which people speak and in the interactive context of the interview itself.

### Notes

- 1 Pseudonyms are employed to protect the individuals and institutions involved in this study.
- 2 This whisper posed a challenge for me during the course of my analysis. My first transcription overlooked it entirely, and I am still unsure if I have transcribed it correctly, considering the somewhat garbled recording. Eventually, I collected other meaningful data to aid in my interpretation – such as the fact that the whispering client had just been told that morning that she would probably be terminated from the program; she may have therefore been particularly critical about her peers' contextualization strategies.

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