

6

Entering the Field



Marla, Ruth, and Anthony have designed their studies and made some preliminary decisions about their settings and participants. They are ready to begin collecting data, but first, they must get into the sites or connect with the individuals, whom they will interview. Access is more than physical entry or obtaining official permission to collect data. As you can see, they are facing the following crucial questions:

- How do they introduce themselves to the participants?
- Who in the setting needs to know what information?
- What position or role will each play in the sites?
- What relationships will be established?
- What promises will be made?

As qualitative researchers enter a setting, their objectives are to ensure freedom and integrity for both the researchers and the participants in their studies. This relationship will vary depending on how collaborative the research is intended to be. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) express a traditional perspective:

For the researcher, this means his own relative freedom to move about, to look and listen, also, to think in his own terms, and to communicate his thoughts to his own intellectual community. For the host, it means freedom for him and his group to pursue their own work unencumbered and unafraid. (p. 29)

The ethical researcher—one whose conduct is guided by a set of moral principles—achieves this balance of freedom and integrity with the participants through a process of presenting her purpose and negotiating acceptance. The entry process may appear to happen quickly in some instances or may seem to take forever in others, but access is a continuous process of building relationships in the setting and taking care not to disturb the “delicate interaction rituals” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 43) of the field.

Qualitative researchers develop a repertoire of strategies to gain access to sites. They draw on all their interpersonal dispositions and skills, as well as their theoretical understanding of social relationships and organizations. Ball (1993) likens the process to going on a blind date; the researcher “must charm the respondents into cooperation” (p. 32). Their choice of particular entry strategies may be idiosyncratic, but the objective is the same as that of their colleagues: to gain acceptance. Like Anthony, who is sponsored by the program funder, you may find that even with official or formal permission to begin the study, participants still decide how much and in what ways they will share information. One of our students, for example, wanted to study the superintendent’s council in a large urban district. The superintendent agreed and invited him to attend council meetings. The student soon noticed that, although he could observe the meetings, the principals and department chairs who made up the council rarely spoke to him directly and seemed reluctant to answer his questions. He realized that they were limiting his access to the full processes of council deliberations. More nuanced access to subtle meanings and operations would require building relationships with the key actors. This chapter details the delicate and subtle processes of preparing for and making initial contact with participants at the site.

Access is a continuous process, not an event.

PREPARATION

Preparation facilitates access. Preparation entails reading, choosing an approach, meeting the gatekeepers, identifying potential obstacles, and negotiating some reciprocity (Jorgensen, 1989) that would be of mutual benefit for all parties. Most important, the researcher tries to allow time for the entry process. He seeks an opening or a door through which he can discover the players and the operations of the world within. Once the researcher has established initial entry, he can build on the relationship, using his skills to renegotiate arrangements as necessary.

A clearly articulated *conceptual framework* is important for entry. The framework helps clarify your focus and purpose and provides a rationale for research decisions. While you may decide to alter this framework over the course of the fieldwork, you start with the questions that emerge from this initial orienting. For example, Marla knows that she and her team will clarify her questions as she spends time in the clinic, but she begins with a framework of poor women's health issues. Anthony's reading has offered him images of a state-of-the-art community arts programs, but he will need to refine and delineate those characteristics that are relevant to his setting. Drawing from her understanding of sports psychology and human development, Ruth brings a conceptualization of "bodied-ness" and athleticism. This conceptualization will change as she learns from the children.

The conceptual framework defines your purpose and strategy. Consider the following questions:

- Are you evaluating a program or a service?
- Will program administrators use your results to inform their decisions?
- Will funders use your findings to continue or withdraw support?
- Will policymakers or legislators use the information to shape policies?
- Do you intend to contribute to theory from your discoveries?
- Will your descriptions change the way in which people see their world and encourage them to act differently?

Your strategy (whether it is to evaluate or inform policy, to analytically describe an individual or setting, or to change practice) shapes your purposes and thereby your actions.

Articulating strategy and purpose is especially important for entry because it affects the participants and influences the way in which they will perceive the researcher. Recall the discussions of reciprocity in Chapter 3. Qualitative researchers notice that folks in field sites receive them differently depending on what the participants see as your research purpose. Evaluators may seem to be given red carpet treatment, but doors often remain closed; university researchers are either ignored or collared by those who

Preparation

- Know why you are there
- Be able to explain why you are there
- Be able to articulate your strategy
- Be aware of the key actors

have a particular interest in the topic; and action researchers are expected to move in and “go native.” Just as in all social interaction, qualitative researchers learn to use their interpersonal dispositions and skills—within their ethical principles—to understand the way in which participants see them and their purposes.

As a qualitative researcher, you try to know a great deal about the site before attempting entry. Read and talk to informed people about the setting. Maybe spend some time hanging out at the site. Have a pretty clear idea of why you are entering this particular setting. Then draw on your accumulated knowledge to approach and present yourself to the participants.

INTENDED INVOLVEMENT

In every study you do, you will find that your roles and interactions with the participants differ. Sometimes you get to know the people really well and spend a long time with them. Sometimes you become a part of the setting. Sometimes you feel that you have “taken the data and run.” The context of your setting, the strategy, and the genre of research all shape your role. In a preliminary way, however, you can think about two aspects of your involvement: (1) how involved you want to be in the setting or with the participants and (2) how you will portray this intended involvement to them. The following questions may help:

- Will you participate in the activities of the setting being studied, or will you simply be a spectator?
- If you will participate, do you plan to immerse yourself fully in the setting or to join selectively in activities?
- Do you intend your involvement to be coparticipation, wherein you and members of the setting will share equally in the responsibility of designing and conducting the study?
- Whatever your involvement maybe, how will others see your role?

Given our acceptance of reflexivity, we believe that all researchers are, to varying extents, participants in their settings. Thus, we do not spend time considering whether to be a participant-observer or a nonparticipant-observer. Instead, we consider the level and type of our participation and how that participation is portrayed to members of the setting.

Degree of Involvement

Participation can be illustrated as a continuum that ranges from coparticipation to immersion as a participant to isolation as an onlooker (see Figure 6.1). The latter is not overtly involved in the processes of the setting. We have not seen the term *coparticipation* used before in the literature on involvement. We believe that it captures the radical and critical stance of participatory action researchers.

FIGURE 6.1 Degrees of Involvement

Coparticipation ←----- Immersion ----- Limited participation -----→ Spectator

Still, we believe that even the spectator is active and fully engaged in experiencing what is happening around her. The difference is similar to that between the football player on the field and the avid spectator in the stands. Moreover, your position on the continuum can change over the course of the study. Marla, Ruth, and Anthony again provide examples of different degrees of participation, including Marla's choice to coparticipate in the inquiry into women's health care services and Anthony's choice to be a spectator at some of the arts events.

The degree of a researcher's participation is usually shaped by design decisions and by what is possible or appropriate (ethically, politically, or just plain naturally) in the setting (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). Different *degrees of participation* can either facilitate or hinder data collection. An observer can sometimes learn the most by playing the game, joining in the discussion, or making and serving the soup. At other times, such involvement would be awkward or would actually prevent data collection. Recording children's responses in a reading group is difficult if you are responsible for leading the lesson or awkward if you are pretending to be one of the children.

Immersion and coparticipation enable the researcher to learn the specialized language and norms of the setting and are more likely to yield a deep emic understanding than simply standing around and watching people. Full participation in the activities of the culture, however, is often limited by how similar to members you appear in background, race, and ethnic identification as much as by the nature of your specific actions. Often, the more you stand out, the harder you have to work to become a member of the group. Sometimes researchers may sacrifice possible data they could be collecting because they must engage in what may seem to be complicated, eccentric, and perhaps unnecessary entry effort.

Design also shapes involvement by the amount of time that has been allocated to spend in the field. More involvement requires more time. Time may range from a single observation or interview of a limited duration (e.g., 1 hour) to long-term and multiple observations and interviews over months or even years. Coparticipation, in particular, is extraordinarily time intensive. The more the time spent in the field and the more involved a researcher can be in day-to-day activities at a site, the less likely it is that members of the setting will react to his presence and will change their behavior as a result. The less the researcher is a curiosity, the less people take notice. Usually, the more familiar the participants are with the researcher, the more they trust him and are willing to share their feelings and knowledge. In rare instances, however, the opposite happens; people

become suspicious over time. Thus, each researcher makes decisions about participation and duration according to the special circumstances of each study. The same holds true while working with individual participants.

The experience of a graduate student who conducted a study in Manus, Papua New Guinea (the site of Margaret Mead's research), provides an interesting and unexpected example of acceptance in a foreign culture (see Demerath, 1996). He and his wife had little difficulty gaining full acceptance because the role of anthropologist has been given an accepted and legitimate place in that community. In fact, the persons with whom they stayed are known as "those who take care of the anthropologists." In this case, the researcher's participation in the community was already defined based on the community's previous history with researchers (this may be the most extreme illustration of reflexivity we can imagine).

Portrayal of Involvement

Qualitative researchers also decide how to present themselves to the participants in the setting. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Will you make your presence as a researcher known and be explicit about your purposes?
- Will you quietly blend into the setting, hiding your purposes and persona as a researcher?
- Will you simply be "truthful but vague" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 25) about your role?

Even a coparticipant, such as Marla, will portray herself in a particular way. Again, how a researcher chooses to portray her role and purpose to the participants in the study settings is best illustrated by continua (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3).

In most studies we have conducted, our participation was overt; people knew who we were and why we were there. Sometimes they formed a vague idea of our purposes and cared

FIGURE 6.2 Portrayal of Researcher Role

Role	Overt	←-----→	Semiovert	←-----→	Covert
Portrayal	Participants know that research is being done and who the researcher is.		Researcher's role is known by some and not by others.		Participants do not know that research is being done or that a researcher is present.

Source: From *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed., p. 217), by M. Q. Patton, 1990, Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Copyright 1990 by Sage Publications. Adapted with permission.

FIGURE 6.3 Portrayal of Purpose

Explanation	Full ←-----→	Partial ←-----→	Covert ←-----→	False
Portrayal	All participants know about the study's purpose; participants are fully informed.	Participants know something about the study's purpose; participants have limited understanding of the study.	No explanation is given; participants do not know about the study.	False explanations are given; participants are deceived.

Source: Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Note: From *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed., p. 217), by M. Q. Patton, 1990, Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Copyright 1990 by Sage Publications. Adapted with permission.

to know no more. Other times, they questioned us and talked with us about what we were doing. Sometimes they were integral to data collection and analysis. Whether the setting was a classroom, a community meeting, or a cardiopulmonary resuscitation training session, we came with a defined role. Our involvement in the activities was negotiated. Ruth portrays herself fully and openly to the children and their parents. Anthony's portrayal is clear and overt to some (staff and some community members) and more ambiguous to others. He may find no need to explain himself to the people who come to the gallery opening or to the modern dance exhibition. Marla will be explicit and overt about her role and purposes as she and the participants in the action research define and implement the study collaboratively.

Research activities can be piggybacked onto other activities. For example, Marla will facilitate the study at the same time she is serving as a volunteer in the clinic. Although most people at the clinic see her primary role as a volunteer, she does not intend to hide from her coworkers that she is a student facilitating action research. Quite likely, many of the workers will forget about her project, whereas others, including workers and clients, may never be aware of her dual roles. Of course, the women working with her in the action research will see her dual roles.

At times, we have collected data while performing other jobs. Such research is overt because we inform participants of our intent to collect the corollary data; we negotiate informed consent at that time. For example, we collected data on the progress of our students during an action research seminar we led for teams of schoolteachers. We were teaching them how to conduct action research studies, but we also documented, with their permission, their learning and activities to study the impact of action research on teacher practice.

We also have collected data that we then used for another, unanticipated purpose. We used such data in writing *Dynamic Teachers* (Rallis & Rossman, 1995). We had reams of notes from years of observations of teachers in various school settings from our roles as

director and evaluator of a professional development and school improvement initiative. We used the actual data and knowledge gained in conceptualizing and describing dynamic teachers. Another illustration is the chapter that Kaye and Rallis (1989) wrote on advanced cardiac life support training, which was based on their extensive observations of advanced cardiac life support training during various studies about this type of training. In both cases, the original data collection was overt, but the participants in these instances could not have known about the future uses because we did not know about them ourselves.

The qualitative researcher may choose not to fully disclose her specific focus when she believes that awareness of the details might make participants particularly self-conscious. For example, we have supported students who describe their studies as focusing on classroom interactions in general without revealing their interest in gender or race. In such cases, the researchers felt that if the participants were aware of the specific focus, they might monitor and alter their actions. As another example, if Marla was using a traditional approach to study clinic services for poor women, she might fear that revealing her specific focus on poor women would draw unusual attention to them. Thus, she might say simply that she is studying health services at the clinic.

If Marla told no one in the clinic setting that she was collecting data for a study, however, she would be violating our code of ethics. Covert research is not acceptable. Similarly, if Anthony were to tell the program director only that he was interested in community arts without revealing his role as evaluator, his research would be covert and unethical.

APPROACH AND NEGOTIATIONS

Negotiating entry is a process and seldom happens quickly and smoothly. The process is one of allocating time for negotiating the terms of the introduction or invitation and for securing written permission.

Time

Qualitative researchers learn to anticipate the time involved in gaining access. In fact, the process of negotiating entry can be as insightful about the people or setting as subsequent observations and interviews themselves. Researchers tend to be wary of any entry that seems to progress flawlessly. They have learned that this may be a “front,” and barriers will pop up later. Moreover, key personnel change jobs, programs move location, and weather and other natural events can interfere with scheduling. Most often, the contact people with whom researchers make the arrangements are pleasant and cooperative, but the site visits are seldom high on their priority lists. The researcher, therefore, must adapt to the schedules and routines of the site and participants.

We recall an entry negotiation that became an odyssey. The study was on high school change (Rossman et al., 1988), and we had selected three schools in different districts. We obtained the superintendent’s approval in each district without a hitch. Each superintendent referred us to the respective high school principal. At one high school, we began with

letters and a phone call to set up an initial meeting with the principal. One month passed before that first meeting. The principal supported the study but said that we needed to meet with his vice principal before any official fieldwork could begin. The vice principal suggested that we meet with the teachers' union, so we scheduled yet another meeting. The union representatives asked us to meet with the department heads to explain the study. The department heads were impressed, so we returned to the principal for official sanction. At this point, however, the principal decided that he wanted the entire faculty to vote their approval or disapproval. At a full faculty meeting, the teachers voted and approved our entry. Finally, we were in—but 6 months had passed.

Each step served as a legitimate screening device for the organization, but precious time had elapsed since the original inquiry. Symbolically, we had been negotiating with the organization rather than with an individual. Having passed the organization's protective mechanisms, we were allowed to enter. Because the entire organization had been involved in the decision to let us in, we found we had access to many levels, and we believe that most members were forthcoming. The results were worth the time.

The same holds true with individuals whom the researcher would like to invite to participate. Quite appropriately, from their perspective, they may resist, ignore, or even sabotage the invitation. As the researcher, you may discover that you need to use extraordinary measures that consume considerable time to engage the desired individuals in the project. At some point, you must decide whether obtaining interviews with these persons is worth the time it takes.

Introduction and Invitation

Unless the site is entirely open and public, you generally need to obtain a formal invitation before entering the field. Whether visiting a classroom, a therapy session, a community activist gathering, or a performance, you need permission for or some acceptance of your presence. Even if observing in a public setting, as did Whyte in *Street Corner Society* (1943/1981), you need the acceptance of the inhabitants or regulars to “see” anything. Getting permission or an invitation is not usually as difficult as it is time-consuming. We note that many of the examples we provide focus on access to settings, organizations, events, or groups. However, some studies are concerned with individuals. For example, Ruth is interested in children and their experiences. Most of the suggestions or principles we offer are intended to apply to both the settings and the individuals.

Initial contact may be made by phone or letter, via e-mail, in person, or through an introduction. Having more than one method of introduction eases the process. For example, if we do not know people in the setting and have no one to introduce us, we write before calling. Cold calls can catch the recipient off guard. If we are seen as strangers, the recipient can be leery of our intent. Often, the person we need to contact for entry is busy and important and would be unlikely to accept an unexpected call from someone he or she did not know. An e-mail or letter allows that person time to prepare a response (or toss it away).

Gaining Access Takes Time

- Making contact
- Negotiating with gatekeepers
- Obtaining an invitation
- Getting formal permission
- Building relationships

Usually, we try to have someone familiar with our project make an introduction, or we use existing relationships to establish contact. For example, when looking for sites to study teacher-researchers, we sought the support of the director of the innovation division of a national teachers' association. She helped us choose the schools and placed calls to the principals as an introduction. When we were conducting the evaluation of a district's inclusion initiative, we knew that support of the principals would be important. We asked the superintendent to call a meeting of the principals at which we could introduce ourselves and describe the study. In both cases, we first considered how the principals would react to the individuals we were asking to introduce us. Do they respect those persons? Might they resent an apparent power play? Might the persons misrepresent us? Because the answers satisfied us, we proceeded with the introductions.

If you are seeking to interview people rather than survey a setting, you might need to try some additional strategies to make contact. We had one student who posted flyers in a coin-operated laundry. A religious woman who was our doctoral student wanted to interview women in other religious orders about their definitions of social justice, so she attended functions at a nearby center for equity and justice to meet women who fit her criteria. Another student found his interviewees by following up respondents to a questionnaire relevant to his topic that a public agency had distributed. Yet another student told her physician about her dissertation topic. The doctor remarked that she had some other patients who might be interested in the topic and offered to pass on the student's number to patients who would be willing to be interviewed.

Making initial contact in person is useful if the setting is relatively public or if you know little about it. Approaching a site in person with no introduction is also a good idea if you suspect that a formal introduction by someone highly placed in the organization might prejudice participants against you. In these settings, you may simply want to go and hang around, getting your feet wet to find out what you want to focus on, who are the important contacts, and how you might get accepted. For example, if you wanted to observe sports programs at private schools but had no contacts, you might begin by attending games to discover who the players are and what informal rules govern interactions off the field. Similarly, Anthony might initially simply hang around the arts center.

Obtaining Permission

Part of the entry negotiations is obtaining permission—sometimes written and sometimes oral (see Chapter 3)—from participants. Some people are willing to give permission under certain conditions and not others. For example, some will not allow their interviews to be audiotaped, but they will allow you to take notes. You should try to accommodate your interview partner whenever possible. In some instances, written permission is covered by the formal permission you received in getting access to the institution, as long as you confine your interview questions to the topics on which you agreed. For example, we did not need permissions from every person in the schools

when we did the inclusion study because we had been contracted by the district office and our questions fell within the purview of the participants' work. Whatever the situation, all participants need to be informed and give their consent, either in writing or orally. Be aware, however, that sometimes the mere mention of informed consent changes the tone of the conversation. This can feel quite awkward; however, it is the researcher's responsibility to find an ethical way to communicate purpose and expectations and to be reasonably sure that the participants understand and voluntarily agree.

Whenever the research is piggybacked on other work, such as using data that were collected for one purpose and were used for another unanticipated purpose, the researcher must ensure the following:

- The data originally were collected systematically and ethically.
- The data do not qualitatively change when analyzed for purposes other than the original.
- No one in the original setting objects to, or no rights are violated by, the new use of the data.

EXPECTATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Unlike in the blind date situation to which the entry process has been compared, the parties in a research study are not likely to either hit it off or "strike out" with the first encounter; it is not usually that dramatic. Thus, negotiations are ongoing. The terms or conditions set during entry establish what will be expected of all parties in a preliminary way. Although these expectations can be—and likely will be—adjusted as the fieldwork progresses, they set the tone for the relationship that develops. Ultimately, this relationship has implications for how trustworthy the data are considered. In his classic work, Johnson (1975) noted,

The conditions under which an initial entree is negotiated may have important consequences for how the research is socially defined by the members of that setting. These social definitions will have a bearing on the extent to which the members trust a social researcher. (p. 51)

Trusting relations between a researcher and the members of a setting are likely to yield a trustworthy report, "one which retains the integrity of the actor's perspective and its social context" (Johnson, 1975, p. 51).

Entry requires time because usually more than one group of participants need to negotiate agreement on terms and conditions. An experienced qualitative researcher recognizes that several parties may be interested in or affected by the research. The several parties were obvious when we performed a court-ordered evaluation in a school system. The court identified "interested parties" as the plaintiff (i.e., the advocacy group

Building Relationships

- How does entry define the research?
- What are the mutual benefits?
- Who owns the data?
- How do gatekeepers receive you?

representing the parents who had brought the suit), the school system, the parents' advisory group, and the court monitor. We discovered that additional parties fell within the boundaries of the school system: the principals, the teachers, and the department heads, as well as the central office. Even these groups could be broken down by special interests, such as itinerant teachers. Despite the legitimate interests of many groups, we saw that the logistics of including everyone in the negotiations would be impossible. We singled out the key parties to agree on the terms of the evaluation before we proceeded.

Expectations to be discussed include (a) permissions; (b) how data will be recorded; (c) the roles of various actors, materials, and documents that the participants will need to find and collate; (d) the amount of time the researcher will spend at the site; (e) what areas are open or closed to the researcher; (f) where the researcher can set up a work space if necessary; and (g) the amount of time or other resources the participants will devote. Negotiations also must cover the more political or symbolic issues, such as reciprocity and gatekeeping.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity recognizes the need for *mutual benefit in human interaction*. Norms of reciprocity operate in all social life, and fieldwork is no exception. Research is a two-way street. The researcher wants something: to enter the site freely and to collect data unhindered. The site participants also want something: not to be seriously disturbed in their work or lives and to gain from participating in the study. At times, they participate to take action on some aspect of their lives through a collaborative inquiry process. They expect some change for the better. Sometimes participants are satisfied with an intellectual gain; other times, they want more. The qualitative researcher needs to establish expectations for reciprocity at the start to avoid misunderstanding and resentments later, as well as to ensure that all participants (including the researcher) are treated fairly. Although these early negotiations set the tone, remember that your relationship is being constantly renegotiated.

Clarifying the relationship, difficult as it may be, is especially important because research is quite unlike any other social interaction and is often misunderstood. As depicted in the modern university, research is presented as a Western, masculine, and joyless enterprise that many cultures and people find alien and off putting. Unequal power relationships between the *researcher* and the *researched* give the *researcher* all the authority. She defines the boundaries and the disposition of outcomes. The *researched* is made to feel ignorant, impotent, and easy to forget. In addition, the qualitative research process has the potential to seduce the researched with promises and desert her when the study is over (Siskin, 1994).

Teachers in schools near large research universities often feel seduced and abandoned. These schools serve as research sites, and teachers and students are labeled "subjects." We have heard discussions in which teachers said they felt that they had been "raped" by the university people, who vaguely or implicitly promised pleasure and intimacy, greatness,

Reciprocity

"This has helped me out a lot; I hope you found it useful, too."

and new understanding but seldom ever returned to share their results. This inequity between the researcher and researched need not be the norm and is becoming increasingly unacceptable ethically. A mutually beneficial relation is preferable.

Under *norms of reciprocity*, the researcher obtains data, while the participants “find something that makes their cooperation worthwhile, whether that something is a feeling of importance from being [studied], pleasure from interactions with the [researcher], or assistance in some task” (Patton, 2002, p. 312), or actual changes in life circumstances from action research. Again, truthfulness, on both sides, is the byword for establishing reciprocity. The researcher states what she wants and what she intends to do: to move about the setting, to watch, to ask questions, to take notes, and to read documents and other written materials. The site participants also clarify any limitations they deem necessary: A reasonable exclusion may be certain private personnel meetings.

In addition to setting boundaries, participants also make requests and express the expectations they have. These may include reassurances of confidentiality and anonymity and also may involve questions about what will be done with the results. Unless the project is collaborative, most participants are not interested in the details of the study. They do, however, want to know about any findings related to their work or activities. The principals of the schools in the inclusion study asked that we personally share the findings about their schools with them, so we decided to create school feedback sheets for each one. Some of the school-specific information on these feedback sheets never appeared in the final report because it was important only to the principals.

Usually, people in the settings we have studied had no trouble identifying the benefits they could gain from the research. A physician whom we interviewed numerous times during a yearlong study on in-hospital training and organizational change called us his “administrative *yentas*.” He viewed interview sessions as therapeutic. The director of an intervention program we studied disseminated our analyses in a monthly newsletter; she reported that the public relations value was extraordinary. We were pleased that she found such a use for the work. The teachers and principals in the proposed teacher–researcher sites view the study as holding a potential for communication between the schools. They have asked that we help them seek funds for Internet connections and technology training so that they can use computers to collaborate on projects that they will propose together.

Not all participants are as sophisticated or savvy as those we just described. Consider the following thorny problems:

- What if participants, quite legitimately, find Western notions of research anathema and hence know little about the process and its possibilities for harm or benefit?
- What if participants are unaware of their rights to privacy?

For example, the women Marla tries to involve in her action research may have no experience to comprehend what she is asking of them. They may feel that they have little

authority to ask questions and seek answers as she proposes they do, nor will they assume the authority to disagree with her. Marla's challenge is to facilitate their empowerment to generate questions and methods that are practical for them rather than for herself as the researcher. As all other qualitative researchers, she will have to be especially sensitive to imbalances of power and authority. She will need to make the potential benefits apparent to the participants.

Reciprocity discussions also might include the question of who owns the data and who can review and edit a written report. Some key players in the setting may want to see the results before they are made public. Some may insist that they read all the field notes and interpretations, and some may even demand editing rights or veto power. Some want coauthorship. We believe that each case must be decided individually. For example, in collaborative action research, participants are appropriately coauthors because they are involved in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. An evaluation such as Anthony's does not warrant participants' veto or coauthorship because the researcher is presenting his view—his interpretation and judgment of the program. The researcher's obligation is to make explicit that it is his voice that is being presented and not necessarily the voices of the participants. Lightfoot (1983) describes how she shared her portraits of good high schools with their principals. She relates how she decided to hold on to her interpretations even when they differed from what the principals saw. To the extent possible, issues such as these should be considered during entry negotiations to avoid misunderstandings that could ultimately limit what use is made of the data. A cautionary note: All these issues cannot be finalized; they often surface unexpectedly. Be aware and remember that negotiations are continuous.

The following painful example illustrates the importance of raising issues of benefit and ownership before the research begins and keeping the discussion open as the research unfolds. We knew a doctoral student who spent a year interviewing and shadowing a handful of successful women leaders for her dissertation. The women were willing to share their thoughts and lives with her because, in part, they felt that their stories were important. They were gratified with the deeper understanding of their own lives that they had gained from their conversations with the student. She neglected, however, to negotiate ownership and confidentiality with the women. In fact, several wanted their real names to be used. When the researcher published the results using pseudonyms, the women leaders were furious. "Those are not her stories! They are ours! How dare she steal them to make money?" said one of the women, expressing the anger of the group. Because the doctoral student had not negotiated this aspect of the study, she may have hurt the credibility of researchers in general. If Marla believes that the stories of the women in her collaborative study are worth publishing, to be ethical and respectful, she must discuss these possibilities with the women:

- Should the stories be published?
- Who should author them?

- Who would receive any royalties from publishing the stories?
- What alternatives to traditional publishing might be appealing?

Organizational Gatekeepers

Recall the discussion of micropolitics and specifically of gatekeepers in Chapter 3. In the discussion at the beginning of this chapter, Marla hopes that because she is volunteering in the clinic, she will not be excluded from routines that will yield valuable information. Anthony is concerned that awareness of his sponsorship by the foundation to do an evaluation might cause program folk to give him an artificial welcome or to close doors precipitously. Ruth knows that she must make contacts that will bring her close to children in wheelchairs. All three realize that no matter how righteous their questions, how sound their methodologies, or how prepared they are, the people in the setting will help them or hinder them and will open up or block off paths to information. Sponsors, gatekeepers, and key sources of information determine, in part, the quality and quantity of data. (Sources of information have traditionally been called *informants*. We are not comfortable with the sinister connotations of that word. Clearly, we do not see key sources of information and insight as spies or turncoats. We invite suggestions for a new term for this role.)

Most bureaucracies have policies or regulations defining who can or cannot have access to what. The individuals who implement or enforce these regulations or policies are typically called *gatekeepers*: the people in settings who control “avenues of opportunity” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 38). Some gatekeepers hold formal positions with legitimate authority to grant or withhold permission. Others possess informal authority and may not be obvious initially. They use their positions to reveal or protect what an outsider may see of themselves, their colleagues, and their organizations. Often, those who hold the keys to revealing information are those who appear unlikely—perhaps the nonprofessionals, the backup crew, or the quiet ones. In schools, for example, we have found that custodians or bus drivers may know more about a particular event than the principal or teacher simply because they can see and hear more sides of the story.

Anyone in an organization can act as a gatekeeper. What makes one person more or less important is the degree to which he can lead you to valuable information, send you off in an irrelevant direction, or block your inquiry at the start. As you enter the setting, ask yourself who holds what information and what routines or strategies these people are likely to use in disseminating their knowledge. Secretaries, for example, are often the first and the best gatekeepers. They hold the keys to their employers and often to the entire organization. When we make initial contact with a director or administrator, we have learned to ask the secretary for her name, and we make sure she knows ours. This way, in future contacts, we can ask for her personally and build on our previous conversations. This simple personal attention makes us familiar; thus, the secretary as

Gatekeepers can make or break your study. Handle them gently.

gatekeeper is more willing to facilitate our access to relevant information and people. Otherwise, secretaries can put up formidable barriers.

Sponsors can be gatekeepers, and gatekeepers can choose to become key sources of information. The line between the roles is not a clear one. In the inclusion study, our “sponsor” was a central office contact, a highly placed administrator. Technically, her role was to ease our access to the schools. At one level, she filled that role by providing necessary print material and demographics to help us choose sites and by writing official letters of introduction to the principals. She became a gatekeeper, however, because she was inordinately slow in posting the letters of introduction and failed to obtain some of the legal permissions we needed (eventually, we called the district’s general counsel ourselves).

As she developed respect for us, however, she became a key source of information. She offered suggestions as to which schools were appropriate and told us details about effective programs in each site. The challenge is to turn a resistant gatekeeper into an active, possibly even collaborating, source of information. A strategy that can facilitate this transformation is establishing what is termed as *comembership*. That is, the researcher finds some common bond on which to build a sense of shared understanding. For example, Marla, whose primary language is Spanish, will have little trouble establishing kinship with the Spanish-speaking women in the clinic.

We use comembership regularly in our research. Our histories as principal and teacher ease our entry into schools. One tense situation occurred when an angry principal sat us down to tell us “what is *really* happening here.” For 15 minutes, she shouted about lack of resources to meet the children’s extreme needs. Finally, we asked her a question we could only have known to ask from direct experience in a similar situation. From that point on, the interview became a valuable and mutual conversation. Subsequently, she cleared the way for further meaningful observation and conversation throughout the school. Our ability to demonstrate that we shared “membership” with her made the difference.

Qualitative researchers may build this bond through some minor or seemingly irrelevant similarity, as long as they are honest and the correspondence is true. For example, Anthony may refer to his cousin, the puppeteer, to indicate that he has some familiarity with the challenges facing these artists. A female student who chose to study adolescents at a private boys’ school found that if she mentioned her teenaged brother early in her interviews, the boys became less nervous and reticent. In the cardiopulmonary resuscitation studies, we drew on personal affinities with the training director (each of us had protested the Vietnam War and each of us likes classical music). The grounds for comembership are less important than that they are genuine.

DISPOSITIONS AND SKILLS

Qualitative researchers make scores of decisions in the course of a project; many concern entry to the setting. The challenge here is negotiating a relationship that is ethical, sensitive,

and as natural as possible, given its temporary and artificial nature. As we stated earlier, the research process is a heuristic, discovering experience. This is highly salient during entry. Each setting—even those with which the researcher believes he is familiar—exists to be discovered, and each researcher has a unique way of discovering. As Marla, Ruth, and Anthony make contact and negotiate entry, their growing understanding of the principles of good practice facilitates their discoveries. Our students who choose international sites for their research often assert that difficulties of approach and negotiation are intensified by distance and cultural differences. We suggest that even studying your own backyard can present surprises and still requires sensitivity to the possible benefits and burdens and demands respect for participants.

The challenge of balancing their needs as researchers with those of the people they will be observing and interviewing is both daunting and exciting. Ruth must protect the privacy of the children and families she interviews, and she also hopes they will feel free to disclose very private experiences and feelings. Marla wants the women with whom she will collaborate to look closely at possible injustices they may experience, but she cannot promise them that the study will yield improvements. Anthony wants to cover areas where the community arts program can improve, but he does not want the foundation to use the program's weaknesses as a reason to withdraw funding.

Because Anthony, Ruth, and Marla are dealing with fellow human beings, they learn to recognize that every entry will be unique and most likely unpredictable. As they build relationships with participants, they will try to be exquisitely sensitive to the participants' feelings, worldviews, and interests. They work with their subjectivist assumptions (see Chapter 2) to build relationships that enact reciprocity; they present the studies and benefits as they see them; and they are careful that they make only promises they are sure they can keep. They create conversations and engage in dialogue more than they expect neat, tidy answers. Above all, they try to be honest and truthful in their relations with folks in the field. They realize that their entries are fluid, changing processes. As they negotiate and renegotiate their entries, they apply the principles of good practice.

Now, they have access to their sites; they have entered the field. In Chapter 7, we join them as they begin to collect data and practice the following key dispositions and skills:

- Comfort with ambiguity
- Capacity to make reasoned decisions and to articulate the logic behind those decisions
- Deep interpersonal or emotional sensitivity
- Ethical sensitivity of potential consequences to individuals and groups
- Political sensitivity
- Perseverance and self-discipline

ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Study Questions

- How will you prepare to enter the field?
- What is the nature of your relationship with the study participants or the site?
- With whom do you negotiate access? What about formal consent?
- How do you establish your expectations and learn about those that the participants have?

Small-Group and Dyad Activities

Issues of Access

In small groups, dyads, or triads, discuss possible gatekeepers and potential barriers to access in your study. Help your colleagues propose strategies for negotiating with these gatekeepers and overcoming barriers.

Portrayal of Involvement Role Play

Using Figures 6.2 and 6.3, which portray involvement, locate your proposed design for study on the continua and create a role play in which you introduce and explain your study and intended involvement. Your dyad partner plays the part of a difficult, challenging gatekeeper.

Writing Activity

Access

Gaining access to a particular setting and working out an understanding of your study entails negotiation with participants. This often takes much more time than a beginning qualitative researcher anticipates. Moreover, it may provide interesting insight into the prevailing, taken-for-granted assumptions of those in the setting.

Write a memo that documents this process. First, describe chronologically the events that led up to receiving formal permission to do a study. Second, comment on the deeply held assumptions you may have encountered in that process. And third, describe your reactions as you negotiated for access.

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