PART I

Qualitative research situated within the constructivist paradigm is defined by a very specific set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological tenets and assumptions. Operating under the presupposition that research cannot be free of personal and/or political sympathies on the part of the researcher (or the participant for that matter), constructivist qualitative research is characterized by a relativist ontology in which multiple, constructed realities are central to understanding the nature of the known or, to put it another way, the nature of one’s reality. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), constructions are alterable, as they are associated “realities” that are devised by individuals who work to make sense of their world. During qualitative research, these constructions emerge through a transactional, dialogic encounter between researcher and participant, and thus reveal the deep-seated views of both the researcher and the participant. As such, the method of dialogue has the ability to promote reflexivity among researcher and participant alike. As Means Coleman writes, “As with any conversant exchange, the researcher’s values, beliefs, or worldview is inseparable from the resultant constructions. [...] Hence, the lines between the ontological and the epistemological blur, and the methodological is, by necessity, hermeneutical or *verstehen*.”1 And while this seeming bias or lack of objectivity in research seems inappropriate, qualitative feminist researcher Reinharz is correct when she offers that in qualitative research bias is unavoidable, and objectivity is an inappropriate criterion for judgment.2 More, as Scheper-Hughes suggests, “We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions [...].”3

It should come as no surprise, then, that a methodology that has as its basic data collection “instrument” a human-being, one who is a) engaged in in-depth questioning and discussion, as well as listening and observation; for a b) marked level of engagement and duration; to c) tap individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and inferences, would prompt a closeness and attachment between researcher and participant. As Ely observes:

> It is natural to develop feelings toward one’s research participants. Much of qualitative research involves prolonged engagement in the lives of other human beings, going beyond the superficial mask of public impression and entering a highly personal realm of private thoughts, secret passions. The researcher who is a keen observer and astute interviewer will inevitably be privy to many of the generally undisclosed vulnerabilities, heartaches, fantasies, and joys of the participants. It makes sense, then, that emotional responses such as closeness, identification, sympathy, and warmth would be spontaneously elicited in the researcher.4

Much has been written on the ethical considerations of such lengthy, intense encounters, especially as the researcher seeks to privilege, and, thereby, not compromise, the emic. These literatures have focused on ways that the researcher can tap the participants’ constructions while being aware of the pitfalls of being overly compassionate,5 going native,6 stifling dissenting viewpoints and elitism,7 Othering and silencing participants,8 invoking *a priori* assumptions,9 and raising a host of other ethical issues. While strategies
on how to protect the participant and the research process from ethical breaches that may be introduced on the part of the researcher are often documented (e.g., human subject safeguards), little has been written by way of advice for the researcher, who needs protection from the moral and emotional crises that can come from a difficult research encounter. Rising feelings of intimacy, compassion, kinship, and identification toward the participants on the part of the researcher are often addressed. However, the many qualitative research “Bibles” fall short in addressing what happens when participants, through their behaviors and/or constructions, offer a view that a researcher may find repugnant or antisocial. Barker encountered such a participant while interviewing comic book fans. Barker found himself taken aback when a participant confessed to being a fascist and a lover of Nazi literature. Ely is the rare scholar who speaks to other researchers, advising them to be prepared for the worst when interacting with participants. Ely explicitly forewarns that it is possible for a researcher to become repulsed by a participant and that the feeling of repulsion, if unacknowledged, may creep into a study’s findings.

This essay works to offer a detailed commentary on what can occur when a researcher mounts a project with participants that may be disturbing to the researcher’s sensibilities and, as a result, faces difficult ethical dilemmas. Drawing on my own research experiences with a trio of convicted murderers, I will address the following concerns:

1) How is the qualitative researcher to handle the difficult process of interviewing people who have done a very bad thing? Specifically, what happens when the qualitative researcher uncovers realities about the participants that are abhorrent within the researcher’s value system?

2) What should a qualitative researcher do when necessary protections such as confidentiality and informed consent conflict with the goals of the study? Additionally, how is resistance, on the part of the participants, to requisite human subject protections handled?

3) How can a fiery interview experience influence the final report?

4) In what ways is the qualitative researcher responsible for affecting change in the lives of participants?

By answering these questions, this essay serves as an accounting of some of the many logistical and moral dilemmas I faced (and continue to face today) during the difficult process of interviewing convicted murderers.

My research seeks to lay bare the meanings a group of young men bring to and take away from the film *Menace II Society*. These participants became known as the *perpetrators* in the media-termed “*Menace II Society Murder Case*.” In this case, in 1994 five youths viewed this ultra-violent, ghetto-centric film and then engaged in copycat acts of crime, including murder, for which they were convicted and are today confined in a state prison. I must say at the outset that my research with the young men continues today, and all is generally well. (Thus far) I have survived a series of stumbling blocks, including their continued criminal activity while confined, misrepresentations about their behaviors, mistrust, and anger on my part. I have learned a lot from the experience. Today, I am largely unconflicted about my research efforts, which means this essay will, indeed, have a happy ending.

**Difference and the Road to Discontent: Cross-Cultural Inquiry**

Margaret Andersen, in her book chapter “Studying Across Difference: Race, Class, and Gender in Qualitative Research,” cautions against inquiry that privileges the perspectives and experiences of dominant group members. Andersen also warns against researchers who seek to tap African American, Latino, or Native American experiences, while holding them up against a set of norms that do not emanate from within the said racial-ethnic group. Worse, for those researchers unwilling and/or unable to move away from popular ethnocentric concepts, scholarship suffers as minority and marginalized groups are simply excluded from the research process. The author urges researchers to be keenly aware of the power relationships that can develop between the researcher and the participant. Andersen cites Blauner and Wellman on this point:
In capitalist America, where massive inequalities in wealth and power exist between classes and racial groups, the processes of social research express both race and class oppression. The control, exploitation, and privilege that are generic components of social oppression exist in relation of researchers to researched, even though their manifestations may be subtle and masked by professional ideologies.\textsuperscript{12}

Attending to the potential for inequities during inquiry forced me to confront my own privilege (profession, education, class, material resources, freedom) and ideologies (morality, justice, law and order). I had to ask myself, as a member of variously defined dominant groups, could I engage with youths whose experiences, behaviors, and beliefs were so different from my own? What impact would these gaps in our lived experiences have upon my ability to interpret and present these (subordinated or repressed) youths’ constructions? In the end, could I contribute to a body of knowledge regarding the role media play in criminal youths’ lives? And, what sorts of methodological techniques would I need to employ in this unique research encounter, particularly given the constructivist tenet of maintaining trust and openness?

Fisherkeller writes of how she reduces some of the gaps between researcher and participant in her own work by: 1) immersing herself in the contexts under investigation; 2) identifying shared experiences between researcher and participant around larger contexts; 3) engaging in the relevant literatures; and 4) learning from the participants.\textsuperscript{13}

I took a similar inventory, asking myself if I could successfully bridge the difference gap between the participants and myself. I began to allay my fears of cross-cultural differences by concluding that I had some opportunity to observe both similar and specific contexts that the youths encountered. For example, I have viewed \textit{Menace II Society} numerous times and collected much of the commentary on the film, its makers, and the genre it is part of. I, generally, understand the home, social, and school lives from whence the youths came. To a degree, we were reared in similar African American, urban, working-class to middle-class communities. We share a racial group and, as a result, at times we are united by a sociopolitical history. We want the same things (peace, happiness, comfort) for our families and ourselves. We tend to watch the same television programs, listen to the same music, and read the same popular magazines. And, of course, as Fisherkeller reiterates, and as scholarship demands, I reviewed the pertinent literatures (e.g., media violence, youth, masculinity).

Still, I must acknowledge that my status as an adult, as an educated person, as a researcher, and as a free individual placed me in a position of power over these continuously punished (they are serving life sentences), isolated, unnurtured, minimally educated young men. It was inevitable, given our positions in life, that some quandaries, rooted in our differences, would arise. To better understand the resulting discontent, it may be helpful to gain a better sense of who I am and who these young men are.

\textbf{The Researcher Autobiography}

Constructivist, qualitative research is reliant upon a process where researcher and participant engage in dialogic interaction to elicit the interpretations of realities held by the participant. As Lincoln and Guba point out, the collection of the tacit and the expressed participant constructions can only be conducted when the data gathering “instrument” is human.\textsuperscript{14} The human, then, draws upon his or her own experiences and the participant’s to bring forth more information for a closer approximation of the participant’s view of reality. The researcher-cum-human instrument should make clear in the study (often this appears in an appendix) and in his or her mind (including in the researcher’s notes) his or her interests, experiences, beliefs, biases, training, and expertise so that the human presence is not overly privileged during the inquiry process. This summary of interests, philosophical orientation, and experience, as they pertain to the study, can take the form of a researcher autobiography. The autobiography (below in an abbreviated form) I penned for myself in my researcher field log served as a
tool to aid me in anticipating potential areas of difference, thus giving me an early warning of the moments where discontent could seep in. The autobiography was one tool (another was the use of peer debriefers) that I relied upon to ensure that my own feelings and biases would not dominate the study. I believe that the dilemmas that I encountered while investigating these criminal youth were inevitable given each of our social positions and experiences. I believe that the exercise of writing a researcher autobiography enabled me to identify my ideological orientations early on and identify steps that I would need to take to decrease the difference gap. Such awareness enabled me to immediately respond to dilemmas and to remedy situations, thereby permitting the continuation of the study. Here follows part of that autobiography:

I am a qualitative researcher; specifically a media audience ethnographer. I also refer to my research initiatives as “audience studies” and “reception analyses.” I am the kind of scholar who asks media consumers about their interpretations of media texts. There are plenty of good reasons to tap the meanings that emerge from a participant’s encounter with media. For example, not long ago, I asked a group of African Americans to share their readings of Black situation comedies. It is likely that one would think, predictably, they hated the comedic images. Well, I am glad I asked, and did not let my a priori assumptions color my inquiry. You see, the research did not singularly uncover the usual “here’s a stereotype, there’s a stereotype” criticisms. Rather, the findings centered on industry accessibility and negotiating its infrastructure; views on race relations and the “language” of comedy, and how each can inform Black images; even personal enrichment and the gain/loss of self-esteem emerged as important for consideration.

In the study I am currently involved in, I want to understand the viewing relationships a group of five teen-aged boys had with a violent film that they later confessed moved them to engage in copycat crimes. Here again, I am glad I asked them about their interpretations of the viewing, as this latest research into media violence is revealing some interesting issues about the role of media in youths’ everyday lives, issues about masculinity and identity formation, and issues about the manner in which they interpret media messages and their level of media savvy.

I do this research, as I once wrote, because my scholarship politics (isn’t everything “political”?) reside in the marginalized, the repressed, and the minority, much more so than in the normative and the central. And, ideally, one should practice what one preaches. I have also been known to profess to anyone who will listen that my aim in my research is to “give voice to, and to privilege” those that are often silenced, ignored, or unheard. I even went so far once as to tell a room of doctoral students that to take on such research is a humbling, quietly noble calling. I told them we could all be the Ghandis or Martin Luther King, Jr.s., of the academy [I will do a bit of back-peddling on this claim later].

You should also know that I believe in God. I am of the Black Baptist tradition and my office keys are attached to a “W.W.J.D.” key ring. I believe in turning the other cheek. I believe that I am humane. I happily admit that I am a liberal leftist. I am also a socialist democrat (but didn’t tell anybody until Cornel West made it fashionable to do so). Frankly, I take great comfort in being able to situate myself within these identity categories, as I cannot tolerate ambiguities and incertitude. These identities guide me; they help me to negotiate my world. Recognizing them keeps me sane—I love the orderliness of it all.

The Participants and the Menace II Society Murder Case

Five youths were associated with the “Menace II Society Murder Case.” Three of the five are participants in my research project. The youths are (ages at the time of the crimes): Steven Johnson, 16; Caryon Johnson, 13 (Stephen’s cousin); Calvin Smith, 16; Kunta Sims, 17 (Calvin’s best friend); and Sylvester Berry, 16 (Stephen’s best friend). On the night of January 23, 1994, in their hometown of Paduch, Kentucky, four of the boys, Stephen, Caryon, Kunta, and Calvin, viewed the film Menace II Society on video. After viewing the film, which depicted numerous scenes of ultra-violence, including execution-style murders, armed robbery, beatings by stomping, and armed car-jacking, Kunta opined that the four should go out and “kill some people” as depicted in the film. The four did just that when they came upon
their first victim, a teen named James Pearson, who was driving home from a restaurant job. Pearson was forced off the road and kidnapped at gunpoint. His vehicle was taken. The four youths drove around with Pearson as their hostage for a short time until he was shot and killed by Kunta Sims. Pearson’s body was dumped onto the lawn of a randomly chosen residence. The body was discovered the next morning. The four then went to Sylvester’s home. Sylvester was apprised of the night’s events and invited along for a ride in Pearson’s car. Now five strong, they came upon Matthew Fiorentini and Melissa Hall. Their car had become stuck in a snow and ice filled roadside ditch. Stephen approached the pair, offering help. Stephen quite suddenly shot Matthew. The five planned to leave Matthew (who they thought has been mortally wounded) on the road and to abduct Hall. The plan of abduction was abandoned and the five fled. Matthew survived. Within a day the police began arresting the youths. Eventually all would confess to the crimes and offer varying accounts of the degree to which the film served as the catalyst for their actions. Most striking was the remarkable similarities between violent scenes of car-jacking and murder from the film and the crimes the youths committed. The case became known as the “Menace II Society Murder Case” in the press and attracted the attention of news media across the country. The five faced the death penalty. Plea bargains helped them avoid a trial and the death penalty. Today the five are serving lengthy sentences in Kentucky’s state prisons.

A Key to the Jailhouse: Participant Selection and Access

Gaining access to research participants is often a complex, exacting affair. Entry into the field must be planned very carefully as the decisions made at this stage will have decisive implications for the resulting study. For example, with my previous situation comedy reception study, I gave painstaking methodological consideration to the impact of purposive or snowball sampling strategies (qualitative sampling techniques need not be random, as generalizability is not the goal) upon the final outcome of the research effort. What would my study look like if I employed purposive sampling? That is, what would the consequences be if the adult African Americans from that northeast urban center were individuals who were specifically or “purposively” sought out? What would a snowball sampling strategy add to, or take away from, this study? In other words, what can be gained if these same participants were asked to introduce this researcher to members of their cohort who may either frequently consume Black situation comedies, or who shun them? In case you are curious, I utilized both purposive and snowball sampling in that study.

Once a sampling procedure is decided upon, you must also give careful attention to how you will recruit potential participants. Again, returning to my Black situation comedy study, purposive sampling sent me to predominately African American organizations such as African Methodist Episcopalian churches, college Black Student Unions, Black fraternities and sororities, the NAACP, the Urban League, and restaurants and businesses in predominately Black neighborhoods. To recruit participants in these locations, I distributed flyers, sent letters of invitation, and tacked up posters announcing my research.

Even at the seemingly less malignant stage of gaining access, important lessons were to be learned. That means I made some mistakes. I should have more carefully considered who might be overwhelmingly included or excluded based on my advertising tactics. Two cases schooled me. In the first, one of my most useful participants was almost missed because I failed to “think low.” All of my announcements were posted at my eye level or higher on bulletin boards, walls, light poles, etc. I thought I was clever when I even posted announcements on the inside of women’s and men’s bathroom stalls. As an able-bodied person, I failed to post notices lower, along wheelchair ramps that were often at a separate entranceway from the stairs for the non-handicapped. I similarly overlooked handicap bathrooms (again, often a separate facility). I learned that not only are handicap bathroom stalls a necessity for the wheelchair bound, but a preference for the more stout. My situation comedy study almost ran the risk of excluding or making it very difficult for the disabled to access me. This was a situation I remedied through continued, more sensitive postings, and the snowball sampling proved to be a useful diversity-
ensuring tool. The second lesson was also one about the potential to exclude participants. Because I relied primarily on written forms of communication, I ran the risk of missing the semi-literate and illiterate—groups who are very heavy consumers of mass electronic media. I also found that those who are very involved with work, family, and hobbies were often too busy to respond to flyers. In the end, telephone inquiries and face-to-face recruitment works just as well for the 6th-grade dropout as it does for the CEO.

These bumpy participant recruitment moments during the situation comedy study taught me it is necessary to be even far more diligent in pre-interview planning. It is this kind of care that I worked to achieve as I made contact with the five prisoners. I also learned that one cannot anticipate every scenario and, therefore, must be prepared to make important decisions and adjustments along the way. For the *Menace II Society* study, securing access to inmates in a maximum security facility, many in solitary confinement and in a different state, and to youths who fear being used by people who are simply seeking fame at their expense, was not going to be an easy task.

**Securing Access**

I first learned of the “*Menace II Society* Murder Case” in 1994, just days after the youths had been arrested, confessed to the murders, and linked the film to their criminal activities. News agencies across the country picked up on the story, and I began clipping newspaper articles about the case and started a file that included the coverage as well as literature on media violence and youth. Anything that I thought might be useful for a scholarly study on youth and media went into the file. I made a crucial decision in 1994. I opted to not attempt any contact with those involved in the case. It was my plan to avoid being associated with reporters who were swarming around the youth and coming up with sensational headlines and “money shots” of the youths looking sometimes weepy, other times defiant, and covering their faces as they entered and exited court buildings. This case was the 1994 version of Columbine in national press and public interest. I correctly surmised that everyone wanted something from these boys (and, quite honestly, so did I). For example, for several months the press inundated anyone even remotely involved with the youths or their victims with requests for interviews and information. According to the youths, MTV, BET, and the *New York Times* traveled to Kentucky to cover their case. The *New York Times* offered them a major book deal. I guessed, correctly, that on the advice of their attorneys these kids would not talk to anyone. The killings had been cast as both a copycat crime and a hate crime (the youths are Black, their victims White), and death threats abound. I also wanted to wait until all the hearings, trials, sentencings, and appeals were past. These were young people fighting for their lives, and I did not want to bother them with interview questions nor, frankly, did I believe responding to me would be their top priority as they fought execution. Today, I think it was wise to talk to the youths after things had settled down. It seems they have greater clarity and perspective about the events and the role of media in their lives. In 1994, their answers could have reflected what needs to be said by defendants fighting for their freedom, rather than responses from individuals free from that particular agenda. In the end, given the appeals process, it took about three years (until late 1997) before I made contact for the first time. By then, minors committing murders was passé, and youths being cited for killing based on films they viewed was a frequent occurrence. However, I also approached the five at a time when they had been incarcerated for some three years and learned the rules of prison: trust absolutely no one.

I worked to gain the trust of the five by first contacting their attorneys to get their support for this study. I asked if the attorneys would contact their (former) clients and introduce my project. Only one attorney (one of the defense attorneys for Stephen Johnson) agreed to write a letter before I made contact. She also agreed to help in any way she could and has been an invaluable resource. I then contacted the prisons where each has housed and spoke with guards who knew the youths, or about their lives in prison, to get a sense of their personalities and behaviors. The guards were very helpful in advising me about what to say in my letter of invitation. They even told me about the youths’ literacy levels and about life inside prison. According to prison guards, I should reveal as little about myself as possible, for my safety. I wrote all
five, explaining to them that my goal was to educate scholars about youth who use media and what role media play in their lives. I emphasized that I could not be involved in matters of their confinement. I made it clear that I simply wanted to increase an academic understanding of kids and media. I told them that their participation would be voluntary, and they would receive no money except for postage and envelopes. They, in essence, would be working with me to ultimately help educators help youths.

Two of the youths did not want to participate. Calvin Smith would not reply to my requests. I was not surprised, as the documents I had on Smith revealed that his family had all along told him not to talk to any one about the case—not the press, not his co-defendants, not anyone. His family members (especially his father) were close advisors, and I suspected his family told him to avoid this research encounter. Stephen Johnson, surprisingly, declined to participate. This, in spite of a letter on my behalf to him from his attorney. Later, his friend Sylvester Berry endorsed the project. Stephen decided to communicate at times through his attorney or through Sylvester, but never directly with me. He therefore was not considered a participant in this study. Caryon Johnson and Sylvester were eager to participate, and they continue to write lengthy letters today. Kunta Sims agreed to come on board, but with great trepidation, as he was in the middle of appealing his sentence and did not want this study to either distract him or be used against him should he reveal something provocative. In the end, I had participants for a reception study who I could never communicate with verbally or face-to-face. I had to rely on letters. If I needed to clarify a response, it would require a series of follow-up questions and, at times, a week or more for an answer. It was a study that would have to be conducted counter to my philosophical belief in working toward equality between researcher and participant. This study would not be dialogic and hermeneutical in the traditional sense by any means.

**ENDNOTES**


9 Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” *Handbook of Qualitative Research* 105-17.


12 Andersen 40.


15 This account is based on a number of sources, including participants, attorneys, press reports, and legal documents.