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# (De)Constructing the Interview: A Critique of the Participatory Method

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## **(De)Constructing the Interview: A Critique of the Participatory Model**

**Lenore Lyons and Janine Chipperfield**

Feminism has a rich tradition of using interviews as a means of gathering data on the lives and experiences of women. While it would be misleading to suggest that all feminist researchers adhere to the same set of methodological principles in their work, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish an epistemological concern among feminist interviewers to avoid the methods associated with “male-centred science”. This concern has given rise to a methodological strategy which Pamela Cotterill (1992) terms the “participatory model”. By this she means a model that ‘aims to produce non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to overcome the separation between the researcher and researched’ (Cotterill, 1992, p.594). Foremost among the strategies employed to break down power differentials between interviewer and interviewee has been the recommendation to build rapport with respondents.

The participatory model has not been used uncritically. Many feminist researchers have begun to revise and adapt the model to changing research circumstances (see Stacey, 1988; Ribbens, 1989; Cotterill, 1992). The assumption that women, because of shared gender, occupy similarly marginalised positions or are capable of empathising across class or ‘race’ barriers has been challenged by these accounts. What remains consistent in these discussions, however, is a continued commitment to building rapport as a means to overcome difference. Such a position asserts that changes or modifications to

the model, in combination with a continued feminist commitment to non-objective, non-hierarchical interview relationships, will make the interview a more effective feminist research tool. According to Pamela Cotterill (1992), while the participatory model may be problematic it is better than the male-centred alternative.

But, is it necessary to “connect” with the interview subject (where “connect” may refer to a continuum of experiences including “friendly stranger” to close intimate) in order to achieve a successful research outcome? Feminist researchers have become increasingly more critical of the centrality accorded to rapport in discussions of feminist interviewing techniques (see Reinharz, 1993; Bloom, 1997; Puwar, 1997). Our own experiences in employing the participatory model show that the continued centring of rapport as a key interview strategy ignores interviewee subjectivity and fails to recognise the essentially “constructed” nature of the interview moment. We argue that the focus on rapport overlooks the interviewee’s own perceptions of what an interview is and thus sidesteps issues of interviewee agency and control. We believe that greater attention needs to be paid to what actually happens in an interview, including the question of who exerts power and how. Such an analysis will show not only that the participatory model relies on a fixed understanding of power, but that an insistence on rapport sometimes works to undermine research outcomes.

Our concern to more closely examine feminist research methods has been motivated by our separate struggles to effectively use interviews as a means of gathering data on the lives and experiences of women as subjects of feminist research. Our decision to use interviews was motivated by a belief that qualitative research techniques allow the respondents greater control over and more opportunity to fully articulate their life experiences (Reinharz, 1992, p.18). At the same time, however, we recognised that any discussion of women’s lived experience could never be separated from the complex web of social relations in which researcher/researched were positioned, and that our snapshots of “women” would always be partial. Our research projects examine the

complex interplay between structures, cultures and women's agency as well as differences and commonalities in women's engagement in various organisational cultures. Lenore's research focuses on the way in which women who belong to the Singaporean feminist organisation, AWARE, negotiate the complex meanings of "feminism" in their lives. She has conducted interviews with 35 members of AWARE in order to explore their understandings of the organisation, their role within it, their relationships with other women (both in and outside the organisation), and their definitions of feminism. Janine's research interest is in understanding differences in women academics' experiences of, and engagement with, academic cultures in order to better inform workplace policies written for women. She has conducted interviews with 77 women academics.

## **The Participatory Model**

Most accounts of feminist interviewing begin with Ann Oakley's (1981a) *Housewife*. Her discussion of power-neutral interview environments has become the mainstay of many feminist interview strategies. Oakley advocated intimacy, self-disclosure and "believing the interviewee" in order to develop a feminist ethics of commitment and egalitarianism (Reinharz, 1992, p.27). A number of tools are available to the feminist interviewer in the task of establishing rapport: sharing experiences and giving advice; revealing personal details; stating one's research goals; opening up spaces for reflection and interpretation; providing the opportunity for long term contact through the creation of friendships; and establishing a conversation in a comfortable environment. A successful research outcome is attributed to the interviewer's ability to set the interviewee at ease and "connect". The "interview" is understood as a conversation between two individuals in which the interviewer controls the setting and other variables in order that the interviewee will, by acting naturally, give true pictures of her thoughts and actions. Oakley (1981b) and others (see Finch, 1984; Graham, 1984;

Smith, 1996) argue that women's shared experiences of oppression form the basis for a non-hierarchical interview situation. This view is supported by women who have undertaken cross-gender interviews which show that women interviewers find it easier to establish rapport with women because of their similarly marginalised positions, as *women* (see McKee and O'Brien, 1983; Scott, 1985). Men tend to dominate in interviews or to make implied or overt sexual advances (see Armstrong, 1995).

Friendship is often seen as the epitome of good interview practice (see Oakley, 1981b; Reinharz, 1992). Pamela Cotterill argues that the notion of long-term friendship is a fallacy because the interviewer has no investment in the relationship after the research is completed. She suggests that the status of "friendly stranger" is more appropriate because the interviewer does not exercise social control over the interviewee and the relationship will end (1992, p.596). We agree with Cotterill that not every woman needs a "sympathetic listener" and that for some, friendship is not a necessary pre-requisite for talking about intimate or difficult subjects. While some women may ultimately perceive the researcher as a friend, others 'prefer a different kind of relationship' (Cotterill, 1992, p.597). Indeed it is precisely because the interviewer is a "friendly stranger" who the interviewee does not know and will not see again that they are able to open up about difficult or even taboo subjects. This tendency may be even stronger in situations where the interviewer is *not* physically present (eg. telephone interviewing) and adopts the distancing strategy of the "stranger on the train" - 'the faceless voice who is not and will not be part of everyday life, and thus to whom much can be revealed' (see Bird, 1995, p.25).

Early accounts of the "feminist interview" assumed that within the interview dyad it is the interviewer who is the more powerful. The aim of building rapport is thus to break down power differences and establish non-hierarchical, more equal interview relationships. While power differences are not expected to disappear under the participatory model they are expected to be diminished. Ultimately, however, it is the

interviewer who is left with the power to “write-up” the interviewee’s life story (Cotterill, 1992, p.605). More recently, attention has focused on the ways in which differences *between* women may impinge upon the interview outcome. These studies show not only that women do not share the same experiences and interests, but that the structural inequalities that divide women can act as powerful barriers in the interviewer’s attempts to establish rapport (Stacey, 1988; Ribbens, 1989). Such barriers may include ‘race’ and ethnicity (see Reissman, 1987; Edwards, 1990, 1993; Bhopal, 1995), class (Game, 1989; Reay, 1995, 1996), sexuality (England, 1994), and age and status (Cotterill, 1992; Puwar, 1997). Rosalind Edwards’ experience as a white woman interviewing black women shows that trust was achieved not on the basis of sex but an acknowledgment of different structural positions as a result of race and hence a lack of shared assumptions. In this situation, rapport is achieved in a way ‘required *by the women*’ (Edwards, 1990, p.489, emphasis in original). It is important to note, however, that even if rapport is achieved in such circumstances, it does not ensure cross-cultural understanding (see Reissman, 1987). Despite such difficulties, many writers assert that if the feminist interviewer is aware of these differences and remains committed to establishing a power-neutral research environment, the interview will be successful. What remains consistent in these discussions is a continued commitment to the participatory model of interviewing. As Pamela Cotterill (1992, p.600, emphasis added) states, ‘*it is always necessary to establish rapport even though efforts are sometimes unsuccessful and have consequences for the research*’.

Our own experiences of conducting interviews, however, question the centrality of rapport as a feminist interviewing technique. In our attempts to utilise the many and varied ‘tools’ available to establish rapport we experienced numerous problems. Simply admonishing the interviewer to interject with her own life story or offer advice fails to consider interviewee expectations of “doing an interview”, in particular their understanding of “interview” versus “conversation”. We found that interviewees expect to be asked questions, they acknowledge the presence of a tape recorder as a “natural”

prop, and can thus be confused by interviewer actions to obscure or hide these “truths”. We both found that attempting to share our own experiences with the respondents was unsuccessful. Interviewees often resented what they saw as unsolicited interjections such as ‘That happened to me to’ or ‘I feel the same way’. This resentment was manifested in puzzlement, impatience or even mild anger (see Ribbens, 1989; Cotterill, 1992; Jacka, 1994; Puwar, 1997).

In attempting to create a comfortable interview environment, the feminist researcher is encouraged to outline the rules of interviewing to her respondent. This includes stating one’s research goals; inviting the interviewee to turn off the tape or refuse to answer questions as she sees fit; encouraging the interviewee to ask questions; and assuring the interviewee of confidentiality. We acknowledge that our own experiences underwrite and inform our research interests and thus we affect data collection just as much as the interviewee does. We do not come to an interview as disembodied, objective researchers intent on producing the “truth” of these women’s lives, but as women “with legs”, with experiences of our own, and with a research agenda, all of which shape the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. For this reason questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How will I ‘speak’ her?’ are equally as important as the question ‘Who is she?’ (Probyn, 1993). To our surprise, we both found that there was greater interest in the way in which the information would later be dealt with - how we planned to “speak them”, to whom and for what purpose - than in us or our research “problems”. Despite a strong desire on our part to avoid the respondents seeing us as “objective” researchers with perhaps hidden agendas, it seemed that the women were disinterested in our attempts to locate ourselves and our research interests - even those who acknowledged being influenced by feminist theory in their academic work! We believe that in part this response reflects these women’s higher social status. Many of the women were academics who may have felt that they “understood” the nature of social research and did not need to be informed about its conduct. Others may simply have taken their “right” to interject or refuse to answer questions as a given. The lack of interest in our

projects is also a reflection of class and educational backgrounds. While the women were flattered by our attention, their disinterest in our research objectives may be a sign that they felt sufficiently empowered not to fear the purposes to which our research would be put.

It is often assumed that one of the main advantages of the interview is that it allows the respondent to explore issues of sensitivity in a comfortable environment. In contrast, our experience has been that it is extremely difficult to explore sensitive topics such as sexuality during an interview - unless the interviewee is particularly keen to tell her story from this position. These difficulties are still present when the interviewer utilises a more “conversational” model of interviewing. The assumption that “conversation” is a more appropriate interview technique continues to harbour essentialist notions of female subjectivity by asserting that women share a common narrative pattern - “women’s talk” or gossip (see DeVault, 1990). It also suggests that power differentials can be effectively broken down and that “woman talk” is a mutually satisfying, comfortable and warm activity. It fails to consider that such talk could be malicious, jealous or hostile. It also fails to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and narrative styles *between* women. Often, when differences between women are “uncovered”, they are attributed to the adoption of masculinist characteristics by the interviewee. This is apparent in Anne Game’s (1989) assertion that interview schemata, presumably because of their question and answer rather than wandering gossip format, are masculinist. Therefore, women who can play the game and use the interview effectively, in this case by wresting control of it from the interviewer, are masculinist. It is also present in the work of Kristina Minister (1991, p.37, emphasis added) who states that,

feminist interviewers will expect the narrator’s stories and descriptions will exhibit an unfinished or incomplete quality and will not conform to the plot and action structures of publicly performed pieces. Again, if well-polished stories are offered - and most persons have ready a few rehearsed self-narratives - they will be welcome, but feminist interviewers know that these stories are *typical of men*. A feminist oral history frame will nurture and assist in the interpretation of stories by women for women.



These positions ignore the fact that there may be a range of narrative styles within any one culture - it is mistaken to assume that similarities between men and women reflect women taking on masculine styles of speaking. By asserting “conversation” as the ideal interview narrative style, the participatory model relies on an essentialist understanding of “women’s talk” that overlooks diversity and ignores the fact that interview narratives are “constructed” through a process of collaboration (Reissman, 1987).

“Normal” rules of conversation consider “conversation” with an “acquaintance” an inappropriate forum for the discussion of sexuality. Actively promoting a conversational style interview by taking on the role of “friendly stranger” reinforces such communication patterns and hence interviewee trepidation to raise such issues. Some women may be encouraged by the formality of an objective interview relationship to reveal personal details. Not only should interviewee expectations be considered, but also the position of the interviewer. We often found ourselves in situations where we did not want to pry (thus reinforcing our own understanding of conversation with friendly strangers). While we both felt that sexuality was an integral part of our research concerns we felt totally inadequate about pursuing topics that are commonly regarded as taboo. At the same time, we are concerned that our inability to examine issues of sexuality may result in inaccurate accounts of the lives of lesbian women. In avoiding such issues under the guise of “taboo” are we merely perpetuating the heterosexual tendency to take “our” experiences as the centre? It may be that by adopting the position of disinterested and “distanced” interviewer (utilising a journalistic role model) we may have felt less uneasy about asking such “personal” questions.

Reflecting on our own difficulties in implementing the participatory model, we began to ask whether the building of rapport was simply a form of manipulation aimed at making the researcher “feel good”? (see Measor, 1988; Jacka, 1994). Could the process of establishing rapport work against the goal of achieving more equal (and hence ethical)

research outcomes by imposing our own view of the interview on our respondents? We agree with Elspeth Probyn (1993, p.75) that moving out from behind the veil of objectivity does not necessarily 'enhance the other's position'. Indeed, it often works to reassert 'the ontological supremacy' of the researcher's self (Probyn, 1993, p.76). As Sondra Hale (1991, p.133) comments:

When there are class differences and/or racial differences, or when the interviewer represents the colonizer and the narrator the colonized, it is not appropriate for the interviewer/biographer to want 'equal time', or expect to be equally affirmed. Is it logical for me, a white Western feminist interviewing a Sudanese, to expect to be addressed as I see myself, when I may represent so many other categories to her?

By insisting that the interviewee listen to our stories we may also ignore her expectations and desired interview outcomes. These may range from "telling my story" to using the interview as emotional therapy. As others have argued, the opportunity for exploitation is most acute when the interviewer has built a close relationship with the respondent precisely because it does allow for greater self-disclosure and intimacy and perhaps raised expectations and dependency (Stacey, 1988; Ribbens, 1989; Patai, 1991). While recognising the need to address interviewee agendas and their use of interview as therapy, we also felt vulnerable to painful personal disclosures (see Cotterill, 1992).

Our problems with applying the participatory model of interviewing suggested to us that rather than accepting the principle of rapport as "flawed but necessary", that we needed to re-examine the basis premises on which the model was built. We argue that the model assumes that the interview is built on an unequal power relationship, and that the interviewee takes up a passive position in the interview relationship. The participatory model, in calling for the interviewer to minimise the intrusiveness of the interview by setting up a cosy, comfortable environment characterised by friendly conversation, is thus premised on a fixed and static model of power relations that ignores the fluidity of power and the myriad of ways in which the interviewee exerts control over the research outcome. Such an analysis overlooks the fact that women who are subjects of research

have clearly developed understandings of what the interview is, and that these understandings shape not only what she says but how she presents herself.

## **Power Relations in the Interview**

Bowes and Domokos (1996, p.54) argue that we need to pay greater attention to the question of power in the research process:

If the interview is understood as a social process, it is clear that, depending on the type of relationship set up, interviewees will respond in ways they consider socially appropriate. ... This is not a purely personal matter, as 'building rapport' might be, but operates within a broader, social structural context; hence the relevance of issues of power.

One of the easiest ways for the interviewee to exert control over the interview is by withholding information (Olson and Shopes, 1991, p.196; Cotterill, 1992, p.599) or by hiding their "true feelings" through impression management (Bowes and Domokos, 1996, p.54). Other writers have reflected on the ability of respondents to control where, when and *if* the interview is to be conducted (see Kauffman, 1992; Bergen, 1993; Dyck et al., 1995; Reay, 1995). Bette Kauffman (1992, p.195) says that she 'learned to understand negotiations over the interview as women artists telling me that my methodology did not fit their experience, indeed, pointing out the presumptuousness of my attempt to set the conditions of our interaction'.

We interviewed well-educated, intelligent women, many of whom had an academic background; all of Janine's interviewees were themselves researchers and thus familiar with methodological issues. Consequently, issues of academic "mystique" surrounding us as "researchers" were absent. We also found ourselves on the lower ends of class, status, age and educational hierarchies. We were both doctoral students at the time of interviewing and came from class backgrounds in which we were both 'first generation' university graduates. As novices we often felt "out of place" and believed that our

inexperience clearly marked us apart from “real researchers”. In situations where age placed us on the higher end of a social hierarchy, our positions were often negated by other markers of social status – particularly class and occupation. The women we interviewed were self-assured and often “took control” of the interview - directing the types of questions and the ground covered. They were not afraid to ignore our requests for information or to interpret their own behaviour for us, or even to suggest how the interview material gathered might be analysed.

Janine found herself interviewing women in their own offices because of her own lack of office space and out of a desire to reduce any inconvenience to already time-pressured women. This meant that she was never in control of the seating, lighting or outside interruptions. More often than not, the interview subject sat higher than she did, sideways at her desk and looking into the room while Janine sat in a lower chair, off to the side, often squinting against the glare of a window. It was a rare interview which passed without an outside interruption, which some women attended to at length. The length of her interviews thus varied considerably. Some women forgot about their appointment or were too busy and gave her 15 minutes, which they then grudgingly extended as they determined they had more to add. She was often at the mercy of the interviewee in terms of how the interview would be conducted and for how long. In one quickly curtailed 15 minute interview, one high status academic even referred Janine to a published biography rather than answer questions related to her background. Janine saw much of this as a definite power play - a desire to control the interview and the data gathered. What it meant in terms of research outcomes was that her data was often “superficial” and full of “gaps”.<sup>1</sup> This has had important implications for how Janine “writes up” the research. These absences and gaps have in themselves become sources of data about women’s places in academic cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> N. Puwar (1997) experienced many of the same controlling mechanisms in her interviews with women Members of Parliament.

These experiences show that descriptions of power relations based on fixed notions of ‘studying-up’/‘studying-down’ and ‘speaking’/‘writing’ need to be replaced with more fluid and shifting accounts of how power operates. This is not to suggest, however, that our understandings of power are simply reversed - ie. that the interview respondent is always more powerful than the interviewer. Or, that because she “got something out of it” that inequalities within the interview are neutralised (Patai, 1991, p.149). Such an account brushes over the very real power differentials that often exist between researcher and researched. It also ignores the often damaging effects that interviews can have on subjects (see Bergen, 1993; Edwards, 1993; Armstrong, 1995). The call to present the self in picture-cut-out style through the creation of a short personal biography (as a precursor to rapport) also ignores the multiple and changing locations inhabited by both researcher *and* researched. What is needed is an account of power differentials that focuses on the way in which we (both interviewer and interviewee) are placed along intersecting axes of power.

This point is clearly demonstrated through an examination of the context in which Lenore conducted her research. Throughout the research project Lenore was plagued by concerns surrounding her speaking position as a white, western woman interviewing Singaporean women in Singapore. This growing sense of frustration grew from a fixation on the identity “white Australian woman” that she attributes to an academic reading of ethnocentrism, racism and the post-colonial project, and not from a reflection on personal experiences as a researcher. For this reason she consciously presented herself as a member of the same organisation, a Singaporean permanent resident, a Chinese speaker, the wife of a Chinese Singaporean, and a woman who lived with her in-laws. She provided these details in the hope that they would legitimise her position and gain her certain “insider” status; she found opportunities to state them as a means to provide connections between herself and the respondent, regardless of whether they demanded or desired it. To her surprise, she found both during and after the interviews

that her concerns about positionality were simply that - her concerns. Some women were interested in her background because it was the reverse of the typical Caucasian-Asian relationship (ie. she was unusual and interesting and therefore a source of further speculation); or because it made her 'pretty much a Singaporean' who would therefore "know" and "understand" what they were saying without need for further elaboration.

By adopting and embracing a fixed understanding of identity - "white Australian woman" - Lenore ignored the complexity of her location *between* Singapore and Australia. Her unease with speaking the Other contradicted her membership in the category "AWARE member". This contradiction - occupying positions of both Self and Other - acted to undermine the logic of binary and to showcase the contingencies of multiple subjectivity. Thus while she attempted to occupy a position of white, Australian sociologist with respect to her "subjects", she was continually located as white, Singaporean permanent resident, AWARE member by the friends and acquaintances whom she interviewed. In fact, it was this latter identity that provided her with access to their lives and experiences. The process of asking questions was both a sign of her commitment to AWARE and an opportunity for other AWARE members to think about the significance of their own membership. This is not to suggest, however, that her motivations were unquestioned. She sought permission from the AWARE Executive Committee (many of whom did not know her) and was queried on numerous occasions about issues of confidentiality and the use of data. But, these were questions about the research process itself (her identity as researcher), and not the issue of her whiteness (her identity as white researcher).

This experience not only highlights the degree to which "whiteness" is a relational rather than static category (see Frankenberg, 1993), but also how an insistence on rapport may create a situation in which power differentials between interviewer and interviewee are reinforced. By insisting on presenting herself (her whiteness) in a certain way, Lenore risked confusing and perhaps angering her respondents, and thus

overlooking the subtle and important ways in which race did in fact mediate the interview relationship. The importance of understanding how the interviewee “saw” the interview, as well as our experiences of the numerous ways in which the interviewee was able to successfully assert control over the interview not only point to the complex ways in which power operates within interviews, but also to the interviewee’s expectation of what an interview “is”. Rather than being passive subjects of research, interviewees are active participants in the creation of “the interview”.

## **The Social Construction of the Interview**

In reviewing our experiences of interviewing we began to pay greater attention to the ways in which both the interviewer and the interviewee present themselves in the interview. In particular, we focused on the “roles” adopted. For the interviewee, such roles may include “the hostess” (see Bergen, 1993; Armstrong, 1995) or “an important person” (Kauffman, 1992). The roles adopted by the interviewer also vary according to the age, class, race and status of the interviewee. We have noted ourselves playing the roles of student/mentor, child/mother, sister/elder sister in our interviews (see Langellier and Hall, 1989). Our ability and opportunity to answer questions or offer advice was affected by these “roles”. The majority of the women Lenore interviewed were older than her; half were in their mid-50s to late 60s. They were women who occupied high status positions in the community and had been founding members of AWARE. These older women saw their role as gatekeepers of knowledge, and the political culture that they lived and worked in necessitated a constant concern for the negotiation of public image. Lenore was very much aware of the need to defer to age when interacting with older members of the community and this was carried over into her interaction with these women. It manifested itself in offering the more comfortable chair in the office, to not interrupting, to not asking personal or distasteful questions, to body language. In these interviews, trying to interject with her own life experiences was responded to with “grandmotherly affection”. On many occasions Lenore felt like an unknowledgeable

(read: powerless) child. It is easy to account for such age deference by referring to Confucianist concepts of filial piety and respect, but is that the only explanation? Lenore does not always defer to age, even in Singapore. Why did she allow herself to be drawn into this role?

Linda Shopes (Olson and Shopes, 1991) makes reference to this when she suggests that in an interview she is especially respectful to respondents of at least a generation older than herself, but that in everyday life she is not so deferential. She states that,

I am led to understand interviews as highly framed encounters, not governed by the rules of ordinary interaction. The peculiar intimacy available to strangers who share an important experience seems to create at least in some interviews a social space where normal power relations perhaps get blunted (in Olson and Shopes, 1991, p.195-6).

Lynda Measor (1988, p.62) also acknowledges that,

the building of 'research relationships' is different from social and personal ones and that highlights again the fact that the interview situation is an unnatural one. In a 'research relationship', one presents a particular 'front' or a particular self.

While we would agree with Shopes and Measor that the interview sets up a situation in which we may act differently to other social situations, we do not understand the interview as "unnatural". Could not the adoption of uncharacteristic age deference also occur when meeting potential in-laws for the first time? Are we to understand this to be outside "normal power relations"? Instead, it is more useful to see the interview moment as one mode of interaction amongst a repertoire of many. Its actual performance varies depending on the historical, cultural and political context. We would prefer to see our actions during the interview as opportunities to be on "our best behaviour" - we are negotiating a performance in order to achieve a desired outcome. Just as in another social setting we may ignore age deference in order to achieve another desired outcome.



The roles that both interviewer and interviewee adopt can change throughout the course of the interview. Interviews have definite beginnings and endings. Beginnings, while difficult when two strangers meet for the first time, are easy to overcome by recourse to strategies employed when “meeting someone new”. Endings, however, can be extremely awkward. The end of the interview does not represent the unveiling of an authentic self, but rather, the adoption of a new role, one in which the interview is bracketed. The way in which both interviewer and interviewee negotiate this end space will be affected by their perceptions of the success of performance (as an act; as a symbol of achievement). This in turn affects the stage of post-interview contact and the phenomenon of the “invisible researcher” (being ignored by the respondent in other social settings) which Janine has since experienced with several of her interviewees. The interviewer’s power to construct the interview subject may produce a sense of fear or danger in which the interviewer becomes either a co-conspirator in the construction of the self (a partner in crime) or a figure to be reviled. This is the reason why feedback and reassurance are so important during and after the interview process - and not because reciprocity and reflexivity are the cornerstones of women’s caring selves.

Rather than seeing the interview as a technique which, used correctly, produces a successful outcome (authentic experience), we prefer to see the interview as a *process* in which subjects (interviewer and interviewee) construct images of them/selves for viewing by a third party (audience). This understanding of the construction of the self goes further than accounts of public/private presentation that draw on Goffman’s (1969) discussion of the “best face” phenomenon - trying to say the “right” things and concealing true views. Drawing on Goffman’s work, Pamela Cotterill (1992, p.596) argues that the shift from public to private accounts is achieved through multiple interviews and the development of trust and confidence. We argue that constructing an image of the other through the interview process does not resemble the slow process of peeling back layers of skin to reveal the authentic self, a self that has been carefully guarded. While it is true that the interviewee may construct different images of the self

in consecutive interviews (and this is not always the case) or in different research projects, they do so with a continued knowledge of the public nature of their account. There is thus no sense in which the interview will ever be a true account of the “private”.

Some of our respondents prepared answers or rehearsed lines (see Langellier and Hall, 1989; Brown and Gilligan, 1992). Conversely, some interviewees noted their frustrations with not having an opportunity to reflect upon certain issues and provide detailed and critical responses because of time constraints, the fact that we had not provided a list of interview questions prior to the interview itself, or through non-realisation of interviewees’ expectations of ground that “should” be covered in such a research topic. In both instances the interviewee constructs a certain image of herself, but one may be more polished than the other; it cannot be said that spontaneity ever really catches the respondent “off guard”. For the same reasons, asserting confidentiality is no guarantee that the interviewer will be privy to sensitive information. In accepting a researcher’s promise of confidentiality, the subject makes decisions about the extent of her trust and what she wants to reveal. The participatory model ignores the presence of these interviewee agendas - why *she* is doing the interview and what *she* wants to get out of it.

It is more appropriate to speak of interviews as conjunctural moments (see Probyn, 1993) in which the interview subjects construct versions of themselves within a triangular relationship. The triangle is represented by the interviewer, interviewee, and the audience (Olson and Shopes, 1991). The interviewee is an active agent, knowledgeable of the interviewer’s role in injecting the interviewee’s worldview into the elusive arena of public knowledge. Both the interviewer’s and the interviewee’s actions may be understood as ‘performances for a ghostly audience’ (Minister, 1991, p.29). The interviewee constructs a version/s of herself during the interview for public viewing. The interviewer uses her interpretation of a version of the constructed other to

examine the socio-cultural milieu. Our attention should be drawn from a search for the “truth” of an interviewee’s life history, to an understanding of how the interview as practice mediates the respondent’s construction of herself. As Ruth Frankenberg (1993, p.41) states, ‘An interview is not, in any simple sense, the telling of a life so much as it is an incomplete story angled toward my questions and each woman’s ever-changing sense of self and of how the world works’. We would take this view one step further. The interview conversation is a product of both interviewer’s and interviewee’s understandings of what the “interview” is. The interviewer also constructs herself as part of interview practice, so that both “selves” are ultimately constructions mediated by the knowledge that ‘we are having an interview’ and that ‘someone is going to see this’. For example, one of Janine’s interviewees admitted being interviewed for a different, but nevertheless somewhat similarly focused research project the previous week. She remarked at that point how she had given very different responses to the ones she was giving to Janine and how she had thus presented a markedly different picture of herself to the other researcher.

## **Conclusion**

Interviewers and interviewees are co-producers of narratives and the interview outcome is constructed - it is a conjunctural moment of negotiation of “appearance” by actors. If we acknowledge the essentially constructed nature of the interview moment, we recognise that both interviewer and interviewee present varied and changing images of their “selves” throughout the period of contact. Our attention should be drawn from a search for the “truth” of an interviewee’s life history, to an understanding of how the interview as practice mediates the respondent’s construction of her/self. The participatory model fails to recognise that both parties are embodied subjects who bring expectations of the interview with them. Simply admonishing the interviewer to establish rapport (and thus achieve a successful research outcome) ignores how the interviewee sees the interview, what she wishes to achieve, and how she will present

herself. Simple claims that feminist researchers need to go out and “connect” with their respondents also ignores the question of what rapport is, why it helps the interview outcome, how it is to be achieved, and whose interests are being served in its accomplishment. The reason that these questions remain unaddressed in much feminist writing is that the position of the interviewee herself is often ignored - rapport is considered to be good for her as well as us.

We are not suggesting that the goals of feminist research should be abandoned as unachievable. Rejecting the notion of an impersonal and objective researcher, eliminating power imbalances between researcher and researched, and collaborating with subjects in the research process are important epistemological principles. What we are suggesting, however, is that present understandings of the ‘feminist researcher’/‘woman as subject’ relationship are largely under-theorised and misunderstood. They assume a fixed understanding of what the interview is and ignore the way the interview is constructed through the actions of both interviewer and interviewee as they negotiate performance with a ghostly audience. The participatory model, by positing the interview as an interviewer controlled and directed research tool, ignores interviewee subjectivity and acts as just another means of “othering” the subject.

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