4

Establishing Access to, Making Contact with, and Selecting Participants

Before selecting participants for an interview study, the interviewer must both establish access to them and make contact. Because interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and the participant, how interviewers gain access to potential participants and make contact with them can affect the beginning of that relationship and every subsequent step in the interviewing process. In this and subsequent chapters, I discuss an idea that I think is equivalent to the First Commandment of interviewing: Be equitable. Respect the participant and yourself. In developing the interviewing relationship, consider what is fair and just to the participant and to you.

THE PERILS OF EASY ACCESS

Beginning interviewers, like running water, tend to look for the easiest path to the goal, their potential participants. They often want to select people with whom they already have a relationship: friends, those with whom they work, students they teach, or others with whom they have some tangential connection. This is understandable but problematic. My experience is that the easier the access, the more complicated the interview.

Interviewing People Whom You Supervise

Conflicts of interest are inherent in interviewing people you supervise. For example, I worked with a doctoral candidate who was the principal

of an elementary school. She wanted to interview teachers in her school about their experience in developing collaborative learning projects in their classrooms. She had been deeply involved in the project with her teachers and was eager to understand what effect it had had on their experiences.

In discussions with me, the principal said that her school was small and not a large, unfeeling bureaucracy. She had a close working relationship with the teachers. She felt that they trusted her. Finally, she thought that despite her investment in the project, she could be impartial in the interview.

One of the principles of an equitable interviewing relationship, however, is that the participants not make themselves unduly vulnerable by participating in the interview. In any hierarchical school system, no matter how small, in which a principal has hiring and firing power and control over other working conditions, a teacher being interviewed by the principal may not feel free to talk openly. That is especially the case when the teachers know that the interviewer has an investment in the program. The issue in such cases is not whether the principal can achieve enough distance from the subject to allow her to explore fully, but rather whether the teachers feel secure in that exploration. If they do not, the outcomes of such interviews are not likely to be productive.

As a general principle then, it is wise to avoid interviewing participants whom you supervise. That does not mean in this case that the doctoral candidate could not explore the experiences of elementary teachers in collaborative learning projects; it does mean that she had to seek to understand the experience of teachers in schools other than her own.

Interviewing Your Students

Inexperienced interviewers who are also teachers often conceptualize a study that involves interviewing students, and they are often sorely tempted to interview their own. As legitimate as it may be to want to understand the effectiveness of, say, a teaching method or a curriculum, a student can hardly be open to his or her teacher who has both so much power and so much invested in the situation. The teacher–researcher should seek to interview students in some other setting with some other teacher who is using a similar method or curriculum.

Interviewing Acquaintances

Sometimes new interviewers want to select participants whom they know but not in a way related to the subject of study. For example,

one doctoral candidate was contemplating an interview study about the complexities of being a cooperating teacher for social studies student teachers. He wanted to interview a participant with whom he did not work professionally but with whom he had regular contact at church. Even experienced interviewers cannot anticipate some of the uncomfortable situations that may develop in an interview. Having to consider not only the interviewing relationship but a church relationship as well might limit the full potential of such an interview.

For example, in an interview about the experience of being a cooperating teacher, the acquaintance from church might reveal that the reason he or she takes on student teachers is for the free time it allows. Normally an interviewer would want to follow up on an aspect of an interview that made him or her feel uneasy, but to do so in this case could affect his relationship with the participant at church. The interviewer may avoid a follow-up, slant the follow-up, or in some other way distort the interview process because of concern for his or her other relationship with the participant. The result is either incomplete or distorted information on a key aspect of the subject of study.

Interviewing Friends

Some new interviewers with whom I have worked want to interview participants to whom they have easy access because of friendship. The interviewing relationship in such cases can seldom develop on its own merit. It is affected by the friendship in obvious and less obvious ways.

One of the less obvious is that the interviewers and the participants who are friends usually assume that they understand each other. Instead of exploring assumptions and seeking clarity about events and experiences, they tend to assume that they know what is being said. The interviewer and the participant need to have enough distance from each other that they take nothing for granted (see Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Hyman et al., 1954; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979).

Taking Oneself Just Seriously Enough

In addition to feeling shy about a process with which they have had little practice (Hyman et al., 1954), a major reason that some doctoral candidates with whom I have worked want to capitalize on easy access is that they tend not to take themselves seriously as researchers. Beginning interviewers find it difficult to imagine asking strangers to spend 4½ hours with them.

Many doctoral candidates see research as something others do. Our

educational system is structured so that most people consume research but seldom produce it. This has led many to adopt an uncritical attitude about published material and to regard it as somehow sacred. Doing research is seen as an elite occupation, done only by those at the top of the hierarchy (see Bernstein, 1975).

At the same time, when dissertation research does not grow organically out of the course work, clinical experiences, and independent reading that have gone before, it becomes a requirement to be overcome. Doctoral candidates who have had little practice in doing research and who see it as a hurdle rather than an opportunity find it difficult to affirm their own interest in their subject, their own status as researchers, the power of their research method, or the utility of their work other than to fulfill a requirement.

Cumulative societal inequities can exact a heavy toll on researchers at this juncture. Research in our society has long been seen as a male preserve, especially a White male preserve, associated with class and privilege. New researchers who are not middle-class, White males may have to struggle against social conventions to take themselves seriously in their task. Some doctoral candidates need bracing from their advisors and their peers at this point in their program in order to affirm themselves as researchers. Taking oneself seriously enough as a researcher is a first step toward establishing equity in the interviewing relationship.

ACCESS THROUGH FORMAL GATEKEEPERS

When interviewers try to contact potential participants whom they do not know, they often face gatekeepers who control access to those people. Gatekeepers can range from absolutely legitimate (to be respected) to self-declared (to be avoided). If a researcher's study involves participants below the age of 18, for example, access to them must involve the absolutely legitimate gatekeepers, their parents or guardians. Although it may be appropriate to seek access to students through the schools, very soon in the process that access must be affirmed by the parents of the children. Within the schools themselves, teachers, principals, and superintendents serve as gatekeepers who must be respected.

Some participants are accessible only through the institutions in which they reside or work. For example, if a researcher wanted to interview prisoners about prison education programs, it is not likely that there would be any route of access other than through the warden. A researcher studying the experience of people at a particular site, whether it be factory, school, church, human service organization, or business, must gain

access through the person who has responsibility for the operation of the site. (See Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 252; Richardson et al., 1965, p. 97.)

On the other hand, one researching an experience or a process that takes place in a number of sites, but not studying the workings of any particular site, may not need to seek access through an authority. Such a researcher may want to study the work of high school teachers who teach in many schools scattered through a region. In such a case, the researcher can go directly to them without asking for permission from their principals.

Likewise, a researcher studying the experience of students in high school, but not in a particular high school, might not have to seek access through a principal but only through parents. In general, the more adult the potential participants, the more likely that access can be direct.

In our study of community college faculty (Seidman, 1985), my colleagues and I interviewed 76 participants in approximately 25 different community colleges in Massachusetts, New York State, and California. Because we were not studying a particular community college, we did not seek access to individual faculty through the administrators of the colleges. On the other hand, we were never secretive about our work; it would have been difficult to be so, carrying, as we were, a tape recorder large enough to allow us to make audiotapes of a sound quality suitable for the film that we made in the first phase of our research (Sullivan & Seidman, 1982). But even if we had been using a small, pocket-sized tape recorder, we would not have hidden our research from others. When asked in the halls what we were doing at the college, we answered explicitly about our project.

On only one occasion was a faculty member uncomfortable with our approaching him directly and not through his administration. We told him that he should inform the administration of our project and our wish to interview him; we made it clear that we were not doing research about the site. We said that if an administrator wanted to meet with us, we would be happy to do so in order to explain our project, but we were not eager to seek permission from administrators to interview individual faculty. The participant did inform his administration, but no one wanted to meet us.

INFORMAL GATEKEEPERS

Sometimes although there is no formal gatekeeper, there is an informal one (Richardson et al., 1965). Most faculties, for example, usually include a few members who are widely respected and looked to for guidance when decisions about whether or not to support an effort are made. In small groups, there is usually at least one person who, without having formal au-

thority, nevertheless holds moral suasion. If that person participates in a project, then it must be okay; if he or she doesn't, then the group feels there must be a good reason for not doing so. To the extent that interviewers can identify informal gatekeepers, not to use them formally for seeking access to others but to gain their participation in the project as a sign of respect for the effort, access to others in the group may be facilitated.

On the other hand, groups often have self-appointed gatekeepers, who feel they must be informed and must try to control everything that goes on, even if they have no formal authority. Their self-importance is not respected by others in the group; avoiding their involvement in the study may be the best way to facilitate access to others in such a group.

ACCESS AND HIERARCHY

One of the differences between research and evaluation or policy studies is that the latter are often sponsored by an agency close to the people who participate in the interviews. In such studies, authority for access to participants often is formally granted by administrators in charge. There is a sense of official sponsorship of the project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which affects the equity of the relationship between interviewer and participant. It is almost as if the interviewer were someone higher in the hierarchy instead of outside it.

Whenever possible, it is important to establish access to participants through their peers rather than through people "above" or "below" them in their hierarchy. For interviewing children, peer access may not be feasible. But in other situations, the demand of equity in the interviewing relationship calls for peer access when possible. If your participants are teachers, for example, try to establish access to them through other teachers; if they are counselors, reach them if at all possible through other counselors.

MAKING CONTACT

Do it yourself. Try not to rely on third parties to make contact with your potential participants. No matter how expedient it seems to have someone else who knows potential participants explain your project to them, try to avoid doing so. Building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study. Third parties may be very familiar with potential participants, but they can seldom do justice to the nature of someone else's project. They have not internalized it the way the researcher has; they do not have the investment in it that

the researcher does. Once having introduced the subject, they can seldom respond to questions that naturally might arise. Third parties may be necessary for gaining access to potential participants but should be used as little as possible to make actual contact with them.

A contact visit before the actual interview aids in selecting participants and helps build a foundation for the interview relationship. A contact visit can also convince an interviewer that a good interviewing relationship with a particular potential participant is not likely to develop. The more care and thoroughness interviewers put into making contact, the better foundation they establish for the interviewing relationship.

MAKE A CONTACT VISIT IN PERSON

Telephoning is often a necessary first step in making contact, but if possible it should consist of only a brief introduction, an explanation of how the interviewer gained access to the person's name, and a decision on when to meet. Avoid asking the potential participant for a yes or no answer about participating. An easy "yes" from someone who has not met the interviewer or heard enough about the interviews can backfire later. A "no" that is a defense against too much initial pressure gets the interviewer nowhere (see Richardson et al., 1965, p. 97). The major purpose of the telephone contact is to set up a time when the interviewer and the potential participant can meet in person to discuss the study.

It takes time, money, and effort to arrange a separate contact visit with individual potential participants or even a group, but they are almost always well spent. The purpose of the contact visit is at least threefold. The most important is to lay the groundwork for the mutual respect necessary to the interview process. By taking the time to make a separate contact visit to introduce him- or herself and the study, an interviewer is saying implicitly to the potential participants, "You are important. I take you seriously. I respect my work and you enough to want to make a separate trip to meet with you to explain the project."

Although individual contact visits tend to be more effective, it is possible also to meet with a group of potential participants. Group contact visits save time and wear on the interviewer by allowing one explanation of the study to several people at once. On the downside, one potential participant's skepticism about participating can affect the attitude of others in the group.

Clearly, interviewers will not always be able to make in-person contact and will have to rely on the telephone. It will be interesting to see as time progresses how electronic mail can be used to make initial contact

and follow-up arrangements with some participants. Something about the informality and directness of electronic mail and the ability of the participant to deal with it when he or she wants seems to offer promise for initiating and maintaining a connection with participants in an equitable way. E-mail may seem less aggressive than the telephone and be more timely than conventional mail.

Whether in person, on the telephone, or in an e-mail message, it is important at this point to present the nature of the study in as broad a context as possible and to be explicit about what will be expected of the participant. Seriousness but friendliness of tone, purposefulness but flexibility in approach, and openness but conciseness in presentation are characteristics that can enhance a contact visit whether conducted in person or on the phone. (For discussions of the importance of the first contact, see Dexter, 1970, p. 34; Hyman et al., 1954, p. 201; Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 65.)

The contact visit allows the interviewer to become familiar with the setting in which potential participants live or work before the interview starts. It also allows interviewers to find their way to potential participants so that they are better able to keep their interviewing appointments. In addition to building mutual respect and explaining the nature of the interview study, a second important purpose of the contact visit is to determine whether the potential participant is interested. In-depth interviewing asks a great deal of both participant and interviewer. It is no trivial matter to arrange three 90-minute interviews spaced as much as a week apart. It is important that the potential participant understand the nature of the study, how he or she fits into it, and the purpose of the three-interview sequence.

The contact visit also initiates the process of informed consent, which is necessary in some and desirable in almost all interviewing research. (See Chapter 5.) Although I seldom show the informed consent form in the contact visit, I go over orally all aspects of the study that the consent form usually covers, so that when I do present it and ask the participant to sign it, he or she will not be surprised by anything included on the form.

BUILDING THE PARTICIPANT POOL

Another primary purpose of the contact visit is to assess the appropriateness of a participant for the study. The major criterion for appropriateness is whether the subject of the researcher's study is central to the participant's experience. For example, a doctoral candidate wanting to study the way process writing affects an English teacher's experience in teaching

writing must select English teachers for whom process writing plays a central role in their teaching.

As the interviewer speaks with potential participants, he or she can keep a record of those who seem most suitable, noting their key characteristics that are related to the subject of the study. Whether the interviewer asks participants to join the study at some point in the contact visit or gets back to them at a later date, he or she must remain aware of the character of the growing participant pool in order to be purposeful in the sampling. (See section on selecting participants later in this chapter.)

SOME LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The experience of scheduling a contact visit often reflects what trying to schedule the actual interview with the participant will be like. If one is a reasonable process, the other is likely to be so too. If scheduling one contact visit is unduly frustrating, the interviewer may do well to take that into account in proceeding to build the participant pool.

Because of the time and energy required of both participants and interviewers, every step the interviewer takes to ease the logistics of the process is a step toward allowing the available energy to be focused on the interview itself. To facilitate communication, confirmation of appointments, and follow-up after the interviews, it is important for interviewers to develop a data base of their participants. They can use the contact visit to begin to collect data.

A simple participant information form can be of considerable use throughout the study. The form usually has two purposes: to facilitate communication between the interviewer and the participants; and to record basic data about the participant that will inform the final choice of participants and the reporting on the data later in the study. At minimum, the form should include the participants' home and work addresses and telephone numbers, the best time to be in touch with them, and the time to avoid calling them. Paying attention to the details of communications with participants from the beginning of the interview relationship can help in avoiding the mishaps of missed or confused appointments that can later plague an interview study.

The contact visit can also be used to determine the best times, places, and dates to interview potential participants. These are crucial. The place of the interview should be convenient to the participant, private, yet if at all possible familiar to him or her. It should be one in which the participant feels comfortable and secure. A public place such as a cafeteria or a coffee shop may seem convenient, but the noise, the lack of privacy, and

the likelihood of the interview's becoming an event for others to comment upon undermine the effectiveness of such places for interviews.

If it can be determined at the time of the contact visit that a person would be an appropriate participant in the study, the interviewer can schedule time and dates right then. The interviewer should try to let the participant choose the hour, scheduling interviews within a time period consistent with the purpose of the three-interview structure as described in Chapter 2. As pointed out previously, because each interview is meant to build on the preceding one, they are optimally spaced no more than a week and no less than a day apart.

In considering the time, dates, and place of interviews the prevailing principle must be equity. The participants are giving the interviewers something they want. The interviewers must be flexible enough to accommodate the participants' choice of location, time, and date. On the other hand, the interviewer also has constraints. Although equity necessitates flexibility, interviewers must also learn to set up interviews in such a way that they themselves are comfortable with the resulting schedule. Resentment on the part of either participant or interviewer will not bode well ultimately for the interviews.

After the contact visit, interviewers should write follow-up letters to the participants they select and to those they do not. The letters are used to thank the potential participants for meeting with the interviewers and, in the case of those who are selected for the study and who agree to participate, to confirm in writing the schedule of interview appointments.

Such detailed follow-up work in writing may seem onerous to the prospective interviewer; however, equity requires such consideration. In addition, this kind of step-by-step attention can have enormous practical benefits to the interviewer. Few things are more frustrating in an interview study than to drive a few hours to an appointment only to have the participant not show up. Sometimes the no-show is the result of poor communication. Sometimes it reflects a participant's lack of enthusiasm for the process because he or she feels asked to give a great deal while being offered very little consideration in return. In interviewing research, paying attention to the details of access and contact before the interviewing begins is the best investment interviewers can make as they select their participants and prepare to begin the interviews.

SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

Either during the contact process or shortly thereafter the researcher takes the crucial step of selecting the people he or she will interview. The

purpose of an in-depth interview study is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed, not to predict or to control that experience. Because hypotheses are not being tested, the issue is not whether the researcher can generalize the finding of an interview study to a broader population. Instead the researcher's task is to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects. Because the basic assumptions underlying an interview study are different from those of an experimental study, selecting participants is approached differently.

"Only Connect"

The United States has more than 200,000 community college faculty. In our study of the work of community college faculty (Seidman, 1985), we could interview only 76 of them. The problem we faced was how to select those 76 participants so that what we learned about their experience would not be easily dismissed as idiosyncratic to them and irrelevant to a larger population. In their influential essay on experimental and quasi-experimental design, Campbell and Stanley (1963) call this the problem of external validity.

A conventional way of defining the issue is to ask whether what is learned from the interview sample can be generalized to the larger population. One step toward assuring generalizability is to select a sample that is representative of the larger population. The dominant approach to representativeness in experimental and quasi-experimental studies has been the random selection of participants. Theoretically, if a large enough sample is selected randomly or through a stratified, randomized approach, the resulting participant pool is not likely to be idiosyncratic.

In interview studies, however, it is not possible to employ random sampling or even a stratified random-sampling approach. Randomness is a statistical concept that depends on a very large number of participants. True randomness would be prohibitive in an in-depth interview study. Furthermore, interview participants must consent to be interviewed, so there is always an element of self-selection in an interview study. Self-selection and randomness are not compatible.

The job of an in-depth interviewer is to go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience. When this experience can be captured in depth, then two possibilities for making connections develop. They are the interview researcher's

alternative to generalizability. (See Lincoln & Guba, 1985, for an extensive discussion of the concept of generalization.) First, the researcher may find connections among the experiences of the individuals he or she interviews. Such links among people whose individual lives are quite different but who are affected by common structural and social forces can help the reader see patterns in that experience. Those connections the researcher calls to the readers' attention for inspection and exploration.

Second, by presenting the stories of participants' experience, interviewers open up for readers the possibility of connecting their own stories to those presented in the study. In connecting, readers may not learn how to control or predict the experience being studied or their own, but they will understand better their complexities. They will appreciate more the intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces and, perhaps, be more understanding and even humble in the face of those intricacies. Understanding and humility are not bad stances from which to try to effect improvement in education.

Purposeful Sampling

How best to select participants who will facilitate the ability of others to connect if random selection is not an option? The most commonly agreed upon answer is purposeful sampling. (See Patton, 1989.) Patton's discussion of purposeful-sampling techniques is very thoughtful. He suggests several approaches, including "typical case," "extreme or deviant case," "critical case," "sensitive case," "convenience" sampling, and "maximum variation" sampling (pp. 100–107).

Maximum variation sampling can refer to both sites and people (Tagg, 1985). The range of people and sites from which the people are selected should be fair to the larger population. This sampling technique should allow the widest possibility for readers of the study to connect to what they are reading. In my experience maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies.

Consider, for example, a study in which the interviewer wants to explore the experience of minority teachers in local teachers' unions in urban school districts in Massachusetts (Galvan, 1990). Using the maximum variation approach, the researcher would analyze the potential population to assess the maximum range of sites and people that constitute the population.

First she would have to define what she meant by the term *urban*. Then she would have to determine the range of school systems in Massachusetts that fall within her definition. Within the systems she would have

to decide whether she was interested in the experience of all minority teachers, those in grades K–12, or just those in some particular grade level.

In Massachusetts, local teachers' unions are usually affiliated with either the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers. She would have to decide whether she was interested in studying the experience of minority teachers affiliated with both unions or with just one.

After considering the range of sites, she would then have to consider the range of people who are minority teachers and belong to local teachers' unions. She would have to determine the relative number of male and female minority teachers, the range of ethnic groups represented, the range of subject matter they teach, their levels of teaching, and the age and experience of teachers represented in the larger population.

The above characteristics are illustrative but not exhaustive of the range of variations present in the population whose experience this researcher might want to try to understand. If the range became unmanageable, the researcher would want to limit the study, looking at, for example, the experience of one minority group in a number of locals or the experience of the full range of minority members in one or two locals. The goal would remain to sample purposely the widest variation of sites and people within the limits of the study.

In addition to selecting participants who reflect the wide range in the larger population under study, another useful approach is to select some participants who are outside that range and may in some sense be considered negative cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the study discussed above about what it is like for a minority teacher to be a member of a teachers' union, it would also be useful to include some nonminority teachers who are also members of the local. If the researcher discovers through interviews that nonminority and minority teachers are having similar experiences, then the researcher will know that some issues may not be a matter of ethnicity or majority-minority status.

As another example, Schatzkamer (1986) was interested in studying the experience of older women returning to community colleges. She also decided to interview some older men who were returning to college to see in what ways their experience connected to that of the women in her sample. Selecting participants to interview who are outside the range of those at the center of the study is an effective way for interviewers to check themselves against drawing easy conclusions from their research.

SNARES TO AVOID IN THE SELECTION PROCESS

New interviewers may take too personally a potential participant's reluctance to get involved. It does little good to try to persuade such a

person to participate in an interview she or he would rather not do. In the face of initial reluctance, interviewers may go to great lengths to exercise persuasion only to find later the interview itself to be an ongoing struggle (Richardson et al., 1965). The interviewer must strike a balance between too easily accepting a quick expression of disinterest from a potential participant and too ardently trying to persuade a reluctant one that she or he really is not disinclined to participate.

Another snare is the potential participant who is too eager to be interviewed. During the contact visit an interviewer can ascertain whether the person has some ax to grind. In a contact visit Sullivan and I made to one community college, we learned that the college had just dismissed its president. The school was divided into factions: those who had worked for the president's dismissal and those who had not. Some of the faculty we contacted were very reluctant to get involved in an interview. Others were too eager. The purpose of our study was understanding the work of community college faculty. Although it is true that academic politics are a part of that work, in this particular case the partisan politics of the campus threatened to load our study with interview participants inclined to be more like informers (Dean & Whyte, 1958; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richardson et al., 1965).

On occasion during a contact visit, someone would tell us we must interview a colleague who won an award and would be wonderful to talk to. Our instinct was always to avoid such "stars." The method of in-depth interviewing elicits people's stories in a way that shows each person to be interesting no matter how anonymous.

HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS ARE ENOUGH?

New interviewers frequently ask how many participants they must have in their study. Some researchers argue for an emerging research design in which the number of participants in a study is not established ahead of time. New participants are added as new dimensions of the issues become apparent through earlier interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Other researchers discuss a "snowballing" approach to selecting participants, in which one participant leads to another (Bertaux, 1981). But even if researchers use a purposeful sampling technique designed to gain maximum variation and then add to their sample through a snowballing process, they must know when they have interviewed enough participants.

There are two criteria for enough. The first is sufficiency. Are there sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance

to connect to the experiences of those in it? In our community college study, we had to have enough participants to reflect vocational and liberal arts faculty, men, women, and minorities, and age and experience ranges. We also considered faculty with advanced degrees and without degrees. In addition, we were reluctant to interview only one person in any particular category.

The other criterion is saturation of information. A number of writers (Douglas, 1976; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) discuss a point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new. Douglas (1985) is even bold enough to attempt to assess when that began to happen in his studies. If he had to pick a number, he said, it would be 25 participants.

I would be reluctant to establish such a number. "Enough" is an interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study and each researcher. The criteria of sufficiency and saturation are useful, but practical exigencies of time, money, and other resources also play a role, especially in doctoral research. On the other hand, if I were to err, I would err on the side of more rather than less. I have seen some graduate students struggle to make sense of data that are just too thin because they did not interview enough participants. Interviewing fewer participants may save time earlier in the study, but may add complications and frustration at the point of working with, analyzing, and interpreting the interview data.

The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants. Researchers can figure out ahead of time the range of sites and people that they would like to sample and set a goal for a certain number of participants in the study. At some point, however, the interviewer may recognize that he or she is not learning anything decidedly new and that the process of interviewing itself is becoming laborious rather than pleasurable (Bertaux, 1981). That is a time to say "enough."

5

Affirming Informed Consent

First-time interviewers tend to be hesitant about securing their participants' informed, written consent to be interviewed. Some interviewers worry that telling people what they are studying will skew the results of their study. They also tend to minimize participants' sense of risk at being involved in an interview. The interviewers have no doubt about their own good intentions, but they do not anticipate the type of material that can be generated in an in-depth interview.

In-depth interviews, however, ask participants to reconstruct their life history as it relates to the subject of inquiry. In the process, a measure of intimacy can develop between interviewers and participants that leads the participants to share aspects of their lives that, if misused, could leave them extremely vulnerable. Participants have the right to be protected against such vulnerability (Kelman, 1977). Furthermore, interviewers can protect themselves against misunderstanding through the process of seeking informed consent, which requires them to be explicit about the range and purpose of their study in a way that makes them be clear about what they are doing. Finally, given the extensiveness of the interview process and the method of following up on what the participants have to say (see Chapter 6), providing people ahead of time with as much information as possible about each aspect of the study is not likely to skew the results of 4½ hours of interviewing.

The relatively recent impetus toward protecting rights of research participants stems from the reaction to the disregard for human dignity perpetrated during World War II by researchers in concentration camps controlled by Nazi Germany. The Nuremburg trials resulted in the Nuremberg Code adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946, which stated that "the voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential" (Reynolds, 1979, p. 436).