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# Open-Ended Interviews, Power, and Emotional Labor

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# **Open-Ended Interviews, Power, and Emotional Labor**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the power dynamics of the interview process and the connected emotional labor, drawing on examples from a recent study on workplace grievances in which most data collection was through open-ended interviews. By exploring the shifts of power and the emotional labor demands in the qualitative, open-ended interview, this article emphasizes that power shifts and emotions within the interview are, themselves, important data. A greater awareness of shifts in interviewer/interviewee power and emotional labor in the interview context helps the researcher better understand the nuances of the data, provides the researcher with more information about the interviewee and the research topic, and facilitates greater insights into the interview process, the subjects, and the nature of the topics discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The interview is a complex activity. As Arendell writes, “The researcher must remain cognizant of and handle several activities simultaneously. The conversation with the interviewee, a dialogue, has to be followed closely; responses and attempts to change the line and direction of discussion considered, anticipated, and guided...and the overall situation monitored, logistically and emotionally” (Arendell 1997: 344).

As Gubrium and Holstein wrote in the introduction to their well respected Handbook of Interview Research, “[a]t first glance, the interview seems simple and self-evident” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 3). In this model, “[r]espondents are relatively passive in their roles, which are delimited by the interviewer...This is the familiar asymmetrical relationship that we recognize as interviewing” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 3). “The basic model, however, locates valuable information inside the respondent and assigns the interviewer the task of somehow extracting it...the image of the subject is not of an agent engaged in the production of knowledge.” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 12). In this model, it is the job of the researcher to extricate the information from the interviewee without the interviewee (or the interviewer) contaminating the data with subjectivity or inappropriate input. More recently, however, researchers have moved away from what Gubrium and Holstein call the “basic model” toward the new “active model.”

In this model, complete subjectivity is not the ultimate goal and the interviewee plays a more active role in the interview. Thus, from this perspective, there is not a single “truth” or only one accurate account for the “perfect interview” to produce (e.g., Foucault 1980). Indeed, as Ellis has said, “there is no single standard of truth...[instead] our work seeks verisimilitude” (Ellis 1999: 674). A greater understanding of and sensitivity to the power dynamics in qualitative data

collection will enhance the research process and enable the researcher to achieve greater verisimilitude (Arendell 1997; Blee 1998; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Gilbert 2001; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002).

As the interview has become democratized, we no longer look to experts to learn about a social phenomena but go directly to those experiencing the social phenomena themselves (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Researchers are more committed to allowing the people involved to speak for themselves in their own way. The interview, therefore, has become the shared task of a “collaboration” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002).

This collaboration demands including emotions and emotional labor as part of the data. In describing Gubrium and Holstein’s old, “basic model,” Kleinman and Copp assert that, “fieldworkers [used to] share a culture dominated by the ideology of professionalism or, more specifically, the ideology of science. According to that ideology, emotions are suspect. They contaminate research by impeding objectivity, hence they should be removed” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 2). Yet, researchers are “challeng[ing] the assumptions and implications behind the “standardized” interview” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 16). “Emotional labor is [now] central to the trade [of the researcher]. But we might be made somewhat more comfortable...if more of our efforts were directed to the understanding, expression, and reporting of [our emotions]” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: viii).

Yet, we, as researchers, often do not analyze the power shifts we experience in our interviews and the emotional labor of the interview situation. Instead, power and emotions are often downplayed and not included as important data. Indeed, as Kleinman and Copp write, “[t]his curious policing of socially correct feeling within the fieldwork community can lead to a rather bizarre slanting of research reports wherein the fieldworker is represented as wallowing in

an almost unmitigated delight while engaged in the research process. This is quite possibly one reason the actual experience of fieldwork can come as such a shock to the neophyte. Such a shock might very well be reduced if we were to have at hand more forthcoming discussion of the broad range of emotions at play in fieldwork” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: vii).

This article takes up Kleinman and Copp’s call. In this article, I investigate the power dynamics of the interview process and the connected emotional labor. Throughout this analysis, I use examples from a recent study on workplace grievances in which most data collection was through open-ended interviews. Thus, this article provides the reader with a greater understanding of the interview process by exploring the shifts of power and the emotional labor demands in the qualitative, open-ended interview.

## **THE LITERATURE: POWER AND EMOTIONAL LABOR**

The power dynamics of the interview must be recognized in order to better understand the interview process and the data they affect. As Gubrium and Holstein assert, “[i]n contrast to the model asymmetry of the standardized interview, there is [now] considerable communicative equality and interdependence” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 17). Understanding the power shifts between interviewer and interviewee is important to the quality of the data gathered and can be, in itself, valuable data. The shifting nature of power in the interview context can be seen in how the interviewer must perform substantial emotional labor.

### **Power**

Power occurs in numerous relationships (e.g., Foucault 1978; Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974; Pfeffer 1978), including the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (e.g.,

Arendell 1997; Blee 1998; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). Gaventa (1980) builds on the power framework originally put forward by Lukes (1974) to suggest a theory of power involving three dimensions. At different times and in various ways, both interviewers and interviewees wield these three dimensions of power.

The first dimension describes the power struggle of unequal direct confrontation between agents. In this dimension, control is explicit and power is overt. The less powerful party displays open resistance, often leading to open conflict. Classic examples of first dimensional power are debates in Congress, back-alley fist fights, and courtroom trials (Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974). In the interview context, an interviewee's refusal to answer a question or decision to terminate the interview altogether are examples of exerting first dimensional power.

The second dimension of power addresses indirect contests of power between actors. This is not simply control of the actors, but includes influencing the rules, deterring action, and agenda setting. Here, the less powerful party may want a first dimensional contest, but is deterred from open confrontation or is prevented from engaging in this by being kept from the agenda. As in first dimensional power situations, the actors are upset and want resolution; however, because the less powerful parties lack second dimensional power, they cannot bring their conflict into the open arena (Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974). An example of this would be if the informant wants to share a particular story, but the line of questions the interviewer chooses does not allow her to bring up the subject. In this situation, the researcher would be exerting "agenda setting power." An example of the interviewee with second dimensional power would be if the interviewer had been rebuffed by the informant several times with regard to a particular category of questions, and then became too timid to ask questions from this category at a subsequent opportunity. This illustration shows the interviewee with "deterrence power."

The third dimension encompasses control or influence over how the less powerful parties think and in what way they understand the world and their interests. This power can build on the systemic effects of culturally patterned behavior, “shaping or determining [the less powerful party’s] very wants” (e.g., Foucault 1978; Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974; Pfeffer 1978). Third dimensional power affects what the parties value, which stories and perspectives are privileged and reified, and what is understood as “the truth.” The researcher’s power to craft how the interviewees’ stories are told is an example of third dimensional power.

In the interview context, power is multifaceted and sometimes difficult to assess. Interviewees often perceive the interview as both an “opportunity” but also a “threat” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 205). For example, in their discussion on interviewing men, Schwalbe and Wolkomir explain that “[a]n interviewing situation is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 205).

While, as the initiator of the contact, the interviewer holds a certain amount of official power, yet “[q]ualitative researchers only gain control of their projects by first allowing themselves to lose it” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 3). In fact, in gathering qualitative data, researchers deliberately take less-powerful roles or abandon some of their power. For example, Kleinman and Cobb assert, “we usually feel so grateful to participants for letting us hang around that we feel and act humble rather than superior” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 29). As barers of information, the interviewee possesses the power inherent in having knowledge that another lacks, but wants. The interviewers strive to acquire this new knowledge and, to quote Becker, struggle “out to get ‘the real story’ [they] conceive to be lying hidden beneath the platitudes of any group” of interviewees (Becker 1970: 103), while also acknowledging that there is no single

“real story,” no single truth to extricate from the respondent (Ellis 1991; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Flaherty 1992). As the “seekers of knowledge,” the interviewers clearly lack certain power.

Nevertheless, the researcher may be perceived by the interviewee as possessing a great deal of power. Indeed, as Becker explains, informants sometimes perceive the interviewer as a dangerous person who could “discover secrets better kept from the outside world” (1970: 103). Informants might be insecure, anxious, and even afraid when approaching the interview (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). Moreover, to submit oneself to the interview might be perceived as succumbing to the power of the researchers. As Schwalbe and Wolkomir wrote, “[t]o open oneself to interrogation is to put oneself in a vulnerable position” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 207).

Schwalbe and Wolkomir distinguish between two types of threats perceived by the interviewee: a baseline threat, which is “built into any interview” and makes informants uncomfortable; and a surplus threat, which “arises because of who is asking whom about what” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 206). To address both types of threat, the interviewee will exert power over the interview context in various ways, one of which is “testing.” Testing is when the interviewee exposes the researcher’s inferiority or lack of knowledge in areas in which the informant has expertise. If the interviewer “concedes being in unfathomable waters, control shifts to the interviewee” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 208).

### **Emotional Labor in the Field**

When researchers act without awareness of their own emotions and the emotional labor they perform in the field, they will be more influenced by their emotions, rather than less (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Hochschild defined emotional labor as “the management of feeling

to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (1983: 7).<sup>i</sup> Some researchers already acknowledge that qualitative research is inherently “an emotionally challenging endeavor” (e.g., Arendell 1997; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Blee 1998: 395; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Ellis 1991; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; e.g., Kusenbach 2002: 150; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). As Ellis and Flaherty have written, “[s]ociologists now generally recognize that emotional processes are crucial components of social experience” (Ellis and Flaherty 1992).

Open-ended interviews demand especially challenging emotional labor, since the interview is not constrained to a narrow set of questions but often develops into areas that the researcher did not anticipate. Fieldwork, unlike e.g., office work, teaching, or factory work, is less routinized, and so it is “more difficult in fieldwork than in more routinized sites of daily life interactions to apply established ‘feeling rules’ to guide the emotional dynamics between researcher and respondent” (Blee 1998: 383). Additionally, interviewers’ emotional labor can be particularly difficult because the researcher in the field is often without the crutches available to workers in other occupations. Unlike many other workers who manage their emotions as part of their jobs, interviewers usually lack co-workers’ assistance in controlling or altering their emotions. The solitary nature of interviews, means that interviewers cannot turn to nearby co-workers for help “with the deflection, shaping, and the eventual transformation of inappropriate emotions” (Lively 2000: 40). Indeed, as Blee wrote, “[e]motional dynamics in fieldwork often require continual negotiation and renegotiation” (Blee 1998: 383).

A few other scholars have discussed how respondents will try to exert power over the interviewer and demand a certain level of emotional labor in order for the interview to continue forward. For example, Blee, in her study of racist activists, explained how her interviewees would deliberately provoke fear in her to establish the power that they could exert over her. In

order for Blee to continue the interview and gather the data she needed, she had to perform concerted emotional labor to keep her fear in check and not completely succumb to these power moves (Blee 1998).

The interviewer's emotional labor is further complicated in that she must perform multiple, at times conflicting, roles for the interviewee. The role of "student" allows the interviewer to ask for the informant's information and establishes a relationship in which the informant will "teach" the interviewer. While this role mainly serves to benefit the researcher, the other roles focus more on the needs of the interviewee. The role of "confidant" provides a safe outlet for the interviewee's story. For example, Becker discusses becoming "a sympathetic ear" and providing interviewees with the opportunity to talk about topics they might not be able to discuss with people closer to them (1997). Similarly, the role of the "therapist" offers the interviewee an opportunity to work through past experiences by recounting them to another person and "let off steam" (Ellis 1999; Gardner and Lehmann 2002: 20). People with "disrupted lives" can create meaning and order in their lives by talking about their life experiences with another person, such as with the researcher (Becker 1997). Other times, the informant wants the interviewer to adopt the role of "expert" and approve of, or explain, previous experiences or take on the role of "confessor" and condone or excuse the informant's story (Rubin 1992).

Hochschild argues that we are taught rules regarding how people in different roles are supposed to feel in different types of situations. Additionally, we learn "display rules" which stipulate how we are to express those feelings in various roles (Hochschild 1983). Yet, sometimes these roles come into direct conflict. For example, the interviewer "student" seeking the informant's story in her own words might encounter an interviewee who wants an "expert" to

reinterpret and validate the interviewee's experiences, altering her story as she tries to guess the agenda and opinion of the interviewer.

When the interviewers' roles conflict, they may experience role strain: "anxiety, frustration, and stress originating in [an] inability to meet or reconcile diverse pressures" (Rothman 1998: 41). Research on role strain in other occupations has shown that this can lead to an array of problems, such as low productivity, high absenteeism and turnover rates, and poor performance (Rothman 1998). While the researcher conducting open-ended interviews is not worried about high turnover rates or low productivity in the manufacturing sense, she is concerned with the quality of her data-gathering, her ability to work with sufficient efficiency and tenacity, and her own experience in the field.

While the sociology profession is critical of fieldworkers who demonstrate "too much sympathy" or other emotional expression within the interview context (Kleinman and Copp 1993), the researchers' emotions should not be excluded from the study. As Kleinman and Cobb wrote, "[i]gnoring or suppressing feelings are emotional work strategies that divert our attention from the cues that ultimately help us understand those we study (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 33). Thus, this emotional labor is, in itself, important data to include in scholarly research. "When we omit our analytical materials and our feelings, we probably also leave out details of the events that provoked strong emotional reactions in us" (Kleinman and Copp 1993).

Understanding the emotional labor of the ethnographer is necessary to gather high-quality data and more fully understand the focus of the research. While there is no single "Truth" for the interviewer to extract from the respondent (Foucault 1980), greater sensitivity to interview power dynamics and the role of emotions in qualitative data collection will make research better understood and more nuanced and the interview experience more rewarding for both researcher

and informant (Arendell 1997; Blee 1998; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Gilbert 2001; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002).

### **Emotional Labor: a Demonstration of Power**

Power in the interview context is multidimensional and complex. The interviewer's performance of emotional labor demonstrates the power of the interviewee within the interview relationship.<sup>ii</sup> Like other labor that demands great effort, emotional labor shifts to those with the least status and power at that moment (e.g., Hochschild 1983; Lively 2000; Morrill 1995). For example, many scholars have noted that emotional labor is often done by women (e.g., Bulan, Erickson and Wharton 1997; Cheng 1996; Hochschild 1983; Kahn 1993).

However, the emotional labor of the researcher is different from much of the emotional labor discussed in the literature. Researchers often have higher societal status than their informants (see Morrill 1995), yet, for the duration of the interview, the interviewees hold sufficient power so that the interviewer must perform extensive emotional labor. Indeed, as Kleinman and Cobb wrote, "participants are the teachers and we are their students. Sometimes we [even] exaggerate the student role to ensure that they continue to teach us" (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 29).

Additionally, much of the literature on emotional labor focuses on workers' emotional labor *for* a client or customer and on how this emotional labor is part of what the client or customer has purchased (e.g., Bulan, Erickson and Wharton 1997; Hochschild 1983). Yet, in the interview context, much emotional labor is not so mercenary. Emotional labor during interviews is not done simply to please someone for whom the interviewer works, but is part of the interviewer's own research process. In qualitative work, great emphasis is placed on empathy

and “understanding the perspective of those we study” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 27). Thus, emotional labor is inherent in engaging in qualitative work.

In this article, I draw on my study of employees’ workplace grievances and their dispute resolution strategies to demonstrate three key ways in which greater awareness of the power dynamics and emotional labor of interviewing is important. First, a greater sensitivity to the shifting power and emotions during the interview can help the researcher understand the data and the nuances of the research topic. Second, greater awareness of shifts in interviewer/interviewee power and emotional labor can provide the researcher with more information about the interviewee – important data in itself. Third, the recognitions of power and emotional labor that the interviewer performed are also useful data, providing insights into the interview process, the subjects, and the nature of the topics discussed. Greater sensitivity and awareness will provide scholars with richer insights into, as Blee wrote, “an aspect of reflexivity in qualitative research that is often erased from written accounts, giving new insight into how the social interaction between scholars and those they study shapes knowledge and interpretation” (Blee 1998: 383).

#### BACKGROUND: THE WORKPLACE GRIEVANCES STUDY

The data to which I refer in this article are drawn from a larger project on workplace dispute resolution (see Hoffmann 2001; Hoffmann 2003; Hoffmann 2004; Hoffmann 2005; Hoffmann 2006). This study investigated workers’ strategies for resolving workplace problems and how their power affected the dispute resolution strategies. Employees in this study experienced a variety of difficulties at their workplaces and developed various strategies to deal with them. Because the focus of this research was on unpleasant aspects of their workplace

experience, the interviews often addressed uncomfortable, unhappy, and disturbing parts of the interviewees' lives.

## **The Sample**

The interviewees were drawn from nine worksites in four industries: (1) coal mining, (2) taxicab driving, (3) organic food distribution, and (4) homecare. The industries ranged from the very masculine coal mining industry with its history of labor activism to the homecare industry which many workers entered by first doing that same work for no-pay for their own family members. These differences in workplace culture were somewhat reflected in the industries' different gender balances: 50:1 men to women at the coal mines, 5:1 in taxi driving, 1:1 in wholefoods, and 1:5 in homecare. Within each industry, I compared a worker cooperative (non-hierarchical workplace in which all workers are co-managers and co-owners) to a conventional, hierarchical business matched in size and gender ratios.

I conducted 177 interviews: 41 at Coal Cooperative/Valley Colliery, 14 at Private Taxi, 20 at Coop Cab, 18 at HealthBite Distributors, 35 at Organix Coop, 14 at Private Homecare, 10 at Charity Homecare, and 25 at Cooperative Homecare. The confidential identification number for each interviewee is shown in brackets after each quotation. For each site, Table One provides a summary of statistics on the interviewees. I did not identify a specific group of workers whom I knew to have had "disputes" but spoke to all interviewees about their workplace experiences generally. My sample included present and former employees as well as managers and worker-managers. Interviewees also differed in terms of length of employment, sex, race, age, level of education, socioeconomic status, and section of the particular business. By including a wide variety of interviewees, I was able to maximize the range of problems and experiences as well as

the variety of solutions and expectations to be included in this study. Through careful sampling and the repetition of responses I encountered as interviewees spoke of similar themes, I am confident that my findings are well triangulated and valid. Although these interviewees are not statistically representative of all the workers at their individual organizations, the diversity of this sample is helpful in developing conceptual models.

--- Table One about here ---

## **Interviews**

All interviews were conducted in person, using a set of open-ended questions as initial probes on a wide variety of work-related topics. The main focus of the interviews was how the interviewee would handle potentially grievable circumstances. Some subjects drew on past actions, while others only spoke of anticipated future action.

The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to over five hours, with most lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. At least one especially lengthy interview occurred at each business. Because the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, all quotations are direct quotations.

Generally, I approached interviewees myself, rather than requesting volunteers to come forward. Since a significant focus of this study was the raising of grievances, interviewing only those inclined to step forward could create an unrepresentative sample of perspectives on grievance behavior. The assertiveness and extroversion necessary to volunteer to be interviewed by a stranger may be correlated with both attitudes on raising grievances and ability to resolve disputes. I arranged certain interviews in advance with key people and workers from

underrepresented groups within the organization whom I wanted to be certain to include. No one was paid or in any way compensated for participating in my study.

The transcribed interviews were coded, using the qualitative data software NVivo, for various themes. Some of these themes were responses to explicit questions (e.g., “In what ways is your job difficult?”). For example, I asked interviewees, “Tell me about problems you’ve encountered at work. What did you do?” Later, when coding the transcripts of the interviews, I coded these responses as various dispute resolution strategies.

However, other coded responses were extracted from interviewees’ answers to broader questions (e.g., “How would you describe a day at your job?” “How would you recommend/criticize your job to another worker in the same industry?” “What would you change about your job if you could just snap your fingers and it would be different?”) or to follow up questions to other responses. Thus, often some coded responses were not the result of a direct question, but were produced by careful analysis of interviewees’ responses to various questions.

## **The Student**

Often, researchers’ personal connection to the research topic is immediately understandable to the interviewees. Examples include a divorced mom studying divorced moms (Arendell 1997), a female construction worker-turned-sociologist studying women construction workers (Paap 2006), or a law professor studying law students (Granfield 1992; Stover 1989). However, in this study, my interest in the interviewees and their jobs seemed more abstract and unclear. Thus, I needed to present myself in a role that explained why I wanted to talk with these groups of people about their employment and their workplace problems.

I introduced myself as a student studying the sociology of work and positioned myself as under-informed with regard to my interviewees' particular industries and occupations. I was there to learn from them; they had the knowledge and experience that I lacked. This began each interview by signaling to the informant that she was in a position of power. However, this also permitted me the freedom to ask what might seem to the informant as stupid questions, in order to have the interviewee articulate what would seem ridiculously obvious – and so otherwise not worthy of mentioning. Thus, being in the role of the Student Outsider I both empowered my informant and also enabled myself to ask any questions necessary.

As Kleinman and Copp have written, “[s]cientists are supposed to be the experts: they control the research process. But qualitative researchers know that the success of our work depends on participants” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 3). For example, this was particularly true in my study since no one was compensated for participating in my study; I had to rely on their willingness to give me their time and cooperation. This limited how assertive I could be during the interviews, since I did not want to make any informant feel sufficiently uncomfortable that she might cut short the interview or discourage co-workers from interviewing with me in the future. As other scholars have noted, (see e.g., Arendell 1997; Becker 1970; Blee 1998), this dependence on informant cooperation places the interviewer in a less powerful position.

### **Method: Open-Ended Interviewing**

Open-ended interviewing often uses a simple, straightforward structure of a predetermined set of questions. The ethnographer uses these questions with each interviewee to ensure that certain topics will be covered with everyone. The set of questions acts as initial probes, possibly on a wide variety of topics related to the main subject of inquiry.

Rather than serving simply as an oral survey, however, these initial probes are augmented throughout the interview by follow-up questions. While some follow-up questions might be pre-determined, most are based on each interviewee's particular responses. This allows the researcher to develop the interview in the most productive way and thoroughly explore all fruitful comments given by the subject. By permitting the informant to expand on any question or even move to other topics altogether, the interviewer can increase the amount of data she collects and also heighten the study's validity (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

Importantly, permitting the informant to expand on questions and raise new topics allows the informant to determine where the interview goes. In eschewing a rigid interview protocol, the interview forfeits a great amount of power to the interviewee. Thus, if the interviewee does not want to address a certain topic, it will not be discussed. Similarly, if the interviewee is particularly interested in another topic, it may be discussed more than the researcher intended or even desired.

A possible methodological weakness of interviewing generally is that the interviewee might provide only the "official account," a reporting of what she feels ought to happen rather than what did happen (Becker 1970; Bourdieu 1977). This can be a very serious issue in interview-generated data. However, ethnographers address this weakness by triangulating the accounts of interviewees whenever possible. In other words, the researcher talks to informants from a variety of perspectives about the same phenomena, confirming one account with the account of other, differently situated interviewees. The researcher also collects data from more than one method; for example, combining interview data, with observational data and archival data.

Additionally, the interviewer might encourage the interviewee to speak beyond the “official account” by asking questions that address the researcher’s areas of interest in many ways and from several conversational directions. This provides the interviewees with opportunities to report the “official account” as well as provide any possible contrasts with their own opinions or behavior or stories of others’ “less official” behavior (Becker 1970).

## **Findings**

I found that three of the four industries (coal mining, taxicab driving, and wholefoods distribution) displayed similar patterns of dispute resolution strategies. The pattern closely linked workers’ amounts of official and unofficial power with the strategies that they preferred. Workers with little official or unofficial power rarely spoke of using formal grievance procedures. They did not believe that formal grievance resolution was an option for them. When they did attempt to resolve their workplace disputes, they turned to informal means. Rather than seeking actual resolution through any means, these workers with little power often learned to tolerate problems or left their jobs. Workers who had only official power were comfortable raising formal grievances, but could not address grievances informally. Workers with both official and unofficial power had the options of either formal or informal grievance processing and did use both, but they preferred to resolve most issues informally, relying less often on formal procedures.

The data of these first three industries (coal mining, taxicab driving, and wholefoods distribution) demonstrated the link between dispute strategies in three of the industries and the degree of official and unofficial power held by individual workers. This research indicates that the effect of unofficial power on grievance resolution may be more substantial than that of

official power, creating unintended workplace cultures not immediately evident from organizations' formal regulations and rules.

This finding emphasizes the importance of looking beyond official measurements of power to the unofficial workings within organizations. These results also highlight how similar organizational structure (hierarchical or flattened) and ideology (conventional or cooperative) have disparate effects on workers due to the workers' differences in official and unofficial power within the organizations. These hidden or unobtrusive differences in employees' degrees of unofficial power mean that some employees will be better able to resolve disputes informally than others. These results, therefore, raise questions about the effectiveness of management programs that are assumed to affect all workers similarly and the assumption that workers who avail themselves of internal grievance resolution procedures are among the more empowered in the workplace. Furthermore, this research indicates a substantial cost to raising formal grievances. Formal grievance procedure users must (1) have sufficient (official) power to be able to withstand the cost and (2) have insufficient (unofficial) power to be able to avoid these costs and resolve grievances informally. Moreover, by assuming uniformly high levels of empowerment among workers, potentially beneficial policies might actually disadvantage certain groups of workers (particularly in comparison to their co-workers) if managers assume they have greater power than they do, and, subsequently place unreasonable expectations on them. Without attention to how power is held in an organization, such management programs may be mistakenly presumed to work uniformly throughout a company, with potentially undesirable and otherwise unanticipated results.

The pattern in the homecare industry was unlike the pattern established in the first three industries. The workers in the three homecare businesses all described informal dispute

resolution strategies, with little mention of formal processes, toleration, or exit. This was surprising because the homecare businesses varied in terms of the amount of power their workers held: workers at Private Homecare had little official or unofficial power, workers at Charity Homecare had official power, but little unofficial power, and members of Cooperative Homecare held a great amount of official and unofficial power. Despite these differences in power, all homecare workers across the three businesses described primarily informal dispute strategies.

The results from the homecare industry also have several important implications. One cannot assume that patterns of grievance behavior and dispute strategies will translate across industries. The care industries, including homecare, have at least three parties potentially involved in any dispute: the caregiver, the manager, and the client. The presence of the client in this triangle substantially changes the disputing dynamic. The impact of worker disputes on the client in homecare could be even greater than in other caring professions, such as nursing or teaching where workers deal with many patients or students. The close, one-on-one relationships that homecare workers and clients build might mean that formal grievances will be especially difficult to raise.

## **SHIFTING BALANCES OF INTERVIEWER-INTERVIEWEE POWER**

Careful investigation of the research process itself and the interviewer's role in conducting that research can "break down" the differences in power between the interviewer and interviewee (Arendell 1997). In this section, I examine the power shifts between the interviewer and interviewee. For example, the interviewer has power in that she initiated the interview, framed the process in terms of what questions she asked, and shaped how others understand the interviewee's story based on how the ethnographer writes the resulting scholarship. The

interviewee, too, has substantial power, since she possesses the knowledge that the interviewer seeks and can determine how much of, and how, this knowledge will be shared. By analyzing power and emotional labor by the ethnographer, one sees how power shifts between interviewer and interviewee and the multifaceted nature of power in interviews.

### **Interviewer Power**

Ellis has said, “as a society, we’re so accustomed to the authoritative interview situation that some [informants] will still expect you to be the authority and ask all the questions” (Ellis 1999: 679). Indeed, one key way I wielded power in the interview was through the second-dimensional power of agenda setting: I asked the questions (Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1974). Even if the interviewee refused to answer (which was extremely rare), the question remained asked. In this way, I put forth the topics to which the interviewee would have to respond – whether through sharing or refusing to share information with me.

Thus, I was the party who asked the official questions, which sometimes were questions about unpleasant topics. Like many sociological subjects of inquiry, my study of workplace dispute resolution inherently entailed asking about upsetting situations. Although sometimes informants recalled these past situations comfortably, other times these recollections rekindled earlier hurt, anger, sadness, or anxiety. By asking my interviewees to reach back in their memories and share these unpleasant situations with me, I was exerting a certain amount of power. For example, I would ask about mistreatment by employers or managers, both at their current workplaces and at previous jobs. Sometimes my respondents had stories of triumph, but often these were sad stories which sometimes resulted in them quitting their jobs or being fired. Additionally, for some respondents, losing their jobs was not the worst outcome. Although losing

one's job could have dire financial consequences, staying in a position in which the respondent felt mistreated or abused could be even more emotionally difficult.

This agenda-setting power of question-asking allowed me to raise topics that the interviewee might never volunteer on her own and which I would never raise without my formal designation as "interviewer." For example, it would be inappropriate for a young woman to ask a man she recently met in a work situation about how he schedules defecating at work. In my research, however, the level of autonomy at work was an important issue as it related to workplace grievances. In mining, one of the occupations I studied, being allowed to take breaks when one wanted – in particular, in order to defecate according to one's own schedule, off in a secluded part of the mine – was one point of conflict between workers and managers. For this reason, I believed it was appropriate and even necessary for me to ask about this otherwise unmentionable topic. While this might have caused surprise initially, the question was answered directly. The power of being the interviewer both allowed me to ask this and created an atmosphere where the interviewee felt that it was acceptable to answer sincerely. Such questions also demonstrated my understanding of the dynamics of their jobs, which further increased my power by proving that I comprehended much of their situation, even though I was not a participant. Asking these types of questions also showed my respect for them and their jobs by treating these issues seriously (see Arendell 1997; Becker 1970; Gubrium and Holstein 2002).

Additionally, I had important third-dimensional power because, as the researcher, I was not only the interviewer but also the originator of the project as well as the narrator of the resulting story. The interviewer holds the "power and control over conceiving, designing, administering, and reporting the research" (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 139). The project was my creation; thus, I had the power of the initial conception and structure of the study. Once the

data gathering is completed, researchers also wield great power by deciding which quotes, which stories, and whose voices will be included, and to what extent, in the written analysis (Richardson 1997). Some scholars ask “whether the process of coding interview responses for research purposes itself disenfranchises respondents, transforming their narratives into terms foreign to what their original sensibilities might have been” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 20). While I tried to allow multiple voices to come through in my presentation of the research results, ultimately, I had a great deal of power in how I told the story and what subplots I emphasized (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). This third-dimensional power allowed me to frame how others would understand the interviewees’ stories. Through my decisions about where to focus my research, I determined which stories were heard; and through my choices about which quotations to include, I could affect the flavor of those stories.

### **Interviewees’ Power**

However, interviewees themselves also possess a good deal of power, particularly in open-ended interview situations. The very fact that I had to ask questions – that each knew something I didn’t, but wanted, to know – gave the interviewee a great amount of power (Blee 1998). As Kleinman and Copp state, “the success of our work depends on participants” (Kleinman and Copp 1993: 3). Because I depended on the interviewee’s willing participation; I could not demand responses. Were it ever to come to it, I lacked sufficient first-dimensional power to win any overt power struggle to force the interviewee to speak with me. Indeed, my position in the interview provided me with less overt, first-dimensional power than my informants. For example, the interviewees could ration out their information at their own rate. Sometimes this meant that I had to spend a great deal of time with certain interviewees who

preferred to slowly unweave their stories, discursively and without response to my efforts to guide them in a more efficient way. One interview, for example, took over four hours to cover topics that other interviews had managed in under two. Additionally, if they decided to only share a single story in response to all my questions, I could not compel them to say more. Indeed, they could engage in the ultimate form of first dimensional power: they could refuse to speak with me at all.<sup>iii</sup>

In addition to the first dimensional power, informants held much second dimensional power. While I was the one with the power to ask the questions, the interviewees were the ones answering. The interviewees exercised their second dimensional power in their decisions about what information they shared and how fully they would respond to my inquiries. In this way, their information-sharing was more powerful than my question-asking.

Interviewees sometimes exercised their second-dimensional power through small challenges during the interview, such as demanding that I phrase my questions within their ideological framework. A good example of this occurred at the coal mine I studied. In this interview with an imposing older miner, I used the term, “chairperson.” He took exception to this word.

“Chairperson? ChairPERSON?!” he bellowed, with, possibly mock, rage. “Never! ChairMAN! Chairman.”

Contrite, I apologized, “Good point. He’s a man; I’ll say chairman.” Throughout the remainder of the interview he would emphasize the word “man” in “chairman” whenever he used the word again, underlining his power to affect my word usage. In this way, he did not merely express his preference, but asserted a condition I had to satisfy in order to gain his participation. I did have the power to ask questions, but I would only receive his insights if I used

his wording. In this way, he determined the words I used, affecting the tone of the interview and its questions.<sup>iv</sup>

Interviewees also had discretion over how they told their stories to me, exercising important third-dimensional power. They determined what nuances to imply and how to present the characters and frame the action. I did not have access to these accounts first-hand, so I could only see their descriptions through the lenses they provided.

Additionally, I had to actively work to understand the interviewee's world and his story within it. For example, before conducting the majority of my interviews with the coal miners, I tried to educate myself about the equipment, terminology, and challenges of this industry. I visited a special museum exhibit on coal mining and this vanishing industry; I read several books about coal mining, the industry's culture, and the economic impact of this industry shrinking; I skimmed many newspaper articles that addressed current issues in the coal mining industry. Without these efforts to self-educate myself, I would have been forced to ask basic informational questions of my coal miner interviewees. This would both waste time during the interview, taking time away from the focus of my study, and also would have demonstrated my ignorance in not understanding key aspects of the coal miners' work experiences.

In some ways, interviewees' power was enhanced by how I conducted my data-gathering. For example, in my consent forms, I emphasized that they could leave the interview at any time and could choose to not answer any question. Although they had this power regardless of whether the consent forms stated it, the explicit articulation strengthened this power by highlighting it.

Additionally, their power was heightened when I shared personal information of my own. I consciously decided to share information in order to establish relationships with the

interviewees and to put them more at ease, establish greater rapport, and create a more enjoyable interview context. These self-disclosures were usually in reaction to information immediately shared by the interviewee previously. For example, if overseas interviewees talked about visiting places in the United States, I would explain where I live, usually in relation to Chicago or Dallas. One person mentioned playing the trumpet; I told him that my dad played the trumpet. Another person talked about the difficulties of doing her job as a short woman. I stated that the women in my family are all short and described our different ways of adapting to a tall world. Thus, I offered my own stories as part of the exchange in our interview relationship. In other words, I asked for “no intimacy without reciprocity” (see e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Gubrium and Holstein 2002).<sup>v</sup>

Furthermore, the interviewee exercised a great deal of third dimensional power as she chose how to influence my understanding of her situation. As Gubrium and Holstein have asserted, the interviewee “not only holds the details of a life’s experience but, in the very process of offering them up to the interviewer, constructively shapes the information” (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 12). Through which stories the interviewee shared, in what way she told them, and by what she decided not to say, the interviewee affected my understanding as well as the particular slant and flavor of that understanding.

### **The Interview Dance**

Arendell describes aspects of the interviewer’s role as “leading the conversational dance” (Arendell 1997: 353). However, as the discussion above evidences, this “conversational dance” often involves the “leader role” shifting between the partners. The researcher will initiate contact, a somewhat powerful gesture, but then the interviewee might have strong preferences as

to where and when to meet. For example, one interviewee changed the place and time of our meeting five times before we were able to actually sit down together and have the interview. Each time she called to cancel or change the meeting, she exercised power over the yet-to-occur interview.

Once the interview actually takes place, the interviewer begins by asking questions. Interviewees often perceive this as a powerful act on the part of the researcher (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). The researcher's questions, however, are of little value without the responses from the interviewee. Here, again, the power shifts back to the respondent. Interviewees might condition their replies on various responses of the interviewer. For example, when I was interviewing the coal miners, I would often be quizzed on various aspects of the mine. In this less powerful role of "student" I had to demonstrate competence before being given more information. For instance, as one miner was telling me a story about when he began working in this particular mine, he stopped short and asked me if I knew what a "dosco" was. Without a sentence or two contextualizing the word "dosco," I was at a loss to place it quickly. The miner shook his head slightly, perhaps indicating annoyance, and truncated the rest of his story by simply saying, "Well, let's just say, it's not the nicest working condition down there." He began to gather his things, preparing to leave. But suddenly the meaning of the word came to me. A "Dosco" was a type of blade on the face-cutting machinery that made the deep cuts. I immediately explained this and reminded the miner that I had, in fact, seen this machinery in question when I had been down to the coal face myself.

This reestablished some credibility on my part and demonstrated that I had a knowledge base sufficient to hear the rest of the miner's story. In fact, the miner not only finished that story in detail but also spoke with me for another 20 minutes. As a "seeker of knowledge," (Becker

1970: 103), I could not simply ask for the information I sought without proving myself worthy of it. This is one way that power can shift to the interviewee. Schwalbe and Wolkomir refer to this as “testing” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). When the interviewer “concedes being in unfathomable waters, control shifts to the interviewee” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 208).

Sometimes the interview process itself can seem threatening. For example, occasionally the homecare workers I interviewed felt “exposed” and wanted my reassurance that the responses and actions they described to me were appropriate and professional. This put me in the role of confessor and, perhaps, therapist, as they told me how they dealt with situations that were emotionally difficult for them. While, on the one hand, this vulnerability might have made the interviewee feel less powerful and threatened by my questions (see Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002), it also thrust them into a more powerful role: I needed to successfully fulfill the role of therapist/confidant before the respondent would move the interview forward. For instance, one homecare worker told me about a time when she discovered a client’s dead body. She was quite shaken. Even though she knew that the official protocol demanded that she immediately contact her shift supervisor, she did not. Instead, she stayed with the body for nearly an hour before she could stop crying and compose herself. Soon after she did finally call her supervisor, the client’s daughter came to the house. Again, violating the official protocol, the woman herself told the daughter, and in doing so, began crying so much that the daughter had to comfort her.

This homecare worker felt that she had failed in her professional duty to notify her supervisor directly and to behave more stoically in front of the client’s family. She was embarrassed and disheartened by her behavior. She wanted reassurance from a neutral outsider that she had acted acceptably, but she also wanted compassion from a confidant who understood her situation. I tried to fulfill both of these roles. Without addressing the issue of compliance

with the rules of her workplace, I reassured her that this would be difficult for anyone and tried to persuade her to not be so hard on herself. I gave her tissue and offered to discontinue the interview altogether. Although I certainly did not want to end the interview, her emotional needs overrode the need of my study for her participation. Of course, even if I wanted to insist that we continue the interview, I did not have that level of power to do so. However, this homecare worker decided that she wanted to continue the interview. In allowing me to continue to ask my questions, the power shifted back to me.

Thus, in the course of the “interview dance,” I had to be an expert, but also student. I played the role of therapist and confessor, but also of trust-worthy, neutral observer. I needed to show understanding and sympathy but was also expected to be objective and scientific. In other words, as the researcher, I played many roles in the interviews.

## **INTERVIEWER’S EMOTIONAL LABOR**

My attention to the emotional labor and power inherent in the interview context enabled me to understand more clearly how power is employed by my informants and how power is used in the contexts that I was studying. By entering into the “power negotiations” of the interview process very consciously, the researcher gains richer data and fuller analysis. Just as Blee found illumination in her study of racist activists by examining her emotional experiences with informant-induced fear (1998), I found that I could better understand how my informants handled power dynamics, a crucial component of their strategies for addressing problems at work. Both my respondents’ emotional responses, as well as my own, were important data.

Emotional labor is one way power disparities are visible. Scholars have documented that the less powerful parties in relationships are often those who must perform greater emotional

labor (e.g., Fletcher 1999; Hochschild 1983; Lively 2000). My efforts to sufficiently withhold or share my emotions demonstrated a significant amount of emotional labor on my part.<sup>vi</sup>

## **Emotional Labor**

The decisions about what level of emotion – and which emotions – to share are very difficult. The display of any emotion is often considered unprofessional and a sign of incompetence, not only when conducting fieldwork, but in many other areas of work (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Davies 1996; Ellis 1999; Kleinman and Copp 1993). Professionals in many fields force themselves to display the acceptable level of detached neutrality (Becker 1970; Yanay and Shahar 1998). While some social scientists agree that “it is both sociological good sense and an ethical obligation to disclose our biases” when we share our findings (Norum 2000: 320), less consensus exists regarding how much to disclose within the interview setting itself, particularly with regard to one’s emotions. The open-ended interview with its minimal structure and the possibilities of discussing unexpected topics, makes the researchers’ decisions about sharing emotions both more critical and more difficult.

The highly emotional nature of my research focus made these decisions all the more crucial. Other researchers have documented that, when workers try to resolve disputes at work, they often find that their negative emotions are discounted, misunderstood, or dismissed (e.g., Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach 1994: 632). This was true for my interviewees, as well. Therefore, because negative workplace reactions to my informants’ emotions had contributed to some of their workplace problems, my reaction to their stories was particularly important.

Given that this was the background against which some of my interviewees were telling their stories, I worried that my own emotional response – whatever it was – could have a

negative impact on the informant and, by extension, on the project. Other scholars have stated that, despite the researcher's efforts to be gentle and sensitive while interviewing, the researcher may disrupt the delicate interview process (Arendell 1997; Ellis 1999; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Josselson 1996). Therefore, which and how much of my *own* emotions to show in response to the emotions and stories shared by the interviewees were significant decisions. How would my displays of emotion affect my informants' abilities to share the emotional components of their stories? If I shared too much of my own emotions, would I silence them? If I shared too little emotion, would I appear unresponsive, hostile, or unable to understand their predicaments?

In some situations, I attempted to stay composed and present myself in similar ways at each interview, making my own reactions to what was being said by the interviewee as unnoticeable as possible.<sup>vii</sup> Sometimes this was particularly difficult. For example, several worker-managers at different worker cooperatives I studied spoke, with much despair, about how they are seen in their new quasi-managerial roles. They told me that many former co-workers now saw them as turn-coats or sell-outs, but, they insisted to me, they were still the same people, still working for the good of the cooperative and its members.

At first, I did not even allow myself to nod, but, at most, tried to strongly "blink with compassion." I tried to look very engaged in what they were saying so that they would know that I was listening carefully to them. I did not want to open up further than the most minimal response. This was because, beneath my intense, somewhat neutral emotional display, my deeper layer of emotion was much more volatile and passionate. In order to control my own emotions, I did not want to allow myself to speak and express more than I believed I should. I wanted to say, "No, people understand, they still like you, still respect you," but this wasn't true; their co-workers had denounced them to me in their own interviews. Despite my compassion for these

respondents, I could not let myself tell them a lie in order to sooth them. Alternatively, I could have said, “So what if some do? They’re jerks. Forget about them.” This might have been an honest statement of my opinion, but would have taken the interview into a different kind of situation, and so I did not say this either. Therefore, all I could allow myself to do was to hold their gaze, and solemnly, intentionally blink. I could not allow myself to express the deeper layers of emotional responses that would sooth or defend these respondents, nor could I allow myself to show the even deeper emotional layer, that of frustration with my restrained emotional display.

### **Sharing Emotions**

Other times, *not* sharing my own emotions would have negatively affected the interview as much as sharing would have in the situations described above. This was particularly true when interviewees discussed extremely painful topics. Since the topic of this research was problems in the workplace, at least a portion of every interview addressed negative aspects of the interviewee’s work life.

Sometimes, these discussions became quite emotional for the interviewee and also affected me as the interviewer. For example, one of the groups of employees I studied, homecare workers, cared for sick or elderly clients. Frequently, workers and clients would develop friendships. Homecare workers I interviewed often discussed their sadness around their clients’ deaths. Their reactions could be particularly intense when the homecare worker was the person who discovered the dead body. For a listener, including an interviewer, to not display some emotion – such as compassionate expressions, gestures of comfort, or empathetic tears – would seem either disconcertingly obtuse or cold-heartedly indifferent.

In the food distribution industry, a worker described harassment at a previous job so abhorrent that she quit. Although she had left that position several years earlier, her emotional injuries were still quite raw. As she described the treatment she received in her previous workplace, she cried so hard that she shook. I could not sit next to my tape recorder and dispassionately watch her. Not only would this have been unkind, but it could have communicated to her that I failed to understand her story or that I sided with her abusers. I comforted her; I offered her tissue; I nodded. I communicated that I appreciated her sharing this painful experience with me, but that I regretted the pain the sharing brought her. In interview situations such as these, I would have communicated a lack of understanding that would have diminished the interviewer-interviewee relationship as well as thwarted the remainder of the interview had I not shown any emotion. As a researcher and a fellow human, I had to show at least a portion of my reaction – my reaction not only to the story, but to the person’s present pain, felt fresh again, having relived it in order to tell me about it.

However, just as I was willing to share my emotions, I also was conscious of somewhat restraining myself emotionally. Exploring additional emotional layers in the above example, I noted that while I expressed my compassion, I was vigilant to not break down entirely myself. I allowed myself to express some emotion and to even shed some silent tears with the respondent, but I did not want to turn the focus of the interaction to me and to an emotional outpouring of my own. Thus, having expressed some emotion and establishing some connection with the interviewee, I had to refocus my gaze from the sadness at hand and to my role as information gatherer. This renewed self-awareness brought me away from a more thorough, unrestrained expression of emotions. I now needed to pull back from fully releasing emotions to a more passive, less engaged middle ground.

Because I used open-ended interviews, rather than a more rigid interview protocol, I could not always predict which difficult topic would spark intense emotion from the interviewee. I may have guessed that a variety of topics might prove uncomfortable for the informant, but could never know in advance which questions, if any, would create intense emotional situations.

### **Emotions as Data**

Hochschild asserts that a researchers' emotional reactions are as important as other sensory data points, such as visual or auditory reactions (Hochschild 1983). Researchers should not ignore informants' emotions or expunge them from data records, since important data includes understanding "emotional negotiations in fieldwork in a dynamic sense" (Blee 1998: 396). Both interviewer and interviewee attempt to negotiate emotions. As Blee and other scholars have argued, "[j]ust as researchers may try to invoke emotional dynamics of rapport to facilitate data collection in interviewing situations, so too respondents may attempt to create emotional dynamics that serve their strategic interests" (Blee 1998: 395).

The emotions experienced during the interview, "whether by interviewer or interviewee, are as real, as important, and as interesting as any other product of the interview. To ignore or discount manifestations of emotion is as unreasonable as ignoring the talk that objectivity demands we record" (Arendell 1997; Blee 1998; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002). Indeed, many scholars assert that the interviewee should be encouraged by the researcher to abandon any filtering and emotional labor and, instead, freely express her emotions as they are felt in the course of the interview.

However, this encouraging of the interviewees' emotions often demands further emotional labor by the interviewer. Thus, decisions regarding which emotions to share, and to what extent, is particularly important when researching topics that trigger informants' emotions. Because the open-ended interview encourages the informant to explore tangents and secondary themes that grow out of her responses to the interviewer's initial questions, the interviewer can seldom anticipate the exact direction of the interview. By relinquishing tight control on the direction of the interview, the interviewer may suddenly and unexpectedly encounter intense emotions from the informant as well as from herself.

An example of an interview situation in which I had difficulty predicting the interviewee's emotions occurred towards the close of one interview with a food delivery worker. I had asked him why he had moved to his present town (and so had to take this new job). He explained that his wife had had a condition that required regular hospital visits, so they had decided to move closer to the specialist hospital. He gradually told me that this move had been quite difficult: his family had had trouble finding housing they could afford and the stress on his wife had been severe. He eventually added that the move now seemed pointless to him, since she died only a year later. I found his story very poignant and, in a purely social setting, might have expressed more emotion. However, this story generated only muted emotions from the interviewee, so I had to engage in extensive emotional labor to match his minimal emotional showing and not unreservedly unload my own emotions. Complicating this situation, he followed this story with an unexpected, although understandable, diatribe against the medical establishment. I had not expected him to discuss health care issues and so this topic, and his vociferous emotions that accompanied it, were a surprise. Here, too, I wanted to support his emotional reaction without either aggravating his distress or dismissing it.

**Table 1: Total Employees and Employees Interviewed**

	interviewed	# total employees	# men interviewed	# men employees	#women interviewed	# women employees
Valley Colliery*	38 (15%)	252	35 (14%)	248	3 (75%)	4
Coal Cooperative*	41** (17%)	239	37 (16%)	233	4 (67%)	6
Private Taxi	14 (12%)	120	10 (9%)	108	4 (33%)	12
Coop Cab	20 (13%)	150	10 (44%)	226	10 (42%)	24
HealthBite Distributors	18 (56%)	32	11 (55%)	20	7 (58%)	12
Organix Coop	35 (70%)	50	20 (67%)	30	15 (57%)	20
Private Homecare	14 (32%)	44	2 (50%)	4	12 (30%)	40
Charity Homecare	10 (19%)	51	3 (60%)	5	7 (15%)	46
Cooperative Homecare	25 (55%)	45	8 (100%)	8	17 (46%)	37
<b>Total ***</b>	177 (24%)	731	136 (22%)	634	79 (40%)	201

\* same site: Valley Colliery = before employee buy-out, Coal Cooperative = after buy-out, as a worker cooperative.

\*\* I record three more interviewees at Coal Cooperative because two men and one woman I interviewed had not been at the coal mine before the worker buy-out.

\*\*\* Does not include numbers from Valley Colliery, because these people were not interviewed separately from Coal Cooperative.

## CONCLUSION

The open-ended interview can yield rich, extensive data. At times, open-ended interviews even produce insights into topics the researcher never considered asking. The minimal structure of the open-ended interview enables the researcher to freely follow whatever topics may arise and empowers the interviewee to share information that might not have been directly solicited.

However, this greater flexibility also produces more complex power relations and substantial emotional labor demands. Both of these components should not be overlooked or dismissed. To do so would be to squander important data and lessen the depth and fullness of the research project.

As Schwalbe and Wolkomir wrote, careful attention to shifting power and emotional labor are not “simply ways to wring more data out of research subjects. They are also ways to see, make sense of, and then see past [what] we generally take for granted” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2002: 218). This enables the researcher to be better equipped to learn more about the interviewee and the subject of the interviews, as well as the interview dynamics.

Emotional labor is a necessary component of the interview. Negotiating the interviewer’s emotional labor can be especially difficult with open-ended interviews, since their less-structured style allows the researcher to be surprised by unanticipated topics or emotions. The interviewer may not be able to prepare herself in advance for certain emotional displays. Nevertheless, the open-ended interview remains an excellent means for gathering deep, rich, qualitative data.

By exploring the shifts of power and the emotional labor demands in the open-ended interview, this article explored how power shifts and emotions within the interview are, themselves, important data. A researcher with greater awareness of the shifts in interviewer/interviewee power and of the emotional labor in the interview context will better

understand the nuances of the data, will glean greater information about the interviewee and the research topic, and have greater insights into the interview process, the subjects, and the nature of the topics on which the project focuses.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Emotion theorists and researchers use the term “emotional labor” when focusing on the exchange value of the manipulations of one’s emotions for a wage. The terms “emotional work” and “emotional management” are used to refer to those same emotions manipulations when done in private for non-monetary value instead (Hochschild 1983). One question qualitative researchers might ask themselves is, which label applies to their emotions manipulations in the field or during interviews? On the one hand, these manipulations are done as part of data collection which is usually part of one’s paid work, rather than one’s hobby or recreation. As such, they could be called “emotional labor.” On the other hand, the interviewee for whom the researcher is manipulating her emotions has not hired her and is not paying her, and, to some degree, the gathering of qualitative data requires establishing a rapport and building a certain, if limited, relationship with the interviewee. In this way, the researcher’s emotional manipulations could be called “emotional work” and “emotional management.” Since this paper discusses the interview process as part of the researcher’s professional, paid work, the label “emotional labor” is used in this paper.
- <sup>ii</sup> This power of the interviewee is not a bad thing at all. I do not intend to imply that the interviewee having power or having more power than the interviewer at times is in any way bad.
- <sup>iii</sup> This, however, is not a “bad thing.” This text is not “disparaging” interviewee power but merely attempting to examine it and better understand this dynamic.
- <sup>iv</sup> This, however, is not a “bad thing.” In describing this interviewee’s power I am not “disparaging” his power, but am discussing this example in order to illustrate how interviewees can affect the tone of the interview.
- <sup>v</sup> While I shared some of my own stories during interviews, I did not share my most important story – my hypotheses, thoughts, and early analysis of this study. I also limited my comments to more tangential remarks by interviewees, rarely speaking my own thoughts about the main focus of the study. For these topics, I refrained from sharing anything because such comments could affect the substance of what the interviewees said, thus tainting or even ruining the data I was trying to collect.
- <sup>vi</sup> The fact that interviewees have power is in no way a “bad thing” nor do I mean to “disparage” their power. This analysis of power is simply to aid researchers by illuminating this aspect of the research endeavor – in no way am I saying that interviewee power is bad.
- <sup>vii</sup> However, no interviewer can be completely detached or not exhibit biased feedback during the interview.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth A. Hoffmann, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Purdue University, studies legal consciousness and workplace dispute resolution. Her research, described in this article, has won awards from the Labor and Employment Relations Association, the Upjohn Institute, and the American Bar Foundation.