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# “Placing” Interviews: Location and Scales of Power in Qualitative Research\*

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For qualitative researchers, selecting appropriate sites in which to conduct interviews may seem to be a relatively simple research design issue. In fact it is a complicated decision with wide-reaching implications. In this paper, we argue that the interview site itself embodies and constitutes multiple scales of spatial relations and meaning, which construct the power and positionality of participants in relation to the people, places, and interactions discussed in the interview. We illustrate how observation and analysis of interview sites can offer new insights with respect to research questions, help researchers understand and interpret interview material, and highlight particular ethical considerations that researchers need to address. **Key Words:** qualitative research methodologies, interview sites, research ethics.

## Introduction

“I’m beginning to think there is NO good place for an interview!” This lament began a conversation between the authors about different sites for conducting interviews in qualitative research. Our research projects were different—one studying the meaning and importance of place for collective activism and neighborhood identity, the other exploring the social and political impacts of the use of information technologies by neighborhood organizations—but we found that we grappled with common dilemmas about where to conduct interviews. Was it better to interview a neighborhood organization staff member at her office or at a local restaurant or coffee shop? Should we interview neighborhood residents in their homes or at the neighborhood organization office? If we asked participants to choose where they wanted to be interviewed, what could we learn from their choices? What issues should we consider in evaluating possible interview locations? That is, why might one site be “better” than another, for us as researchers or for participants? Drawing on our training in qualitative and feminist methods, we were prepared to assess these questions about interview locations with respect to two kinds of issues: pragmatic considerations such as choosing places that participants could

find and travel to and that were conducive to conversation; and concerns about power relations between participants and researchers, specifically with respect to the ways that choosing a location such as our university offices might constitute our own position as that of “expert.” However we found minimal guidance in the literature as to the implications of different interview sites for the power and positionality of our research participants, or discussing whether interview sites can be a source of information about the geographies of people and places in the research.

In this paper, we argue that interview sites and situations are inscribed in the social spaces that we as geographers are seeking to learn more about, and thus have an important role to play in qualitative research. We suggest that the interview site itself produces “micro-geographies” of spatial relations and meaning, where multiple scales of social relations intersect in the research interview. Careful observation and analysis of the people, activities, and interactions that constitute these spaces, of the choices that different participants make about interview sites and of participants’ varying positions, roles, and identities in different sites can illustrate the social geographies of a place. These “microgeographies” can offer new insights with respect to research questions, help researchers

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understand and interpret interview materials, and highlight ethical considerations in the research process.

We begin with a brief discussion of scale and how we use it to conceptualize microgeographies of the interview, followed by an assessment of the ways that methodological literatures have examined locational considerations in qualitative research. This literature has offered suggestions as to appropriate interview locations, and has analyzed ways that spatial relations constitute power and position of researcher and participants. In the following section, drawing on examples from our research, we outline some of the potential contributions offered by reflection on interview sites and situations. In our work, such reflection provided crucial contextual details about the social geographies of our field sites by highlighting significant power struggles within these communities, illustrating important community institutions, and informing our understanding of the different roles and identities through which community members identified with and were active in their neighborhoods. These insights were a crucial source of data, one which we argue deserves more direct attention in the design and implementation of qualitative research, particularly in geography. In conclusion, we make specific suggestions as to how researchers might understand the contributions and significance of microgeographies in which they are conducting research.

### **Scale and the Interview Site**

Geographers stress that scale is socially constructed (Smith and Dennis 1987; Herod 1991; Delaney and Leitner 1997). While social or political processes may operate within a particular bounded space, those processes are not fixed at that scale, but are constructed through social relations. Any given location, therefore, is a setting for a variety of social, political, and economic activities and relations that operate at and through multiple scales. For our purposes in this paper, it is crucial to recognize that, far from being removed from social and cultural contexts at other scales, the interview site provides a material space for the enactment and constitution of power relations. By interview site, we mean specifically the location where the interview—an exchange of information between the re-

searcher and research participant—takes place. As such, it represents a microscale of sociospatial relations, manifesting the intersection of broader power dynamics—at multiple scales, such as the neighborhood, city, region, and so on—with the social relations constructed in the interview setting itself. The microgeographies of the interview reflect the relationships of the researcher with the interview participant, the participant with the site, and the site within a broader sociocultural context that affects both researcher and participant.

### **Pragmatism and Power: Past Considerations on Placing Interviews**

Two different literatures on qualitative research methods have shaped our understanding of important issues to be considered or addressed in using interviews as a research technique, particularly with respect to the question of where to conduct interviews. Broadly, we differentiate these two groups as: 1) “instructional” texts, which outline and discuss the mechanics and some of the implications of a range of qualitative research techniques, and 2) critical reflections on methodology found throughout the social sciences, which focus particular attention on the power relations that are reproduced in and affect the research process and its results.

Instructional texts offer advice to researchers on a number of different aspects of conducting interviews, including how to select participants and appropriate ways to contact them, how to compose interview questions, and how to record information (on tape, in notes, etc.). However, many of these texts are silent with respect to the spaces and places where interviews might be carried out (Morgan and Spanish 1984; Merton et al. 1990; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Lofland and Lofland 1995). A few do make explicit suggestions as to appropriate locations for interviews or focus groups, including restaurants, private homes, and public buildings such as schools or community centers (Morton-Williams 1985; Yin 1989; Krueger 1994). Primarily, these texts frame the question of interview locations in terms of convenience for participants and researchers, suggesting that the location should, for instance, be quiet and easy to find. Morton-Williams (1985) alludes to the importance of considering relationships

and interactions in particular places—noting that participants might feel uncomfortable speaking freely about some issues in places where other people are present and might overhear the conversation. For the most part, however, these texts either ignore the power dynamics constituted by the interactions among interview participants in particular interview sites or assume that power is somehow absent in certain locations, as in Krueger’s (1994) advice that researchers should seek a “neutral” place to conduct interviews. By glossing over issues of power and place, the instructional texts provide minimal guidance for understanding the significance of the social and political dynamics of different spaces for interviews, research data, and analysis.

Critical reflections on methodology in the social sciences, particularly those drawing on feminist scholarship, offer a much more detailed conceptualization of power and place in research processes. A number of feminist ethnographers offer insightful discussions of power relations in the spaces and places where research is carried out (Kondo 1990; Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1993; Behar and Gordon 1995). These scholars examine different constructions of power—inequalities between the so-called first and third worlds, as well as power hierarchies rooted in gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other dimensions of social differentiation. Their primary arguments are that researchers must examine how these power relations are manifest in the particular cultures and places where research is conducted, how they shape relationships between researchers and participants, and how they shape the ethics and politics of knowledge construction in fieldwork.

The bulk of this literature focuses on participant observation, but some researchers have written specifically about interviews and the power relations of the spaces in which they are conducted. For instance, Berik (1996) shows how gender relations affected the spaces in which she could conduct interviews and shaped her interactions with participants in these interviews. As a woman doing research in rural Turkey, she found that the cultural norms defining spaces in which men and women could interact presented particular difficulties for her attempts to interview men. Simultaneously, these spatial divisions had the advantage of enabling her to interview women without inter-

ruption from men, because men could not enter certain spaces. In her research, Berik navigated these spatial divisions strategically, to foster open conversations with women participating in her research.

Although the feminist ethnographers described above clearly demonstrate that there are spatial and geographical dimensions to the power relations they discuss, this point is not always explicitly examined. A number of geographers have entered these discussions with particular attention to the ways in which power relations in research are spatially constituted, at multiple scales (Gilbert 1994; Katz 1994; Nast 1994; Nagar 1997). There is a great deal of variation with respect to how these scholars examined the methodological implications of such spatially constituted power differences, but their common point is that social divisions have spatial expressions with practical and ethical implications for researchers.

At the global scale, there are cultural expectations and international economic hegemonies which situate power between a “first world” researcher and “third world” interview participants (Moss 1995; Lal 1996; Wolf 1996; Nagar 1997). Yet Katz (1994) and Gilbert (1994) argue that the inequalities that accompany a “first world” researcher who conducts work in the “third world” are not necessarily resolved by conducting research in one’s own country or city of residence. They suggest that race, class, family status, ethnicity, and other social identities are important sources of differential power that shape relationships between researchers and participants, even if they share similar national or local identities.

A number of geographers have examined ways in which power relations between researchers and participants are shaped by the locations in which interviews or focus groups are carried out. In particular, these discussions focus on the implications of conducting interviews or focus groups in private homes. Both Longhurst (1996) and Goss and Leinbach (1996) write about focus groups that were conducted in the researchers’ homes, a choice made by the researchers to try to foster an atmosphere conducive to sharing personal information, and to create a more reciprocal relationship with research participants. Oberhauser (1997) and Falconer-Al Hindi (1997) argue that interviews conducted in participants’ homes

have important potential as a strategy for disrupting power hierarchies between researchers and participants. In none of these cases do the authors suggest that their locational choices erase power differences. Rather, they seek to illustrate how power relations between the researcher and interview participants are constituted by the locations in which research is conducted. Nagar (1997) expands this consideration of the locations of interviews to other spaces besides homes. She examines multiple spaces in which the interviews and conversations of her research took place—in homes, neighborhood streets, and various public institutions—and discusses the ways that race, gender, class, and caste expectations and hierarchies of these spaces shaped her interactions and relationships with participants. Similarly, McDowell (1998) examines the ways in which her interviews with bank employees were affected by the location of the interviews at their workplaces. She suggests that some participants had concerns about confidentiality in the interview site and the appropriateness of engaging in an interview at work, and also that some participants seemed reluctant to talk about their home lives in an interview conducted at their workplaces.

The key understanding from the critical methodological literature is that social interactions have inherent power dynamics that operate or are simultaneously manifest at different spatial scales. However, these discussions focused primarily on the identity and positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the participants. With the exception of McDowell's (1998) workplace interviews, there is very little discussion of how interview participants relate to the space of the interview and are situated within the multifaceted power dynamics of a particular site. Thus, while the critical methodological literature explicitly recognizes power and positionality as crucial elements of research interactions to be examined, it has paid less attention to the ways that research sites—the microgeographies of the interview—can be interrogated to illuminate substantive research material about the power relations and social identities of the people participating in these interviews.<sup>1</sup>

We suggest that these microgeographies provide a window on salient power structures operating in a particular community, among particular social actors, at a variety of social

scales. That is, the very social relations that are the subject of research may be highlighted in microgeographies where the research is carried out. In the following section, we offer examples from our research of ways that microgeographies of interview locations can be “read” for important insights into social geographies of places being studied, and also for their influence on identities and positions of research participants. In many instances, interview locations are fixed or severely constrained (cf. Berik 1996; Lal 1996), but in situations where researcher or participant has greater flexibility or choice, it is important to reflect upon these choices in terms of what they can tell us about the community, individuals, or places involved in the research, as well as how they may impact the interview experience and material collected. In interrogating interview sites in this manner, we are guided by a question that Kondo uses to frame her ethnographic research: “How did the people I knew craft themselves and their lives within shifting fields of power and meaning . . . ?” (1990, 10). That is, in our analysis of interview sites, we examine how participants situate themselves and their lives within the shifting fields of power and meaning that constitute the spaces and places in which the interview takes place.

### **Microgeographies of Interview Locations**

We explore here two important contributions that an examination of microgeographies of interview locations can make to research. First, microgeographies can offer a rich source of data about social geographies of the research situation and enable researchers to enrich their understanding of explanations offered by participants. Researchers may observe artifacts such as decorations or posters in a person's home or office that reveal certain priorities or commitments, or observe interactions with other people that are relevant to understanding a participant's experiences in a particular place. Second, microgeographies of interview locations situate a participant with respect to other actors and to his or her own multiple identities and roles, affecting information that is communicated in the interview as well as power dynamics of the interview itself. For instance, in one location a participant may assert one identity,

such as that of political official, and in another location answer interview questions from a different perspective, such as that of concerned parent.

At the most basic level, interview locations provide an important opportunity for researchers to make observations that generate richer and more detailed information than can be gleaned from the interview content alone. These observations can both generate new information and give the researcher a stronger understanding of issues explicitly discussed in the interview. For example,<sup>2</sup> in an interview conducted in a participant's home, Denise<sup>3</sup> and I engaged in a conversation about neighborhood activism and organizing at her kitchen table. Before the interview began, I was introduced to her daughter and granddaughter, who came to my mind later in the interview, when Denise described her concerns about neighborhood crime in terms of the safety of children on a block where drug dealers were active and sometimes violent. She pointed out the house directly across the street where drug dealers had lived the year before. Meeting some of Denise's family members, and seeing the close proximity of the problems she sought to address, helped me to better understand the immediacy of her activism. In many ways, being involved in her local block club was a necessity for Denise, to challenge the eroding safety on her street. The setting of her home made clear to me the long-standing connections that Denise has in and to the local place. Her husband worked just down the street, at a bar where they could meet with other neighbors. She was employed by the local school district, but her knowledge of and commitment to the school system was clearly connected to her own childhood, as well as the schooling of members of her family. Being able to sit in Denise's house, and go outside to look at the former drug house—now home to a friendly, law-abiding neighbor—and the bar where her husband worked, made the words Denise had spoken into my tape recorder come alive. The rootedness of this family in their neighborhood, an essential detail in explaining Denise's activism, was conveyed as much by the location of the interview as by the taperecorded words of the interview itself.

Not only is it useful to observe the microgeographies of a single interview as an opportunity to learn more about a particular participant or

place, but analysis of the microgeographies of a number of interviews can also offer important opportunities to learn about the social geographies of a community. The sites available for interviews—as identified by both the researcher and participants—and the choices that a group of participants make about where they want to be interviewed may offer useful clues about important community institutions, highlight a lack of such institutions, and provide greater understandings of social and spatial divisions in a community.

In one of our research projects, for instance, participants chose a number of different locations within the neighborhood for interviews, indicating by their choices some of the key institutions around which the neighborhood's activities and the interactions of residents are centered—a park building, a coffee shop that was formerly a cooperative grocery, the neighborhood association office, and a local restaurant. Further, in many interviews, participants offered unprompted and enlightening explanations of the importance of these spaces to the neighborhood. The grocery-turned-coffee shop, for instance, had been a vacant or nuisance property for many years, and as both a coop and a coffee shop, served as a gathering place for residents. Several participants talked about the site as tangible evidence of their collective capacity to make changes in their community and as a reason to continue their hard work. Other participants talked about a difficult transition period when the coop shut down, explaining that this transition was part of a larger struggle in the neighborhood about the direction and priorities of collective community efforts. These accounts illustrate how participants use various locations to construct their communities, and show that by situating the interview in important community sites, researchers and participants (re)construct essential community histories and values through the social interaction of the interview. In this instance, information gathered through attention to the microgeographies of interview locations was especially valuable because such histories were sparsely recorded or totally absent in other sources of historical information, such as neighborhood newspapers, organization newsletters, and meeting minutes. Interrogation of microgeographies of interview locations is, therefore, an important opportunity for triangulation of evidence

and overlapping methods, which are fundamental strategies that qualitative researchers use to build rigorous explanations and cases (Denzin 1989).

In another neighborhood, common community spaces for interview conversations were much less apparent. When I offered to meet participants at a coffee shop or restaurant, an uncomfortable silence usually followed. I ran over the options in my own mind: numerous ethnic restaurants, none of which I knew especially well, and a strip of fast food restaurants, identical to their counterparts in other towns and neighborhoods. A few restaurants and a diner which I knew had been focal meeting places in the community were now defunct. In the end, most participants offered their own homes as the site for an interview (a choice which, as discussed above, may highlight the connections individuals make between neighborhood activism and their homes). Occasionally, participants suggested one of four neighborhood organization offices, a choice which generally indicated an allegiance by that individual to one organization more than the other three. Certainly the choice of a neighborhood organization's offices for an interview illustrated the salience of the organizations for these residents. Yet it was especially telling in these interactions that the many small independently and family-run ethnic restaurants were not viewed by the participants as suitable interview sites. Most of the restaurants were run by Asian immigrants, while most, though not all, of the neighborhood activists were white. The absence of any single public location outside of an organizational office to serve as a focal meeting place for any of the main organizers and organization members demonstrated a lack of a community gathering place, and was perhaps illustrative of a lack of cohesion among neighborhood residents overall.

In similar fashion, the choices that participants in the other, more cohesive neighborhood in the study made about where they wished to be interviewed indicated relationships and divisions in that community, information that was invaluable to my larger research questions. After completing a number of interviews with residents about their activities in their neighborhood organization and the changes occurring in that organization with the rising use of information technologies, I noticed a pattern

beginning to emerge with respect to where participants wanted to be interviewed. Older, working-class homeowners mostly wanted to be interviewed at a neighborhood restaurant, while younger middle-class homeowners who had more recently moved to the neighborhood predominately chose a recently opened coffee shop for their interviews. This division of activity spaces suggested there might be divisions in the community along lines of class, age, and length of residence, and that such power relations operate and are reconstructed in various locations in the neighborhood. This observation turned out to be central to my research questions regarding the impacts of information technologies on power struggles in the neighborhood organization. Specifically, the older residents drew on their longterm experiences in the neighborhood as their claim to authority in neighborhood decisionmaking. The newer residents discounted such experiential knowledge as biased and uninformed, advocating instead the use of GIS-based maps and analysis of large governmental datasets as more authoritative and legitimate sources of information. Thus, close attention to the choices made by participants about interview locations revealed information about the social geographies of the neighborhood that in turn were central to understanding the community's struggles over authority and the legitimacy of different kinds of knowledge claims for neighborhood decisionmaking.

In addition to providing evidence about social geographies being investigated in research, microgeographies of interview locations are a part of the many ways that participants' roles, identities, and power are constituted in the interview experience. Participants may consciously or unconsciously position themselves differently with respect to the multiple roles and identities that structure their experience of different places. These explicit and implicit presentations of self have important implications for interpreting interview material, as participants might offer different perspectives on questions being asked, depending on where the interview is conducted. Further, the microgeographies of locations construct participants' power and expertise, meaning that different locations might situate participants differently in terms of their power in the research process and their sense of the contribution they might make to questions being asked.

In interviewing neighborhood organization staff and neighborhood residents about their experiences, actions, and perceptions of the neighborhood, we found that they offered strikingly different kinds of answers, depending on where the interview was conducted. When organization directors and staff members were interviewed at their offices, they tended to offer explanations and answers based primarily on the organizations' priorities and viewpoints. They answered questions about their neighborhood activism primarily with regard to their organizational roles and activities as paid staff members. In contrast, when we interviewed organization directors and other staff members in their homes or in public places outside of their offices, they talked more freely about their opinions outside of the organizational goals or missions, and offered examples drawn from experiences of the neighborhood through other identities besides that of organizational leaders. In addition to talking about their activities with the neighborhood organization, staff members who lived in the neighborhood talked about volunteer work at the local school, relationships with nearby neighbors, activities at a community garden, or work with their block clubs. Rather than limiting their answers strictly to one aspect of their identities in the neighborhood, that of staff members, they reflected on questions through multiple roles shaping their experiences. Since we did not interview the same individuals in different locations, we cannot definitively attribute these differences in interview material only to location. It could certainly be the case that differences in participants' personalities or some aspect of our own relationships with these individuals led them to offer different kinds of answers to our interview questions. However, the commonalities between our separate interview experiences lead us to believe that the site of an interview does play an important role in the way that interviewees position themselves with respect to questions being asked. Each location constructs or represents particular microgeographies of sociospatial relations, such that, in different locations, participants are situated differently with respect to identities and roles that structure their experiences and actions. Consequently, interview participants may offer different kinds of information, depending on where they are interviewed.

The ways that locations can situate participants also has implications for the power relations of our interview experiences. Different sites may serve to define a participant as having valuable knowledge to contribute, or, conversely, can constitute the researcher as holding expert knowledge. For instance, organizational directors who wanted to be interviewed in their offices emphasized their position as directors, seemingly to assert their expertise about the neighborhood and authority in the interview experience. This assertion of authority may be rooted in a concern expressed by organization staff in both neighborhoods that outside “experts” such as university researchers tended to write negative or critical accounts of their neighborhoods or organizations. Similarly, in interviewing resident volunteers at organizational offices, we found that they were much more likely to present themselves as knowledgeable participants with valuable information to contribute. In other locations, such as their homes or neighborhood institutions, they expressed considerably more anxiety during the interview about whether or not they could make a contribution or were giving us the “right” answers. We argue that this difference is rooted in the microgeographies upon which participants draw in constructing their identities in particular places. Many residents seemed to consider perspectives drawn from their “official” work with the neighborhood association to be more legitimate sources of information and expertise than their experiences of simply living in the neighborhood. Interviewing in the neighborhood association office highlighted this work with the neighborhood, allowing participants to constitute themselves as having knowledge and expertise about the neighborhood.

The microgeographies of a single site may have contradictory implications, immeasurably complicating the researcher's tasks. In the examples above, interviewing volunteers at the neighborhood association office was advantageous when it empowered people to constitute themselves as knowledgeable participants. However, some of the research questions dealt with the neighborhood or neighborhood organization's conflicts and struggles, and residents' feelings about the organizations' actions and agenda. Ethically, this interview content made the neighborhood office a less than ideal location. Residents and staff might be legitimately

concerned about expressing dissenting or negative opinions in the office. Directors and other staff might not want to express their concerns about the neighborhood in the organization office, where their role is primarily to act as an advocate of the neighborhood. In the end, there were no “right” answers to these dilemmas. For the most part, we both tried to limit office interviews to those participants who seemed to feel most anxious about their ability to contribute information useful to our research and expressed the strongest desire to meet us at the neighborhood office.

### Implications and Conclusion

Interpreting and understanding the significance of different interview sites is important throughout the research process as part of creating a feasible and effective research plan, understanding power relations between researcher and research subjects, addressing ethical considerations and dilemmas that may arise, and gaining insights into fundamental questions of the research. We suggest several approaches to incorporating these issues into research projects involving interviews. We do not intend this to be an exhaustive set of recommendations, but rather a useful starting point for reflection.

As Oberhauser (1997) has illustrated, we stress that the interview is not just an opportunity to gather information by asking questions and engaging in conversation, but is also an opportunity for participant observation. Specifically, during an interview it is important to consider the physical attributes of the site and to observe the people who are present and their interactions with each other and with the interview participant. Although the interview site may not be part of the primary avenue of inquiry in the research, observing dynamics in that place, and paying attention to what the participant says about the place, may generate useful research material.

There are many other ways that interview locations provide insights into a research project. Interview sites may be negotiated, restricted, or chosen by researchers, participants, and other actors who are part of or affect the research. Participants who are given a choice about where they will be interviewed may feel more empowered in their interaction with the researcher, and the researcher has an opportu-

nity to examine participants' choices for clues about the social geographies of the places where research is being carried out. However, it is important to talk with participants about the content of the interview, so that they may choose a place where they will feel comfortable to speak freely. On the other hand, if the researcher must choose an interview location—either because the interview participant is reluctant to suggest places or because of other constraints—it may be fruitful to suggest several different potential sites. In order to be ready to generate ideas about possible locations, it is important to learn as much as possible about microgeographies of the potential sites within the community, and about the broader social geographies of the community and interview participants. For example, what is the role of a particular site in the community? Who will be there? How will participants' and researchers' roles, identities, and positions be constructed in a particular place?

Reflection on the microgeographies of interviews is a process that starts before the actual interviewing begins, and continues throughout the research and analysis. Understanding the ethical implications and analytical significance of interview sites may help researchers to navigate the process of selecting and analyzing interview sites, while they try to balance the needs of research with the interests of participants. Finally, considerations of the implications of interview locations can be situated as part of the basic motivating questions that drive us as geographers; that is, how space matters and affects us. Explicit analysis of the ways in which power and positionality are constituted and evident in the places where we conduct interviews is yet another way to interrogate the sociospatial relations that we seek to understand in our research. ■

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> One important exception is Oberhauser's (1997) discussion of home as a field site, in which she mentions that conducting interviews in participants' homes enabled her to observe women navigating the multiple demands of homeworking, the primary inquiry of her research.

<sup>2</sup> In describing specific examples from our different research projects, we use “I” to refer to our individual research experiences, and “we” in describing experiences common to both our projects or in analyzing the significance of these experiences.

<sup>3</sup> “Denise” is a pseudonym.

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