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Interview Shocks and Shockwaves

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Abstract

This paper uses a postmodern lens to examine "shocks," cognitive emotional reactions of interviewer to the unexpected, and shows how shocks and "shockwaves," responses to shocks, are related to the process of Othering. The concepts master narrative, coherence, Othering, positionality and nonunitary subjectivity are used to present the analysis. Using excerpts from research interviews as illustrations, the paper describes three types of shocks—those based on a violation of a social taboo, those deriving from professional role reversal, and those that are based on stereotypes. In addition, it explains three types of responses to shock—avoidance, circular strategies, and acceptance and moving on. The paper shows how interviewees resist being Othered and, in an attempt to negotiate a more equitable interview situation, administer shocks. Interviewer expectations of master narratives and the process of Othering prevent interviewers from hearing complex, multifaceted, and atypical stories.

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Interview Shocks and Shockwaves

In the opening chapter of *Qualitative Interviewing*, Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe interviews as "wonderfully unpredictable" (p. 7). As they explain,

> The person being interviewed may take control of the interview and change the subject, guide the tempo, or indicate the interviewer was asking the wrong questions. Sometimes interviewees become hostile; sometimes they become overly friendly, threatening, or flirtatious. Occasionally, bizarre events occur such as getting to an appointment and finding the interviewee sitting in the middle of the room with a shotgun in his lap. Part of the skill of the qualitative researcher is in being to adapt quickly to a situation that did not go as expected. (p. 7)

This paper uses a postmodern lens to explore the meaning of a qualitative research interviewer's encounter with the unexpected.

Qualitative research texts and books specifically on interviewing provide suggestions to help interviewers ensure that the interview proceeds smoothly. Many emphasize the importance of rapport, respect, neutrality, building a conversational partnership, and manifesting understanding (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998; Weiss, 1994). Other texts advise interviewers to be nonjudgmental, attentive, and sensitive, and to maintain focus (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Feminist research interviewers endeavor to be non-hierarchical, collaborative, and attuned to voices and emotions (Bloom, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; DeVault, 1999; Sands, 2004). Whatever approach might be taken, the interviewer is expected to maintain control in the face of unexpected occurrences in research interviews. A byproduct of the open character and flexibility of in-depth interviews and of the natural sites where they take place, interviews challenge interviewers to make "on-the-spot decisions" about whether to

pursue a topic raised by the interviewee, probe, or follow an interview guide (Kvale, 1996, p. 84).

Gilgun (1999) provides a stunning example of an interviewer's encounter with the unexpected in an article in which she describes her encounters with Alan, a 33-year old man who killed his two toddler sons, his girlfriend, and another woman. He approached Gilgun while she was interviewing other perpetrators of violence in a maximum-security prison and volunteered to participate in her study. Although she was used to hearing the stories of perpetrators, she felt horror, a result of the way he presented himself to her, the content of his deeds, and the words and rhythm he used when describing them, which made his account a "hot" text (p. 181). As the author/interviewer made clear, she was "shocked" "to the point where I probably should not have been able to speak, but I could croak something out because years of doing research and social work practice with difficult family situations had prepared me" (p. 190).

Like Gilgun, we have been shocked during research interviews. As we pursued this topic with our students and colleagues and listened to the stories that emerged, we realized that being shocked is an experience we all share. One of the most common occurrences associated with shock seems to be having interviewees cry when discussing an event that has caused them pain. Overwhelmed by the intensity of their emotions, interviewers are shocked when they experience pain by proxy. Being witness to powerful emotions is especially difficult for interviewers whose professional backgrounds or personal experiences do not prepare them to handle situations like these. In contrast with shock over heightened emotion is shock over the lack emotional expression when expression seems to be called for. In an article describing the interviewers' experiences studying children affected by living with parents dying of HIV disease, the authors wrote, "Sometimes the children's very simple description of how they helped to care for a dying

parent took away the researcher's capacity to respond: the very simplicity of the child's story made the loss feel more real and painful to the researcher....” (Kay, Cree, Tisdall, & Wallace, 2003, p. 36). As these authors demonstrate, an interviewer can be as overwhelmed by emotions that are not expressed as those that are.

Consistent with the above examples, we are using the word “shock” to describe the interviewer’s emotional-cognitive reaction to an encounter in which her implicit expectations are disrupted. An emphasis on the level of intensity of emotions as a cause of shocks, however, places shocks in the private realm of the interpersonal relationship whereas our goal is to examine the social and political contexts that underlie the shocks. The aim of this paper is to explore shocks as a manifestation of a clash between different narratives as they are understood by interviewer-interviewee dyads occupying different power positions. To achieve this end, we will first discuss several concepts that will help us understand interviewing from a postmodern perspective and then identify circumstances in which interviewers get shocked and examine the ways in which interviewers respond to shock.

Toward a Postmodern Understanding of Interviewing

The postmodern turn in the humanities and social sciences has had an impact on our understanding of the interview. Problematic to define, postmodernism is characterized by the centrality of discourse, fragmented identities, a critique of representation, a discrediting of grand narratives, and acknowledgment of the connection between power and knowledge (Alvesson, 2002). Accordingly, interviewing is an “active” process in which the “product” is jointly constructed by participants who are situated in local and political contexts (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Narrative Conventions and Master Narratives

From a postmodern perspective, the larger culture is saturated with narratives that privilege some ways of interpreting reality and marginalize coexisting others (cf. Foucault, 1978). Interviews take place in a political context in which the contents of the conversation, the attributes of the participants, and the meanings that are constructed may or may not be aligned with privileged narratives. Because the power positions of the interview participants can only be inferred at the start of the interview, it is not known where the interviewer and interviewee stand in relation to privileged narratives. An interviewer's shock signals that she and the interviewee espouse discrepant narratives and occupy different power positions in general and in the interview encounter. Close examination of the "what" (content) and "how" (process) of interview narratives (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) makes these discrepancies visible.

The exchange of narratives is a social process in which there are social demands in terms of content and form. Gergen and Gergen (1986, 1988) emphasize the importance of structural *narrative conventions* to the understanding of one's story. Through the establishment of a valued end point, the selection of events relevant to the goal state, the ordering of events, the establishing of causal linkages, and the use of demarcation signs, people construct their self-narratives according to specific conventions. These practices, which we assimilate through socialization, enable us to interpret life events as consistencies, improvements, or decrements, in a similar fashion to the literary genres of tragedy, comedy, and romantic saga. Similarly, Bruner (1990) points out how a community's "myths, its typology of human plights, but also its traditions for locating and resolving divergent narratives" (p. 68) facilitate the interpretation of stories. The narrative mode of thought, as opposed to the logico-scientific mode, convinces the listener or reader of its legitimacy on the basis of its "lifelikeness" by establishing "not truth but

verisimilitude" (Bruner, 1986, p. 11). Accordingly, we expect people to tell us stories according to specific storylines, that is, with certain themes and characters, certain sequences of events (plots), and certain endings. Storylines resonate with interviewers because they are standard, cultural scripts with which they are familiar.

Postmodern scholars use the term *master narratives* to describe pre-existing sociocultural forms of interpretation that serve as legitimization strategies for the preservation of the status quo regarding power and difference in general (Bamberg, 2005). Power relations are the social forces that guide narrators to present themselves and others according to certain normative ideals (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). Master narratives involving power relations operate “underground,” unconsciously affecting thinking and behavior (Jameson, 1984, p. xii). They create implicit standards for defining what is real, valid, and good in comparison to what is unreal, invalid and bad. As such they insidiously diminish “little narratives” that are local and multiple (Lyotard, 1994, pp. 60, 66), or "counternarratives", "the little stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledge and histories have been marginalized...or forgotten in the telling of official narratives" (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p.2).

Coherence and Othering

Gergen and Gergen (1986, 1988) identify *coherence* as one of the major components involved in "good" stories. Linde (1993) refers to coherence as "a social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture" (p. 16). "It derives from the relations that the parts of a text bear to one another and to the whole text, as well as from the relation that the text bears to other texts of its type" (p. 12). A text may be described as coherent if two sets of relations hold: One is that its words, phrases, sentences, and other discourse units are in proper relation to one another and to the text as a whole, thus creating

continuity and causality. "The other is that the text as a whole must be seen as being a recognizable and well-formed text of its type" (p. 12).

The recognition of a text as coherent, however, is not a neutral activity; it is influenced by the master narratives of the larger culture that provide models of “lifelikeness” (Bruner, 1986). Therefore, a postmodern inquiry is concerned with “What makes a narrative coherent?” “Who defines it as such?” “What purposes does a narrative’s coherence serve and for whom?” “What purposes does the designation of a narrative as incoherent serve and for whom?” Because research on social life tends to be “top-down,” and interviewers are likely to have a higher social status than their interviewees in terms of their education, race or ethnicity (Wolf, 1996), interviewers are predisposed to adopting views about coherence that are based on master narratives. Interviewers already assume power because they select their interviewees, are more familiar with the interview situation than those they interview, and have greater potential to use the interviewees’ stories to reach a larger audience, which they may do to further their own careers. In retelling interviewees’ stories, they determine what parts of the interviewee's story they will keep, focus on, and emphasize and how they are going to interpret it and what parts they will delete or ignore (Fine, 1994; Wolf, 1996). Yet, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995, 2005) and Alvesson (2002) assert, interviews are collaborative and interactional, with both interviewer and interviewee contributing to what is constructed and how the process unfolds. The interview is a joint, negotiated accomplishment of all participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Accordingly, both possess some sort of power, both are active, and each operates from her own sense of coherence. The power of the interviewee, however, tends to be unacknowledged.

The gap in power over who defines, interprets and writes about the knowledge deriving from the interview brings Krumer-Nevo (2002) to describe interviews as taking place in an

"arena of othering relations." The process of "Othering" occurs when the focus is on a single category of identity which has become dominant rather than on a rounded, holistic view (Krumer-Nevo 2002; Sullivan & McCarthy 2004). In this arena both interviewer and interviewee negotiate their own reflection in the eyes of the other. Negotiation is explict and implicit and encompasses issues such as what is "good" and "bad," "success" or "failure," and who is "good" or “bad.” An interviewee’s arousing a “shock” on the part of the interviewer should be considered a response to being Othered. As we will illustrate below, the interviewee plays an active role in the interview by putting forth an unexpected local narrative, a counternarrative that resists the Othering narrative.

We will explore the role played by these concepts in the following examples and later in this paper. The next section identifies and offers examples of different kinds of shocks. We will interpret the shocks as part of the negotiation process that takes place in active interviews. The illustrations are from our own interviews, interviews conducted by students or research staff, and from the literature.

Kinds of Shock

We identified three types of interviewer shock among our samples—*shocks based on a violation of a social taboo, professional role reversal,* and *expectations based on stereotypes.* This is not an exhaustive list of types. Moreover, it is theoretically possible for more than one type of shock to occur within the same interaction.

Shocked over Violation of a Social Taboo

Occasionally interviewees will impart content about behavior that violates a deep-rooted social taboo. Such revelations may occur in contexts in which they are unexpected. The interviewee may breach a taboo herself or talk about someone who did so. Upon hearing about

the breach, an interviewer may become alarmed. For example, Karen, a woman in her 20s who was an interviewer for a study of grandparents raising grandchildren, told the project directors that she was shocked in the course of conducting an interview with Mrs. M, a middle aged grandmother. The following excerpt begins with Karen's inquiring about Mrs. M's family history. In response to the interviewer's question, "Were you married?" Mrs. M offered an ambiguous response. After entertaining Karen's numerous questions about her husband and his whereabouts, Mrs. M pointed to the grandchild and shocked the interviewer:

Karen: Um were you married?

Mrs. M: OOOH BOY heh was I ever!

Karen: Okay. Tell me heh about that

Mrs. M: Still is

Karen: Okay. You're still married?

Mrs. M: Oh, yeah.

Karen: And your husband?

Mrs. M: I don't know (pause) (softly) I don't know where that bugger at.

Karen: What's his name?

Mrs. M: Andrew.

Karen: Andrew. And so he's still living?

Mrs. M: Mmm hmmm heh heh heh

Karen: Do ya know how old he is?

Mrs. M: Oh boy. Maybe, he's about sixty seven.

Karen: Okay. But you don't know where he is?

Mrs. M: Ah he's in (names section of city).

Karen: So ya don't have any contact?

Mrs. M: Whenever I go try to see hi-, see how he is, see how he's doing

Karen: So, sometimes you do see him.

Mrs. M: U-huh.

Karen: What year were you married?

Mrs. M: Uh (pause) '56. February.

Karen: And so you're still married? You jus' separated?

Mrs. M: U-huh

Karen: When did you separate?

Mrs. M: Oh (pause) thirty (pause) about thirty years

Karen: Thirty years ago?

Mrs. M: Mmm hmm (pause)

Karen: Okay (pause). So you s-try to see him but he-he's not someone you're real close to? Or are you, would you say you're close with him?

Mrs. M: When we meet it's-it's all right (pause). There's-there's no um thing (pause)

Karen: No conflict

Mrs. M: Uh um (pause) that's his.

Karen: Hmm?

Mrs. M: (softly) That's his.

Karen: What was? (long pause)

Mrs. M: David.

Karen: OOOH (long pause) (softly) his his

Mrs. M: (softly) offspring

Karen: Okay. That's Andrew's child?

Mrs. M: Mmm hmm

Karen: (softly) Obviously these are not your children.

Mrs. M: Uh uh

Karen: Okay. Tell me about your children, who your children were. You said you had...

The interviewer's shock came when she realized that "that" referred to one of the grandsons that Mrs. M was raising and that Mr. M was the father of his grandson. In the context of this study of stress, well-being, and life satisfaction of grandparent caregivers, the interviewer did not expect to encounter incest. The shock is apparent in Karen's "OOOH" and long pause, and search for confirmation, "That's Andrew's child?" Our review of a videotape of this interview indicated that the interviewer did not change her demeanor or her physical position when she learned about the incest; perhaps she was too stunned to react.

Looking at this interview retrospectively, we see evidence of Mrs. M's resistance as soon as Karen asked her about her marital status. Instead of answering the question with a simple "yes" or "no," Mrs. M indexed her having been married by speaking in a mocking, exaggerated way. Similarly she stated that she is still married to Mr. M. At this point the Karen seems puzzled about Mr. M and asks about him. Mrs. M uses the same mocking tone when she says that she does not know "where that bugger" lives. Apparently still confused, Karen returns to the task at hand, collecting information about names, birth and marriage dates to include in the family tree (genogram) that she was constructing. The interviewer restates Mrs. M's assertion that she does not know where Mr. M lives and learns that Mrs. M does know where he lives and

has had some contact with him. Karen again inquires about Mrs. M's marital status ("And so you're still married? You jus' separated?") and learns that they are separated. It appears that Mrs. M's story of being married but not married and having no contact but some contact is outside the interviewer's framework and dominant narratives about marriage and separation. Stuck on conventional stories, the interviewer was even less prepared to hear that Mr. M was both a grandfather and father to David!

Taking Mrs. M's perspective, we see a low-income African American woman who may have consented to the interview because she was being paid. She may have found the questions about her family background intrusive, but she did not say this directly and did cooperate. One way she may have gained power in this interview was by providing a counter-narrative about being married and subsequently shocking the interviewee. We observe how Mrs. M withheld the shocking information about David's parentage until the end of this segment, allowing for a build-up of suspense. She appears to have been successful in throwing the interviewer off balance.

Shocked Over Professional Role Reversal

Professional interviews, such as those between a social worker and client, tend to be asymmetrical and nonreciprocal (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). The normative expectation is that the interviewer ask questions and the interviewee provide answers. In therapeutic interviews, the professional is clothed with authority based on her expert knowledge. Although qualitative research interviews (such as in depth or life story interviews) tend to be based on a more reciprocal relationship than clinical interviews are, interviewers who are also clinicians may be shocked when an interviewee assumes the role of interviewer or a related professional role, or when the interviewee displays professional knowledge or professional language. By doing so, the interviewee challenges and resists the power hierarchy in a subtle way. The use of

professional terminology demonstrates the mastery of knowledge and language which are the symbols of the prestigious status of the professional. An example of shock over professional role reversal comes from an interview conducted by a middle-aged female interviewer (Roberta) with a 20-year old woman (Tanya), who had been diagnosed with a serious psychiatric disorder. The following excerpt shows what happened when the interviewer began to inquire about the reason for Tanya's psychiatric hospitalization:

Roberta: So you were in the hospital. What were you in the hospital for?

Tanya: I jumped off the roof.

Roberta: Oh. Were you trying to

Tanya: No

Roberta: kill yourself?

Tanya: No. I was having a tactile hallucination.

Roberta: Yeah. Okay. What was that like?

In this example, the interviewer assumed, based on her prior experience as a mental health professional and familiarity with master narratives within that field, that when a mental health client says that she "jumped off the roof" she was describing a suicide attempt. Understanding where the interviewer was coming from, Tanya interrupted her before she could complete her question, "Were you trying to kill yourself?" by stating, "No." Roberta's initial shock came when Tanya anticipated correctly the direction of her questioning. The interviewer was shocked again when Tanya presented an unexpected alternative storyline—"tactile hallucination"—using technical language, usually spoken by professionals. The interviewer's shock is discernible in the last line ("Yeah. Okay") where she accepts Tanya's storyline and invites her to describe her hallucination.

This interaction, like that one with Mrs. M, shows how interviewees are able to divert interviewers away from master narratives and toward counter-narratives. An experienced mental health client, Tanya was as familiar as Roberta was with the words that denote a mental health problem. Tanya resisted being Othered by redefining and renaming the event. In doing so, Tanya conveyed to the interviewer that as the owner of her own experience, she had the prerogative of labeling it. Labeling and using technical language is a double power move to negotiate more leverage in the interview.

Shocked Over Expectations Based on Stereotypes

Another type of shock occurs when expectations based on stereotypes are not met. These stereotypes evoke the person's likely prior history and set of behaviors and current personality. Gilgun's (1999) paper about Alan offers an example of unmet expectations based on stereotypes. Explaining her own shocked response to Alan, Gilgun says,

> I saw a young-looking man sitting in a chair. He had the clearest gray eyes I had ever seen. He was picture-book handsome, a blonde curl looping across a smooth, white forehead... The shock of his words figuratively knocked me to the floor….Besides the shock of his words, I was struck by the incongruence between his appearance and his crimes. What is someone who looks like Leonardo DiCaprio doing in a maximum-security prison? (pp. 190-191)

Alan's appearance did not fit the stereotype of a murderer and contradicted his deeds to such extent as to shock an experienced interviewer and social worker.

An example of a more subtle shock based on stereotypes emerges from Yamit's interview with Adam. Interviewing youth who have been involved in criminal activity and drug use, she had some stereotypical ideas about participants' likely educational histories. In this example,

Yamit begins by explaining the interview process to Adam:

Yamit: So, as I told you I'm asking you to tell me your life story, the way you remember it, and since you remember. I will ask some questions, when I'll have…

Adam: I remember myself from the kindergarten, a small and shy boy, and in eighth, ninth grade… or later, in grade ten, since then *that's it*, everything blew up

Yamit: What is it everything blew up?

Adam: That's it, blew up, I'm not shy anymore, nerves, that's it, a normal kid… what is it a normal kid? Does what I have, what I feel

Yamit: How did this change happen?

Adam: Don't know, that's the way it is

Yamit: No explanation?

Adam: Don't know

Yamit: May be you can go back, you skipped many years very fast, as if nothing had happened in them. You said that you remember yourself in the kindergarten, what do you remember from that time?

Adam: Nothing, easy, normal. No troubles and no nothing, as if a good boy till eighth grade.

Yamit: In the elementary school, can you remember a little?

Adam: Also may be, here a trouble, there a trouble, once a year one trouble, beside that - nothing, in my corner, alone… what is it alone? The friends in the recess, but in class alone, no troubles, no problems, nothing.

Yamit: Listening carefully?

Adam: Yes.

Yamit: Did you like studying?

Adam: No, not at all, boring.

Yamit: Describe to me what kind of student you were in the elementary school.

Adam: What, grades and this stuff?

Yamit: Everything, what you remember about yourself.

Adam: Just like that, I remember myself in the corner, with no one in the classes, also studying didn't interest me, nothing, sitting, drawing, reading, that's it.

Yamit: You didn't like to study so your grades were also not good?

Adam: Yes, yes, I didn't care about the tests or anything, nothing, I didn't give shit.

Yamit: Why?

Adam: Don't know, I felt it doesn't interest me all of this stuff. … I was bored, don't know, I was fed up with the town, I wanted to go out a bit, don't know, there I got along, I was in ninth grade, ok, studying, an honor roll student. After that I went back in tenth grade to Amal in town, there I was also a honor roll student, eleventh grade I started to work in industry, four months, after that , that's it, I quit everything.

The discrepancy between the interviewer's expectations and the interviewee's story is made visible in Table 1, which separates Yamit's questions from Adam's responses so that each participant's talk can be seen as a whole (see Table 1). Focusing on Yamit's column, one can see that she appears to be pressing Adam to construct a linear narrative. She pursued a line of questioning that would show how Adam's past school failures led to his criminal activity, while ignoring Adam's repeated references to his being a shy, lonely boy and continuing to be shy to this day. In addition to suppressing his story, she did not listen to his resistance. Adam

repeatedly said, “Don’t know,” “nothing,” “no,” and “that’s it.”

Reflecting on this excerpt, Yamit did not remember being "shocked" but recalled being "unsatisfied" by what he said, trying to get to the "real" story of his being a failure in school. Thus, she expected the storyline of his life story to begin with school failure and end in a criminal career. His description of himself as being a shy, lonely boy, a good boy who used to read and draw during classes, and was even an "honor roll student" did not fit into her preconceived ideas regarding youth who are involved in criminal activity. Accordingly, her shock consisted of a clash between her expectations and his explanation of who he was. Because his explanation does not fit master narratives about “delinquents,” it was difficult for Yamit to hear him. Mismatched expectations such as this are evident in the way the interviewer responds to the interviewee.

How Interviewers Handle their Shocks

When the expected does not occur and/or something else happens instead, the interviewer is surprised, confused, and moves into a state of disequilibrium. At first the interviewer has only a dim awareness that something has gone wrong. Subsequently there is a reaction. We are calling the interviewer’s response to shock “shockwaves.”

Our review of the interviews from which our examples came revealed that there were three fundamental strategies interviewers use to handle their shocks. The first is to avoid hearing potentially shocking information; the second is circular (avoidance and returning); and the third uses acceptance and moving on.

Avoidance

Some interviewers avoid facing a potential shock or avoid exploring one that they have encountered. One way the interviewers in our examples did this was to ask the interviewee a

series of questions that are peripheral to what the interviewee puts forth but met one of the goals of the interview. In Karen's interview with the grandmother, one of the goals of the interview was to construct a genogram, an intergenerational diagram of the family. After Karen received an ambiguous response to the question, “Were you married?” she proceeded to inquire about the year Mrs. M married, if she was still married, if she was separated, the name of the man she had been married to, how old he was, and if she still had contact with him. The interviewee offered brief responses but did not offer any details or explanations. At no time did the interviewer respond to the grandmother’s mocking tone of voice or to other indications that the relationship between Mrs. M and her husband was problematic. After Karen understood that the grandson who was being raised by Mrs. M was the result of an incestuous relationship, she acknowledged hearing this information but ignored its import. Instead she continued to ask questions about the family tree.

Another example of avoidance is to ignore the content put forth by the interviewee and instead explore one’s own hypotheses about the situation. Yamit learned early in her interview with Adam that he had been “a small and shy boy” in 8th or 9th grade but that in 10th grade “everything blew up.” When Adam could not explain why this change occurred, Yamit inquired about his early years in school. Even though Adam described himself as aloof, a good boy, an honor student, and not being in trouble when he was in elementary school, Yamit did not inquire further about these components of his history. Instead she persisted in creating a storyline that depicted Adam as a school failure. In so doing she missed the opportunity to explore a more complex story about a lonely honor roll student who explored a variety of lifestyles before he began to engage in criminal activity.

Circular Strategies

Circular patterns consist of avoidance around the time of the shock and a later revisiting the issue that was avoided. We noted above that Yamit avoided exploring topics that were inconsistent with her own hypotheses about the probable childhoods of those who become involved in criminal activity and drug use. Later in the interview, however, she acknowledged that when he was younger, he was "a good kid" and shy. It appears that when she is shocked she moves away from the interviewee's topic in favor of a more familiar storyline and that when she recovers she acknowledges what she had previously heard.

Gilgun (1999) gives another example of circular strategy under the subtitle: "Researcher Down a Second Time":

> "How did she die?" I asked.
>
> "No one knows," he answered.
>
> "The cause in unknown?" I asked.
>
> "Well, that's not exactly true," he answered. "They found her body by a river bank."
>
> "How did she get to the riverbank?" I asked. "She couldn't have gone down there to die. Elephants do things like this but people don't."…
>
> "They found her remains in a lime pit and identified her through dental records…" (p. 192)

Reflecting analytically on this excerpt Gilgun says: "Alan was telling the story of his wife's death with a twinkle in his gray eyes and the dimple in his left cheek showing. Without being aware, I was partially losing my analytic stance because I got caught up in his light manner when I made the remark about his wife not being an elephant. I've been ashamed of that remark ever since I understood what happened to her" (p. 192-193). In this example Gilgun tries to

"escape" from the horror of Alan's story with a joke, and then, after realizing it, comes back to face his narrative.

Acceptance and Moving On

Another approach was to accept and validate the interviewee's remarks, despite whatever personal feelings they may evoke. During the interview with Tanya, a woman with a diagnosis of a serious mental illness, Roberta was shocked at the interviewee's assertion of her knowledge about suicide and hallucinations. Although initially taken aback, Roberta responded by changing her frame so that it matched Tanya's and invited Tanya to talk about her tactile hallucination. The interviewer asked, "What was that like?" allowing Tanya to describe her hallucination. Roberta also inquired about how Tanya got onto the roof. Tanya presented a dramatic story about how she trying to cope with what she experienced as a mouse on her cheek by rolling on the roof. She cried for help, someone called the police, and the police arrived. The interviewer was attentive to the story, wondered if Tanya was afraid, and expressed concern about Tanya might have been hurt. In this case, the questions were attuned to what the interviewee was saying, eliciting an elaborate story. The story, however, was ambiguous, leaving the reader with unanswered questions about the source of the tactile hallucinations (marijuana or psychiatric illness) and the role of the presence of police in her jumping off the roof. Non-linear narratives seem to be difficult for interviewers schooled in master narratives to follow.

Discussion

The paper identified three types of shocks—those based on a violation of a social taboo, professional role reversal, and expectations based on stereotypes. In all cases, the interviewers appeared to be shocked when the person they interviewed presented content that is outside master narratives and when the interviewee interacted in ways that did not coincide with

"normative" expectations for the interview situation. Thus, both the “what” and “how” of the interview are intertwined (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005) in the process of producing a shock. Discussions of incest, child murder, and jumping from high places usually do not enter into ordinary everyday conversation. The unique interpretations some of the interviewees provided were not in alignment with stereotypical or professional views of these subjects. In cases in which interviewees or persons the interviewers discussed belonged to a "non-normative" group such as perpetrators, prisoners, and persons with mental illness, interviewers seemed to be shocked when the "non-normative" story included normative behaviors or attitudes (e.g., Adam) or when the interviewee did not look the way someone from this group is “supposed to” look (e.g., Alan).

Shock may be used by interviewees as a strategy to resist being located in master narratives as “sick,” "a failure" or "bad." By introducing content and language that make the interviewer feel puzzled or disoriented and thus disarmed, interviewees gain the opportunity to negotiate the social value of their stories. Although, as Bamberg (2005) explains, master narratives are inherently contradictory and in competition with one another because people have multiple identities and roles that are reflected in many storylines that intersect with one another, the examples presented in this article show that the interviewers seemed to be prepared to hear only the dominant storylines that they associated with specific contexts and persons of certain social locations. When they heard something different, they were caught unawares and experienced shocks that jolted them from the familiar to unknown ground.

Interviewers responded to being shocked in a variety of ways—avoidance, circular strategies, and acceptance and moving on. Avoidance is a defense, a fear reaction, and a means of preventing a clash over an issue that appears to be sensitive. Rather than exploring a

perspective that is different from her own, the interviewer ignores or suppresses the interviewee's voice. This is understandable when the content is abhorrent or otherwise offensive, but this approach does not promote a deeper, more complex, expansive narrative. The circular strategy is a less rigid approach. After an interviewer sidesteps an issue, she or he may later recognize what she or he did and return to the topic that was avoided. By that time, too, the interviewer may have recovered from the shock and is ready to face the issue. The third type of response, acceptance and moving on, fosters the telling of the story the interviewee wants to tell, and thus this seems to be the most productive approach.

As we reviewed the interviews in which shocks and shockwaves occurred, we became increasingly aware of how difficult it was for interviewers to hear stories that did not correspond to the dominant cultural narratives or storylines. Likewise, we struggled to discern why we and the interviewers were shocked. It appears that when one knows that the interviewee is "mentally ill," one expect her to act "mentally ill." If he is a youth who engaged in criminal activity and drug use, one expects him to have an earlier life history that is consistent with this outcome. If she is a grandparent raising a grandchild, one assumes she has specific characteristics that are connected to this status. Regardless of how neutral or empathetic we think we are, we are influenced by these assumptions.

The direction of our assumptions is toward finding coherence in the interviewees' accounts, with coherence based on master narratives. Accordingly, we do not ordinarily expect a woman with mental illness to present herself as an expert on her "presenting problem" and we do not usually expect a 17-year old criminal and drug user who comes from very poor family and neighborhood to have been on the honor roll as a child. How shocked we are to find out that our assumptions are not realized! By expecting our interviewees to tell us the stories we expect to

hear, we strip away their complexity, depriving them of the opportunity of presenting themselves as multifaceted.

Reading these examples, we also became aware of the value of understanding the interview as a site for the negotiation over power, using the concepts of positionality and nonunitary subjectivity. Positionality refers to the influence of the researcher's social location, personal experience, and theoretical stance, as well as interpersonal and institutional contexts of the research, on the research's process (hooks, 1984; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). It is an acknowledgment of the constructed nature of the research process and of the knowledge derived from it (Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Perceiving the interview context as the interaction of two situated persons enables us to come closer to the richness of stories or aspects of stories which may be seen otherwise as incoherent or incomprehensible. Influenced by feminist writings (Braidotti, 1991; Cixous, [1975] 1976; Irigaray, [1974] 1985; Kristeva, [1979] 1986; Rosenau, 1992), Bloom (1998) resists the claim of an individual essence, in terms of identity, in Western humanist ideology, in order to create space for changes in subjectivity over time and for the "multiple subject positions people occupy which influence the formation of subjectivity" (p. 3). Such a space would enable the interviewer to reveal her nonunitary subjectivity, that is, her fragmented and fractured subjectivity, as it manifests itself in different relational contexts and moments and as it changes over time. Rather than a fixed, distinct entity that “is,” identity is multiple, fluid, and complex (Sands, 1996).

Expecting interviewees to express nonunitary subjectivity, we argue, may help interviewers to avoid "Othering", that is, creating a simplistic distinction between "we" and "them" and assigning the good and positive qualities to "we," and the negative to "them," the Others (Fine, 1994; Krumer-Nevo, 2002). Whereas positionality allows for unfixed or

unessential identities, because identities are defined anew in every interaction (Anthias, 2003), Othering is the process of perceiving others as having fixed identities. As such, Othering is used to denigrate those in the margins of society – women, the disabled, the poor, people of color or those who are disenfranchised because of their ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and so on. "We" are subjects while they are "objects" (de Beauvoir, 1984). The differentiation between "we" and "them" leads to a devaluation of the Other. "We" project upon the Other that which is undesirable in ourselves or repressed and buried in our unconscious (Kristeva, 1991).

"Narrative conventions" or "storylines" help us understand the ways in which social conventions influence stories, but they ignore the influence of power relations on the practice of interviewing and understanding what a story is. As such, these concepts may function as mechanisms of "Othering". We come to every interview encounter with a predisposition regarding our interviewee, based on what we already know about her. Even when we think that we do not know much about her, we know some details regarding her social location, her response to our invitation to be interviewed, and after seeing her we also have the impressions of how old she is, what she looks like, and so on. This knowledge becomes part of an implicit categorization of a set of expectations regarding the interviewee's behavior and the interview process. Shocks remind us that our assumptions were unfounded.

Discussions of reflexivity portray it as a means to unmask the interviewer's biases, and preconceived ideas and assumptions that derive from embeddedness in the world that is studied (e.g., Devine & Health, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Still, there is a need to delve into the nature of these biases and predetermined ideas. Based on the analysis of the examples we previously presented, we argue that these biases are inherently connected to the process of Othering. Interview shocks are the result of violations of the implicit expected narrative. As such

they serve as signals or signs of our positionality and of our implicit expectations to hear a coherent and conventional narrative. When an interviewer ignores the story that the interviewee wants to tell and presses the interviewee to tell the one that she expects to hear, the interviewer is engaging in Othering.

The analysis of interview shocks thus is a useful means to guide interviewer reflexivity. It suggests that one focus on listening to and hearing what the interviewee is trying to tell, even if the story is abhorrent. The analysis of shocks also makes evident the need for awareness of our own and our interviewee's positionality and inclinations one may have to impose cultural myths on Others. By "bracketing" our expectations and listening for atypical storylines, we may be able to achieve a better understanding of the interviewee's nonunitary subjectivity. After all, the purpose of our inquiry is to hear about the unusual—not to confirm master narratives! Finally, the analysis of shocks suggests that we listen for "nonunitary coherence," that is, storylines that are nuanced, complex, and non-rational. As we explore the potential of the narrative mode of thought (Bruner, 1986), we need to explore its potential to delve into ambiguity.

By pointing to shocks and shockwaves as signals of clashes between different narratives and as signals for negotiation over social power, this paper adds to the growing body of knowledge which locates interviews in their social contexts, exploring the influence of power relations on the interaction of interviewer-interviewee. In keeping with the postmodern turn toward highlighting marginal discourses (hooks, 1984), positionality and multiple voices (Alvesson, 2002), we view shock as a strategy by which interviewees can move their previously muted voices to the forefront where they can be heard.

Table 1: The Interviewer's Questions and the Interviewee's Responses

Turn	**Yamit (interviewer)**	**Adam (interviewee)**
1	So, as I told you I'm asking you to tell me your life story, the way you remember it, and since you remember. I will ask some questions, when I'll have…	
2		I remember myself from the kindergarten, a small and shy boy, and in eighth, ninth grade… or later, in grade ten, since then *that's it*, everything blew up
3	What is it everything blew up?	
4		That's it, blew up, I'm not shy anymore, nerves, that's it, a normal kid… what is it a normal kid? Does what I have, what I feel
5	How did this change happen?	
6		Don't know, that's the way it is
7	No explanation?	
8		Don't know
9	May be you can go back, you skipped many years very fast, as if nothing had happened in them. You said that you remember yourself in the kindergarten, what	

	do you remember from that time?	
10		Nothing, easy, normal. No troubles and no nothing, as if a good boy till eighth grade.
11	In the elementary school, can you remember a little?	
12		Also may be, here a trouble, there a trouble, once a year one trouble, beside that -nothing, in my corner, alone… what is it alone? The friends in the recess, but in class alone, no troubles, no problems, nothing.
13	Listening carefully?	
14		Yes.
15	Did you like studying?	
16		No, not at all, boring.
17	Describe to me what kind of student you were in the elementary school.	
18		What, grades and this stuff?
19	Everything, what you remember about yourself.	
20		Just like that, I remember myself in the corner, with no one in the classes, also studying didn't interest me, nothing, sitting, drawing, reading, that's it.
21	You didn't like to study so your	

grades were also not good?

22 Yes, yes, I didn't care about the tests or anything, nothing, I didn't give shit.

23 Why?

24 Don't know, I felt it doesn't interest me all of this stuff. … I was bored, don't know, I was fed up with the town, I wanted to go out a bit, don't know, there I got along, I was in ninth grade, ok, studying, an honor roll student. After that I went back in tenth grade to Amal in town, there I was also a honor roll student, eleventh grade I started to work in industry, four months, after that , that's it, I quit everything.

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