

Article

So You Really Want to Interview Me?: Navigating “Sensitive” Qualitative Research Interviewing

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Abstract

This article discusses the qualitative interviewing techniques that the authors used to conduct their respective dissertation research in Jamaica and South Carolina. (The research in Jamaica examined the implementation of primary education policies. The research in South Carolina delved into the life history of Benner C. Turner, a controversial college president.) Most of the literature about interviewing focuses on asking the right questions; in contrast, this article discusses the challenges of interviewing. In this article, selected interviews are used from both studies to examine the difficulties these researchers encountered when conducting “sensitive” interviews, the risks female researchers face in unfamiliar places, and the challenges of working in international settings (which requires interpersonal skills and cultural competency). While the task of research interviewing is complex, the authors provide ideas that can be used to navigate such moments.

Keywords: qualitative interviewing, rapport, interviewing in developing countries, Jamaican educational policies, Benner C. Turner

Conducting fieldwork (especially for one's master's thesis or doctoral dissertation) can be an exciting process. The researcher has likely already completed graduate-level courses in research methodology and thus is eager to put this theory into practice. Fieldwork, however, can be a daunting task. The researcher may encounter unexpected situations that may not have been discussed in class or even in the literature. As future or current PhDs, we have a competitive nature—that is, an innate and a genuine desire to unravel the nuances associated with our research questions. We cannot, however, be so eager that we dismiss that those who are valid “holders of knowledge” can also be vulnerable populations, located at the margins of society. As novice researchers, who have tried to make sense of qualitative interviewing via “textbook knowledge,” we know that it can be difficult to translate interviewing theory into practice. This article will highlight the joys and pitfalls involved in the interview process. Although this article will of course mention some relevant literature, the focus of this article is to highlight our personal experiences and challenges while conducting sensitive field interviews. The literature about qualitative research often provides how-to suggestion lists, but it does not as often give full examples of real-life surprises from the experiences of interviewers, demonstrating roadblocks and how to get around them. Reading an item from a suggestion list is not quite as instructive as seeing the idea in the context of an actual interview. We hope that more examples are published so that students get an idea of meaning and context of the qualitative journey.

This article follows our field interview experiences as we completed our PhDs. While one of us researched education, the other delved into the life history of a controversial college president. The research project about Jamaica specifically examined the implementation of primary education policies to find out how change was enacted, and with what success. Jamaica's Minister of Education, Mavis Gilmour, had identified several “areas of deficiency” (Jamaica Government, 1983–1984, p. 187). She implemented policies to remedy problems in these areas: (a) the school feeding program, (b) teacher training, (c) compulsory attendance, (d) classroom furniture, and (d) school buildings. The research project attempted to find out why there was resistance to the implementation of change. The research conducted in South Carolina studied the life of a controversial college president, Benner C. Turner. Although the research included detailing his early life (such as his education), the most important part of the investigation was his tenure as president at a historically Black college during a violent time of social upheaval.

Interviewing

Both of us used qualitative interviewing as one of the strategies to gather data. It is helpful for a novice researcher or a doctoral candidate who is entering the field to understand the body of literature with regard to qualitative interviewing. According to Creswell (1998), there are several steps involved in interviewing. One must identify interviewees according to purposeful sampling. It is necessary to define what type of interview is practical and will be most useful in answering the research questions. One must determine the place, and after arriving, obtain consent. Of course it is important then to have the questions ready and allow time to elaborate. Patton (2002) went further by stating that a successful researcher interviews people to find out things that are not easily discernable, such as feelings, thoughts, intentions, and previous behaviors. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful.

One fundamental aspect of good interviewing is asking the right questions. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) teach that interview questions must fit the topic, and the queries must be culturally relative. Silverman (2000) indicates that questions should tease out some theory underlying behavior. While some questions may not amount to a theory, they can provide a framework for understanding a phenomenon, which is a forerunner to a theory. Silverman also suggests that an interviewer observe body language to see the effects of the questions on the respondent, and then adjust to avoid the subject's boredom, annoyance, and physical discomfort. An interviewer

should attempt to remember the questions, maintain eye contact, retain information on past points, and make connections.

Sociologist Michael Quinn Patton (2002) categorizes six types of questions that a researcher can ask. There are experiential and behavioral questions, which are about what a person does or has done. There are opinion and values questions, which are designed to understand what people think about some issue or experience. Other queries, known as feelings questions, endeavor to elicit the emotional responses of people to their experiences and thoughts. In contrast, knowledge questions seek to inquire about what facts the respondents understand. Patton also states that sensory questions inquire about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. Last, demographic questions (such as age, education, and occupation) identify characteristics of the person being interviewed.

Patton (2002) suggests that questions can be asked in a particular order. Opinions and feelings questions can be asked first, while the researcher is probing for interpretation of experience. Next, a researcher may ask knowledge questions as a follow-up. Questioning about the present tends to be easier than about the past. According to Patton, background and demographic questions are boring; people hate these questions, and therefore, researchers should keep such questions to a minimum. Fundamentally, questions should be open ended, so that people can respond in their own words. This tactic allows respondents to be expressive. Questions should also be singular; no more than one idea should be expressed. Finally, a note about clarity: when researchers are formulating questions, they should find out special terms that are commonly used by people in the setting.

The questions may or may not determine the form and structure of the interview. However, after a researcher has determined the questions, the researcher must determine the interview approach. Patton (2002) characterizes three approaches to qualitative interviewing: (a) the informal conversational interview; (b) the interview guide; and (c) the standardized, open-ended interview. In the informal conversational interview (unstructured interviewing), there is no predetermined set of questions. Therefore, the questions will flow from the immediate context. The data gathered will be different for each person interviewed. This interview design, according to Patton, offers flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness, because questions can be personalized to deepen communication. He warns, however, that informal conversational interview may require a greater amount of time to collect data, and that this strategy also demands exceptional interviewing skill on the part of the interviewer.

The interview guide method provides a framework for the questions. The interviewer would not go into areas that are not covered within the framework. The guide lists the questions or issues to be explored during the course of the interview. According to Patton (2002), the guide also provides topics within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions. The guide helps to make interviewing several people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be explored.

In contrast to the standardized open-ended interview, each question is carefully worded before the interview. Interviewers cannot deviate from the script and the interview does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview was written.

Although the informal conversational interview requires an experienced interviewer, the standardized open-ended interview allows for inexperienced interviewers because of the strict adherence to the script. This interview approach is also highly focused, so that interviewee time is used efficiently.

According to Creswell (1994), interviews can be face-to-face (questionnaires, or asking questions), by telephone, or via group interview. Bassey (1999) stresses that interviews have a

sense of formality. Some informants may be pleased, frightened, or irritated, and answers may be influenced by the views of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher must make the interviewees feel comfortable.

Similar arguments can be found in other works. For example, business professor David Silverman (2000) postulates that interview responses should be treated as giving direct access to “experience” or as actively constructed narratives. He indicates that the researcher can check the accuracy of the interviewee’s interpretation through triangulation.

Although some scholars focus predominantly on interview styles, others focus on technique. Glesne (2006) states that an interviewer’s appearance, speech, and behavior, as well as the time and place of the interview, should be acceptable to both parties. Glesne stresses the importance of developing rapport, which takes into account factors such as the participant time, cultural competency, political awareness, and building trust. Rapport, he offers, should be continuously negotiated. Rapport and friendship, however, may not always work in tandem, so it may be necessary to establish rapport, but avoid friendship because friendships may bias data selection.

It is important for researchers to be cognizant that there are ethical challenges in qualitative interviewing. Interviews lay open thoughts and feelings, and the process may cause the interviewee to reflect on uncomfortable situations in his or her life. The more problematic the experience was for the individual, the harder it may be for the interviewer to get this information. This line of questioning “involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction” (Douglas, 1985, p. 25). Some these tactics include active listening, building trust, allowing time for the participant to tell his or her story, and showing empathy.

Interviewing, as educational anthropologist Glesne (2006) explains, is a complex act, with a variety of techniques. When working with other cultures, researchers are presented with unique challenges. According to Patton (2002), cross-cultural interviewing increases the chances of misunderstandings and skewed data, because similar words can take on different meanings in other cultures. Even body language can be misunderstood. In India, moving the head sideways means the other person understands. Similar head movement in the United States indicates the other person does not understand. Norms and values are also important factors. Patton (2002) suggests that there are some topics that are discussed freely in western societies, but are taboo in other geographical regions. Some taboo topics are “family member, political views, who owns what, how people come to be in certain positions, and sources of income” (p. 393).

Bassey (1999) indicates that some researchers like to interview with a tape recorder, but that some subjects (such as politicians) prefer that the researcher take notes. It is at this juncture where informed consent and reciprocity should be used. Some researchers use cash; others opt to provide a copy of the interview guide.

Environmental social scientist Julian Agyeman (2003), in examining the under participation of people of color (mainly African Americans) in outdoor recreation, says that scholars at the time attributed the under participation to lack of economic resources and socialization. But, environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor (1989) warns that “black environmental concern, support, and activism may be masked by two types of measurement errors: (a) the use of inappropriate indicator measures, and (b) the sampling techniques, because blacks do not always show concern in ways that are easily measured” (p. 190). This point is well made, especially as two of the most used indicators, expenditure and time, are in short supply for many people of color, and sampling techniques often use “preconceived, precoded categories” (p. 191). Additionally, she argues that what the indicators in the study measured—time and money—privileged Whites.

Cohen, Phillips, and Palos (2001) highlight the importance of language when conducting research with some ethnic participants. They give an example of a breast cancer study in which the Latina participants spoke predominately in Spanish. They also identify the importance of developing an ongoing relationship based on mutual trust and respect, and being culturally sensitive.

Linda Tillman (2002), an authority in educational leadership, provides a comprehensive analysis of culturally sensitive research approaches, particularly as it relates to the study of African Americans. She defines *culture* as a group's collective way of thinking, believing, and knowing, which includes shared experiences, consciousness, skills, values, forms of expression, social institutions, and behaviors. This definition assumes that individuals are not monolithic but rather exist on a continuum. This definition can be attributed to many groups. Tillman acknowledges that all research can be considered culturally based, but that a researcher does not have to belong to a cultural group in order to study that culture. She believes what is important is the researcher's cultural knowledge regarding the experiences of the group under study.

Higginbottom and Serrant-Green (2005), in their research on minority health, report on the disparity between that community and the general population. They claim that quantitative studies have been ineffective in illustrating this disparity; instead, policymakers are asking for in-depth, qualitative studies. However, they find that some researchers lack the requisite culturally sensitive research skills. Certainly, one must be culturally sensitive to gain confidential health information from minority populations. Higginbottom who is biracial (Black and White), initially considered herself an insider in the Black community. But as her research progressed, she came to realize that there were several differences between herself and the Black community:

Whilst initially I thought it was not possible for me to have a Eurocentric perspective, increasingly I have become aware that, via my European education and professional socialisation, I may hold Eurocentric perspectives that may influence the research process. This idea has been difficult to acknowledge. (Higginbottom and Serrant-Green, 2005, p. 665)

Most of the participants were working class, and they perceived her as middle class. She also initially believed that she possessed considerable insight into the Caribbean community given that she could speak and understand Jamaican "Patois." But later, she discovered that she "could not understand Patois well enough for the purposes of a research project" (p. 665).

Another aspect of interviewing that is important to remember is that a researcher must interview participants with a case-by-case approach to prevent the misrepresentation and objectification of a group (Barron, 1999). The balance of this article (about our experiences) builds on the aforementioned qualitative literature in two ways. First, this material provides insight into our field experiences as doctoral students. Second, it adds to the work of Tillman (2002) and Higginbottom and Serrant-Green (2005) regarding culturally sensitive research. While reading the rest of this article, keep in mind that our outlook is conceptually grounded on the importance of understanding the researcher's "positionality." By this term we mean that the interviewer must delicately balance culturally sensitive research approaches while conducting personal field interviews.

To illustrate this juggling act, let us look at one possible scenario. The researcher, in conducting an important interview, is attempting assiduously to use Creswell's steps, Glesne's techniques, Tillman's strategy, and Higginbottom and Serrant-Green's culturally sensitive approaches. Suddenly the participant refuses to continue the interview. The participant fears that the researcher may be a political operative or may have a personal agenda. Obviously, this glitch would be a sensitive moment! How can a researcher navigate such moments?

In order to provide a framework for understanding the context surrounding our interviews, we will briefly discuss the research design, the role of the researcher, site selection, and selection of participants.

Jamaican Fieldwork: Unraveling How Well Educational Policies are Implemented

Research Methodology

Qualitative methods were used for both of the studies because qualitative research enriches the scholarly field through multiple viewpoints. According to Creswell (1998), “Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Additionally, Taylor, Fazal, Lingard, and Henry (1997) state that the aim of policy research is to unravel the complexities of the policy process; therefore, qualitative research is fitting.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explain that qualitative researchers study phenomena in natural settings in hopes of understanding meanings in people’s lives. Our two studies were conducted with the goal of examining real-world problems. These two studies were exploratory and descriptive. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), “The strengths of qualitative studies should be demonstrated for research that is exploratory or descriptive, and that stresses the importance of context, setting, and participants’ frames of reference” (p. 54).

Research Design

Although it may seem common sense, it is helpful to have as a mantra a basic guiding principle stated by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000): “The purpose of the research determines the methodology and the design of the research” (p. 73). The Jamaican policy study, for example, used a case study design. It consisted of interviews and document analysis. Creswell (1998) defines a *case study* as being bounded by time and place. The Jamaican study involved detailed, in-depth data collection, using multiple sources of information. Creswell also believes that the case should be situated in its natural setting. He reminds researchers that a case study must use a wide array of data collection tools, so that the researcher can build a profound picture of the case.

Bassey (1999) categorizes numerous types of educational case studies: (a) theory seeking and theory testing; (b) story telling; (c) picture drawing; (d) narrative stories; (e) descriptive accounts of educational events, projects, and systems; and (f) evaluative (p. 93). The Jamaican research was an evaluative case study.

Research Site

The ideal research site meets the following conditions, as noted by Marshall and Rossman (1995): “There is high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions and/or structures that may be a part of the research question will be present; the researcher can maintain presence as long as necessary” (p. 54). The Jamaican parishes of Kingston and St. Thomas were selected as the study sites. Kingston (the capital city of Jamaica) was selected for two reasons. First, the policies were implemented there. Second, Kingston provides a rural–urban perspective. St. Thomas is a rural parish in eastern Jamaica. It was selected because the Minister of Education Mavis Gilmour stated that St. Thomas lagged considerably behind other parishes in attendance and other issues. Gilmour found out that St. Thomas had the highest level of illiteracy and the lowest average attendance (Jamaica Government, 1981–1982). As a result, the ministry tried to implement a new primary education policy between 1980 and 1985, commencing in St. Thomas. These parishes were also selected because Taylor et al. (1997) said that implementation issues should be conducted at sites of “the policy in practice” (p. 41).

Research and the Researcher

How does the sensitive nature of research affect the researcher? In his assessment of the researcher, Miller (1992) maintains that “Lack of education, whether provision or participation, often indicts an individual, a family, a community, an ethnic group, a government, or a country. Assessing education is never neutral. The assessor’s perspectives, preferences, and prejudices are often very evident” (p. 137). The term “fly-on-the wall researchers” describes field workers who attempt to be objective. Researchers cannot insert themselves into the case; otherwise, the outcome of the research would be biased. I am aware, as a Jamaican who has been through the socialization process, of my biases. I am Indian-Jamaican (Indian father, Black mother) and I grasp the perception of my social class. Therefore, awareness of my identity as a researcher is important. I know that Jamaica’s colonial history continues to shape education policy; today’s political parties use education research to promote particular agendas. Because I have been living in the United States for 10 years, I must also be careful that I am not grafting a United States educational framework onto Jamaica. I kept a field journal in which I bracketed my personal interpretations. However, my background as a Jamaican was of great advantage. Knowledge of this culture was crucial to my credibility.

Interviewing for the Jamaican Policy Study

Good interviewing requires asking the right questions. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) remind researchers that interview questions must fit the topic, and the queries must be culturally relative. Silverman (2000) further clarifies that questions should tease out the theory underlying behavior. So while some questions may not lead to a theory, they can provide a framework for understanding a phenomenon, which is a forerunner to a theory.

The Jamaican study used an interview style that was informal and conversational. In this type of interview, there is no predetermined set of questions; therefore, the questions will flow from the immediate context.

The Number of Interviews for the Jamaican Study

As the researcher, I was in the field for two months, and I interviewed 37 participants. Interviews were scheduled ahead of time in locations selected by the participants. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 3 hours, for a total of 46 hours and 10 minutes. Some participants were more comfortable sharing information than others. Thirty-one people were audiotaped during face-to-face, in-depth interviews; one person was interviewed over the phone but also audiotaped; and five participants were interviewed face-to-face, while I wrote their responses. (These numbers do not include follow-up interviews by phone and email.)

The questions were open-ended. Participants were asked about their involvement in the policy implementation process, how their actions were influenced, and their perceptions about the outcome of the policies. The questions were aimed at answering the research questions and identifying themes that emerged from the literature review. I also wanted to find out about the factors influencing policy implementation. The order in which the questions were asked depended on the flow of the conversation. I inserted questions or probing comments depending on the flow of the interview and the information that was provided.

Identifying Participants for the Jamaican Study

Two forms of sampling were used to identify participants: (a) purposeful sampling and (b) snowball sampling.

Purposeful sampling.

Qualitative research with policy analysis requires access to key players in the policy process—people such as political advisors, politicians, and senior bureaucrats. Thus I selected two policymakers.

Snowball sampling.

Taylor et al. (1997) point out that when policymakers are interviewed, they may provide a version of their role that is distorted or magnified. Therefore, it is important to access as many story accounts as possible. In the snowball method, one respondent leads the researcher to other respondents (who are involved in the micro-level implementation process). Between the two parishes, I interviewed 35 other participants, identified through snowball sampling, such as teachers, cabinet members, and education officers.

Interview Parameters

All the participants were interviewed in English, although there were sporadic moments when the Jamaican dialect, Patois, was used. It is noteworthy that none of the participants signed the interview consent form (although Mavis Gilmour did give approval for her name to be used in reporting the findings). A number of participants made strong political statements about the administrative process, and thus they were concerned about reprisals. All participants indicated that they did not wish to see the interview transcripts, probably because I assured them that their names would not appear in my report. In the interest of developing a trusting and collaborative relationship between the academy and the participants, I called several participants and shared my findings, which they supported. Additionally, I had follow-up visits with several participants.

The Data-Gathering Process

I made contact with several people at the Ministry of Education. For example, I met a statistician who was helpful in identifying charts and figures that could be useful to the study. I was introduced to a policy analyst who worked in the policy unit at the ministry, but who also was a junior teacher in St. Thomas during Mavis Gilmour's administration. She assisted me in identifying teachers from St. Thomas. I also met an assistant to Andrew Holness, the Minister of Education. This assistant helped me to schedule an appointment with the minister.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission, I immediately emailed my contacts at the Ministry of Education. I also emailed Dr. Hyacinth Evans at the University of West Indies. Dr. Evans provided some guidance with my research and contacted Dr. Gilmour on my behalf. Before I left for Jamaica, I had scheduled interviews with Mavis Gilmour, former Minister of Education, and current (at the time of my research) Minister of Education Andrew Holness. Although I was assured that I would be able to meet with teachers in St. Thomas, I was apprehensive about finding all the participants I needed.

When I arrived in Jamaica, I was anxious to get started. I was on a tight timeline, and I needed to find 35 additional participants. Dr. Gilmour was the first interview I conducted. She was pleasant and engaging. I was glad to be able to talk with her, because she usually does not grant interviews. She noted, however, that my research was of interest to her. Her recommendations were the beginning of the snowball-sampling process in Kingston.

I was provided with contacts for St. Thomas teachers. Nevertheless, I was still apprehensive, because I am not as familiar with St. Thomas as I am with Kingston. When I arrived in St. Thomas, I hired a taxi driver to assist me with finding my first participant. At first, I was nervous about riding in a taxi with a strange man. This taxi was similar to public bus: there were six passengers, four in the back and two in the front. Although I did not know where I was going, I did not ask the taxi driver, because I was fearful for my life. There have been numerous cases of

females being raped by taxi drivers in St. Thomas. While in the taxi, I decided I would look for a sign directing me to the school. As we traveled, the other passengers got out at various locations. To my distress, I was left alone with the driver. To allay my fears, I struck up a conversation with him. We traveled until there was no more paved road, and we turned on a road that was made of stones. My heart began pounding at a much faster pace. I was convinced he was about to rape me. I still showed no fear. We were at my destination.

After I arrived, I surreptitiously recorded the car's license plate number, as well as a description of him and his car. I called my sister in Kingston and gave her all of this information. My insider knowledge made me fearful as a safeguard.

Following my first interview in St. Thomas, I was delighted to receive recommendations, which led to the snowball-sampling process. I interviewed a former elementary school principal. She said that I did not have a Jamaican accent on the phone; so, when I met her and she realized that I was Jamaican, she hugged me and welcomed me into her house. She was wearing a housedress, and she decided against changing clothes, because I am Jamaican. This may not have been the best idea, as her breast kept falling out her housedress (she was not wearing a brassiere). She would laugh each time her breast fell out, indicating that she was not bothered that I was seeing it. She merely replaced it and kept answering my questions. I smiled occasionally, and even mentioned that my mom always wears a similar housedress, especially during the summer. At the end of the interview, she asked if I was related to a politically prominent Jamaican family. I told her no. She commented that I shared similar features with this family. At this time, I reflected on her responses to my questions and noted that she went to great lengths to present neutral responses. I wondered if her neutrality was based on her perception of my political affiliation. In my journal, I bracketed these thoughts.

Another participant invited me to her house in the city. When I arrived, her 9-year-old grandson greeted me at the door. Their dogs were barking furiously. When I entered the house, her grandson developed a fascination with my cell phone. He took my phone without my permission, and he began taking pictures of himself and the house. My participant spent over 2 hours complaining about her family. Additionally, she had been on her way to the dentist, because she had broken her dentures. When she realized that I was Jamaican, however, she laughed and said she would talk with me without her teeth, because I understand the culture. When the interview started, she answered the questions; but somehow we always came back to talking about her challenges with her family. I would sneak in a question between her stories. I would also find ways to attach a question to issues she complained about. I discovered ways to identify social issues in my field notes that were related to family complaints, so I identified the issue, related it her family, and then asked my question. I initially had scheduled this interview for 1 hour, but I stayed for 6 hours, which meant I had to postpone other interviews I had scheduled for that day. Although I was a bit frustrated, I felt like a member of her family by the end of the interview.

In another case, after speaking at length on the phone with an 80-year-old participant, describing my research in detail, he seemed excited to participate in the study. He was a retired principal who served as Justice of the Peace. He performed this service twice weekly, and clients met him at a local bar. Keep in mind that these bars are not similar to bars in the United States (or most developed countries). The bar was located across from the school where he served a principal. The bar also doubled as a grocery store and a private residence. This bar was constructed of wood, without a specific architectural design. I traveled over an hour by public bus to meet this participant. I did not know the area. Nevertheless, I found the bar. When I arrived, I waited inside for the participant to arrive. Upon his arrival, I introduced myself, and I reminded him about the topic of my study. To my utter dismay, he shouted that he was not going to participate in the study because I might be a political operative. He stressed that I talked and looked like an

operative. He questioned why a girl from America would be interested in talking about education in the 1980s.

I thought I had done everything right. I had been clear about my motives when I had spoken with him on the phone. I had hoped that because I received his contact information from a friend of his, who also participated in the study, that the link would allay his fear. I had come to the bar early, I had dressed conservatively, because I did not want to give the impression that since I lived in the United States I was wealthy and somehow superior. I had greeted everyone in the Jamaican dialect, Patois, again a sign of belonging.

I did understand that interviews lay open thoughts and feelings, and the process may cause the interviewee to reflect on uncomfortable situations in his or her life. The more problematic the experience is for the individual, the harder it may be for the interviewer to obtain this information. One important tool that may assist an interviewer conducting an emotionally charged interview is superb listening skills and patience. I am a Jamaican who possesses the language and cultural nuances that are unique to Jamaica. This knowledge equipped me with skills to navigate such moments. Yet, I started to feel like an outsider.

So, I painfully explained that I was not an operative. He shared that Minister Gilmour wanted to fire him, because he was not a member of her political party. He stressed that she had worked assiduously to remove him as principal. She went so far, he said, as to accuse of him of stealing the milk from the school lunch program and selling the milk to the bar in which we were conducting the interview. He said that these problems were solely based on his political affiliation. He stated that if I were doing an interview about Gilmour, that he wanted no part of it.

I was on the verge of tears, though I showed no sign. I am thinking, I traveled to rural Jamaica, by public transportation, to conduct this interview, and it is falling apart! I smiled and explained that I was not conducting the interview about Gilmour, just about her policies. In the meantime, several of his friends arrived at the bar, so he told them how angry he still was at Gilmour, and that I wanted to interview him. I was daunted by this task. I pondered about what to do. Should I leave? No, I decided. I had come too far to lose this interview.

Interviewer: I am Winsome. Thank you so much for meeting me.

Interviewee: Yes, no problem.

Interviewer: This is where you work on Thursdays! I would love to have my office in a nice, friendly bar.

Interviewee: Yes! It keeps me young and alert.

Interviewer: So, as we spoke about last night, I will talk to you about being a principal during Gilmour's administration.

Interviewee: Mavis Gilmour! Are you a JLP (Jamaica Labor Party)?

Interviewer: No, I am not affiliated with any political party in Jamaica.

Interviewee: I don't trust you! I am a PNP (People's National Party), and Mavis Gilmour was a JLP. She accused me of stealing the milk from the school lunch program. She said I sold it to this very same bar to chase rum. She said this at a teachers' meeting in Port Antonio! She did not like me because of my political party. I cannot do this interview!

Interviewer: Okay ... okay. I am going to get some water; I will be right back.

I stayed around. We talked. He calmed down. I engaged other people in the bar in general conversation. The participant then performed some Justice of the Peace duties (signing official documents). I came back to him between his duties and asked him to talk about what Jamaica's political system was like during the 1980s (arguably, the most tumultuous period in Jamaica's political history). I did not take notes; I did not turn on the tape recorder. He spoke at length about the period, and I when I felt it was safe to do so, I began to ask probing questions unrelated to my

research. I found out that he was very passionate about his political beliefs and had remained politically active.

My moment came when he began to talk about the social policies of the 1970s compared to the 1980s. Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley (PNP) introduced sweeping social changes in Jamaica in the 1970s. Those policies included an established minimum wage, maternity leave for pregnant women, and free university education. My participant talked extensively about how educational opportunities opened up for the poor. This was my “in”! I said, “Great! This is what I want to talk to about—how the poor benefitted from education policy, what policies worked, and what are the legacies of these policies.” I assured him that I was not interested in the political party, just the policies. He then gave me the okay to tape the interview. The interview was quite insightful, and I enjoyed the experience.

I left some of the interviews delighted about what I was learning; but after others, I left depressed. One participant stressed that nothing could be done about policy implementation until there is the political will to institute change. At that point, I called Francis Godwyll (a PhD advisor), who assured me that researchers sometimes struggle with various emotional challenges, depending on the nature of their topic. I had to remind myself that though I had been a recipient of these policies, I was now a researcher; so my field journal was helpful as a place to log and bracket my thoughts. Experiences in the field differ from researcher to researcher. Nevertheless, all researchers encounter challenges in which they have to navigate through sensitive qualitative research interviews. Approximately 1,000 miles away, my colleague was experiencing a few speed bumps when seeking interviews to discover facts about the controversial Benner C. Turner.

The South Carolina Fieldwork: Discovering Benner C. Turner

Research and the Researcher

During the course work phase of my PhD program, my research interest leaned toward exploring the lives and experiences of college presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) during the Civil Rights era. I was particularly interested in investigating the presidential administration of former South Carolina State University (SCSU) president Benner Creswill Turner, who served from 1950 to 1967.

I had studied during my undergraduate years at Claflin University, which was located “next door” to SCSU. I remembered that SCSU held an annual commemoration of the Orangeburg Massacre, which had occurred on February 8, 1968. At that tragic event, students were protesting a segregated bowling alley, which resulted in the police shooting and killing some of the protesters. Somehow people laid part of the blame on the leadership style of Turner (Hine, 1996), who was not even president of the school at the time of the killings. All those years that I was a student at Claflin, I wondered what Turner had done to be considered at fault.

After successfully completing my courses and passing exams, I wrote my dissertation proposal, within the context of a case study format, seeking to examine Turner’s tenure as president at SCSU. My committee, however, thought it would be a more interesting study if I wrote a life history of Turner. According to Creswell (1998), a life history is “an approach... where a researcher reports on an individual life and how it reflects cultural themes of the society, personal themes, institutional themes, and social histories” (p. 49). Similar to Creswell’s focus, my committee’s interest was in aspects of Turner’s life such as his formative experiences, career path, presidential administration, retirement, and death (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), an historical analysis is helpful in gaining information in areas that have not been examined or in areas that need to be reexamined. Because not much was known about Turner’s early life or about his life after he retired, historical analysis was a good choice of research method. Further, this method was helpful because his legacy as president of

SCSU had been vilified historically because of his conservative and accommodationist approach to leading SCSU (Fairclough, 2007; Hine, 1996; Shuler, 2012). So I began to fill in the gaps in the literature about his early life and his life after retirement. I also tried to take an informed, new look at his legacy. Although writing a life history on someone is a daunting task, I understood what my committee was looking for, and thus I was energized when I entered the field.

Field Work Sources

I was in the field for over two months. Part of the time, I collected data and examined various primary historical documents from archives, libraries, and repositories. These documents helped me to discern themes in my findings, to add to the existing body of literature, and to chronicle the life of Turner. When I was not collecting archival data, I was recruiting participants for interviews. I interviewed 11 participants, at a time and place convenient to them. The locations of the interviews varied: the residences of participants, a restaurant, a photography studio, and a participant's office. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 3 hours. Out of the 11 participants, I audiotaped 7 either face-to-face or by phone, because of the long distance. My participants can be grouped into four types of people: college presidents at HBCUs, alumni of SCSU, community members of Orangeburg, South Carolina, and relatives of Turner.

My semi-structured interview guide consisted of a basic format to administer the interviews. The guide was organized to conform to the four types of participants. The college presidents were asked what it means to be a college president, what constitutes effective leadership within the context of higher education, and their opinions on the leadership of Turner. The interview guide for SCSU alumni aimed to provide the study with background information and sought to help alumni reflect on their student years at the school, and on their personal opinions of Turner's administration. The interview guide for the community members and family members of Turner contained questions that were aimed to provide more background and sought to help them reflect on the sociopolitical climate of Orangeburg, South Carolina during Turner's administration. The questions were tailored to allow them to recount their thoughts and memories of Turner as an administrator and as a relative. My study used two forms of sampling: (a) purposeful sampling and (b) snowball sampling.

Purposeful sampling.

I chose several participants through purposeful sampling because of their intimate knowledge of the schools through their experiences as students at SCSU and Claflin University during the 1950s and 1960s. These participants, over forty years later, continue to serve the Orangeburg community and their respective institutions in some form. It must be noted that prior to entering the field, I received IRB approval to interview participants for my dissertation.

Snowball sampling.

I selected others through snowball sampling, such as Mrs. Geraldine Zimmerman.

“Tell Me More About Your Family’s Relationship With Turner”: Driving Over a Speed Bump in the Interview Process

In Jack Schuler's 2012 book, *Blood and Bone: Truth and Reconciliation in a Southern Town*, he examines the impact that the 1968 Orangeburg Massacre has had on the economy, morale, and the state of race relations in that small southern town in the twenty-first century. He notes in the epilogue that he was careful how he approached people he interviewed for the book. Conversely, he shows how his interviewees were careful about talking to him, especially when first meeting him. Getting good rapport is a challenge that many researchers in the field can identify with, and it was something I certainly had to deal with, because Turner was such a polarizing figure. I wanted to interview people who could offer a fresh perspective of Turner. At the same time,

however, I did not want, during the process, to make them feel uncomfortable, and potentially to lose rapport with them.

During the initial interviewing of participants, I was met with interesting perspectives and recollections of the legacy of Turner. My interviewing process was standard, predictable, and what one would find in the literature regarding the qualitative interviewing process. While I certainly appreciated the time and feedback from my initial participants, I was not satisfied with the data from the interviews. There had to be people out there who knew Turner really well and who could share specific and intimate details about his legacy. Perhaps one of the most unexpected interviews, one that would ultimately lead to a significant breakthrough in my fieldwork, was the interview I conducted with the late Mrs. Geraldine Zimmerman (on 7/10/08). My interview of her was not your standard qualitative interview. Mrs. Zimmerman, who was 97-years-old at the time of the interview, was a widow and a retired faculty member of SCSU. Her father, the late Professor James Pierce, was one of the first students to attend the college when it first opened in 1896. He would later serve as a faculty member. Mrs. Zimmerman resided in a well-kept, two-story, Russell Street home, which was also the home where she grew up. Ironically, I would later learn that Turner stayed temporarily in that house in 1947 when he first accepted a position as the dean of the law school.

Although she agreed to do the interview, she was initially suspicious of me and my dissertation topic. Despite sharing the same racial identity and my having attended a historically Black college next door to SCSU, I, in many respects, was still an outsider in her eyes. I was a researcher from a university seeking to interview her for my research project and I represented a research tradition that has in the past, at times, misrepresented historically marginalized people. When I entered her home on that extremely hot July day, she peered at me, saying, “So you want to know more about Turner?” Intimidated by her question, I hesitantly answered, “Yes, ma’am.” She proceeded to inform me about her hesitation to talk about Turner. She feared being misquoted and potentially damaging the relationship her family had with Turner’s family. This was a speed bump I had not anticipated in the interview process. At the moment, I was unsure of where this interview would go. After several minutes of exchanging pleasantries, such as my ties to Orangeburg, I decided to navigate the interview differently, because her insight would be invaluable to my research. So I asked her, “Tell me more about your family’s relationship with Turner.”

With that question, the informative, 3-hour interview began! Mrs. Zimmerman talked specifically about her life and her family history, but at times incorporated the topic of Turner into what she was saying. For example, I learned that her parents opened their home to Turner when he first accepted the position as dean of the law school in 1947, because the local hotels would not allow Blacks to stay there. Because of this kind act, Turner, and later his family when they relocated to the Orangeburg area, developed a strong relationship with Mrs. Zimmerman’s family. This small piece of information was invaluable to my study; it helped me to piece together aspects of Turner’s life—and in this instance, his whereabouts and the relationships he formed when he first arrived in Orangeburg. Moreover, I learned that her children were childhood friends with Turner’s children, with whom she still kept in constant contact. Knowing this was important. It provided a breakthrough in my research, because it allowed me later to interview Turner’s children, interviews that proved invaluable to my dissertation and my understanding of Turner’s motives.

Mrs. Zimmerman also provided more in-depth information, as much as she could recall, which also included his immediate family members, in-laws, and his whereabouts after he retired as president of the SCSU. This information would serve me well when I interviewed Turner’s children. As the interview with her proceeded, the tone of the interview changed from her family’s history to her critique of Turner’s presidency. She was brutally honest about Turner as

an administrator. She liked and respected him outside of the office, but she was not fond of the way he administered. She delicately, but firmly, provided an important perspective on Turner. She allowed me to understand that there was a difference between Benner C. Turner and President Benner C. Turner. Her analysis, in many respects, reinforces recent research on presidents at HBCUs during the Civil Rights era. Research has revealed that numerous HBCU presidents were pressured to maintain good relationships with the state legislature. This need caused them to lead their schools in a way that may not have reflected their real personality (Fairclough, 2007).

After a 3-hour interview that seemed more like a casual conversation between friends, I walked away excited about what was yet to be found in the field. She not only provided me with a much-needed, in-depth perspective on Turner, but also allowed me to have the contact information for Turner's children. She invited me back to her home to chat. I did return on a few occasions to follow up on Turner's life as well as to talk about contemporary issues, such as the significance of the 2008 U.S. presidential election. She even allowed me to take a photo of her beautiful home, because it was historically significant and relevant to my project.

When I initially met Mrs. Zimmerman, I had been worried that her apprehension of talking about Turner was going to be a roadblock. This glitch, however, turned out to be merely a speed bump. I had to be very careful how I framed my questions, in order to get her to open up about Turner. This type of challenge is one that many researchers face in the field. The literature on qualitative interviewing, which beginning researchers use, may not necessarily speak to these specific challenges. I discovered that it was possible to get past a speed bump to find a significant breakthrough in my research.

Discussion and Conclusion

As Tillman (2002) explains, "culturally sensitive research approaches use qualitative methods such as interviews (individual, group, life history), observation, and participant observation" (p. 6). This kind of research captures "the social, political, economic, and educational factors that affect the everyday existence of African Americans, particularly in educational settings" (p. 6). Additionally, Higginbottom and Serrant-Green (2005) propose that all researchers need to gain the trust of their study participants, as well as understand the intersection of migration, cultural adaptation, racism, social class, and gender in the lives of minority ethnic people.

While there may be informative classes and bodies of literature on the concepts of qualitative interviewing and qualitative interviewing techniques, this article (showing such concepts in two meaningful contexts) demonstrates an important point. There are certain realities one may face while conducting qualitative interviewing, such as the need to conduct "sensitive" interviews, the risks female researchers face in unfamiliar settings, and the challenges of working in international settings. These realities are related to culturally sensitive research approaches.

Further, Higginbottom and Serrant-Green (2005) argue that there is paucity of training for researchers on how to do such culturally sensitive studies. Therefore, this article adds to the body of literature as well as provides contextual insight into conducting culturally sensitive research.

The general findings across the two cases underscore that challenges when conducting qualitative interviewing are infinite, complex, and vary from researcher to researcher. As Ezzy (2010) offers, "Research is also embodied, emotional, and performed" (p. 169). This article shows our emotions as the two researchers as well as the performance of our interviews. Moreover, our experiences demonstrate that even if you are a member of a particular cultural group and consider yourself an insider, such as dressing and speaking the part, you may still face challenges. Your perception of yourself may be at odds with your subject's perception of you.

We believe that novice researchers, particularly doctoral candidates, can benefit greatly from hearing full experiences from today's modern field, rather than reading only literature with how-to lists. The two cases we worked on demonstrate that novice researchers should be aware of their own privilege as well the issues that are sensitive to historically marginalized populations. In essence, novice researchers should make calculated accommodations, in other words, they should be flexible and patient regarding the time commitment. Novice researchers may have deadlines (including visas); however, one should be cognizant that participants are also giving up their time. Interviewers can remain professional, even when their credibility is challenged. Our attempt as researchers to unravel a phenomenon associated with the subjects' lived experiences should not cause harm to the subjects.

Successful interviewers are highly aware of language and cultural barriers. Furthermore, they are cognizant of their health and safety. Novice researchers must have a support network such as a community of people to look out for them while they are in the field. Interviewers spend countless hours constructing questions, examining the metrics of questions, and looking at similar protocols. Although there is a methodology that researchers follow, it is critical to note that when we enter into the same space as research subjects, the first rule of qualitative research is to "do no harm."

While there is a sense of excitement in finally collecting the data (in this case, conducting interviews), one must be prepared for ambiguity, personal safety issues, and possible roadblocks when conducting qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, when faced with the latter, it is important as a researcher to trust your instincts, and the environment you are in, to construct culturally sensitive interviews. In such interviews, the researcher is astutely aware of the surroundings and is able to employ techniques to secure the interview.

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