I Said, They Said, I Heard
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What do we mean by “getting good” at qualitative research? In this paper I suggest that, in part, we should mean that the final product has integrity and that research with integrity must pay very close attention to issues of listening. I begin this paper by discussing the interview stage of the research process, perhaps the stage in which listening plays the most central role; I try to offer some practical advice based on my own interviewing over the past few years doing qualitative research. I then illuminate several ways that the research process inevitably constrains listening and suggest that while such constraints may be inevitable, it is nevertheless important to be aware of them. I conclude with reflections on particular aspects in my training that provided me with opportunities to “get good” at qualitative research.

This is largely a “how-to” paper. My ideas are all rather common-sensical and are not likely to spark much controversy (though I would be pleased if they did for the sake of discussion). However, while the ideas are common sensical, the practice of them can be difficult. As qualitative research is complex, requiring the researcher to keep a lot in mind, I hope this paper will serve as a reminder for us all about what some of the most important steps are along the path toward “good” research.

Ways of Listening in Interviews
The interviewing stage in the research process is perhaps the stage in which listening plays the most central role. In this section I try to offer some practical advice based on lessons I learned over the past few years doing qualitative research. I find two metaphors appropriate to the work of a qualitative researcher. The first is the interviewer, or listener, as learner. With this metaphor I mean to emphasize the role of the researcher as one who listens in order to understand the phenomenon or event s/he set out to study. As learners we ask questions in attempts to clarify and deepen our understanding, just as we should ask questions as researchers. This is in contrast to researcher as teacher. Implied in the metaphor of researcher as learner is the idea that researchers do not already have the answers—that research is not simply a search for evidence to support a hypothesis, but rather a search for an understanding of the phenomenon being studied, the “inputs,” “outputs” and everything in between. Identifying the researcher as learner could also help to displace some of power differential often associated with researchers. That is, researchers, especially in the field of education, stand on rungs traditionally higher up the social ladder than many of the participants in their studies. Thus, researchers who think of and carry themselves as learners and think of the participants as their teachers could establish a tone that helps participants feel more respected than they otherwise might.

The second metaphor is the researcher, or listener, as therapist. This metaphor highlights the role of researchers as those who listen, probe and periodically rephrase what they have heard. The researcher holds this paraphrase up to see if the participant recognizes it as a reflection of what s/he has been trying to express to the researcher. The point for the researcher as therapist, much
like the researcher as learner is to understand what the speaker is explaining, but unlike the
learner, the role of therapist may be non-judgmental -- purely interested in understanding. Susan
Krieger expresses this approach when she advises qualitative researchers not to care about the
phenomenon as good or bad, but simply as a thing to understand (Krieger, 1979).

Whether working from either of these metaphors or from another one altogether, there are at least
five specific ways of listening in an interview that I have found to be useful. The first is to
“listen” by observing before interviewing. That is, attending a class or a meeting at the school
before interviewing any of the participants can be useful for three reasons. One, it allows the
researcher to pick up the language that the participants use to name, describe and define the
things the researcher will study. This can be important for the sake of communication. For
example I study school governance structures and each site where I work the different governing
bodies go by different names. Clearly I want to be able to understand and refer to the bodies by
the names given them at each site, “SSC,” “Steering Committee,” “Board,” or whatever the
appropriate term is.

Two, it can also be important for the researcher to observe before interviewing in order to gather
background information that can serve as the basis of the original protocols, or interview
questions. Writing interview protocols that are specific to the site can help get at more and deeper
information than generic or uninformed interview protocols would. Three, observations can also
help researchers to become conscious of who their “audience” is for the interviews. It can be
difficult for a new researcher to drop the role of student for example and take on the role of
researcher. By attending meetings or classes at the research site researchers can begin to see how
they might relate to the study participants and, ideally, begin to feel comfortable in that space.
There is a story about Thurgood Marshall that comes to mind for me when I think about trying to
“be” in a place as a researcher. It is said that Marshall was able to be simultaneously respectful of
and at home in any crowd—educated, poor, uneducated, wealthy—he knew how to “be” there.
This ability to be both respectful and at ease in various situations could well serve researchers
looking to understand a place, event or person since these traits are likely to build the trust and
respect of those from whom the researcher must learn. If participants are not comfortable or if
they feel talked down to, it is likely to be more difficult for the researcher to get the deep,
thoughtful responses s/he seeks.

The second way of “listening” is not with our ears, but our eyes. During observations, interviews,
walking down the halls between interviews, in the parking lot, and essentially anywhere the
researcher goes, the researcher can gather information. There are signs posted on bulletin boards,
certain people eating or chatting with other people in particular. Some departments have better
buildings or more computers. All of these “sightings” are often good clues to understanding what
goes on at a school—where the tensions lie and who is who. Getting a teacher mailbox can be
another way of “listening” with our eyes—reading what each of the teachers receives. The point is to listen with more than our ears.

In interviews eyes can “listen” to details like age, mannerisms, styles, the way the room is decorated, etcetera. These types of clues can offer nice triangulation and/or contradiction to conclusions researchers draw. For example, I interviewed a parent in his home one evening and I noticed that all over his kitchen were works of art. I commented on them and he said, proudly that his son had done them all. During the same interview his bird frequently squawked loudly and though he offered to move into a different room if I wanted, he was clearly quite comfortable with all the noise. Both of these rather trivial details supported other pieces of evidence I had and helped me create a picture of him as a man with great respect for children and as someone who could bear interruptions and noise and remain unflustered. Similarly, a teacher I interviewed who many other teachers had disparaged as someone who has no respect for her students has a classroom filled with student photos and student work. She walked me through the room pointing out students she remembered fondly and happily showing me some of her current students’ work. I am still forming a complete picture of her, but my impression changed based on what I saw in her classroom.

The third and most obvious way of listening is with our ears. The tape recorder really is the qualitative researcher’s best friend. Silly, but true. The tape recorder allows the researcher to: get direct quotes without asking the speaker to repeat him/herself; hear everything the participant says and; to review his/her own interviewing skills by listening to the tape later and/or reading the transcription. Aside from the chance that a tape recorder may not work during interviews and the notes taken are all that remain, the researcher wants to hear the speaker for at least two other reasons. One is to pick up the vocabulary the speaker uses to describe the phenomenon the researcher is studying in order to use it in the rest of the interview. That is, the words that the participant uses should act as cues to the researcher to use those same words in future questions in order to facilitate understanding. It may be that the researcher needs to clarify what the words mean to the participant, but once the definitions are clear, the researcher should work within the speaker’s choice of words. Not only is it likely to make conversation easier since both the interviewee and interviewer are speaking the same language, it also illustrates for the participant that the researcher is listening carefully. The second reason the speaker should listen closely to the speaker during the interview, despite the tape recorder, is to inform his/her next question. I explore this in more detail in the paragraph below on interview protocols.

The fourth way of “listening” is in the way we carry ourselves during the interview. By this I mean four things: where our eyes are, what we do with our hands, how we speak and how we sit. In my experience eye contact and what I’m doing with my hands are connected. I either look at the person I am interviewing or I take notes. Both convey the respect and interest I have in the
person and in what s/he is saying. How we speak should similarly convey these. I find that nodding instead of saying anything is effective in keeping the participant engaged in discussing a question. In thinking about how to sit, I think back to the Thurgood Marshall image, a man who is comfortable and respectful. The more at ease we can be as researchers the more we might expect our interviewees to be at ease.

The fifth way of “listening” is in what we say. What we say in an interview, the questions we ask, have everything to do with what we will ultimately hear and not hear. Thus the interview protocol, or set of questions for the interview, is a central part of the research. There is no single way to design an interview protocol. It may be that the researcher designs a single protocol and is careful to ask each participant each of the questions on it, no more and no less. This of course ensures data sets that can be compared with one another and perhaps even quantified. Another approach is to work from a protocol that changes over the course of the research in order to align with the various questions that arise along the way. For example, in one study I began with a protocol that focused largely on the history of the school reform at the school I was studying. Over time I began to drop those questions as I thought the picture I had of the history was clear, and I added questions that reflected the themes I thought I was hearing in the earlier interviews. I always kept the number of questions on the protocol between ten and fifteen. I did not necessarily ask each of the questions in each interview. This depended on time and on what kinds of responses the interviewee had to my questions. I often used the interview questions less as guides during the interview than as checklists after the interview to determine what I had and had not heard during the discussion.

A researcher must decide how structured or unstructured his/her interview will be. A structured interview is neater, cleaner—one that gets an answer to each question the researcher intended to ask. An unstructured interview follows the line of thought of the participant. And of course a semi-structured interview is a combination of these two strategies. I have already pointed out an advantage to the structured interview (cross-comparisons). An advantage to the less structured interview is that the researcher may find things s/he could not have anticipated with his/her original set of questions. By remaining open to everything the participant says and how it may bear on the research topic, what Heshusius calls an “allocentric” approach, the researcher is able to discover more than s/he might if limiting his/her window onto the research site (Heshusius, 1994).

No matter the strategy used in follow up questions, two strategies are essential in qualitative research: wait time and making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Both are likely to be old news to even new researchers, but they are slippery strategies to put and keep in practice. Wait time means allowing for silences, pauses in the interviewee’s responses. We should allow for the time to pass so the respondent can compose his/her thoughts. We should watch not to
rephrase the question over and over simply to fill the silence. If the respondent does not understand the question, it is likely s/he will ask us to clarify and if they do not and their response is off base, we can rephrase the question then. Second, clearly it is our goal to “make the strange familiar”—to understand what we did not understand before the study. But what is difficult is making the familiar strange. By “making the familiar strange” I mean not making any assumptions that we do in fact know what the participant is implying or suggesting. For example, we should remind ourselves if we were/are teachers not to assume when we interview teachers that their idea of a “good day” or “bad student” or even a “good grade” is the same as our idea of these things. By asking for participants to explain further the things we may be tempted to assume we know, we can make the familiar strange.

Recognizing Constraints to Listening

Turning from ways of listening during the interview stages of the research process, I would like now to discuss the other stages of the process and ways researchers should be attentive to aspects of listening in each. The title I gave this paper is somewhat misleading. I imply in the title, “I Said, They Said, I Heard” that it is only the interview itself I will address, but from the very start of the research process, we make choices about what we will hear. There are at least seven stages of the research process that inevitably limit what we will hear. While it is inevitable that we will not hear all we could hear, as researchers we must be aware and act accordingly at each stage of the process for the sake of the integrity of our work.

The first stage in the research process is choosing a research question. There are two ways in which the necessary focus on a question can constrain listening. One is more obvious than the other. If I go into a school asking a research question focused solely on one school reform and its outcomes for example, I may not listen for the ways in which other reforms or issues at that school are in fact important to the school. It is not that I can’t understand the reform because of my focus, but my question could limit my understanding the school itself. This is not necessarily a problem, research questions by nature serve to constrain what we look for and hear, but it is important to recognize this limitation—to perhaps remind ourselves that there may be a bigger picture and to determine if it is important to our question or not.

The act of designing a research question can also constrain what we hear. Developing a research question is typically (as Teresa’s paper will report) an intense process. Through the process it is possible, perhaps even likely: (1) to develop hypotheses as to the answer(s) to our questions and; (2) to become vested in those answers. The necessary focus on an overarching research question or set of questions can make the researcher vulnerable to missing important data—listening only to data that supports his/her hypotheses. Again, this is not a necessary result. I only mean to point out possible hazards and to remind us of our responsibilities in doing good qualitative research to listen for data that may not in fact support our hypotheses.
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The second stage of the research process where we limit what we hear is in our site selection. We must make practical decisions based on time (how much time each week is necessary, how many months of data collection are possible) and geography (how far is/are the research site(s) from home). The inevitable decision of where to do the research necessarily limits the types of “answers” we will hear. This is not a problem of course, simply a constraint to keep in mind. Increasing the number of sites we study can help alleviate this issue somewhat, but we probably cannot ever study all sites. It may be sufficient to be clear about the context of the sites we study and how the context affects what we are finding.

Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews are the third and fourth stages of the research process where we as researchers should be cautious of how we do and do not constrain what we hear. By asking the questions we do ask we necessarily do not ask all the other questions we might ask, given infinite time. We must make choices and these choices limit what we hear. Similarly, the way we conduct our interviews (i.e., how much wait time, how we carry ourselves, as I suggest above) can affect what the participant does and does not share with us.

The fifth stage of the research process is selecting whom we will interview. Again, it is inevitable that our decision about whom to interview will limit what we hear since we are not likely to have time to interview all of the teachers, students, administrators, parents and/or other school participants. This is not simply a sample size issue. If I interview sixty percent of the school, I have not necessarily been rigorous in my interviewing, since the remaining forty percent may be the forty percent who disprove my conclusions. Qualitative researchers especially run the risk of “poor sampling” for two reasons: (1) We often rely heavily on key players at our research site (“informants” as Alan Peshkin refers to them) to refer us to others at the site for interviews. Informants may be more likely to refer us to those who will corroborate their ideas and impressions, thus keeping us from hearing alternative perspectives; (2) As researchers we may be passionate about our hypotheses and, subconsciously or not, avoid the interviews that will contradict our own ideas. Choosing whom we listen to is integral to the integrity of our studies.

The sixth stage in the research process in which we must consider our listening is data analysis. Once the data is collected the qualitative researcher must decide what themes are most prominent in answering the research questions. Listening to the data involves attending to all of the perspectives represented by the various interviewees. Listening carefully at this point can simply mean reporting the answers we found to our research questions. It can also mean deciding that the answers we found are not exactly answers to the questions we set out to answer. While it may be a bit scary or frustrating not to end up where we hoped to, by listening to the data we may find we have even richer research than we realized. It is in listening to the data that the qualitative researcher has another opportunity to hear what is happening at the research site, to “get it right.” Often, as Hochschild notes, what are error and noise for quantitative researchers are findings for
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the qualitative researcher (Hochschild, 1981).

Finally, listening plays an important role in the writing of the final product, be it a paper, a report or a dissertation. Sam has already gone into great depth on the topic. I raise it here to suggest that it may be important to “listen” to our work by thinking of how it will read to our various audience members. Consider our colleagues, other qualitative researchers, practitioners, policy makers and, perhaps most importantly, those whom we interviewed whose voices we represent in our work. Listening through their ears for implications we make and the evidence we bring to bear to support our ideas can be an important check on the integrity of our work.

Reflections on Training Qualitative Researchers
I turn next to reflections on particular aspects in my training that provided me with opportunities to “get good” at qualitative research. I expect my reflections echo what the other panelists will say since we all shared the experience of Alan Peshkin’s class. Therefore I list and briefly summarize the benefits of the most useful training activities.

• Small group work – This for me was one of the most useful activities in my training. Peshkin divided us into groups of six or seven and we typically met the last hour or hour and a half of class to discuss each other’s work. By emailing each other our research questions, access letters, interview protocols, excerpts of transcriptions and drafts of our papers, we were able to get feedback on our work at each stage of the process. The perspectives of my group members always opened my eyes to things I had not noticed or necessarily intended: tone, definitions, impressions, etc.

• Pilot study – Actually being in the field was crucial to my understanding how to do qualitative research. So much of it seemed logical when I read about it, “Yes, of course we should get consent from the necessary people before we begin our research.” But who exactly were the “necessary people” and how to contact them and what to say were not things I could have learned by reading about it. I had to learn not to be afraid to call people I did not know and ask them for interviews. Nothing but practice at this could get me past my fear. Similarly, until I had piles of interviews, data analysis sounded simple enough. In practice it was bigger and more complex than I realized and only the hands-on work could have taught me how to find patterns and themes and “discover” my findings.

• Expert advisors and models – Having expert advisors like Peshkin and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (a class I took two years earlier) was important also. They played two important roles. One was to act as guides and post signs (some directional and some warning) along the way. The other was to model good results with their own work in qualitative research.

• Self reflection – Richard has already explained in detail the role of the log. I only want to echo that thinking hard about my practice as I was engaged in each stage of the research process was useful. For me perhaps the most useful part the log played in the pilot study I
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did was to help me realize some biases I had and to rectify them in my future, larger study. For example, through a series of entries in my log over the year I became aware of my unintentional bias against the principals at two of my school sites. I was both intimidated by them and unimpressed with what teachers and parents described about them. This meant I never pursued two key interviews for my study, a mistake I will not repeat, no matter my impression or intimidation.

- Readings on the theory on qualitative research – While this was perhaps the least helpful to my work during the course, it did spark class conversations that were useful and it has been a resource I return to in my practice.

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In conclusion, I do not accomplish all that I suggest “good” qualitative researchers accomplish. I hope that this paper will serve as a good reminder of some of the things that we should strive for in our work and some ideas for what professors of qualitative research might include in designing a course for new researchers, researchers who aim to be good listeners.

References


Appendix

Five Ways of Listening in Interviews

- Pre-Interview Listening
- Listening with the Eyes
- Listening with the Ears
- Listening with the Body
- Listening with Speech

Seven Inevitable Constraints to Listening in the Research Process

- Developing the Research Question
- Selecting a Site
- Writing Interview Protocols
- Conducting Interviews
- Selecting Interviewees
- Analyzing the Data
- Writing

Five Important Aspects of my Qualitative Research Training

- Small Group Work
- Pilot Study
- Expert Advisors and Models
- Self Reflection
- Theory