

THIRD EDITION

Interviewing **as Qualitative** **Research**

*A Guide for Researchers in
Education and the Social Sciences*

IRVING SEIDMAN

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in Education and the
Social Sciences

Third Edition

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Irving Seidman



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Preface

In my experience as a teacher, I have worked with many graduate students who have deep and passionate interests they wish to pursue in their dissertations. Often, however, they are stymied by the lack of an appropriate and feasible methodology. They are, in Sartre's (1968) terms, "in search of a method."

This book is intended for doctoral candidates who are engaged in that search and who think that in-depth interviewing might be appropriate for them and their research topic. It will also serve more experienced researchers who are interested in qualitative research and may be turning to the possibilities of interviewing for the first time. Finally, the book is geared to professors in search of a supplementary text on in-depth interviewing that connects method and technique with broader issues of qualitative research. For both individual and classroom use, the book provides a step-by-step introduction to the research process using in-depth interviewing and places those steps within the context of significant issues in qualitative research.

The text centers on a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing. The Introduction outlines how I came to do interviewing research. Chapter 1 discusses a rationale for using interviewing as a research method and the potential of narratives as ways of knowing. Chapter 2 presents a structure for in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing that my associates and I have used in our research projects. The text provides specific guidance on how to carry out this approach to interviewing and the principles of adapting it to one's own goals. Chapter 3 explores issues that may make proposal writing daunting and discusses meaningful but simple questions that can guide the researcher through the process. Chapter 4 stresses pitfalls and snares to avoid in the process, and discusses issues in establishing access to, making contact with, and selecting participants. Chapter 5, responding to the increasing concern about ethical issues in interviewing research, introduces the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and its implications for researchers who interview. This chapter explains the risks inherent in interviewing research that lead IRBs to require Informed Consent Forms. The chapter explicates the major points that an informed consent form should include, alerts readers to corresponding ethical issues,

and assesses the complexities and debates that swirl around the IRB process and informed consent. Chapter 6 avoids a cookbook approach but discusses specific interviewing skills and techniques and links them to important issues in interviewing and qualitative research. The chapter stresses how to listen as well as how to ask questions. Chapter 7 explores interviewing as a relationship. It places that relationship within the context of major contemporary social issues that are often embedded in the interaction between interviewers and participants. The chapter also faces squarely the potential for confusing in-depth interviewing research with therapy, cautions readers about the complexities of rapport, and stresses equity as the necessary element in interviewing relationships. Chapter 8 discusses how to manage, work with, and share the data generated by in-depth interviewing. It guides the reader through a step-by-step process of working with the extensive material that interviewers gather. The chapter presents two potential analytic processes: one leading to identifying themes that emerge from the interviewing material and the other leading to developing narrative profiles of participants' experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences. Both are ways of sharing and discussing results of interviewing with a wider audience.

The Appendix presents two narrative profiles. These examples reveal the potential of interviewing both to tap the depth of life-and-death experiences and to explore the complexities and significances of everyday experience.

While proposing a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing, the book provides and discusses principles and methods that can be adapted to a range of interviewing approaches. Throughout the text I have provided examples from interviews done by colleagues, graduate students with whom I work, and from my own research that illustrate the issues under discussion. I try to maintain a balance between sharing my experience with in-depth interviewing so that a reader can use what he or she may, and giving enough explicit guidance so that a reader can successfully conceptualize and carry out a research project based on the approach described.

In addition, I describe a practice project that individuals, entire classes, or workshops can use to gain concrete experience with the method in a short amount of time. I also guide readers to ways to study, reflect upon, and assess their own interviewing practice.

My goal has been to write a text clear and practical enough to provide useful guidance about in-depth interviewing as a research method. At the same time my objective has been to connect that method to broad-

er issues in qualitative research. To that end, I selectively refer readers to additional readings that lead to further consideration of methodological, ethical, and philosophical issues in interviewing and qualitative research. In addition, the Internet has become an important research tool, and I have pointed readers to relevant Internet resources that are now readily available. My hope is that the emphasis on principles in the guidance the book offers and the integration of broader issues in qualitative research will make the book useful to a wide range of researchers in education and the social sciences.

Aristotle (1976) said that virtuous and ethical behavior involves doing well, whatever we do. My further hope is that this book will guide interviewing researchers to a method that engages their minds, touches their hearts, and supports their doing good work.

Acknowledgments

One of the pleasures for me in the years since this book was first published has been the contact I have had with new researchers who have e-mailed and called to discuss their research projects. Some of their names appear in Chapter 2. To all of them I express my appreciation for their interest in and work with the approach to research outlined in this book.

I am indebted to Ms. Julie Simpson, Manager of Research Conduct and Compliance Services of the Office of Sponsored Research and Service, University of New Hampshire, Durham. Throughout my exploration of the Institutional Review Board review process, Ms. Simpson has guided me on specific and general issues. While she is not responsible for any shortcomings in this area, her generous, informed, and thoughtful guidance led me to a better understanding of the IRB process.

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Throughout this work—thanks to the support of Linda Griffin, Ken Divoll, and my colleagues in the Secondary Teacher Education Program—I have had the research assistance of Frederick Asante-Somuah, an outstanding graduate student from Ghana. He has been meticulous in his efforts, good spirited, and talented in his command of the new electronic databases in our library. Thanks also to Linda Neas and Jennifer Goodheart for their timely support. I also wish to express my appreciation to the Interlibrary Loan Department, and to Stephen McGinty and Barbara Morgan, Reference Librarians of our W.E.B. Du Bois Library.

I am deeply appreciative of the efforts of doctoral candidates Tony Burgess and Nate Allen of George Washington University and Margaret Boyko, Roel Garcia, and Tom Telicki of the School of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst who read and gave me specific, thoughtful, and very useful feedback to Chapter 5.

My wife, Linda, and son, Ethan, have once again contributed significantly to whatever strengths the book may have through their considered and talented editing.

Thank you to David Schwandt and Margaret Gorman of the Executive Leadership Program of George Washington University and to the officers of the New England Educational Research Organization (NEERO) who have offered me opportunities to present workshops on in-depth interviewing in which I have been able to clarify and test ideas in this book. I also want to express my continued gratitude to Daniel P. Schwartz for his teaching, which stays with me.

I deeply appreciate Teachers College Press's support of this third edition and in particular the thoughtfulness of Jessica Balun, Susan Liddicoat, Nancy Power, Peter Sieger, and Shannon Waite.

While the above acknowledgment focuses on those to whom I am indebted for their support of this third edition, I do not want the publishing of a new edition of this book to mean the loss of attribution to family, friends, teachers, colleagues, associates, and graduate students whose early support has stayed with me as I have continued this work: Clifford Adelman, Theresa Barton, Sara Biondello, John Booss, Kathryn Charmaz, Richard Clark, Elizabeth Cohen, William Compagnone, Edward W. Hughes Jr., Sarah Kuhn, Alice Levenson, Ruth Levenson, Sari and George Lipkin, Lawrence F. Locke, Robert Maloy, Lori Mestre, Linda Miller-Cleary, Judith H. Miller, Jane Nagle, James O'Donnell, Sally Rubinstein, Mary Bray Schatzkamer, Alex Seidman, Louis Seidman, Rachel Filene Seidman, Patricio Sullivan, Mark Tetrault, and John Wirt.

Since the last edition of this book, our daughter Rachel and son-in-law Benjamin Filene have brought into the world another avid listener to stories, their daughter Hazel, younger sister of Eliza. When asked what it meant to live well, Freud was reported to have said, "To work and love well." In my continued and certainly imperfect attempt to merge the two, I dedicate this edition to our granddaughter, Hazel.

Introduction

How I Came to Interviewing

In my study at home, I have a picture of my grandfather, whom I never met, on the bookshelf. He was born sometime around 1870 and he died in the early 1940s. In the sepia photograph that I have, he is a bearded man with sad eyes, wearing a worn jacket over a sweater and tie. His eyes look out at me no matter where I am in the room.

Whenever I asked my father about his father, he said his father was a religious man. “What did he do?” I would ask, and my father would say, “He studied.” I never got very much of his story. I know only that he was a religious man, that he studied, that he didn’t do much else, that his family was poor, and that he died of a heart attack running away from the Germans early in World War II.

My father was an immigrant from Russia. He came to this country with my mother in 1921. While I was growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, and upon visits to my family home later, I asked my father about his experiences in Russia (my mother, also from Russia, died in 1963): What was it like to live there? How did he come to leave? I asked him about his family, about what it was like to be a child in Russia.

His reply, almost invariably, was, “Why do you want to know? We were poor. Everyone was poor. There was nothing there. America is wonderful. Why do you want to know about Russia?” My father died in 1989 and, although I have accumulated a few anecdotes about his days in Russia, I did not learn the story of his life there, and I never will.

After graduating from college, I earned an M.A.T. degree and taught English for 4½ years in every grade from 7 through 12. Perhaps it was as a teacher of English that I first came to see stories and the details of people’s lives as a way of knowing and understanding.

To suggest that stories are a way to knowledge and understanding may not seem scholarly. When I was earning my doctorate in education in the mid-1960s, the faculty in my graduate program in teacher education seemed almost totally committed to building knowledge in education through experimentation. My graduate experience was governed by a sense that research in education could be as scientific as it was in the natural and

physical sciences. Experimentalists informed by behaviorism dominated my graduate experience in research. I remember sitting in an advanced educational psychology class. The professor was discussing conditioning as a basis for understanding learning. It was a class of about 60, but discussion was officially encouraged. I raised my hand and said something about humans being different from rats because people had language. I don't remember exactly what the professor said in return, but it was not what I would call today a collaborative response.

That day brought to a culmination my feeling of being stifled and frustrated by behaviorism during the first year of my graduate study. Only of late have I come to appreciate a suggestion my doctoral advisor and mentor, Alfred Grommon, made to me: that I do a biography of one of the early presidents of the National Council of Teachers of English for my dissertation. At that time, I considered his suggestion well intended but somehow not connected to my interests. Now I realize that he may have been offering me a way out of the Procrustean bed of behaviorism and experimentalism that pervaded my graduate experience.

Despite my aversions, I did an experimental dissertation. I designed a study of the effects on students' achievement motivation of teachers' comments on their writing. I had different treatment groups; I established independent variables and dependent variables; I enlisted a group of English teachers in the field to carry out "the treatments" that I had designed on "the subjects."

Nathan Gage's (1963) *Handbook of Research on Teaching* had recently been published. In some respects it was treated as a bible in our graduate program. I remember reading and rereading, and developing mnemonic codes to help me remember the threats to validity and reliability described and analyzed in Campbell and Stanley's (1963) chapter on "Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Design for Research in Teaching."

While at the time I chafed under the heavy emphasis on experimentalism, I now respect how committed my graduate institution was to research in education. Despite my resistance to the approach then, I now realize how valuable and important it was for me to confront the assumptions of positivism and behaviorism that seemed to me to dominate the institution. In my thinking about both teaching and research, my professional career has been shaped by that confrontation. There were also, at the time, professors who provided an alternative point of view. They helped open my mind to exploring new intellectual paths, especially the impact of social and cultural forces on individual experience in education. In the end, my graduate school communicated

a sense of imperative about research in education that has had a long-lasting effect on me for which I am grateful.

As I continued my career in education after I earned my doctorate in 1967, I took a position that left me confused about research. I joined the English Department of the University of Washington as one of three faculty members in English education. I had surprisingly little contact with the College of Education as I began to face the pressures of publishing in my field. On some levels, I was estranged from my own dissertation because I had not really believed in its methodology, so I did not then and never have sought to publish an article based on it. That first and formative year, I did do some writing, but no research. I often wonder how I would have figured out my relationship to research if I had stayed at the University of Washington. Given my experimental experience, my discomfort with it, and my position as a teacher educator in a strong, conservative English department where the notion of research was that of literary scholarship, my research options at that time were not clear to me.

I stayed at the University of Washington only a year. I had a good position in an exceptionally strong department in a public university that was the pride of the Northwest; but I left in 1968 to become the assistant dean of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst under the leadership of Dwight Allen. This is not the place to dwell at length on that part of the story (*Frenzy at UMass*, 1970; Resnik, 1972). It looms larger in my mind, I am sure, than in most others'. Suffice it to say that our goal reflected the times and our sense of them. Our objective was to reform professional education and to have our School of Education play a role in making society more equitable. I will always respect the idealism of those goals. In our inexperience and naiveté, we made many mistakes along the way—in and among some significant accomplishments. As the times changed, and our mistakes accumulated, a new administration was called for. I was a faculty member again after 6 intense years as an administrator. Although I learned much about higher education during my tenure as an administrator, I gained little new experience in doing research.

After my administrative years, I was fortunate enough to take a sabbatical in London with my family. I had the chance to do reading that would allow me to return responsibly to my teaching. In addition to reading works on the teaching of English, which I had been away from for 7 years, I read Thomas Kuhn's (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* and thought about my experience with science and research as a gradu-

ate student. I read that book just in time. When I got back to the States, references to “governing paradigms” in journal articles abounded.

Upon my return, I co-taught a course with Robert Woodbury on Leadership in Higher Education. A new faculty member by the name of David Schuman had joined our school in the area of higher education. Through my teaching in the Higher Education Program I came to know him. Of the many constitutive events that led me to interviewing as a research methodology, meeting and working with Schuman was the most significant. Because I had rejected the approach to research I had learned in graduate school and had not learned a new approach in my short time at Washington, or in the 6 years I was an administrator, I was, paradoxically, a relatively experienced faculty member searching for a research methodology.

Schuman was beginning to write a book based on interviewing research that he had done with Kenneth Dolbeare. Schuman’s book *Policy Analysis, Education, and Everyday Life* did not come out until 1982, but in the meantime he generously shared with Patrick Sullivan and me his methodological approach, which he called “phenomenological interviewing.” He also directed me to some of the readings he had done in coming to the type of interviewing research he and Dolbeare had done. I remember in particular his suggesting to me that I read William James’s (1947) *Essays in Radical Empiricism* and *In a Pluralistic Universe*, Sartre’s (1968) *Search for a Method*, Matson’s (1966) *The Broken Image*, and, most directly relevant, Alfred Schutz’s (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*.

I was ready for what Schuman was generously willing to share. I remember the feeling that I would like to do interviewing as a research method. I remember thinking what a good way it was to learn about people and schools as I listened to Schuman and began to build in my mind upon what he was saying. Additionally, I had had experience with psychotherapy. Through that process, I learned to appreciate even further the importance of language and stories in a person’s life as ways toward knowing and understanding. That personal experience made me even more ready to consider interviewing as a research method.

Sullivan and I were co-teaching a course for community college teachers on critical issues in community college teaching. Sullivan, with his colleague, Judith Speidel, had earlier done a documentary film on the Shakers (*The Shaker Legacy*, 1976), and we decided now to do a film on teaching in community colleges based on the interviewing method we had learned from Schuman. We received a grant from the Exxon Corporation to support our interviewing 25 community college teach-

ers on how they came to teaching, what it was like for them, and what it meant to them.

The film was produced in 1982, and we then received a second grant from the National Institute of Education (NIE) to expand our interviewing to community college faculty in California and New York. The work continued to be a deeply satisfying way to do research. I loved talking with people about their work as faculty members and learning about community college education through the experience of those who taught there. We interviewed a total of 76 community college faculty and, through the efforts of Mary Bray Schatzkamer, 24 students to try to gain an understanding of what it was like to work and teach in a community college. That interviewing led to a draft of a manuscript called "What We Have Learned About In-Depth Interviewing" that was published as Chapter 14 of our Final Report to NIE (Seidman, Sullivan, & Schatzkamer, 1983) and a book on community college teaching called *In the Words of the Faculty* (Seidman, 1985).

While doing our research on community college faculty, Sullivan and I began to co-teach a graduate seminar, *In-Depth Interviewing and Issues in Qualitative Work*. I continue to teach that seminar and to do interviewing research.

Interviewing the community college teachers was the first research I had done that was neither literary nor experimental. I had finally found a way to do "empirical" work that was emotionally and intellectually satisfying. In spite of problems and complications everywhere in the research process, from conceiving the idea and contacting participants to writing up the results of 3 years of interviewing, this kind of work was and continues to be deeply satisfying for me. It is hard and sometimes draining, but I have never lost the feeling that it is a privilege to gather the stories of people through interviewing and to come to understand their experience through their stories. Sharing those stories through developing profiles of the people I had interviewed in their own words and making thematic connections among their experiences proved to be a fruitful way of working with the material and of writing about what I had learned. A good deal of what follows is an attempt to describe and explain the roots of the intellectual and emotional pleasure I have gained from interviewing as a research method in education.

One final introductory note: Although this book concentrates on in-depth interviewing as a method of research in education, I am not proposing it as the sole, or the best, method of doing research. Some scholars argue that having multiple sources of data is one of the intrinsic

characteristics of qualitative research (see Patton, 1989). The interviewing method I describe, explain, and, I hope, illuminate can be done in combination with other approaches to understanding the world outside ourselves. On the other hand, I think a case can be made that in some research situations the in-depth interview, as the primary and perhaps singular method of investigation, is most appropriate. Use of in-depth interviews alone, when done with skill, can avoid tensions that sometimes arise when a researcher uses multiple methods. That is especially the case when those methods may be based on different assumptions of what it means to understand the experience of others.

Why Interview?

I interview because I am interested in other people's stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing. The root of the word *story* is the Greek word *histor*, which means one who is "wise" and "learned" (Watkins, 1985, p. 74). Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. Every whole story, Aristotle tells us, has a beginning, a middle, and an end (Butcher, 1902). In order to give the details of their experience a beginning, middle, and end, people must reflect on their experience. It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience. (See Schutz, 1967, p. 12 and p. 50, for aspects of the relationship between reflection and meaning making.)

Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236–237). Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people. W. E. B. Du Bois knew this when he wrote, "I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning of life and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best" (Wideman, 1990, p. xiv).

Although anthropologists have long been interested in people's stories as a way of understanding their culture, such an approach to research in education has not been widely accepted. For many years those who were trying to make education a respected academic discipline in universities argued that education could be a science (Bailyn, 1963). They urged their colleagues in education to adapt research models patterned after those in the natural and physical sciences.

In the 1970s a reaction to the dominance of experimental, quantitative, and behaviorist research in education began to develop (Gage, 1989). The critique had its own energy and was also a reflection of the era's more general resistance to received authority (Gitlin, 1987, esp.

chap. 4). Researchers in education split into two, almost warring, camps: quantitative and qualitative.

It is interesting to note that the debate between the two camps got especially fierce and the polemics more extreme when the economics of higher education took a downturn in the mid-1970s and early 1980s (Gage, 1989). But the political battles were informed by real epistemological differences. The underlying assumptions about the nature of reality, the relationship of the knower and the known, the possibility of objectivity, the possibility of generalization, inherent in each approach are different and to a considerable degree contradictory. To begin to understand these basic differences in assumptions, I urge you to read James (1947), Lincoln and Guba (1985, chap. 1), Mannheim (1975), and Polanyi (1958).

For those interested in interviewing as a method of research, perhaps the most telling argument between the two camps centers on the significance of language to inquiry with human beings. Bertaux (1981) has argued that those who urge educational researchers to imitate the natural sciences seem to ignore one basic difference between the subjects of inquiry in the natural sciences and those in the social sciences: The subjects of inquiry in the social sciences can talk and think. Unlike a planet, or a chemical, or a lever, "If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on" (p. 39).

At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language. To understand human behavior means to understand the use of language (Heron, 1981). Heron points out that the original and archetypal paradigm of human inquiry is two persons talking and asking questions of each other. He says:

The use of language, itself, . . . contains within it the paradigm of cooperative inquiry; and since language is the primary tool whose use enables human construing and intending to occur, it is difficult to see how there can be any more fundamental mode of inquiry for human beings into the human condition. (p. 26)

Interviewing, then, is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience. To those who would ask, however, "Is telling stories science?" Peter Reason (1981) would respond,

The best stories are those which stir people's minds, hearts, and souls and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science

that can more fully serve this aim. The question, then, is not “Is story telling science?” but “Can science learn to tell good stories?” (p. 50)

THE PURPOSE OF INTERVIEWING

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. (See Patton, 1989, for an exception.) At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (For a deeply thoughtful elaboration of a phenomenological approach to research, see Van Manen, 1990, from whom the notion of exploring “lived” experience mentioned throughout this text is taken.)

Being interested in others is the key to some of the basic assumptions underlying interviewing technique. It requires that we interviewers keep our egos in check. It requires that we realize we are not the center of the world. It demands that our actions as interviewers indicate that others’ stories are important.

At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth. That is why people whom we interview are hard to code with numbers, and why finding pseudonyms for participants¹ is a complex and sensitive task. (See Kvale, 1996, pp. 259–260, for a discussion of the dangers of the careless use of pseudonyms.) Their stories defy the anonymity of a number and almost that of a pseudonym. To hold the conviction that we know enough already and don’t need to know others’ stories is not only anti-intellectual; it also leaves us, at one extreme, prone to violence to others (Todorov, 1984).

Schutz (1967, chap. 3) offers us guidance. First of all, he says that it is never possible to understand another perfectly, because to do so would mean that we had entered into the other’s stream of consciousness and experienced what he or she had. If we could do that, we would *be* that other person.

Recognizing the limits on our understanding of others, we can still strive to comprehend them by understanding their actions. Schutz gives the example of walking in the woods and seeing a man chopping wood. The observer can watch this behavior and have an “observational understanding” of the woodchopper. But what the observer understands as a result of this observation may not be at all consistent with how the woodchopper views his own behavior. (In analogous terms, think of the prob-

lem of observing students or teachers.) To understand the woodchopper's behavior, the observer would have to gain access to the woodchopper's "subjective understanding," that is, know what meaning he himself made out of his chopping wood. The way to meaning, Schutz says, is to be able to put behavior in context. Was the woodchopper chopping wood to supply a logger, heat his home, or get in shape? (For Schutz's complete and detailed explication of this argument, see esp. chaps. 1–3. For a thoughtful secondary source on research methodology based on phenomenology, for which Schutz is one primary resource, see Moustakas, 1994.)

Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). To observe a teacher, student, principal, or counselor provides access to their behavior. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. The best article I have read on the importance of context for meaning is Elliot Mishler's (1979) "Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?" the theme of which was later expanded into his book, *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (1986). Ian Dey (1993) also stresses the significance of context in the interpretation of data in his useful book on qualitative data analysis.

INTERVIEWING: "THE" METHOD OR "A" METHOD?

The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the "others" who make up the organization or carry out the process. Social abstractions like "education" are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built (Ferrarotti, 1981). So much research is done on schooling in the United States; yet so little of it is based on studies involving the perspective of the students, teachers, administrators, counselors, special subject teachers, nurses, psychologists, cafeteria workers, secretaries, school crossing guards, bus drivers, parents, and school committee members, whose individual and collective experience constitutes schooling.

A researcher can approach the experience of people in contemporary organizations through examining personal and institutional docu-