Conversational Interviews and Multiple-case Research in Psychology

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The use of conversational interviews within a multiple-case framework (after Rosenwald, 1988) is described as a method to address research questions in psychology. The assumptions that underlie the method, the essential aspects of the method, the analytical processes used to create theory, and the criteria for evaluating theory are each discussed in turn. The starting point is an assumption that reality, and hence psychological phenomena, are constructed both within the individual and through social interaction. The consequence is that multiple, dynamic, and potentially contradictory realities are assumed to exist. These realities are best understood through a collaboration between researcher and participants in which the social worlds of the participants are brought together through the researcher. The aim is to generate theory that is convincing and useful. One way of achieving this aim is through conversational interviews within a multiple-case framework. An example is presented that provides concrete illustration of the key points.

All research is conducted within a framework of assumptions that determine what questions are legitimate and how answers may be obtained. Psychological research is predominantly conducted within a framework of assumptions consistent with logical positivism. These assumptions include the existence of a single static reality that can be discovered through an objective process of hypothesis testing. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the value of research that is not consistent with these assumptions. Here, we explore the use of conversational interviews and multiple-case research within an alternative framework in which reality is assumed to be socially constructed, multiple, and dynamic; and research is viewed as an inherently subjective process of creating theory and understanding that is convincing and useful. These assumptions are similar to those of a number of recent approaches such as appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1991), and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The paper concludes by illustrating the key points through a discussion of research conducted by the first author.

Each person shapes their own social world within themselves. Each person's social world is also shaped by their interactions with others. Meanings are continually constructed and reconstructed both within the individual and through social interactions. Shared meanings are created through these social interactions, and these shared meanings constitute social reality (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Gillett, 1995; Henwood & Nicolson, 1995; Patton, 1990; Rosenwald, 1988).

Asserting the constructedness of reality allows the facticity that is typically assigned to psychological phenomena to lapse. The positivist assumption of a single, static reality gives way to an assumption of temporary, negotiated, and constructed realities; and consequently, psychological phenomena are viewed as temporary, fluid, and negotiable syntheses of past, present, and future (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Karlsson, 1992).

An assumption of socially constructed realities also challenges the construction of science as neutral, disinterested, and value free. Instead, the researcher is a part of a social relationship through which knowledge and understanding are constructed. At its most extreme, the assumption of the constructedness of reality, and the inevitable subjectivity that follows, leads to the solipsist conclusion that the researcher and the participant are locked into their own social worlds, and no shared understanding is possible. However, life is lived on the basis of the assumption of shared meanings (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Although the experience and consciousness of interacting individuals can never be identical, they are connected at the very least, and inferences can be, and are, made. As Kapferer (1986) puts it, "paradoxically, your experience is *made* mine; I experience my experience of you" (p. 189).

Thus, although a researcher's voice must always be distinct from the participant's, the researcher's voice can be grounded in the research participants' experiences and can reflect a shared understanding.

An implication of these assumptions is that psychological phenomena are best understood through understanding the individual's own construction of their social world. It also follows that the individual's constructions of their social world are lived out and modified, not only on a daily basis, but also as they are communicated to the researcher. Similarly, the researcher's understanding of the individual's social world is preconceived, and yet it is also socially constructed through communication with the participants and others during the period of research activity (T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998). Accepting the validity of such dynamic social realities has the additional implication that an individual may experience contradictory realities. Although the creation of ordered, consistent, and coherent realities is conventionally assumed to be an important task in everyday living, this assumption is rejected in favour of a recognition of the lived experience of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and complexities of everyday life (for an example, see Gergen, 1991).

MULTIPLE-CASE RESEARCH

If psychological phenomena are located within socially constructed, multiple, dynamic, and potentially contradictory realities, then investigation of these phenomena requires a

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method that permits the construction of theory at the phenomenological level of the individual while embracing the connections between individuals. Multiple-case research is grounded in phenomenology, and brings individual cases into conversation with one another (through the researcher) to construct shared realities out of individuals' perspectives (Rosenwald, 1988). The multiple-case method has the advantage of being both ideographic and nomothetic, in that it seeks both an understanding of the individual, as an individual, and an understanding of the theoretical constructs that are relevant between individuals.

Bringing individuals into conversation with one another through the researcher facilitates the construction of useful understandings of the realities of their lives. This construction, or theory, is a synthesis of images (in Rosenwald's terms), or a synthesis of stories. Each story reflects a particular vantage point that becomes a part of the overall synthesis. Although the synthesis is constructed in tandem with the participants, and is grounded in the participants' stories, it is, ultimately, the researcher's own construction (T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Geertz, 1988; see further discussion in the Conversational Interviews section).

The selection of participants for the research is a critical, but vexing, issue. A rich understanding of any particular phenomenon would be facilitated by choosing participants who are maximally different from one another with respect to some aspects of the phenomena. However, it cannot be known in advance which participants are most likely to represent distinctive and informative vantage points. A small, purposive sample is appropriate in such instances (Blumer, 1969). To select participants, the researcher purposively draws on his or her own cultural experiences and understanding of the issue to choose individuals who are considered likely to develop the researcher's understanding. The developing theory, or synthesis, informs the choice of additional participants.

Multiple-case research typically involves a sample of between 8 and 20 participants who represent unique vantage points on the issue under consideration (Rosenwald, 1988). For example, Bateson (1990) selected a sample of 5 women, Mary Gergen selected a sample of 8 women (Gergen & Gergen, 1991), Ochberg (1987) selected a sample of 11 men and wrote a book on the basis of 7 of the men, and Ballou (1978) selected a sample of 12 women. Samples of this magnitude make it possible to consider each individual as a particular, or as a case, whilst taking advantage of the capacity to compare between cases, and seek similarity of themes and points of illuminating difference.

STORIES AND NARRATIVES

Stories that people tell about their lives form an integral part of the multiple-case method. These stories, or personal narratives, represent the experiential truth of the life rather than the actual experience or the historical truth of the life — and salient sections of the life, rather than the whole life (Ginsburg, 1989; Mann, 1992; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990).

Such personal narratives are useful for bringing the hidden into view, and making the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities associated with multiple truths more accessible (Davies, 1992). The construction of the narrative is, in many respects, the construction of the life (Aspinwall, 1992; Goodman, 1989; Mann, 1992). The dialectical relationship between life and narrative is easily lost, however. The narrative may be misconstrued as a statement of "the way it is", or a static, objective reality. The processes of sense-making are treacherous as they veer between life and narrative, apparent fact and fiction. The danger is that the researcher, as well as the participant, may see a pre-given reality in a narrative (Threadgold, 1990). Rather, the stories or narratives are temporary, audience-specific constructions. The way in which the story is constructed is influenced by its historical and cultural context, the power relations through which it is composed, beliefs about a normal life course, and ideas about what makes a good story (such as coherency) (Bruner, 1986; Gabriel, 1991; Gergen & Gergen, 1984; Ginsburg, 1989; Passerini, 1989; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Riger, 1992). Understanding stories or personal narratives becomes an intensive process of interpretation, paying particular attention to the context within which the story was constructed and to the purposes for which the story was employed (Gabriel, 1991; Passerini, 1989).

Personal narratives transcend the social–individual dichotomy by illustrating the processes through which individuals are simultaneously their own, and social, creations. When people talk about their lives, they are telling stories that represent flexible, situated, and impermanent meanings. These stories are shaped by context, yet they also shape context. The resultant meanings are the substance of shared realities that are socially constructed through story-telling and story-listening.

CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Conversational interviews are a powerful way of gaining access to an individual's interpretations of their personal experiences (i.e., their social world). In this model of interviewing, the agenda for each interview is established interactively. A recursive process is used in which the researcher's questions build on responses to previous questions, stories told by the same participant in previous interviews, and stories told by other participants. Each individual and situation produces a unique agenda that allows the researcher to ground the research completely in the experiences of the participants.

Conversational interviews are most useful when multiple interviews are conducted with each participant. The benefits of multiple interviews include enhancing rapport (Minichiello et al., 1990); highlighting transformations in participants (Wiersma, 1988); providing opportunities for the researcher to check understanding (Stewart, 1990); permitting the exploration of multiple and contradictory truths; and facilitating movement beyond the press release, that is, the initial story told by participants to explain their experiences (Wiersma, 1988).

Conversational interviews embrace the social aspects of the research interview, and challenge the conventional construction of the interview as a setting for data gathering by a researcher from the researched. Instead, researcher and participants are viewed as partners, collaborators, or co-constructors of knowledge. The researcher is an active and reflexive learner listening to stories, reconstructing them, embellishing them, censoring them, and conveying them to others (Bruner, 1986; T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Gabriel, 1991; Gillett, 1995; Marshall, 1986, 1993). A consequence is that different researchers would construct different understandings from interviewing the same participants. Where resources permit, different researchers can be purposefully used to generate a wider range of insights into an issue.

The researcher's interpretations are shaped by his or her social and historical positioning (Harding, 1987a; Yeatman, 1991). It is not possible to transcend this positioning by acknowledging it, nor by "reflexivity, dialogue, heteroglossia, linguistic play, rhetorical self-consciousness, performative translation, verbatim recording, and first person narrative" (Geertz, 1988, p. 131). Rather, actively taking the researcher's positioning into account adds depth to the interpretation of the participants' stories; facilitates consideration of alternative interpretations; and assists the reader in evaluating the trustworthiness of the interpretations, and in becoming an informed third party in the interdependent social construction of meaning (Harding, 1987a, 1987b; Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987; Marshall, 1992; Mishler, 1990). The researcher's biographical details, such as substantive interests, philosophical stance, and personal experiences, priorities, and values, are important parts of the perspective that the researcher brings to bear on the research, and should be reported (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995).

Viewing research as a collaborative inquiry contains an inherent danger of neglecting the dynamics of power between researcher and participant. There are many power differentials that are an inevitable part of social relationships, and that shape the balance of power between researcher and participant. The participant is relatively empowered in conversational interviews because the researcher is responsive to the participant's agenda, and because the participant may choose whether to participate, where and when to have the interviews, how long the interviews last, and what to disclose (B. Limerick, T. Burgess-Limerick, & Grace, 1996). Indeed, as Ribbens (1989) notes, "the researcher may at times regret not being able to exert *more* control" (p. 582).

Despite these benefits to the participants, advocating greater respect for, and equality with, participants heightens the risk of exploitation by concealing a variety of power differentials that favour the researcher (Bhavnani, 1990; Geiger, 1986; Stacey, 1988). The researcher has different forms of power at different stages of the research. During interviews, the participant is surreptitiously disempowered in that the interview is a controlled conversation for the purpose of the researcher's interests (Minichiello et al., 1990). After each interview, the participants' stories are taken away and analysed by the researcher, and ultimately the researcher chooses which interpretation is best (Geiger, 1990; Ribbens, 1989; Stacey, 1988). Finally, in the report-writing stage, it is often difficult to guarantee anonymity, and the participant is forced to trust the researcher (Middleton, 1985). Acknowledging the power imbalances does not diminish them, and although the researcher is morally obligated to favour the interests of the participants over the research, the risks and differences remain (see B. Limerick et al., 1996 for a more detailed discussion of the power issues involved in interviewing).

The issue of the degree to which the interviewer should reciprocate in the conversational interview also arises. Ribbens (1989) identifies three levels of reciprocity: responding to questions asked by participants, self-disclosure, and establishing a friendship. Answering questions and openly discussing the research enhances rapport and strengthens the researcher's understanding of the situation. Self-disclosure by the researcher can be construed as equalising the power between researcher and participant. However, self-disclosure can also be perceived to be manipulative, or an imposition, and therefore its use should depend on each researcher–participant relationship. Establishing friendships with participants has been advocated as an important part of a reciprocal and collaborative research relationship (Oakley, 1981). However, egalitarian relationships constructed in personal terms may not be appropriate in research because the potential for exploitation is increased, and the participant may come to expect a long-term, caring relationship that does not eventuate (Ribbens, 1989).

PROCESSES OF ANALYSIS

The principles and methods associated with *grounded theory* (as espoused by Glaser & Strauss, 1967) are useful in the context of multiple-case research. However, the principle of grounding theory in texts is permeated by a conflict in underlying assumptions. This conflict contributes substantially to the tension that developed between Glaser and Strauss (see Glaser, 1992). In their early work, Glaser and Strauss were both concerned with the *discovery* of the theory that exists in the data. Despite acknowledging that the researcher has a focus, an interest, and a perspective, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that the researcher must "study an area without any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to the research, 'relevancies' in concepts and hypotheses" (p. 33). Glaser (1978, 1992) has maintained this position, and continues to argue that the researcher is the objective finder, rather than the subjective creator of theory. In particular, he cautions against contaminating the data with researcher bias, and argues that the researcher should learn not to know. Strauss, in contrast, has more recently recognised the researcher's participation in, and impact on, the construction of grounded theory, and recognised that a range of meanings are possible for data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Glaser (1992) attacked Strauss's later work, criticising these concerns as over-selfconscious, and as leading to torturing data until theory is forced out while losing the rigour of sticking to the data. Glaser and Strauss are caught in the dichotomous construction of the researcher as the creator of theory versus the text as source of theory. Both extremes are inadequate. The challenge is to work within the dynamic of the researcher-in-conjunction-with-the-participants/texts to generate theory. The premise then becomes knowing from learning. That is, the researcher, as a positioned sense-maker, remains open to learning about, and learning from, the experiences of others (T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Mann, 1992; Marshall, 1992; Sacks, 1989).

Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed the method of grounded theory to facilitate the discovery of a single reality, it is possible to use the methods in the context of multiple-case research to facilitate the exploration of multiple, socially constructed meanings. Accepting the relevance of context, and the constructedness of theory, means that the coding process recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) becomes a tool for thinking through text towards theory. It can be used as a system for creating, rather than a system for discovering — and for embracing multiple, fluid, temporary, and contradictory meanings and different levels of abstraction. Thus, coding the text into substantive categories (descriptive categories that pattern the text) facilitates the grouping of ideas or the shaping of text into units. Memo writing and constant comparison can be used to work towards formal categories (conceptual categories that provide links between substantive categories), and formal categories facilitate the exploration of shapes and forms of theory. The coding process and category-making need to be flexible, to permit creative and intuitive thinking, to be responsive to the participants' texts, and to work directly from the researcher's subjectivity to avoid producing unmanageable quantities of categories.

There are other strategies for theory generation that more readily create space for multiple, constructed, and dynamic realities. When coding becomes stifling, the researcher can choose to undertake case summaries, case updates, and case analysis meetings (Miles, 1979). In case analysis meetings, colleagues challenge and assist with the development of emerging ideas. This is a particularly useful technique for alerting the researcher to alternative interpretations of text. Considering the 18 coding families outlined by Glaser (1978) also encourages the researcher to consider alternative ways to conceptualise the texts, as does asking ludicrous questions about the texts and considering all unusual, contradictory, or undesirable interpretations (Blumer, 1969; Eisenhardt, 1989). These techniques treat the researcher as the instrument of the research and enhance the researcher's ability to understand the range of meanings and incongruencies which are implicit in multiple realities (see T. Burgess-Limerick, 1993, 1995; B. Limerick & T. Burgess-Limerick, 1992, for examples).

The processes of analysis involve a dynamic relationship between literature, theory, methods, and findings such that the research questions and interpretations are constantly changing in the light of new experiences (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles, 1979; Mishler, 1990). The analytic and interpretive processes are consciously enmeshed with the researcher's engagement with the participants, and their texts, such that theory is grounded through negotiation rather than discovery. Successive interviews, continual immersion in the literature, and analysis are conducted together and inform one another.

This responsive and cyclical process of research is difficult to portray in the written form. In particular, the conventional *genre* for reporting research is not able to adequately represent the dialectical process of negotiating theory between researcher, participants, and the literature. Departures from the

conventional format of research reports may be necessary in favour of a written form that is consistent with the research method. The reader should be informed of the ways in which the method evolved in tandem with the focal problem and the needs of the participants and researcher. Another departure lies in the reporting of the relevant literature. Literature will typically be reviewed in response to the theory that is being constructed with the participants. The literature that develops this theory is treated as an additional text for analysis, and may be discussed with the results, rather than in an introduction.

CONSTRUCTING THEORY

The notion of theory is frequently imbued with positivist assumptions that the role of theory is to attempt to describe a single objective reality, which focuses on cause and effect, and provides hypotheses to be tested (also assuming that hypotheses may be disproved; for a critique of this assumption, see Bechtel, 1988; Laudan, 1988; Quine, 1990; and for a specific example in psychology, see R. Burgess-Limerick, Abernethy, & B. Limerick, 1994). Such connotations are inappropriate, and are rejected in favour of construction (rather than discovery) of multiple dynamic meanings (rather than a single objective reality), and generating (rather than verifying) theory.

The problems associated with the term *theory* can be partially avoided by using words or phrases such as conceptual framework, synthetic construction, angles of interpretation, perspectives, rhetorical strategies, meta story, constructed visions, patterns, or conceptions (see, for example, Bateson, 1990; Brush, 1992; Gabriel, 1991; Geertz, 1988; Kondo, 1990; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Rosenwald, 1988; Sampson, 1989). Alternatively, the term *theory* can be redefined as an explanatory framework that is constructed and reconstructed at an abstract level of analysis and is directly dependent for its form on the texts of the participants, the researcher, and the literature. The emphasis on the direct relationship between text and theory undermines the conventional dichotomy of empirical and theoretical (Berger & Luckman, 1967), and the process of theorising becomes grounded, rather than logico-deductive, by directing the relationship in terms of theory in response to text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The construction of theory involves an iterative process in which the skeins of literature and research participants' stories are woven together by the researcher to craft a rich synthesis. The sources of the constructed synthesis, or theory, are the researcher, the participants, and the previous literature. These sources are dynamic, and thus theory is also in process, ever-changing, and developing. Theories can never be definitive statement, but rather are presented as a part of a developing understanding.

EVALUATING MULTIPLE-CASE RESEARCH

The difficulties of communicating across paradigms are, perhaps, more acute when it comes to the issue of evaluating research outcomes. The purpose of multiple-case research is to generate a satisfactory construction, rather than to verify an existing theory. The centrality of meanings and interpretations rather than facts or observations means that different theories cannot be judged on their approximation of an objective truth. Different theories may be equally useful in that they offer different foci, the usefulness of which depend on the purpose of the theory. Theoretical pluralism may be necessary, or even desirable (see Feyerabend, 1965). Different criteria for judging whether or not a construction is satisfactory are required. The validity of a construction may be appropriately judged according to whether it is *convincing* and whether it is *useful*. These criteria are appropriate because they relocate validity in the constructedness of the social world.

Whether or not a construction is convincing depends on whether the reader perceives it to be trustworthy (Mishler, 1990). The trustworthiness of an interpretation can be established by presenting the reader with extensive details of how the research was conducted, the processes of analysis and interpretation involved in the production of the research outcomes, and the support for interpretations as found in the texts. The researcher's engagement with the research is threaded through each of these reflexive strategies. Highlighting these strategies contributes to the "rhetorical power", or persuasiveness, of the research outcomes (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995).

A convincing construction is also grounded in the context to which it refers. Context validity can be developed by asking others (including participants) for feedback on interpretations. However, this "respondent validation" is sufficient on its own because it is subject to the power relations that are a part of the research relationship (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995; see T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998, for an example of what can be learnt from disagreement between participant and researcher). Other sources of context validity include considering the structural and ideological context of the participants, seeking a wide variety of perspectives, exploring themes across contexts, and examining relevant literature (Fine, 1985; Marshall, 1986; Rosenwald, 1988).

A useful construction is a good story with theoretical import (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Useful theories are also generative. In part, generative power may be judged according to the relevance of constructions to cases other than the initial cases that informed them. In assessing this aspect of generative power, it is important to distinguish between statistical and analytic inference (Honess & Edwards, 1987). Generalising from an individual (or even several) cases proceeds through an analytic, rather than a statistical, inference process. The strength of analytic inference may be judged according to the extent to which it has explanatory power. More importantly, generative power is evident when a construction creates opportunities for action or breaks boundaries in understanding (Gergen, cited in Misra, 1993; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995), or when it creates criteria for change or modes of resistance (Lugones & Spelman, 1983).

AN EXAMPLE OF MULTIPLE-CASE RESEARCH

The following section illustrates the key points addressed in this paper through a discussion of research completed by the first author (T. Burgess-Limerick, 1995). This research involved studying the lives of 8 women who own small businesses to understand how such women negotiate the meanings of, and relationships between, home and work. Multiple conversational interviews were conducted to generate theoretical constructs that were directly grounded in the lives of women in business.

Assumptions

At first it was assumed that a sufficiently rigorous approach to the research would unearth generalisable facticities surrounding the lives of women in business. Interviews were seen as a superior method for accessing the truth because they avoided the problems of structuring preconceived theory into questionnaires. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that "facts" and "truth" were illusory. In particular, each participant's stories were so temporary as to differ between interviews. In one interview, Kerry, a bridal dress designer, maker, and retailer, asserted that she would never stay home and be a housewife (for fear of becoming "fat and boring"). Yet shortly after the conclusion of the research interviews, Kerry sold her business and now sees herself as a housewife (but not fat or boring). The search for facticity gave way to the struggle of shaping theory from temporary, fluid, impermanent, and multiple truths.

Multiple-case Research

The tensions between truths (and hence the richness of understanding) was maximised by selecting cases to represent distinct and informative vantage points. Consistent with the principles and practice of purposive sampling, the participants

were chosen sequentially, and the time frame and criteria for the inclusion of each participant differed according to the development of the research. The foci of the research suggested three criteria, which were met by all of the participants. The first criterion was that the participants be typical rather than atypical of women who own small businesses. The second criterion was that the business was a central component of the participant's life; that is, the participant had to be actively involved in the daily management of her business and undertake at least half of the managerial responsibilities in her business. The third criterion was that the participant had children, or planned to have children in the near future. Within the broad framework of these criteria, participants were chosen on the basis of the issues raised in previous interviews. These included industry types (traditional and nontraditional industries), ownership types (solo and partnership), number of employees, and family arrangements (including children of different ages, and different roles of spouses, if present). This is not to imply that the participants were representative of women in business; rather, the participants were examples of women in business.

Stories and Narratives

In the pursuit of an understanding of the specificity and complexity of each participant's life, stories were sought that represented the experiential (and often hidden) truths of day-to-day life. These experiential truths, when brought into conversation with one another, created significant insights into women's lives as business owners. For example, diverse stories about bits and pieces of the participants' lives were synthesised so that the decision to go into business could be understood to be a complex mosaic of interconnected reasons that involve both home and work issues. Specifically, being in business affords the possibility of manipulating the conventional boundaries between home and work. Linda, a management consultant, spoke about creating a "boundaryless" life, and illustrated this with stories about her young children competently answering the telephone in a business-like manner, and clients coming to the home, meeting with her in the garden while the children, supervised by a nanny, played nearby. Similarly, Meg, a builder, told stories about being in her pyjamas while talking business on the phone and responding to her daughter's emotional request for a dry towel to be delivered to the bathroom. The experiential truths embedded in these stories were used to construct the point that the opportunity to integrate home and work lives is a significant part of the appeal of business ownership to women.

Conversational Interviews

Detailed and useful stories were generated by ensuring that the research process was responsive and adaptive, particularly in relation to the interview agenda. The first interview with the first participant, Fiona (whose business involved marketing and packaging fruit), was semistructured and restricted to one hour. The agenda for this first interview was derived from issues raised by the literature, and from the researcher's interests. The agenda covered a range of topics, including what the business meant to the owner; whether ownership had changed her; how the business fitting into her life; how she thought her business may have differed from other women's lives; the role of power in business ownership and her life generally; whether business ownership was time-intensive and what implications this had for her; whether business ownership involved autonomy, freedom, or risks, and what implications these had for her; and whether partnerships in business might be a different experience from sole proprietorship. However, at the end of the interview, Fiona expressed concern about the limitations on what she could discuss, and questioned the one hour restriction. The agenda had the undesirable effect of constructing Fiona as the supplier of answers to questions, and this stifled story-telling.

Subsequent interviews with Fiona and the other research participants used a conversational interview style, and the standardised agenda gave way to the preparation of an unstructured list of prompts based on the previous interview and the interviews with other participants. These prompts were used only to encourage conversation (and, generally, the participants did not need prompting). For example, in the third interview with Kerry (the bridal dress designer, maker, and retailer), the following prompts were prepared, drawing on the conversation of the previous two interviews:

How is your baby?

How has business been?

What is life like without your full-time worker?

How was your day at home with your baby on Wednesday?

Have you been experimenting with your work, as planned? How is it going?

What did you mean "owning a business is a blur"?

Do you have a house-cleaner regularly? How do you organise your housework?

How did you locate your full-time worker to begin with?

Why do you think you want to sell in three years?

An interview usually started with disclosing something about the researcher's own life (often in answer to the participant's questions), followed by a broad question about how the participant had been and what had happened since the last meeting. If necessary, prompts were used from the list (the most commonly used prompts were those that followed up on important events that had been anticipated by the participant in the last interview). Frequently, the list of prompts was addressed by the participant in the course of the interview without being explicitly raised. Alternatively, questions from the list often occurred in a recursive manner, following the developing conversation.

Even this informal and responsive style of interviewing was rejected by Anne (a hairdresser and gift retailer). Anne accused the researcher of being "an FBI agent", and insisted on no tape-recorder, no note-taking, and no questions. After accommodating Anne's needs, an excellent relationship evolved that offered a unique vantage point on the struggle of a single mum to juggle young children and business start-up.

Being responsive to each participant's requirements was also evident in the negotiation of the number of interviews with each participant. Flexibility regarding the number of interviews added to the breadth and depth of the research by permitting stories to be gathered from participants who would otherwise have been inaccessible. The verbal agreement with most participants was for four or five interviews. However, there were nine interactions with Anne because she preferred not to talk in the relatively formal setting of an interview, but welcomed my presence in her salon and casual conversation over longer periods of time. There were 11 interactions with another participant because 10 of these interactions occurred over shorter periods of time in a non-interview setting, while the last interaction was an interview that lasted 3 hours.

Processes of Analysis

The theoretical outcomes of this research are considered to be *grounded theory* in that they have been generated by the researcher-in-conjunction-with-participants. Rather than attempting to discover theory, a range of processes was actively used to learn from the participants' stories. These methods of analysis included immersion in the texts (reading interview transcripts), thematic coding (experimenting with different ways of coding the transcripts using a computer package for managing qualitative data), writing (drawing on the participants' stories to create a meta-story about an issue, such as "the motivation to own" or "success"), and workshopping (discussing emerging interpretations and theory with the participants, other researchers, and other women in business). Analytic and interpretive processes were consciously

enmeshed with my engagement with the participants and their texts. This is particularly clear in the reconceptualisation of agency in the final interview with Meg (described in detail elsewhere: see T. Burgess-Limerick, 1998). Essentially, Meg disagreed with her stories being viewed as indicating that her agency was constrained, and a fundamental shift in interpretation occurred as a consequence of the collaboration between researcher and participant.

Constructing a Theory

The participants' stories were brought into conversation with relevant literature. For example, conventional models of self-as-entity were brought to bear on the participants' stories. Self-as-entity models assume that self is relatively stable and generalisable between situations (Gordon & Gergen, 1968). Such models failed to capture the dynamic process qualities that were fundamental to the participants' stories and that were evident in fundamental shifts in meanings for such central concepts as "mothering" and "businesswoman". To make sense of the participants' stories, a selves-in-process model, termed *processual being*, was constructed. The construction and reconstruction of meaning was understood through the processual being model in terms of the processes of experimenting, redefining, and organising.

The process of experimenting, for example, occurs in a wide range of arenas, including image and lifestyle, how many hours a housekeeper is needed for, job definition for staff, and ways of attracting clients. The implications of experimenting can be far-reaching. To experiment with the number of hours of child care is to experiment with what it means to be a mother, what it means to be a business owner, and what it takes to feel fulfilled. The participants explored these ramifications by trying out different arrangements and meanings in their lives. Kerry found that her little daughter with a felt-tip pen running through the shop full of bridal gowns proved to be an unsuccessful arrangement, yet she was able to try it out and learn for herself. Tugging at conventions and experimenting with different ways of arranging a life was facilitated for the participants by being their own boss.

Evaluating Multiple-case Research

The "validity", and the value, of the research should be judged according to whether it is convincing, and whether it is useful. A number of strategies were employed to ensure that the research was convincing. These included explicitly addressing the research assumptions and processes, providing detailed and persuasive illustrations from the participants' stories, seeking validation from the research participants throughout the research process, and positioning the research in relation to existing research and literature. Usefulness depends on whether the research has created new ways of thinking or new ways of being. One of the core outcomes of this research is the processual being model. Conventional self-as-entity models depend on a coherent and stable reality and cannot capture the social construction of dynamic, multiple realities. As a self-in-process model, processual being draws our attention to the participants' contextualised capacity to negotiate new meanings, and in doing so, legitimises and encourages the processes of *experimenting*, *redefining*, and *organising*. These processes could not be understood through research that is grounded in an assumption of structure and facticity. We would go so far as to argue (after D. Limerick, Cunnington, & Crowther, 1998) that to understand the participant as agent it is necessary to focus on process, and that structural theories which postulate hypothetical constructs only create additional distance between the reader and the participants' lives.

A focus on process (embracing multiple, shifting, negotiable meanings) enables researchers to think differently about conventional hypothetical constructs. The researcher then confronts the challenge of developing language and concepts that will convey an understanding of the fluidity of the processes. Processual being begins to give voice and form to the process of negotiating self on a day-to-day basis according to a fundamental principle of flexibility. In talking about self in this way, new issues are raised. The focus of research questions shifts from consistency of self across contexts to the coordinates afforded by different contexts, and how these are negotiated by the agentic, yet responsive, individual.

For example, the coordinates of "businessperson" conventionally specify a hierarchical model of business relations (boss–subordinate). Participants told a range of stories about rejecting this model of business relations, such as Laura's observation that she cleaned floors and windows in the shop alongside her staff. Laura pointed out that other business owners had advised against this blurring of boss–subordinate distinctions, but she did not feel comfortable operating in any other way. This process of constructing an alternative "businesswoman" identity is captured by the processual being model through the notion of redefining. By collaborating with the participants as co-researchers, and working together to generate stories and unpack the meanings of everyday stories, new ways of thinking about self have been created.

Reconceptualising validity in terms of whether it is convincing and useful firmly places the responsibility for evaluating research with each reader. In effect, the relevant questions become "Do *I* find this research convincing?" and "Is this research useful *to me*?". The research participants found the results to be convincing and useful. The final interviews contained comments such as "I'd never thought about it that way, but you're right. That's exactly what I'm doing". The participants began to talk about their lives using the concepts, and now had words that enabled them to speak about their lives in ways that previously had been silenced or framed negatively. Participants could say, for example, "I am *organising*" and feel less guilty about never actually being "organised". Similarly, the participants' responsiveness to shifts in context were reframed from a weakness (e.g., indecisiveness or uncertainty) to a strength. Proactively adapting to constant contextual changes (ranging from a child's happiness with a nanny, to a staff member's pregnancy) was constructed as a vital life-management skill. Presenting such ideas with the warrant of a researcher's voice begins the political process of legitimising the ways in which women who own small businesses compose their lives.

Addressing psychological phenomena within a framework of multiple-case research is an inherently political activity. Success or failure is to be judged according to whether the research produces new ways of thinking or new ways of being. It is only by accepting the social constructedness of psychological phenomena, and viewing research as a collaboration between researcher and participants, that such progress is likely to be made.

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