

Using Shadowed Data

When we conduct unstructured interactive interviews, we tend to forget that the participants speak not only for themselves but also for others. This “speaking-for-others”—information that participants give us about the types, characteristics, and dimensions of concepts, perceptions, behaviors, and opinions of others—I call *shadowed data*. The most obvious use of shadowed data is when it is necessary to obtain data about a person or groups that are otherwise inaccessible. Perhaps it is not possible to interview the other person(s) because of absence, death, or illness (aphasic and so forth), so it is necessary to ask relatives for information about the others’ perspectives or experiences. Obviously, shadowed data is second-hand and may not be as useful as interviewing the person directly, but there may be no alternative.

Another, and more important, role of using shadowed data comes from the interview text itself. We all have different ways of seeing the world and different and unique perspectives, and we know that these different ways and views are clustered and patterned. During the course of an interview, participants give us information about others who are like them, or who are not like them, and can describe the groups. Within the interview itself, there are linguistic indicators of these groupings. Let us consider a few: Participants may use the pronouns *you* and *your* to refer to themselves as belonging to a particular class of people or to refer to the *generalized self*: “When *you* are in a wheelchair” is a tag that precedes a statement about what people do or think about those who use wheelchairs. These statements provide information on wheelchair users that implicitly contrasts them to those who do not use wheelchairs. Sometimes *they* and *them* may be used to indicate what I call the *generalized other*, the behaviors of a different group to which the participant does not belong. An excellent example of such a use of shadowed data is a recently published study about bisexuality (Lichtenstein, 2000).

Our is indicative of the embodiment of the other person in an unexpected situation. For example, a wife may refer to “our diabetes” when it is actually her husband who is diabetic. Listen for the use of *you know*—sometimes dialogue is peppered with this phrase. *You know* does not always indicate that the speakers are looking for acknowledgement or understanding but rather are perhaps asking for their perspectives to be recognized. When this occurs, the excellent interviewer plays dumb, responding with “tell me” and thus obtaining even richer descriptions.

These modes of speech in an interview have important ramifications for various aspects of the research process:

1. Exploring the use of the generalized self and the generalized other makes the domain and the various components of the phenomenon understandable more quickly so

that analysis goes faster. Ethnographers use this technique all the time when interviewing their key informant(s). When researchers use grounded theory and other methods, it provides important information that may direct theoretical sampling and facilitate the organization of other types of sampling frames. One final adage, also from ethnography, is: When seeking shadowed data, use expert informants rather than those who are new to the scene. Expert informants are able to provide the necessary generalizations on which to base subsequent work.

2. The perceptions from outside a certain group (i.e., the generalized other) may not coincide with how the people from within the group see themselves. Nevertheless, outsider's perspectives may provide interesting alternative data. These data make the data set richer and more interesting.
3. These perceptions of others may easily be verified, both from within and outside the group concerned. Thus, not only may the researcher reach an understanding of the phenomenon more quickly, but saturation may also be achieved and the analysis validated more quickly and efficiently.
4. The use of shadowed data makes a mockery of qualitative researchers' habits of reporting samples as the exact number of people interviewed. I am not suggesting we should discard this habit but rather that we interpret our reporting of *ns* differently when shadowed data is used to enhance sampling and analysis.

Shadowed data may therefore emerge as subtle nuances of meaning in interviews, but the researcher may also purposefully seek shadowed data. When interviewing, simply ask, "Is that true for everyone?" "What do others think?" and then probe, asking questions about the alternative views.

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REFERENCE

- Lichtenstein, B. (2000). Secret encounters: Black men, bisexuality, and AIDS in Alabama. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 14, 374-393.