Ethical Dilemmas in Personal Interviewing

by
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There are many issues of ethics and openness in elite interviewing that I have learned how to deal with through the years.[1] My work has focused on people who cause trouble: protesters, litigants, defendants, sidewalk counselors, rescuers, and abortion providers, to name a few. Of course, in dealing with people you are studying you must be honest and ethical. It is important to remember that their activism comes from something they deeply feel. Their activism is because of their beliefs, opinions, experiences, and sense of community. They do not exist as activists so that you can add more lines to your vita or finish your dissertation. You must leave them in the same position in which you found them. You must do no harm to them.

Openness: Recently, my work has focused on reproductive politics (see The Political Geographies of Pregnancy, University of Illinois Press, 2002). I have interviewed dozens of pro-choice and pro-life (I use the terms they describe themselves with) activists, lobbyists, interest group leaders, litigants, and lawyers. This work is often tricky ethically. For example, I am genuinely fascinated with pro-life activism. However, I have found it more difficult to book interviews with pro-life people than with pro-choice people. This is propably due to my being an academic or my affiliation with a women's studies program. Pro-life activists might assume that I am very pro-choice and that my purpose in wanting to interview them or observe their meetings or demonstrations might be to belittle them. That is not my intention, but pro-life people are nervous for many reasons about letting someone like me learn more about their organization, tactics, resources, and plans.[2] When I try to schedule a meeting with a pro-life person, often they ask me, "What are you?" (i.e., are you pro-life or not?). Rather than tell them my position on abortion, I tell them that I am an academic researcher and that I study people who do more than simply vote about an issue. I tell them the truth, that I am fascinated in their activism and want to learn more about it. Usually (not always) a response along those lines satisfies them. You have to hedge sometimes in order to get an interview. However, you cannot mislead people.

Conflicts: Researchers sometimes find themselves with conflicts of interest concerning their access to interviewees and what they are going to write about. In some of the groups I have studied I have learned about personal animosities between group members or untoward behavior by activists. If I write about this (and the activists find out about it), it can hamper my access to these activists in the future for follow-up interviews. Activists also travel in small worlds and can let each other know about less-than-satisfactory experiences with a researcher. So, my future interviews could be jeopardized. In group politics, conflicts are sometimes important since they add to the fragile nature of a group's mobilization. Thus I mask the conflict and discuss it in another way. I do not name people who hate each other, or who feel that someone is hogging the spotlight or using the group for his or her political career or personal agenda. But, I do write about factions within the group if it is an important part of the group dynamics. If it is just gossip, I don't use it. It is up to the judgment of the interviewer to know when these conflicts are a serious part of the story and when they are just part of the complexities of people's personalities and relationships and not important politically.

Context: Depending on who you are interviewing and what the context is, you might have to anticipate how to handle people telling you things that are very painful to them still. It helps you make these judgments if you are very well informed about the context in which your interviewees work. For instance, for my first book (*From Outrage to Action: The Politics of Grass-Roots Dissent*, University of Illinois Press, 1993) I interviewed people who organized into ad hoc, issue-specific groups in order to recall judges who they felt had made insensitive comments during the sentencing phases of two rape trials. One group successfully recalled Judge Archie Simonson in Madison, Wisconsin, who remarked that given the way women dress, rape is a normal reaction. Another group, a few years later in a rural area of Wisconsin, tried to recall another judge who said that a four-year-old sexual assault victim was a "particularly promiscuous young lady." Their recall was not successful. I knew before I did any interviews for these two cases that rape is an underreported crime, often kept secret by victims. As a scholar of gender I also knew how widespread rape is in any population. I surmised, then, that some of the people remembering their efforts to recall these judges had sexual-assault experiences in their lives. However, it was not my purpose to dredge up painful memories from someone's past. Since I am not a counselor or psychologist, I am not trained in how to help people who might be recalling something very traumatic in their lives. Yet, given the statistics on rape in this

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country, the issue comes up in my interviews. In a couple of the interviews when I asked why it was that this issue (a judge saying these insensitive things in a rape case) caused them to become politically active, the respondents would become upset. Some cried. Some revealed to me that they had been raped decades ago when nobody talked about it, no crisis hotlines or support groups existed, and they had simply kept the event to themselves. When the judge, however, said these things about another rape victim, they were in a place in their lives where they felt they had to do something about it. Their activism is an important part of my book. During the interviews, however, I was faced with upset people. What I did was tell them that I understood and that I was glad they were telling me their story. I also reassured them that their identities would not be revealed in anything I published. In fact, that pain even decades later is a research finding. In my case, it displays how important rape reform efforts are within the large and diffuse women's movement and how controversial sexual trauma is for people their whole lives long.

Additional tips: From my fieldwork I can offer some tips for others doing person to person interviewing. I often end my interviews with a question like this, "Is there anything you would like to tell me about which I haven't thought to ask you?" It is amazing what I learn from this question. Interviewers cannot anticipate everything and you need to give the respondents openings to tell you about an event, connection, or insight that you didn't think to ask them about. Don't let your interview schedule tie you down. I do most of my interviews in respondent's offices, homes, churches, or community centers. In one person's home I noticed two framed portraits on the dining room wall: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. I decided not to ask the interviewee what political party they affiliated with.

During my interviews, I take notes about the environment. This helps me to remember the context of the interview and to understand my interviewees. Since most of the activists I study are women, they are often balancing many other obligations as I talk to them. My field notes include, "Children kept running in and out of the room," and, "She paused while she took a phone call from her mother." One judicial recall activist took a call during an interview, and I could tell that she was speaking to a woman who could not afford an abortion; the activist was part of an unofficial local network that could piece together the funds for an abortion. Though I did not intend for this interview to cover abortion, I now knew more about the depth of this activist's commitment.

It is amazing what people will xerox and give to you once you are in their office. I have been given copies of confidential internal memoes, drafts of amicus briefs, correspondence between brief signers that I would never be given if I met the person outside of their office. Even if they promise to send it to me when they return to their office, usually they never do. Either they are too busy or when they are back in their offices they think twice about handing the materials over to a researcher and then "forget" to do it. I have also witnessed interesting interactions while waiting in interest group lobbies. I once saw a UPS man pick up boxes of newsletters from a group that claimed to be separate from the interest group whose lobby I was sitting in. I figured out that one group was really just an affiliate of the other, with a separate post office box, but running its operations out of the larger groups offices.

Another issue is whether to tape record. I have quit using tape recorders; it is up to you whether you use one. I find them intrusive for me and for the interviewee. I write notes during the interviews and flesh them out later. If it is something important that I might like to quote directly in my work, I read it back to the interviewee to make sure that I wrote it down correctly.

Ethically, it is important that we researchers send copies of what we write and publish to the people we have interviewed. It is more than a courtesy. It is an acknowledgment on the part of the researcher that without the interviewee, our work would be diminished. Many times people have called or written to thank me for sending them a copy of the chapter in which their interview is included in my works. They feel happy and vindicated that their stories will not fade away and that their activism and efforts were noticed and appreciated.

Finally, be sure to ask them if you can come back later, or call on the phone, if you have further questions or issues. Sometimes I must recontact someone I interviewed early in my rounds of fieldwork because later interviews brought up topics and issues of which I was not fully aware when I began the fieldwork.

Serendipity. Although it is probably a sin in political science to admit it, luck plays a big role in fieldwork and interviews. If you are interviewing someone and they ask you if you would like to accompany them to their next meeting, or ride in the taxi with them while they go downtown and file legal papers at the courthouse, make sure that you do so. People will be very candid when outside of their usual home or work environment. I have been able to secure interviews with additional people because they saw me while I was with an activist they know and respect.

Inspiration. Finally, I must report that this work has been fun for me. The people I have interviewed over the years are inspiring. Their activism and enthusiasm invigorates me regardless of whether I agree with their positions. They have taught me a lot about the nitty gritty of politics. They have been active on issues even when they knew it could hurt them in their small towns, in their business networks, in their neighborhoods and communities. They have picketed stores in Wisconsin snow storms. They have badgered pompous politicians to keep their promises and be more connected to people like them. They have directly challenged racism, sexism, and class bias. It has been an honor to talk to many of these people.

I hope that you enjoy your fieldwork as much as I have enjoyed mine (despite being stood up for interviews, rescheduled, ignored, and put off). In a discipline that sometimes doesn't value this kind of work, it is interesting nonetheless to notice how many political science classics are built on elite interviewing and fieldwork. You will most likely find that your interviews give you far more than you ever expected they would. If I can be of help to anyone doing this kind of work, just let me know.

Notes

1. Thanks to Beth L. Leech, Rutgers University, for including me in this workshop. I learned a lot listening to my fellow interviewers and gleaning wisdom from their experiences. Thanks also to Jeffrey Berry and the Political Organizations and Parties Section of APSA for putting the workshop on.

2. It is important to remember, also, that some pro-life organizations are nervous because of lawsuits against them and because some adherents have practiced violence. They are very reluctant to let a researcher into their community given the legal issues involved in some of their activities.

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