

CHAPTER 5

The Empathic Attitude of Listening

The aim of a narrative research interview is to enter the world of the participant and try to understand how it looks and feels from the participant's point of view. This occurs through empathic listening. Empathy is a cognitive phenomenon (taking the perspective of another) as well as an affective one (vicariously feeling another's inner experience) (Kerem, Fishman, & Josselson, 2001). We reach an empathic attitude through highly attuned, focused, careful, attentive listening.

Listening is difficult, and understanding is even more so.¹ Good listening means exposing ourselves to the unknown; it involves giving up our usual frameworks and immersing ourselves, intellectually and affectively, in the viewpoints and experiences of the Other. To understand takes a great deal of patience and work—work that demands attention to both the content and emotional tone of what we seek to understand. The challenge to understanding results from there being so many levels to hear and to grapple with; things are both said and unsaid. Meanings are both transparent and hidden. The description of experience always includes both the “facts” (as

¹See Orange (2011), Greenspan (2010), and Andrews (2007).

the participant knows them) and the indicators of how the meanings of those “facts” are to be assessed. Embedded in every narrative is what Labov and Waletzky (1967) call the “evaluation”—the markers of what the experiences meant to the person. These meanings are generally the focus of our studies.

Our default position is not understanding. The less we think we know, the more we are likely to investigate. The participant before us is an unknown individual whom we approach with benign curiosity and a readiness to learn about how this person has been going about life. We are poised to be open to and accepting of whatever we might hear. We expect to be surprised and to grapple (together) with indeterminate meanings; we recognize that things will not be “clear.” If we imagine ourselves as trying to get “answers” to our “questions,” we have moved outside the dance of creating shared understanding. At the end of the interview, we may feel enlightened, but the indeterminacy will remain. (We will make further sense of the material during the analysis.)

Our orientation to what is transpiring in the conversation will be affected by nonverbal exchanges as well as by what is said. We will be either consciously or subliminally aware of when the participant moves away from us, shifts uncomfortably in the chair, makes eye contact to search for a response from us or looks off in the distance, fidgets, smiles, or brightens. None of this will be on the audio recording, so if we can keep track of it, we include these observations in the notes we make after the interview. Beyond noting these instances, however, if we are empathically attuned, we will be responding as we listen, and we may be able to hear in our own voices in the recording our empathic attunement to the emotional state of the interviewee—matching joy, sadness, fear, guilt, outrage, worry, contentment, or pride.

Empathic listening demands focused attunement and is very hard work. Most people take for granted that they are skilled at listening, but few really are. In everyday life, we listen very partially—taking in bits of the sound that we hear and meshing these bits with our own thoughts, which actually claim more of our attention. The act of artful listening involves clearing out our mental houses for a

time and opening our minds and hearts to what is coming in. It is an act of un-self-consciousness, of becoming something like a mirror. (Indeed, the neuroscientists tell us that the parts of our brains that are active when we are empathically attuned are the “mirror neurons.”) We must stay fully in the present moment, undistracted by the outside world or by what we might say next. When we attune successfully, the interview becomes a very gratifying experience for the participant, who feels truly heard. In my workshops, I ask, “When was the last time someone just sat and listened to you for 2 hours?” Usually my students just laugh in response to this question. None can recall such an experience. In social life, we take turns in conversations; we express ourselves in short bursts of speech. We don’t expect that people will have enough interest in us to pay sustained attention just to us. This is why many participants in interview studies feel that the opportunity to speak about themselves has been integrative or healing for them. All we have to do as interviewers is to listen well.

Empathic Responsiveness

The aim of the interviewer, then, is to move with the interviewee, doing verbally as well as nonverbally what happens in the “moving together” exercise (see Exercise 2 at the end of Chapter 4). This requires empathically attuning to the feelings that are connected with the events being narrated, demonstrating to the participant that the interviewer is mentally capable of putting oneself in his or her place (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is, of course, first an internal response—a necessary first response before the interviewer makes a verbal response. To be fully empathic, the interviewer must allow him- or herself to be emotionally touched, to resonate with the experience being narrated. At the same time, at the level of thought, the interviewer must ask him- or herself, “What have I understood from the interviewee’s communication? What is the interviewee’s point of view?”

The listener's understanding will be increased by more specific detail—the stories of lived experience, rather than generalities about a life. It is important, then, to communicate interest in the actual instances of what the participant is describing, and the interviewer may prompt with “Tell me about a time that happened,” or “When was the first/last time you remember this happening?” in order to direct attention to actual stories. It is in recounting the specific aspects of an experience that the interviewee's experience will become fully present in the interview and the interviewer will be able to be “right there” with the interviewee.

Working from this internal understanding, the interviewer might then offer one of the following verbal responses (if something beyond silence or acknowledgment seems necessary for maintaining the conversation):

1. *Summarizing.* This kind of intervention takes the form of “So what I've understood from what you said is that you . . .” This is a way of noting that you have been hearing what the participant has been saying, and the summary will invite either acknowledgment (“Yes, that's right”), correction (“Well, it wasn't exactly like that”), or further detail. Summarizing is a way for you to clarify meaning by asking, “This is what I got. Did I get it right?” Summarizing carefully stays with the same words that the interviewee chose. A summary will often invite further discourse, but a simple “Right” or “Yes” from the interviewee is a signal for you to choose the next direction—either to request other examples, or to pick up something else from the earlier narration or from another aspect of your interview plan.
2. *Paraphrasing.* This is related to summarizing, but it condenses the account or focuses on some essence of particular interest to you as a researcher. You may gingerly and cautiously introduce some new words into the interchange to determine whether they “fit” the participant's experience. If paraphrasing is empathic, it will lead to further elaboration. Examples:

“So this was a kind of epiphany for you,” or “So it seems like this was a time you kind of hit bottom.”

3. *Mirroring*. This involves reflection of feeling. This response expressively focuses on the feelings communicated in the account and invites elaboration on the emotional level. It has the form of “So you were feeling _____ when that happened.” The participant may not have named the feeling, but you have detected it from the tone of voice or facial expression, and in your response you lightly, tentatively name it. In other words, you try to match the feeling, not declare it.

In general, beyond getting the main plot of the story the participant wants to tell (what happened), following the feelings in the account will open deeper and more complex layers of experience. Empathy is both cognitive and affective. You must be able both to know and to feel with the interviewee. If the interview takes the affective route, there will be richer lodes of meaning, because what will be expressed is how the events being recounted had an impact on and became significant to the participant. The parts of the story where the interviewee felt joyful, excited, proud, moved, sad, disappointed, envious, guilty, angry, or resentful are the points of greatest arousal, and thus central to how he or she accounts for whatever changes or experiences are at the center of the research question. A good mirroring response conveys that you have understood the participant at the level of feelings being expressed, without in any way distorting the content.

Strong feelings indicate that something important is lodged in this part of the story and should entice rather than repel you. One of your primary tasks as the interviewer is what Bion (1962) calls “containment”—holding, absorbing, and staying present with feelings. It has the sense of “I can feel this with you,” without having to get rid of the feeling. You just need to stay with the feeling while the participant shepherds it into words and follow it wherever it goes. If you flee from affect, the message this sends to the participant is to stay on the surface, at a distance from what was experienced.

Probably the most frequent question I hear in workshops is about what to do if a participant cries. The students who raise this question are perhaps worried about feeling embarrassed and “not knowing what to do.” There is no “doing” that is required. An interviewer can simply sit quietly and wait for the participant to gather him- or herself and continue speaking. Listening empathically, the interviewer tries to convey an understanding of what the incident being described felt like to the participant. The interviewer might say gently, “I see you have strong feelings about this” or try to reflect the nature of the feeling and see where the participant takes the narration.

In rare cases, and I mean really rare, where the participant seems too upset to continue (see *Good Interview 3* in Chapter 7), you might suggest going on to something else and perhaps coming back to this later. You have to use your empathy and sensitivity here. You might ask the participant whether he or she wishes to go to something else if you aren't sure. If the participant apologizes for tears, it is important to say that no apology is necessary: “Of course people feel strongly when talking about difficult or painful things.” This normalizes what is, after all, quite normal.

Once a student told me quite sheepishly, with great shame and trepidation, that during an interview in which her interviewee grew tearful while talking about the sudden death of her mother, she got tearful as well, and tears streamed down her face. My student expected me, it seems, to chastise her and tell her she had lost her role (and no doubt wasn't suited for this kind of work). Instead, I commented that it seems that she was indeed in empathic attunement to her participant.

So often, students I am supervising will tell me that they were interested in some difficult aspect of a participant's life, but the participant “didn't want to talk about it.” When we look more closely, it is usually the students who became skittish about the area and backed away by changing the subject.² So who is it, I wonder, who

²See Hollway and Jefferson (2000) for elaboration of the idea of the “defended researcher.”

didn't want to talk about it? Some students are afraid of "making people talk about things they don't want to talk about." In general, participants are in control of themselves and what they tell you. There is no way to *make* participants in a research interview tell what they don't want to tell. It may be true, however, that in a relationship with an empathic, accepting listener, people will tell more than they had expected they would. In such cases, there is no coercion, only invitation and opportunity.

Some people have asked me whether it is okay to laugh with participants if they tell funny stories that they laugh at themselves. Of course it is fine to do this. The principle is to match the participants' feeling—and to try not to inject your own.

Emotional expression is not unitary. People often have more than one feeling about an event, and the aim is to empathize with all the feelings that are being expressed. The most common interviewer error here is to "hear" just one feeling state and follow that—usually the one that makes most sense to an interviewer, the one the interviewer thinks he or she would have been most likely to have experienced in that situation, leaving aside the other feelings. This will result in a skewed view of the experience at the interpretation phase. Here is an example. This segment is from a study about reactions to loss and processes of grieving; the interviewee and participant were women of similar age.

PARTICIPANT: It was a terrible blow when my boyfriend broke up with me, but all my friends gathered around me, and I realized that there were a lot of people who cared for me, and they helped me move on and apply to graduate school. I realized how many resources I had and how much good there was in my life.

INTERVIEWER: So you forged ahead, feeling that you had a lot of love and potential in your life.

A better response would be this: "So you forged ahead, feeling you had a lot of love and potential in your life, but it had been a terrible blow." This response would pick up both sides of the emotional

experience and leave the interviewee free to elaborate either side of it. The interviewer must be interested in hearing about the complex interplay of experience, not just a simple story line. The interviewer could, of course, return to the other side of this experience later. The mistake would be to recognize only one aspect of the affect—in this case, to privilege the happy ending over the “blow.”

Empathic Questions

Although I have said previously that the ideal empathic response is a reflection rather than a question, and that this is a skill you should practice, in actuality interviewers do ask questions. It is possible to phrase a question empathically, picking up an element from the previous narrative passage and asking for elaboration. Such questions take the form of “What was that like for you?”, “Tell me more about what you meant by that,” or “How did that feel to you?”

A question beginning with “Why . . .” usually has accusatory or judgmental overtones, and it is better to expunge this word from your vocabulary. If you want to know why someone did something, ask, “What sorts of things were in your mind when you chose that course of action?” or “How did that come about?”

An empathic question follows the flow of the narration by inviting the next part of the story. Or it might ask for amplification of a part of the story that was told cursorily or just referenced obliquely. As with reflections, you need to be paying attention to the feelings being expressed in the course of the narration and following the affect. Strong feelings point to aspects of experience that were meaningful to the participant, and these moments should be noted and inquired into. Sometimes only a question will do, even if it's in the form of “You mentioned this difficult time in your life. Can you tell me more about that?” Empathic questions should seem to the interviewee to be designed for him or her and to derive from their experience, rather than to be prepackaged or taken off of a list.

Here is an excerpt from an interview study of adult women

who had lived as heterosexuals and become lesbians in adulthood.³ This excerpt begins with good empathic responses, but then goes off track:

SOPHIE: You know, you're looked at differently. I can remember, early on in our relationship, going out, and I had kind of the, I was very aware of being looked at in public because of who I was with. When you're straight, you don't worry about that. Nobody looks twice at you. And, um, you know, again, I was a person who wasn't used to getting a lot of attention. And all of a sudden I feel like I have this attention on me. And, again, you know, to be labeled something that is stigmatizing, and you know you're going to lose certain things . . . your rights. [Laughs, then suddenly becomes serious.] You know, that was really scary. My partner's always known and she grew up, you know, being kind of different because she is Polynesian and, and, and, 'cause she is lesbian too. So I kind of had a real hard time probably for about 2 years, adopting that, you know, that label.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned stigma a couple times and having a hard time "adopting the label."

Note that this excellent response falls in between a reflection and a question. It is a reflection that invites elaboration, rooted in what Sophie has been talking about. It concerns a central aspect of the researcher's Big Q question, but is asked unobtrusively within the flow of the interview, linked to the participant's experience as it was emerging in her memory.

SOPHIE: In the beginning it was not good. I . . . [long hesitation] I was drinking [face turned to the side, voice lowered]. A lot. In the beginning. Gosh, I'm trying to think. That was not a good period of time. The first three years were really tough. I spent a lot of money, um, that's how I was coping. I spent *a lot* of money. I put myself into massive debt. So, and then, I finally was like, "Okay, I have got to, I, I, I, I know I have the genetic makeup to be an

³This study was conducted by Jeanne Miller for her dissertation.

alcoholic, so I gotta quit this stuff.” And you know, I had to just, kind of . . . I remember one day sitting down and just going, “I gotta get my life on track, I gotta get my stuff in order,” you know? My partner and I weren’t doing well at the time because she’s not a drinker, and I was literally going to, you gotta remember too, I grew up so sheltered and in such a strict family, I went right from my parents’ house to my husband’s house and I never, I never had that. You know, that kids have that adolescence, you know, that young adults go through, kind of out having fun.

So it was the first time that I was really doing anything like that. It was the first time, you know, that I had this group of friends, um, who I was hanging out with. And they were all kind of drinkers. And they didn’t have any coping skills, so I kind of adopted what they were doing. So when I got away from them because, I remember thinking, “I gotta get away from them, these people here, gotta get away,” you know, because I just felt like I was not being who I was.

That’s pretty much how I coped back then. I was part of this group; it was a generalized support group open to LGBT, that’s no longer being run, and it kind of turned into a free-for-all. There was really no structure. I felt like it was a place for people to get together, and the guys were all hooking up together, and the girls were trying to hook up together.

INTERVIEWER: Is that the group you were going out with?

This is a side clarification, and the participant goes on.

SOPHIE: Yeah, I was hanging out with that group. Now I do have two very good friends from the group that I totally exclude from, but most of them were really toxic people to be around. They just didn’t have healthy lifestyles. They were doing lots of drinking. And again, I grew up, so, for me to put myself in that . . . Now I can’t stand to be around someone who has a drink. And that’s really, truly who I am, I just kind of stay away from that. So to just kind of submerge myself in that, you know, I just wasn’t myself.

And my girlfriend, who never had a drink in her whole life, she probably had a big hand in getting me out of that, because I knew she was not going to stick around if I continued on the path, so yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So that's how you came out of that, you made some decisions and she was there . . .

This is a fine reflection of what has come last, but it ignores the obviously difficult but important material about the period of the participant's being out of control—a period that coincided with her coming out, so it is important for understanding in the context of the research question. It may be a good choice, though, to wait to see whether Sophie spontaneously picks up that part of her story.

SOPHIE: I did. I remember her saying, "I'm worried about you, you're doing these things, and you know, you're kind of being self-destructive." And I remember sitting down, and thinking to myself, "All right, I gotta get my life in order." I am very organized, I mean, I make lists for everything. I do. I remember I sat down one day, and I made a list of this is stuff that I need to do to get my life back on track, and I started knocking them out.

Sophie's narrative here had many intertwined elements and presented a challenge to the interviewer. Empathically, the interviewer recognized that coming out, stigma, being out of control, drinking and spending and the evolving relationship with her lesbian partner were all interconnected. Sophie seemed to be saying that her partner was the catalyst for getting her life under control, but this was not clear. What was especially unclear was whether "accepting the label" of being a lesbian initiated or resolved the "out of control" period. The challenge here was to find an empathic response that would hold all of these elements while they were still emotionally close. The breaks in Sophie's speech indicated that there was emotional pain connected to memories of this period, so the interviewer would need to move gently. One possible intervention would be this:

So you got your life back on track (*acknowledging the good outcome*). I wonder, though, (*signaling a shift in the other direction*) if you would tell me more about that difficult period you had. It sounds like your drinking and spending and coming out all kind of happened together (*asking about the overlap among these experiences rather than trying to bring the feelings themselves to the surface, which would be more of a therapeutic avenue*). And somehow stigma was part of the whole thing (*to try to understand the links in the progression of the interviewee's thoughts from stigma to the out-of-control period, to the influence of her partner*).

Empathy and the Big Q Question

The more of an expert you become about your research question and the themes that you want to investigate, the more you will be able to empathically engage your participant in helping you to learn about these themes in the participant's particular life. In this way, you can find and enlarge the themes of interest to you as you empathically attend to what the participant tells you. It then becomes unnecessary to pose a direct question. When the participant is talking about something close to "what you really want to know about," you will perk up internally and pursue that avenue with an empathic lead. For example, in a study about felt relationships to teachers at school in relation to academic success, the researcher began by asking about best and worst experiences at school:

PARTICIPANT: Junior year was the worst. My friends kind of snubbed me and I didn't like my classes. I was doing okay gradewise, except in history, but that teacher didn't like me.

INTERVIEWER: You thought that teacher didn't like you . . .

If the study were about friendships or academic preferences, the interviewer would have empathically followed these elements of the narration

instead of the relationship with the teacher, which was the focus of the researcher's interest.

Using Empathy to Follow the Story

Questions can empathically follow the story, picking out the most salient meanings and asking further about them. These kinds of questions are voiced in the same tone as the respondent is using, thus empathically matching the feelings that are being expressed. Empathic questions differ from questions that redirect or change the course of the interview. Note the differences in the excerpt below, which is from my study of identity development in women. This participant had been somewhat difficult to interview, because she mainly narrated other people's stories and talked about herself only in brief generalities. She was clearly uncomfortable with self-disclosure, but she had spoken about having a crisis in her marriage and going with her husband to couple therapy.

INTERVIEWER (ME): What has your experience of therapy been like?

A very open-ended question.

ZELDA: Yeah. She's sort of helping me, you know, realize . . . that I tend to be . . . I tend to be fairly rigid about things and see things in my own particular way, and there is more than one way to do it, and how Frank sees things is not necessarily how I see things. Uh, so that's . . . [looking at me expectantly]

ME: Can you think of an example?

Noting all the hesitation in the speech here, I invite a story rather than pursuing "rigid" (another option), especially in light of how guarded this interviewee has been.

ZELDA: [Long pause] . . . This is a pretty simple one. Frank

was going to buy a car, and I feel pretty strongly that I hate noise, and he was originally going to get an alarm in his car, and . . . we talked about it, but for some reason, I had this feeling that he didn't necessarily hear what I was saying, 'cause . . . so I asked him to repeat, you know, what I wanted as far as the car goes. And it took a bit, but it was clear that he definitely hadn't heard what my concerns were, and before I actually would . . . it would not have occurred to me to do that, and basically I'd be fairly explicit without getting excited and understand that just because you see something one way, that's not necessarily how it is or how other people perceive it. I don't know if that's helpful.

ME: So this was news to you about yourself?

I am picking up the change aspects of this story and empathically restate the sense of learning something new about herself, especially in that I am unclear about what she had learned. In linking her example to the question, I am implicitly indicating that the story is indeed "helpful." I am also careful not to take any kind of judgmental position on her change or how she used to be. "News to you" is as neutral as I can be and still empathically highlight the sense of learning about herself.

ZELDA: Yeah. I know I tend to be fairly rigid.

ME: What does "rigid" mean for you?

*She comes back to "rigid" and is perhaps ready to discuss this aspect of herself. Note that in picking up her word and asking her to expand it, I am trying to make clear what **her** meanings are. It is always a good idea to recognize that people have their own definitions of words, and we cannot assume that they are using words the same way we are. This is especially true when there are sociocultural differences, but also true in general. It is best to inquire about words that appear to be loaded with meanings.*

ZELDA: Um, like, I could remember from when I was a kid, I think it was in the May procession from school, and I was the person who was leading it, and there was a very set way we were supposed to go around the church. And the priest

went one way and he went the wrong way, so I went the other. [Laughs.] It probably would have been better to just follow and do it the way he went, even though it wasn't the right one. So . . . And probably with accounting [her profession], it serves me well that I tend to be obsessive—compulsive and pay attention to details, but in relationships, it's not the best thing to do.

Inviting this elaboration leads to new and important material. She expands the idea of “rigid” to include a focus on doing it right, even if this means challenging authority. Also, we see Zelda spontaneously commenting on the positive side of her “rigidity,” which includes her professionally useful attention to detail. If the study had some particular interest in issues of authority or autonomy, I could at this point follow the thread of “going one’s own way in the interest of what is right.” I could also follow the idea of learning that what works professionally does not serve her well in relationships and ask for other examples. Such choices are made depending on the overall aim of a study and the material a researcher hopes to obtain and analyze. In this instance, given that my project is about identity development, I decide to pick up the thread of the story the participant is telling about how she has learned something new about herself and changed.

ME: So what you did differently was ask him to repeat what he heard so you could check.

I am summarizing the main point of the “how I changed” story, in hopes of picking up and deepening this topic.

ZELDA: Yeah. It wouldn't have occurred to me. He would have gone off and got the alarm, and I would have gotten angry.

ME: So the old scenario was: You say what your concerns are, he didn't hear you, did what he wanted, and then you'd feel your concerns were overlooked.

I am summarizing in hopes of further elaboration and reflection.

ZELDA: Right, and that's something that happened a number of times. We clearly were not communicating. He wasn't hearing, and I thought I was being very explicit, but clearly not from his mindset.

ME: So this is one way the therapist has been helpful to you—to help you make your feelings very explicit.

I am summarizing and reflecting her meanings.

ZELDA: Yeah, and even if it's something I very much want. I'm trying to think of an example. I think it was—Frank came back from a business trip and said he was thinking of buying a company he used to work for and was unhappy working there. And I said, "If that's something you want to do, you can, but I under no circumstances want to have the house mortgaged to pay for it. If you're going to do it, you need to arrange financing without the house being at issue." He wasn't, you know, happy with that, but I also felt really strongly that I've been working hard to get the mortgage paid off and to do something and he not be happy with it, um, you know, that that would not be a good thing. So . . . he sort of dropped it.

ME: And do you think you would have handled that differently in the past?

I have many choices for response here. The participant ends her narration with "So . . . he sort of dropped it." Both the pause after "So" and the "sort of" indicate that there is a great deal more to this story. But this is a participant who has spent much of the interview largely talking about her husband, his family, and his choices, and the research question is about changes in her identity over time. Thus I am trying to keep her narration centered as much as possible on her experience of herself. In this segment, the discussion is focused on the question of how she feels she has changed, so this follow-up question pursues that direction.

ZELDA: I might have been inclined to think that if that's something he wanted to do, then we should work at it and try to do it, while I would have been really unhappy. So it's given me not permission, but . . . to protect myself and take care of myself as far as what feels reasonable for me.

I now feel that I have an understanding of the theme of getting more explicit about communicating her wishes. The participant has developed the theme, with stories, of having moved from supporting what her hus-

band wanted even if it made her angry or unhappy to learning to speak her own views. I could ask for an example from the past in which she went along with something and was “really unhappy,” but I feel I have enough understanding of this theme to proceed. I am also afraid of landing back into another long story about Frank, of which I have already heard many. I note that in this last narration, Zelda has opened up a lot and spontaneously offered an example, perhaps because she is feeling that I am hearing her meanings. So I return to the main question and invite another theme.

ME: What has been another important thing you have learned about yourself or about life in the last 10 years?

Personal Reactions and the Empathic Attitude

Our stance as interviewers of maintaining an empathic attitude means keeping our personal reactions to the material out of the interview. This can be difficult when participants have views or experiences that we are in fact quite judgmental about. One of the people I interviewed for a study on relationships talked of the closeness he felt to his buddies when they went yearly to Alaska to shoot bears. This was difficult for me to listen to. One of my favorite movies is *The Bear*, a movie about an orphaned bear cub and a wounded giant grizzly and their efforts to protect themselves from hunters. I was quite horrified by listening to how they bonded over killing bears. Similarly, when a participant in my women’s identity study, in describing her political views, vehemently advocated that the United States should “nuke the Arab terrorists,” I found it a challenge to contain my repulsion. In both instances, I had to keep my (strong) reactions to myself and try to stay focused on understanding how my participants had come to these positions. If, however, my participants had nevertheless picked up my response, I would have acknowledged my difference, apologized, and declared that I was nevertheless still interested in understanding their experiences and views.

Just as we are not there to judge our participants critically, we are also not there to praise or reassure them. If we respond to something a participant says with “I think that’s wonderful,” then it understandably raises a question in the interviewee’s mind when we do not respond in the same way to something else. We can acknowledge achievements by saying, “It sounds like you are very proud of this,” or “What a sense of accomplishment you must have had,” thus staying in an empathic stance, reflecting on the person’s experience of their deeds or honors rather than our own judgment of them. A resonant “Wow!” to someone who tells of a great success in an excited way is sufficiently ambiguous to be acceptable; it is then empathic rather than complimentary. Containment implies hearing, acknowledging, accepting, extending, and wanting to understand more. Judgments, good or bad, change the atmosphere and the dynamics of the research relationship.

Sometimes interviewees imagine that we are experts on mental health or moral living and invite our opinions, even asking directly, “What do you think of what I did?” At such times, I often respond by generalizing and normalizing, saying something like “So many people, more than you imagine, have experienced something similar,” or “You know, as a psychologist I know that there is no right way to handle this.” One of my interviewees disclosed to me that she had been sexually abused as a child by her (now deceased) grandfather, and that her therapist urged her to confront him with this, but that she refused and left therapy. She then began debating with herself about whether she had done the right thing, clearly inviting me into this debate (she knew I was also a therapist). This was, I thought, one of those times where telling her (feelingly) that I believe that there is not a “right” way, that all choices have their benefits and costs, was the best response I could make. In part, I was responding to the unspoken question about whether I was just like her therapist, so my comment had the underlying message that I was a different person—and that I was trying to understand her rather than tell her what to do. My response did seem to reassure her enough that she could continue with her narration.

Empathy and Identification

Another personal reaction that is sometimes useful to furthering the interview and sometimes intrusive is identification. Identification involves finding something in one's own experience that seems to match what the participant is narrating. At such times, one is tempted to say, "Me, too." This can further the interview if the interviewee seems to be doubting that the interviewer could possibly understand, but it can also detract from the interviewee's sense that the interviewer is trying to understand the uniqueness of the participant's experience.

In a study of women who joined the Occupy Wall Street protests, one of my students, Julia, was interviewing a woman living on welfare. The woman described herself as the mother of twin daughters, age 2. As it happened, Julia also had twin daughters, age 3, but (appropriately) resisted the temptation to say so when her participant first mentioned this. Later in the interview, the following exchange occurred:

PARTICIPANT (RICKI): I have these twin daughters. They are just 2. And they always need their diapers changed at the same time. Or one wakes up in the night and wakes the other one, and I have two who are crying. You can't imagine how hard it is!

INTERVIEWER (JULIA): Actually, I have twin daughters myself, so I know something about how hard it is [with a smile, very empathically].

RICKI: Do you have a husband?

JULIA: Yes.

RICKI: Then you can't imagine what it's like to do this all alone.

*Julia's response has been offered in a spirit of empathy, but Ricki makes clear that Julia's experience could not be anything like **her** experience.*

JULIA: Yes, I can imagine that taking care of twins all alone

would be much more difficult, very difficult indeed. Please tell me about how you have managed.

In this last response, the interviewer returns to a fully empathic stance.

Empathy always involves some internal identification, a capacity to resonate with and therefore understand, but leaving a space for difference. Identification on its own does not constitute an empathic response and may impede understanding the other person as other.

“Bumps in the Road” of Empathy

As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, maintaining an empathic stance is difficult. There will always be “bumps in the road.” The essence of the stance is “Help me understand this so I can be there with you.” But the other person is just that—other; that is, different from you. If it seems really easy, then you are likely to be identifying with your participant rather than empathizing, projecting yourself into the participant rather than encountering an *other* person. The process of an interview is one of continually getting in contact, losing the contact, and regaining it. Sometimes, though, interviewees will just close the door on an aspect of their lives—perhaps something they don’t really understand in themselves or are unwilling to talk about, despite our best efforts at gentle invitation. At these times we just have to move on gracefully. (Grace in this context means never giving the interviewees the impression that they are letting you down or not “giving you what you want.”) Exercises 3 and 4 on pages 100 and 101 are designed to give you practice with getting in contact and maintaining it for longer periods.

The possibilities for empathy are influenced by the dynamics of the relationship and how it is structured, situated, and experienced by the participant. You can expect to be “tested” by the participant, especially at the beginning of the interview. The participant is “test-

Exercise 3. Interview Practice: All Empathy, No Questions

The task is to interview without asking any questions. Arrange a 15-minute interview with a colleague or classmate on a topic of your choice. Begin by orienting your interviewee to the question you want to explore, and then try to respond throughout the interview with empathic responses that invite elaboration rather than with questions. Record your interview and then listen to it later, noting the places where you got stuck and felt you *had* to ask a question. In this review, try to think about how you could have inquired without a question. This exercise will help in decreasing your reliance on questions to propel the interview. Repeat this exercise until you can do it relatively smoothly.

ing” how well (and in what areas) you can truly “move with” him or her. This process is, of course, influenced by who the interviewee thinks you are, how you have framed the research in relation to the participant, and the other dynamics of the relationship that I have discussed in Chapter 2. In the next chapter, I return to, and provide a wider view of, the research relationship.

Exercise 4. Round-Robin Interviewing

We rarely get meaningful feedback from our interviewees, and this makes it difficult to notice how we ourselves might get in the way of creating an engaging interview. This exercise is designed to produce such feedback and can be repeated. It is best to do this exercise with at least five people, so that no two people interview each other. Going down the line, each person interviews in turn two people for 15 minutes with the same question. No one interviews someone who has interviewed him or her. (If there are five people, A interviews B and C; B interviews C and D; C interviews D and E; D interviews A and E; E interviews A and B. Two of these interviews can be taking place simultaneously, with the fifth person writing feedback to be given later to his or her interviewer.)

After the interviews are over, groups of three meet (each group includes an interviewer and the two people he or she has interviewed). Each person who was interviewed by that interviewer offers feedback about how he or she experienced the interviewer's listening. What made the person feel that the interviewer was in contact with him or her? At what points did the person feel out of contact? Were there any moments of feeling judged? What interviewer responses led the person to want to tell more? What responses led him or her to decide not to tell something that came to mind?

Each person has the opportunity to experience the differences in interviewing styles as an interviewee. The contrast in experience helps to sharpen the feedback. The benefit of having feedback from two people who have responded to the same question is that the interviewer can also learn about how he or she can be experienced differently by different people.