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**Interviewing  
the Incarcerated:  
Personal Notes on Ethical  
and Methodological Issues**

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### MEET THE AUTHOR

**Ken Tunnell** was born and raised in the mountainous region of northeastern Tennessee. His boyhood was rarely dull amidst parents, two sisters, innumerable visits with extended family, and a close knit immediate community. After finishing his undergraduate degree, Tunnell worked as a social worker with welfare and food stamp recipients, first in east Tennessee and later in Nashville. During his stay in Nashville, he immersed himself in the music of his childhood—bluegrass—and began playing and singing it for fun, an activity that, regrettably, he can't do for a living. Realizing that social work offered a dreary existence, he enrolled in graduate school. While his first sociology class as an undergraduate had been a unique and eye-opening experience, it was his first graduate class that enlightened him, put him on the path to earning a graduate degree, and led him into academics as a profession. His dissertation research at The University of Tennessee was about property offenders described in his chapter in this book. After completing his PhD in sociology in 1988, Tunnell accepted a position at Eastern Kentucky University, where he today is an associate professor. His publications have appeared in a variety of periodicals such as *Justice Quarterly*, *Qualitative Sociology*, *Sociological Spectrum*, and the *Journal of Popular Culture*. His books include *Choosing Crime* (1992) and *Political Crime in Contemporary America* (1993). His ongoing research interests include qualitative approaches to understanding crime and justice, the political economy of crime and punishment, and the sociology of popular culture.

Tunnell describes his work in studying incarcerated property criminals and drug traffickers. He shares his experiences in conducting ethnographic interviews in prison settings. He discusses two major concerns in his work: (a) assessing the factual nature of the information shared in the interviews and (b) risks involved in qualitative research with incarcerated participants.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

As you read this chapter, consider the following questions:

1. Tunnell paid his participants for their contributions to his study. What issues are involved in payment for interviews?
2. Tunnell related two incidents in which his participants conned him with false information. He considered these interviews wasted time and useless for the research project. What do you think of his assessment?
3. In describing his experiences with attorneys who wanted to subpoena his data, Tunnell raises sensitive ethical issues about protecting the confidentiality of participants. What would you do in such a situation?

That sound. It's one I have never gotten used to. It's a sound that says it all—controlled, locked up, caged by thick prison walls, razor wire, and the hard, cold steel of prison gates that ring out a reminder of captivity with each echoing SLAM. Although I was a free world person entering the world of the nonfree, that sound alone often made me feel as though I was imprisoned. The burly guards who escorted me deeper into the bowels of prisons seemed unaffected, suggesting that prisoner and guard alike eventually adapt to such surroundings. And just as police officers typically address both the criminal and the law abiding in equally authoritarian voices, prison guards treat outsiders similarly to the incarcerated—with suspicion, distrust, and brazen authority. They seemed to trust no one behind these prison walls, and yet I spent hours on hours inside those prisons, asking for their cooperation in my attempts to sit with and interview incarcerated property offenders, and later drug traffickers, who, likewise, trust few people behind prison walls. My task was to win not only the captors' simple cooperation but the captives' active participation in the interview research.

I spent 18 months traipsing across the state of Tennessee interviewing career property criminals, that is, criminals who had committed a disproportionate number of property crimes (e.g., burglary, armed robbery, forgery, and auto theft)—some on a weekly basis and others daily. During that year and a half, I visited six state prisons, three minimum security community-service institutions, two work camps, and five county jails, interviewing a total of 60 male career property offenders. Some 2 years later, I interviewed incarcerated male drug traffickers in one Kentucky state prison. This chapter describes my personal methodological and ethical dilemmas in doing interview research with populations that are powerless (given their incarceration), and are, for good reason, cautious and distrustful of outsiders. Specifically it describes the interview settings, ethical assurances to the participants who potentially were at risk due to the incriminating information they offered, the methods used in alleviating their concerns and apprehensions, my constant struggles in discerning fact from fiction, and the various risks involved in such research.

### INTERVIEW SETTINGS AND CONCERNS

During both property offender and drug trafficking studies, I always arranged my visits in advance with a prison administrator to interview a particular inmate at a specific date and time. After my arrival at the prison, I made my way to the first checkpoint.<sup>1</sup> It was at the inside checkpoint that the decision was made to search

<sup>1</sup>I always drove a university car on these trips. The presence of an official state car with an official state logo on both front doors added legitimacy to my mission in the eyes of front-line prison employees. The university car also allowed me to park near the front door in the Official Visitor parking space. I nearly always was seen as I parked my car there (sometimes before, if watch towers were staffed). This obvious presence alerted the guards that I indeed was on official business which I believe resulted in my being harassed less than I would have been had I arrived in no apparent official capacity.

me or not. During those times when the decision was made to search, I was asked to empty my pockets and place my research materials on the countertop. Searching my possessions varied considerably from guard to guard. Some merely glanced at the items, some quickly leafed through my papers, and some searched with such apparent confidence in their suspicions that I had to be carrying contraband that they actually disassembled (as best they could) my tape recorder and audio cassette tape boxes, leafed through my various interview papers, leafed through my wallet, and on two occasions counted my money.

If all went well, I would be escorted to a small room, usually used for other forms of consultation, where I waited for the arrival of the interview participant. Shortly thereafter a guard would enter escorting a prisoner.<sup>2</sup> I always began by thanking the guard for his or her help. I would then turn to the prisoner and introduce myself, shake his hand, and ask if he had received the letter from the university about the project.<sup>3</sup> Then I would remind them of what they had read in the letter and explain in much greater detail the research project, their selection as potential participants, the types of information that I was seeking, the process of tape-recording interviews, the amount of time required for the interview, their rights as participants, issues of confidentiality, and monetary compensation for participating. Each respondent in the property offender study was paid \$50 after the prison interview and \$100 after a second interview that took place after their release from prison. The increased payment was to function as an inducement for them to keep us informed of their whereabouts. I then answered any questions that they had.

Some 2 years later I interviewed drug traffickers in Kentucky, a state that prohibits the payment of prisoner research subjects. While a total of 15 property offenders refused to participate (in a study, with a final sample of 60) 16 drug traffickers (in a study with a projected sample of 10) refused, although I had made clear who I was and that I was not interested in their drug dealing within the prison. My belief is that payment played a major role in decisions to participate. While monetary compensation often is all that researchers have to offer potential respondents, some who participated expressed a desire to educate or enlighten others about drug addiction, trafficking, and the maddening war on drugs. Those who agreed to participate signed an informed-consent form, keeping a copy for them-

<sup>2</sup>On two occasions, both in the same county jail, the prisoner, wearing both handcuffs and ankle shackles, was brought into the room. I immediately asked the guard to remove the restraints. Both times the guard removed the handcuffs but refused to remove the shackles. Other than these two times, no prisoner was restrained in any way. There was never a time when I felt the least frightened or apprehensive about talking with them.

<sup>3</sup>I always asked about the letter up front for two reasons. One, to let them know who I was by connecting my presence to the letter that had informed them that I would soon visit them, and two, to alleviate any worries or fears they might have immediately formed that I was "the man," a member of the parole board, an attorney, or any other person in a position of control over them and of their destinies. When I inquired about the letter, only one had not received it. He, nonetheless, agreed to participate.

It was also at this point that I would ask or encourage the guard to leave us in privacy. Only one time at a particularly inhospitable prison did a guard stay in the room and listen to this introduction and to the informed-consent procedures.

selves.<sup>4</sup> Each interview, which lasted from 1 to 3 hours, usually took place within a small counseling room.<sup>5</sup>

As I interviewed the participants, I tried to make them feel as though they possessed knowledge unknown to those outside their profession (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Johnson, 1981). I strove to shape the interviews into focused conversations, sometimes painful, sometimes humorous, but nonetheless focused, in which I acted as a conversational guide. I became an active listener and constantly assessed how what I heard related to the focus of the research, and how it was similar or dissimilar to what other respondents had told me. By using a respectful yet critical approach, I also could better monitor reliability by letting the participants know, if need be, that I was conwise when certain information appeared dubious or contrary to official documentation (Frazier, 1978). My objective was to get inside the head of each participant, which I believe could only be accomplished by making them feel at times as though they were co-researchers because, after all, we were working together to understand their own decisions to engage in property crime. Throughout the long interviews, richly detailed information emerged about their criminal histories, the frequency of their crime commission, and their decision-making processes.

## FACT OR FICTION?

I wish that I could say with confidence that I was never deceived by these men, but I know, from two specific cases where their trickery eventually was detected, that such is not the case. In this type of interview research, with participants who obviously had much to hide and good reason for deception, I realized that I simply had to do all that I could to minimize such deception from occurring, to verify as much information as possible, and to use a system of validity checks, while recognizing all the while that the possibility of deception was very real. Two specific cases where I was duped are worth recounting to illustrate the conning ability of people in such situations and the personal effects that I experienced as I grappled with how best to continue. I certainly am not proud of being deceived, but fortunately I was able to determine that I had been, long before the data-analysis

<sup>4</sup>At a couple of prisons, guards asked me to have the inmates sign the prison's own informed-consent form. Their version, however, said that the state had access to the data and that anything the inmate said would be held against him in a court of law. I refused to comply with their request and on both occasions we had to discuss the matter with their superiors. Each time the prison staff relented and asked for a copy of our informed-consent form. I was happy to supply them with one.

<sup>5</sup>I say "usually" because prisons do not have ample interviewing space, other than that for prison personnel. I also interviewed in such diverse settings as a holding cell, a glass-enclosed room, a prison library, a warden's office, a parole board hearing room, a large broom closet, a prison chapel, a prison counselor's office, and at an outdoor picnic area. Regardless, I was and am confident that we had complete privacy and believe that the participants thought likewise.

phase began. Thus, I avoided tainting the data with these particular falsehoods. (Of course, other falsehoods, which remain unknown, were included in the analysis.)

During both the property-offender and the drug-trafficking studies, I tried to read the case files of potential sample members before ever meeting or interviewing them. With the property-offender research, I was able to do so before each of the 60 interviews. With the drug trafficking-research, because the files were being used elsewhere in the prison, I was unable to peruse two individuals' files until after the interviews.

My first example comes from the property-offender research (Tunnell, 1992). The offender, to whom I will refer as Jimmy Morini, deceived not only me, but evidently for years had duped the entire correctional system, board of parole, and post-prison halfway house administrators where he was eventually assigned. Evidently, for years he had maintained a false identity and no one seemed to know otherwise. In fact, a local journalist had interviewed him about his illustrative, yet unbeknownst to her, fictional past, and was writing her story at the time that I interviewed Jimmy.

As part of most interviews, I tried to gain some understanding of their backgrounds, including their experiences with legitimate employment. Jimmy told me that he, at one time, had been boxing's Welterweight Champion of the World, a title that he claimed to have kept for only a couple of years, but one that allowed him to make a considerable amount of money. He claimed to have personally been acquainted with such well known fighters as Rocky Marciano, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Jake LaMotta, the most famous of boxers during his boxing days. During the interview, he claimed to have recently written Sugar Ray Robinson who answered his letter, although he was surprised to have heard from Jimmy, believing him dead. Jimmy claimed that Robinson must have assumed him to be dead because he had dropped out of sight and lost contact with his boxing colleagues after his first incarceration. The only modesty he displayed was when he admitted his championship victory had been a fluke, a lucky punch.

After he lost his title, he came to believe that the Internal Revenue Service, his managers, and accountants had bilked him of nearly all his money. He was left a defeated, near penniless, angry boxer, with few skills other than fighting. His anger at a system that he defined as nearly robbing him was the initial reason given for his earliest criminal involvement, which atypically for that sample, was a very serious property crime—armed robbery. Years later, after four separate stints in prison, after reaching his mid-60s, and after having spent about 25 years in prison, he decided to give up a life of crime. According to Jimmy's prison files, parole board documents, and my casual conversation with a prison guard, Jimmy Morini indeed had been a Welterweight Champion of the World and a model prisoner. Undoubtedly, Jimmy's history was vastly different from the other sample members and this history was vital to understanding his earliest motivations for engaging in serious property crime.

Being somewhat of a boxing aficionado, I decided to learn more of Jimmy's boxing career. This is when I realized that I had been duped, which made my 2 hours with him disappointing and the interview data I collected worthless. According to various boxing encyclopedias, Jimmy indeed had been the Welterweight Champion for a short period of time; he had defeated just whom he reported to me and had lost to just whom he had told me about. But, according to the literature, Jimmy had died nearly 20 years before our interview.

My first reaction, as a cautious yet somewhat confident researcher, was that the literature simply was inaccurate. After all, the entire department of corrections and I couldn't be wrong, could we? My primary concern, however, was with the data. I did not care in the least whether the department of corrections had the truth about Jimmy, just as I did not care whether the halfway house that he would be shortly sent to had accurate information. Because of the ethics of such research, I never imagined volunteering any information to them about what I had found. But, to satisfy my own curiosity as well as to determine if the interview data were of any value, I simply had to learn more about Jimmy's case.

From microfiche I read articles from *The New York Times* about Jimmy's boxing victories. There was a photograph or two, but the quality was so poor that facial characteristics were a blur. The newspapers indicated that a single sportswriter covered Jimmy's career. After some contemplation, I decided to contact him. He knew Jimmy well, still knows his widow, and after Jimmy's death, organized a fundraiser for her. As our conversation was winding down, he offered to send me pictures, which he did. One is an autographed, promotional photograph of a young Jimmy Morini, and the second, an older Jimmy shortly before his death. I immediately framed the boxing photo and today, some 8 years later, it still hangs on my office wall, not only as a reminder of Jimmy, but as a warning to be ever-so-cautious while doing research with populations that have every reason to be distrustful and who have lived their lives conning and deceiving outsiders. No doubt I, as a researcher, was perceived as simply another representative of the straight world and was one who was often held at bay by deception, trickery, and sheer conning ability.

The second example comes from the drug-trafficking research and concerns a participant whose file I was unable to read until after the interview (Tunnell, 1993). I knew very little of him, except that he was serving his second prison sentence for selling drugs. During the interview he was unwilling to describe his drug use, entry into trafficking, his current charges for trafficking, or anything related to the crimes for which he was incarcerated. He steadfastly maintained that he had been discarded by the law enforcement community after having participated in numerous undercover drug transactions. He was an informant, a narc, a trusted aid in the escalating war on drugs and was not, he reiterated, a drug trafficker or user. I must say, I was somewhat suspicious and no matter how I phrased questions, no matter at what angle I approached him, he steadfastly maintained his story. Because I had not seen his file, I felt unprepared to challenge him other than through normal

interviewing tactics. For example, I continually probed his responses; I asked the same questions in a variety of ways and let him know I was skeptical and needed convincing. All was for naught. He was unmoved by my tactics and continued to hold fast to his story of innocence and his assertion that he had been set up, convicted, discarded, and incarcerated by the very law enforcement officials whom he had aided.

A personal characteristic of mine is my distrust of police; my trust in them equals my trust in incarcerated drug traffickers. At another time, I may have been more willing to believe his claims, yet this story seemed too unreal. Some 2 weeks after the interview, when I was able to review his file, I came to the conclusion that if his story was accurate, then his files had been doctored with the sophistication of the Kennedy assassination conspiracy. The files simply did not support his story and, in fact, repudiated his claims. The files confirmed my suspicion about him and his story, and I made a decision then and there not to use his interview as part of the data. Again, hours were wasted and an interview was conducted that proved useless for the research project, yet fortunately, as in Jimmy's case, I learned that the interviews were filled with falsehoods prior to the data analysis stages.

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND RISKS

Ethnographers researching deviance and those who themselves indulge in deviance, often find themselves in situations wherein they themselves are at risk, wherein they and their data are threatened, and wherein worries abound concerning the information they possess. Adler (1985), Becker (1963), Ferrell (1993), Hamm (1993), Humphreys (1970), and a host of others have found themselves in such situations; after all, the rich rewards of ethnography often come with a price—risks. Potential problems arise whenever we are privy to sensitive information. For example, Carey (1972), and later Adler (1985), described problems resulting from drug use among their interview participants.

During both of my studies, undoubtedly some respondents were altered by one substance or another. At times their conditions were obvious, while others perhaps intentionally exaggerated their conditions. Whichever the case, the drug impeded conversation and the retrospective descriptions of decisions they had made. Such recollections are difficult enough for the sober, and those under the influence of a drug (some that I simply suspected and some that actually volunteered such information) had greater difficulty. The major problems identified are that they sometimes became confused, their responses seemed slowed, and their abilities to explain their decisions as well as logistical behaviors were affected. This is a common risk associated with interviewing known and admitted criminals.

A second problem specific to ethnographic research with deviant groups is the risk that researchers must assume. In my case, the potential risks to me were from

the criminal subjects themselves, various legal authorities, and concerned, yet overzealous, defense attorneys. Let me explain. I interviewed the property offenders twice, once in prison and again a few months after their release. The prison interviews were conducted in a private setting; those after release were held primarily in their homes. Although I never felt threatened by these men, I realized the gravity of the situation, for I found myself alone with men who had committed serious property crimes, including armed and strong-armed robbery. On a few occasions, while in their homes, others entered the interview setting. Twice I became nervous when I realized that these intruders were the running buddies of the interview subjects. Of course we were strangers and had no relationship, unlike the participants and myself. The intruders also had no vested interest in my presence there, unlike the participants who were being paid. While nothing overt occurred that made me think risk was imminent, I was reminded of the potential for such.

On at least two occasions I agreed to meet participants at a prearranged location within public housing projects. During one of those visits, either the research subject or I (I suspect the latter) got lost and we were never able to connect. During my attempts to find him, I pulled the university car to the corner where two of the project's residents were talking. Predicting their answer, I nonetheless asked them if they knew the man I was seeking. "Never heard of him," one responded, while the other asked, "Are you a bounty hunter?" Sensing some hostility and quite a bit of suspicion, I thought it best to simply leave the scene rather than to continue my efforts to locate him. Again, this serves as an example of a situation where the potential, at least, for risk was real.

Another risk, and one described by other ethnographers (Adler, 1985; Humphreys, 1970), was the possibility of legal authorities learning of my research and issuing a subpoena for the data. After all, I had information about various crimes unknown to legal officials. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' names never appeared on the interview audio tapes and I never spoke their names during interviews. I simply numbered the tapes in ascending order and assigned a corresponding number to each participant. Immediately after the interview, a secretary transcribed from the cassette tape. The tape would then be erased and the identifier number removed. I kept an identifier list with only the assigned numbers and pertinent information that I had obtained from the case files. Never was any name connected to the information from the files or interviews. If by chance legal authorities learned of the project, realized that I was privy to information about participants' crimes for which they had not been charged, and then decided to subpoena my records, they would end up with nameless files. I decided in advance that if I was ordered to court and asked to relate a particular interview transcript to a specific participant, I would simply respond that it was impossible for me to identify any single individual from the dozens of interviews I had conducted. This was a calculated strategy to minimize the risks to the participants to whom I had assured confidentiality, and to myself and the success of this research project.

During another qualitative study, a rather lengthy case study, a colleague and I were subjected to overt threats from defense attorneys. After learning of our research, the attorneys threatened to subpoena our interview cassette tapes, to ask the courts to issue an injunction against us, and to question us under oath about conversations between ourselves and our interview subjects. The threats concerned a murder case that we were studying. The defendant, their client, was on death row for the murder under study, but his case was in the initial stages of appeal.

The public defenders had hoped that the case would simply be quietly appealed unbeknownst to the small community where the murder had occurred, and feared that our involvement might arouse public curiosity which perhaps might interfere with their appeal. When they learned of our case study, they evidently assumed the worst possible outcome, and attempted to prevent our research from becoming known to the wider community. They thought it best to silence us, and in effect, to bring our study to a halt. During a 2-hour conversation, the attorneys told us that in order to prevent (a) an injunction from being filed against us, (b) a suit from being filed against us, and (c) the investigation of some of our interview participants, we would have to stop the research and deliver to them all materials requested, including specific field notes, interview tapes, and transcripts.

Coming from an office toward which we actually felt sympathetic, we were somewhat surprised. However much we tried explaining to them that our raw data simply would not be made available, it seemed to have no impact. We left their office having resolved nothing except that we would reconvene in a few days. In the interim, we devised a strategy to minimize risks to ourselves, our interview participants—to whom we felt very much indebted—and to the integrity of our study. We decided we had no choice but to refuse to surrender anything—field notes, participants' names, or interview transcripts; we decided simply to lie and tell them that due to their threats we destroyed the tapes and transcripts in question. We decided to let them know that their threats of an injunction and lawsuit instilled no fear in us whatsoever, and furthermore, if their desire was to have a quiet appeal, then threatening us would likely have just the opposite outcome.

When we later met with them and told them these things, they obviously were angered but realized there was little they could do. We had anticipated this reaction, but still took the chance because they very well could have engaged in the type of legal jockeying they had threatened. This was a painful time during an otherwise rewarding case study, when the potential for risk to ourselves, our participants, and our academic freedom was very real. We finished the case study, published two academic articles from it, and their client won a new trial on appeal (Cox & Tunnell, 1993; Tunnell & Cox, 1991).

## CONCLUSION

These reflections about interviewing the powerless, whether incarcerated or recently freed, illustrate some of the benefits and rewards of qualitative research—a strategy that is both liberating and restrictive. While survey research certainly minimizes the risks that I have described here, the rich, insightful explanations central to interview research are absent. Ethnographic interviewing encompasses more than simply learning about a particular problem or population. It is an ongoing lesson about how to relate to divergent groups of people, how to establish rapport, how to win confidence, and how to assist them in opening up and revealing those subtle complexities of social life that can only be tapped through qualitative methodologies. These strategies demand that researchers take risks, weigh ethical considerations, ponder just what assurances of confidentiality actually mean, assess data as they are gathered, and question just how far one is willing to go to obtain data while at the same time protecting it. Such strategies are the heart and soul of interviewing and are the characteristics that set it apart from other, perhaps less eventful, methodologies.

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