Eliciting Narrative Through
the In-Depth Interview

Wendy Hollway
University of Leeds

Tony Jefferson
University of Keele

A central feature of the fear of crime debate is the fear-risk paradox: the finding that those least at risk, namely, elderly women, are most fearful, and vice versa. This article argues that this paradox can be resolved theoretically by placing an anxious, defended subject rather than a rational, risk-avoiding one at the center of the debate, and explores some of the methodological implications of so doing, especially the importance of eliciting narratives. This methodological position, appropriately adapted for this study's rather different purposes, derives from the biographical-interpretive method first developed in Germany for the collection of life stories of Jewish survivors of the concentration camps. The authors outline the principles of this approach and the importance of eliciting concrete stories in a nondirective way in pursuit of the respondent's "gestalt," and then put this to work in attempting to operationalize their theoretical position into appropriate interview schedules. Specifically, the authors contrast the results of pilot interview schedules conducted in traditional question-and-answer format, in which "why" questions loom large, with those obtained by a schedule based on eliciting narratives from respondents, demonstrating both what the former misses and the latter (unconsciously) reveals. The authors also show how they use the same narrative-based principles in their follow-up interviews.

INTRODUCTION:
RESEARCHING THE ANXIOUS SUBJECT

In this article, we use the example of our research project on the subject of anxiety and fear of crime to explore a set of fundamental methodological issues thrown up by positing a research subject who is anxious. Not only did

we expect our respondents to be anxious because of the subject matter but also because we share the psychoanalytic assumption that anxiety is a fundamental characteristic of the human condition. What implications does this have for social research methodology and, in particular, for in-depth interviewing that has been the method of choice for those researching sensitive topics?

Our narrative begins when we tried to make sense of a particular finding in the fear of crime literature, which derives from the British Crime Survey question: "How safe do you feel walking in this area after dark . . . very safe, fairly safe, a bit unsafe, or, very unsafe?" The finding—what is commonly referred to now as the fear-risk paradox—is that there is a marked discrepancy between those demographic groups who report feeling unsafe and their objective risk of criminal victimization as calculated by official crime statistics. For example, young men are at highest risk and report lowest fear, and older women, who are at lowest risk, report highest fear. It is generally acknowledged in the debate, which was launched by this finding (Hough & Mayhew, 1985; Young, 1988), that the concepts are poorly theorized (Sparks, 1992) and that it will take qualitative work to achieve the necessary theoretical development.[1]

It seemed to us that the question of the relationship between risk and fear of crime would benefit from an analysis using insights from psychoanalysis, primarily because this provides an extensive literature on the cognate concept of anxiety. Indeed, because psychoanalysis starts from the premise of a dynamic unconscious as the core of subjectivity, where anxiety mobilizes unconscious defenses, anxiety is arguably the core concept in the theoretical edifice of psychoanalysis. Hence we hypothesized that fear of crime would not be a direct response to risk of victimization, but would be mediated by anxiety and the defenses against it. Kleinian psychoanalysis in particular has developed the notion of splitting to understand the way in which anxiety-provoking material may unconsciously get separated out from what is more acceptable within the psyche. This rejected material may then be modified through defenses that can work intersubjectively as well as intrasubjectively; that is, the unconscious dynamics could work between people, through projection (casting out) and introjection (taking in from another person) of anxiety-provoking material. One possibility we wanted to explore was that the anxiety experienced as fear of crime could be displaced by projection and introjection. This could take place both between individuals (e.g., between a heterosexual couple living in the same household, where a man might not be aware of being fearful of crime, but unconsciously this might be at the expense of his female partner feeling very fearful) and also between social groups (e.g., the way that old people are routinely construed as fearful of crime by younger people).

How, though, were we going to arrive at a method to tap anxiety in our respondents and to explore its relationship to risk and fear? Survey methods

were clearly inadequate for this question, and, equally clearly, a qualitative approach was necessary; but even standard qualitative approaches fell short for our purposes because participating, observing, and interviewing seem focused on uncovering the consistent rationales of individual or group action rather than the meaning of inconsistent or contradictory evidence. In our research proposal, we talked about developing a quasiclinical interview method, defined as "an interpretive method that does not take respondents' accounts at face value, which probes, using absences and avoidances in the narrative as much as what is said, to identify areas of significance." Specifically, we did not expect research respondents necessarily to be able to understand their own actions, motivations, or feelings. Some respondents remained perplexed and surprised by aspects of their own accounts, whereas others could give a coherent, but unconvincing, account of their behavior. If this is true in general for interviewee data, it may be particularly salient in researching a topic such as fear of crime, where one would expect anxieties to be heightened by the subject matter. If assumptions to do with rational, unitary subjectivity have defined the individual in Western history (Hollway 1989), the tendencies reach very deep for not only respondents but also researchers to search for, and help to produce, coherence and consistency in the narratives rather than highlight and work with inconsistencies and contradictions. We decided early on that to give us the time and distance from such forces, we needed a double interview—one to establish a preliminary symptomatic reading and the second to check this in various ways—and then we would fill in any evidential gaps. After the first interview we would have the opportunity to interrogate critically what was said and to pick up the contradictions, inconsistencies, avoidances, and changes of emotional tone. These we could explore further in the second interview by seeking further evidence to test our emergent hunches and provisional hypotheses (see Hollway & Jefferson, 1996b).

A full theoretical elaboration of our use of the term "anxiety" is beyond the scope of this article, but this much should be said. First, we are not talking about the cognate commonsensical term "worry," which may be the rational outcome of known fears or troubling events, for example, worries about having sufficient income to cope with life's many financial exigencies. Anxiety is an altogether more theoretically derived concept. Where worry becomes excessive in relation to the known threat, this is one sign of anxiety, related to what Klein (1988a, 1988b) termed "depressive anxiety." Where the level of concern is both excessive and apparently unrelated to observable events in a person's life, this is a sign of what Klein called "persecutory anxiety." Here, the defenses called in aid operate to deny or otherwise distort the threat, and result in behavior that will need to be read symptomatically if we are to uncover other issues masked by defenses against anxiety. The idea that anxiety leads to distortions and displacements demands a methodological strategy designed both to recognize and decode anxiety's many guises.

PILOT ATTEMPTS

Our initial attempts to operationalize this thinking produced inevitably a number of draft interview schedules. We decided to pilot a third of these as the first interview. It had a tripartite structure, with each of the three sections (fear of crime/victimization, anxiety/worry, and risk/safety) devoted to one of our key theoretical variables. Because we were trying to tap into the particular history of individuals, questions were intentionally specific, asking after concrete incidents or hypotheticals wherever possible, while remaining closely tied to our theoretical interests in discrepancies (e.g., between fear and risk) with detailed alternative routes for "yes" and "no" answers (where applicable). The effort to remain close to an interviewee's own experiences was assisted by a "what happened," "what did you do," "what did you feel" framing of questions. Thus we opened with a "what" question ("What's the crime you most fear?"), checked whether it had happened to them, and, if it had, followed up with "do" and "feel" questions, namely, "What did you do?" "How did you feel?" Our wish for detail led us also to ask whether feelings changed with the passage of time. Given our theoretical interest in intersubjective defenses against anxiety, we asked also what any "relevant others" did and felt each time. There were constant invitations to explain actions and feelings, motivated by our pursuit of contradictions, inconsistencies, and the irrational explanation. Thus, if the crime interviewees feared most had not in fact happened to them, they would be asked whether they felt it was likely to happen to them. A "yes" response would be followed by "Why do you think that?" A "no" answer would be followed by "Why do you fear it?" Finally, the attempt to be comprehensive produced, for example, in the section on fear of crime/victimization, not only questions relating to the crime "you most fear" (see below for an example) and "what (other) crime(s) you have most been a victim of," or might be, but also questions about nonstranger and violent crime (if not otherwise mentioned) and vigilantism.

Having completed the process of revising and refining questions through successive drafts, and feeling pleased with the results, we were then ready to try it out. Unfortunately, the results were disappointing. Why this should be the case only became clear when we went through the resulting transcripts. What follows is a short extract from one such transcript and our critical evaluation of it—an evaluation that graphically, and somewhat embarrassingly, illustrates the problems with what we then took to be a focused, concrete, and hard-won approach.

Interviewer: What's the crime you most fear?
Ann: An offense against the person probably.
Interviewer: The person or your person?
Ann: Well, erm yes, I fear being hurt myself but I also fear for my children being hurt.
Interviewer: OK. Has, have you ever been hurt?

Ann: Yes.

Interviewer: And what did you do?

Ann: Can you be more specific, what do you mean?

Interviewer: Well I mean you choose any incident that you can recall.

Ann: Where I've been physically hurt?

Interviewer: Where you've been physically hurt.

Ann: Erm, it erm. Well I've been hurt by people I've been in relationships with. Is that the sort of crime you're referring to?

Interviewer: That's fine.

Ann: It's varied what I've done. It depends on . . .

Interviewer: From what to what?

Ann: Yes, it depends on what the circumstances were and whether I think I contributed to it or not, how I responded ultimately.

Interviewer: So if you thought you contributed to it you did what?

Ann: My usual response actually, if I describe my response, my response pattern to any situation where I've feel threatened, it'll probably help to answer the question. If I am threatened physically and it's not happened a lot but if I am I notice now that I have a patterned response which is, that I immediately go into shock and that it takes me a couple of days to recover from that actual physical shock and I, I experience the shock as though it were an accident or you know, [Interviewer: Yes] my body closes down and I can't think about it and I just feel very numb and, erm, after a couple of days with not being able to think about it then my mind starts to process it and I start to analyze it. I've never ever called the police except on one occasion when my children were involved with my ex partner. So I've called the police on one occasion.

Interviewer: But as well as going into shock are there other things you do?

Ann: Well I feel, do or feel?

Interviewer: Do.

Ann: It depends. If I'm able to access the person who's done it to me then I usually want to talk to them about it. Erm, but that's not always possible. What I've found is that when people hurt you they run away themselves and you're not able to actually resolve it and so therefore I think that exacerbates the shock I feel.

Interviewer: Why?

Ann: Because you're dealing with a range of feelings then [Interviewer: Right] which are not just about the physical assault.

Interviewer: Can I just sort of be clear in my own mind what we're talking about here. You mentioned threat. Are we talking about threats of violence or actual violence?

Although the opening question is an attempt to tap concretely into Ann's fear of crime, it comes across as abstract because it was introduced abruptly, devoid of context, and prior to the build-up of any rapport. The result is a singular, somewhat uncertain answer ("probably")—an uncertainty that matches the unwitting abstractness of the question. The interviewer then has to work to focus the answer ("The person or your person") to make it less abstract, echoing the interviewee's words where possible ("have you ever been hurt"). The result is a concrete but singular "yes." The interviewer again tries to focus the respondent through a "do" question ("And what did you do?"), but only succeeds in producing a request to be more specific because

the respondent has no idea which incident is being referred to, none having yet been specified. In an attempt not to override her meaning-frame, the interviewer invites the respondent to choose an incident; but this is still too abstract. Ann's subsequent request for clarification ("Where I've been physically hurt?") might be seen as an attempt to ask after the interviewer's meaning-frame, what the interviewer is really after, because that is the kind of relationship that the question-and-answer approach has established, that is, the interviewer defines the agenda.

Even when agreement has been reached that an incident where Ann had been physically hurt was appropriate, she is still uncertain that being hurt by "people I've been in relationships with" counts (for the interviewer). Reassurance on this score still leaves her unfocused because her responses have varied ("it depends"). Instead of getting her to focus on a particular incident, the interviewer picks up on this lead about her various responses, thus effectively inviting her to continue in a generalizing mode ("it depends on . . . the circumstances . . . and whether I think I contributed to it or not"). Perhaps realizing the error, the interviewer attempts to recoup by specifying a contributory situation: "So if you thought you contributed to it, you did what?" It is still too little; no actual incident has been specified, so the respondent plumps for her usual (i.e., general) response, hoping this will help. The interviewer allows this and learns that usually Ann goes into shock and, on one occasion (and only one occasion), she called the police. This should have provided two openings: one toward her meaning-frame via a further exploration of the issue of shock; the other (at last!) toward a specific incident—the time she called the police. The interviewer misses them both, clumsily cutting across her shock-based meaning-frame in pursuit of an apparently concrete question: "Are there other things you do?"

At this point, Ann half reintroduces her meaning-frame ("Well I feel"—a reference back to her feelings of shock), only to accede to the interviewer's as she remembers the question. So she asks, "do or feel?" Again, in the interest of (an apparent) concreteness, the interviewer reiterates "do." Once again she vacillates ("it depends") and then generalizes ("I usually want to talk to them about it," if she can "access" them; "when people hurt you they run away"). The interviewer responds with a "why" question, thus inviting further speculative theorizing as to why someone running away "exacerbates the shock" she feels. Ann's answer ("Because you're dealing with a range of feelings then") makes sense, but is still free floating. In desperation, the interviewer seeks clarification as to "what we're talking about here. . . . Are we talking about threats of violence or actual violence?" Not only has any hint of a concrete incident disappeared, but the interviewer seems now to be completely adrift, not even knowing whether Ann is talking about threats or actual violence.

What has happened? How has the interviewer's attempt to elicit concrete, detailed experiences managed to produce only this vacillating, generalizing

discourse about what usually happens? Blaming either the interviewer or the respondent helps little: the former was a sympathetic listener with a lot of professional experience; the latter was intelligent, thoughtful, and articulate. Probably the somewhat abstract and abrupt opening was a mistake, as were the failures to follow up certain opportunities, such as Ann's shock response to threatened violence, and the one time she called the police to deal with partner violence. But the problem goes deeper than a few mistakes, which all interviewers, however good, make frequently—through tiredness, lapses of concentration, a clumsily worded question, tapping into unknown (and unknowable) sensitivities, and so forth. Rather, mistakes might usefully be seen as symptoms of a general underlying problem common to all in-depth interviews, namely, the fact that respondents have parts of their lives that they wish to protect from the prying questioner (as well as parts they have protected from their conscious self through repression, projection, denial, etc.), whereas interviewers hope for the chimera of unfettered divulgence.

As a result of positing a defended subject, we begin to read the above interview extract differently. What the interviewer has stumbled on is the hornets' nest of this woman's painful experiences of partner violence. Because she hardly knows the (male) interviewer, part of the vacillation is an elaborate, largely unconscious sounding out of the interviewer, staying safe through comfortable, well-rehearsed generalizations. But what the interviewer is also up against are Ann's established defenses, which protect her from her own painful experiences. Seen in this light, her well-rehearsed generalizations about what she does in this situation and what she does in that, intelligent and articulate though they are, are part of a defensive strategy—a strategy of intellectualizing, of managing painfully confusing emotional experiences through words that offer (apparently) the comfort of comprehension and the prospect of control.

It is here, in the difficulties posed by respondents' defensive structures, that the problem reveals itself as one of method rather than ability or mistakes. The direct route to the concrete and particular using our "what/do/feel" compass—however well thought out, revised, and refined—mobilized a set of defensive barriers. Asking "why" questions only makes matters worse because they encourage—invite even—intellectualizing-type defenses. Small wonder we began to think a more indirect, less obvious route was called for.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL-INTERPRETATIVE METHOD

At this point, somewhat fortuitously, we stumbled across the biographical-interpretative method, first developed by German sociologists producing accounts of the lives of holocaust survivors and Nazi soldiers (Rosenthal, 1993; Rosenthal & Bar-On, 1992; Schutze, 1992). As Schutze's articles reveal, such elicited accounts will be highly defensive ones, given the painful subject

matter, which needed a methodological strategy to uncover what he called "faded-out memories and delayed recollections of emotionally or morally disturbing war experiences" (Schutze, 1992, p. 347). Although Schutze sees "some intersections between Freud's impressive theory on repression" (1992, p. 359) and his own method, this insight is not developed. The main theoretical principle is not the defended subject, but the idea that there is a "gestalt" (a whole which is more than the sum of its parts; an order or hidden agenda) informing each person's life that it is the job of biographers to elicit intact and not destroy through following their own concerns (Rosenthal, 1990). If the German sociologists needed a methodological strategy to get beyond the parts to the hidden whole, we needed one to glimpse behind defenses to the anxieties they protect.

Broadly, their strategy can be summarized in terms of four simple principles: use open-ended not closed questions, elicit stories,[2] avoid "why" questions, and follow up using respondents' ordering/phrasing. In practice, for the German biographers, this entailed a single, open, initial question that was also an invitation: "Please, tell me your life story" (Rosenthal, 1990). Beyond that, it involves attentive listening and some note taking during the initial narration to be able to follow up themes in their narrated order, using the respondent's own words and phrases, eliciting further narration through open questioning. The art and the skill of the exercise is to assist narrators to say more about their lives (to assist the emergence of their gestalt) without offering, at the same time, interpretations, judgments, or otherwise imposing the interviewer's own relevancies (thus destroying the interviewee's gestalt). Apparently simple, it required discipline and practice to transform ourselves from the highly visible asker of our questions to the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst of the interviewees' stories.[3]

THE NARRATIVE QUESTIONS IN INTERVIEW 1

Following our attendance at a biographical-interpretative method workshop, we set about revising our interview schedule. We considered asking one single question (as the German biographers do), but our three-part theoretical structure—crime/victimization, risk/safety, anxiety/worry—seemed to provide an important frame for eliciting what we wanted to know. Life stories can be structured by an infinite number of themes, but our research provided a particular frame that we could not ignore. We decided, therefore, on six questions deriving from our theoretical structure and a seventh about moving into the area.

Interview 1 Questions
1a. Can you tell me about how crime has impacted on your life since you've been living here?
1b. [follow up in terms of detail and time periods, following order of narrative]

2a. Can you tell me about unsafe situations in your life since you've been living here?

2b. [as 1b]

3a. Can you think of something that you've read, seen or heard about recently that makes you fearful? Anything [not necessarily about crime].

3b. [as 1b]

4a. Can you tell me about risky situations in your life since you've been living here?

4b. [as 1b]

5a. Can you tell me about times in your life recently when you've been anxious?

5b. [as 1b]

6a. Can you tell me about earlier times in your life when you've been anxious?

6b. [as 1b]

7a. Can you tell me what it was like moving to this area?

7b. [as 1b]

Question 1 aims to elicit any associations to crime. It is designed in such a way that it does not assume victimization, and indeed it elicited stories about criminal involvement from several young men. Usually it provided an account of criminal victimizations directly to the respondent and of crimes happening locally. The (b) questions follow the principle of respecting the gestalt of respondents' accounts: remaining faithful to the order and wording in which they presented their associations (see below for a detailed example). Question 2 and Question 4 elicited stories relating to safety and risk, respectively, providing us with two routes to the same theoretical point. Safety is the same concept that is used in the British Crime Survey question ("how safe do you feel") and is assumed to be the antithesis of fear. Although the notion of being at risk is similar, as in the fear-risk paradox, we wanted to broaden out the question so as not to talk specifically about risk of criminal victimization and also to leave open whether a respondent associated to being at risk or to being a risk taker. Question 3 was designed to explore some links between fear of crime and discourses available in the media. Question 5 and Question 6 were both about anxiety, but were separated into recent and past anxiety in recognition of the importance, according to psychoanalytic theory, of childhood trauma in producing adult fears and chronic anxiety. Question 7 was added to take into account that a person's perception of a neighborhood will be influenced by comparing it with where they lived previously. This question asked for stories about moving to elicit such comparisons. It was also likely to be the most neutral question with which to end.

The key concepts in each question did not always elicit different stories. However, the different frames of the questions meant that people could elaborate different associations to the same memory. After the first question, we were not asking specifically about crime, although the overall frame in which the research interview was presented defined crime as a key theme. In Question 3, we widened the frame specifically by asking about any media stimulus that had made people fearful, giving respondents explicit permission to broaden out. This was informed by our hypothesis that generalized

anxiety might occupy, and be expressed by, a fear of crime discourse, or it might occupy other topical discursive vehicles, for example, environmental pollution. Any associations to the question were therefore legitimately within our interests.

THE NARRATIVE INTERVIEW[4] IN ACTION

How did our new, story-based approach fare when put to the test? In this section we try to show something of its strengths: first, in drawing out themes for follow-up, the significance of which are not necessarily obvious at the time; second, in securing an unexpected admission that enforces a thorough reevaluation.

Eight Themes, or an Emergent Gestalt

In what follows, we use the transcript of the beginning of Interview 1 with a 19-year-old White woman, single mother of two children, aged 2 and 3, living on a high-crime council housing estate.

> Interviewer: Tell me first of all how crime has had any effects on you since you moved here.
> June: Em, it's just you know, like, we got broken into once. But they didn't seem to take owt. They just took stuff outside there, and that were it. They must er, I must 'ave come 'ome and they were 'ere. And just—I see police, y'know, bringing cars up from fields at back. There's always motor bikes. Kids on motor bikes. They just don't seem to do nowt. They just see 'em go past and—it's just like—you know things like—there's a 'ouse up there and some kids 'ave broken into it. It were like in daylight. Kicking door down and smashing window—nobody were doing nowt. There was somebody living next door, people across road, nobody seemed to do owt. And they're all their kids. And it's like—they just let the kids do what they want. They don't bother. [Interviewer: Right]. There 're like, there's like 1- and 2-year-olds just playing out on the street and it's all that kind of thing.

At first sight, the interview looks far from promising. It is not always clear what June is referring to and she dries up quite quickly. The interviewer's technique involves not intervening until the interchange is handed back and identifying the themes that are apparent, so as to return to them in the order of their appearance to elicit further detail. Eight themes were identifiable in this short extract. June mentions the break-in (1), summed up in four short sentences. Her next association (2) is to the police, in the context of a different crime: police retrieving stolen cars from where they have been dumped. This leads her (3) to think of another instance of local joyriding: kids on motor bikes. Her theme is still (4) the police (though she does not specify this here, the interviewer does not intervene to clarify): the police go past, but "don't

seem to do owt." In midsentence June shifts to a different example of inactivity (5), in this instance where "nobody were doing nowt," even though kids had broken into a house and were vandalizing it. She elaborates on the nobody (6), instancing neighbors' inactivity in the face of kids breaking the law. Her train of association is then (7) to parents who do not stop these activities and finally (8) to parents' more general negligence as instanced by very young children playing out unsupervised.

Because this pathway of associations is produced out of her concerns, the hypothesis is that the whole will signify more than the sum of the parts (this is definitional of a gestalt). A quick-witted interviewer, who has already taken biographical details, may have realized the significance of where this young woman ended her first contribution. Certainly, as the interview developed, there were numerous pointers to the fact that June's relation to the council estate where she had lived for 12 months was informed more than anything else by her concern for how she was going to bring up her two young boys in this context of precocious male delinquency. Her disapproval of the negligence of some parents on the estate was an expression of her difference ("I couldn't believe it, me"; "Mum couldn't believe it") on which were pinned, presumably, her hopes that her children would not go the same way. This was all the more important given that she and her family represented one of the stereotypes of the negligent mother: a young, single parent with half-caste children. This key to her gestalt manifested itself at the first opportunity, that is, at the end of her first unimpeded response to a question framed for maximum openness.[5] It had actually entailed her going off the question, in the sense that she had started by listing some crimes and then moved on to other, noncriminal, issues, which for her were intimately associated, but of greater concern. It is her emotional concerns that produce this pathway of associations. She eventually mentioned her core concern later in the interview: "It's just with these [her children] getting older. It's like everybody round 'ere, I mean they're—it's attitudes and that." To have confined the interview to crime would have been to rule out the central preoccupation, not just of her relationship to the high-crime council housing estate where she lived, but of her relationship to crime on the estate.

An Open Question and an Unusual Admission

The following extract is taken from the transcript of our first interview with Tommy, a 42-year-old White man from a large local family who has lived on the same high-crime estate for 33 years, currently with his common-law wife, their 5-year-old son, and her two older sons.

> Interviewer: So you started there by talking about the 2 times in your life when you've been ill and that made you anxious. Er, has there been any other times when you've felt anxious about anything? Or is it just about health?

Tommy: Well actually I were frightened when I lost me dad.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Tommy: Yeah. Only one in family who were frightened, 'cos we 'ad 'im at 'ome.

Interviewer: Yeah. Tell me about it.

Tommy: Well he worked all 'is life, me dad. Never got—and 'e was 65 and not even got 'is bus pass. And it *really* 'urt me that. That er, 'e died in pain in 'ospital as well. They fetched 'im 'im home. Fetched 'im over, put 'im at side of wall and they took lid off. You know what I mean? Me dad were laid there and everybody, when we come down next morning, oh I couldn't go to sleep that night thinking about it. And everybody come down stairs, 'oh God bless', all mourners, everybody came—'cos 'e were well loved me dad. They loved me dad on estate. And everybody kissed 'im bar me because I were frightened. Eventually we cremated 'im and I went back to work week after and I broke down at work. Because I didn't do what I should have done. I broke down at work, they fetched me 'ome from work and I were off work 3 week.

Interviewer: 3 weeks?

Tommy: I broke down, aye. I went to bed one night and I'll never forget it happened. Me mam will probably tell ya as well, when you go and see 'er. Went to bed one night, summat woke me up. I woke up and I looked at bottom end of bed. Me dad were there. Me dad turned round "don't worry about it, I still love ya." Just disappeared. Got up next morning, I told me mother. "Oh you 'aven't 'ave ya?" I said "aye" I says "he says he loved me and told me not to worry about it, because I didn't kiss 'im." I wish I 'ad 'ave done na. 'cos it's 20 year na since we lost 'im. 1974.

The interviewer starts by picking up on Tommy's previous answer concerning anxiety, attempting to ensure that there are not other times in his life when he has felt anxious. This time-based approach is a good example of open questioning, as is the addition "about anything," but it is not an invitation to generalize. His response ("I were frightened when I lost me dad") uses the vocabulary of fear, not anxiety. Rather than seek to clarify and risk cutting across his meaning-frame, the interviewer invites him to continue with a noncommittal but interested "yeah?" Tommy starts to tell the story and is explicitly encouraged to continue. Note the absence of any attempt by the interviewer to check the story's relevance (to the project) in advance. What follows is a richly thematized story of what the interviewee's dad's death meant to him: the injustice of a working man dying before enjoying any of the fruits of retirement ("not even got 'is bus pass"); his inability to sleep with the dead body in the house; pride in his dad's reputation ("They loved me dad on estate"); and, finally, the revelation (and the anxious point of the story) of his fearful inability to kiss his dead dad, to do what he "should have done," and his subsequent breakdown at work. Given the richness of this story, the interviewer might have been tempted to follow up the themes it revealed (hopefully respecting Tommy's ordering). But it is important to ensure that each story is finished, uninterrupted. Hence the interviewer merely echoes, in questioning fashion, Tommy's endpoint: "three weeks?" thereby implicitly inviting him to continue should he wish. The reward for this disciplined reticence is another extraordinary revelation, this time about a visitation by

his father's ghost, though it is a comforting not a frightening memory because it involves his dad's forgiveness for not kissing him.

Could this story have been elicited using our old pilot schedule? And what new understanding of Tommy has this story made possible? Although we cannot be certain that this story would not have come out using our old schedule, it seems unlikely: first, because there was no specific question inviting it; second, because its interventionist ethos probably would have interrupted Tommy before he got this far back in his memories. As for the new understanding it affords, the important point is to register the surprise the admission engendered—a surprise that was partly to do with the unusual nature of the story itself (though another male respondent on the same estate later offered a similar story about his terrified inability to kiss his dead grandmother), but mostly to do with the way it appeared to contradict the cheerful, confident, and not obviously fearful Tommy revealed through his other recounted stories. Something previously unknown (and unsuspected) had now been revealed: that Tommy as a young man had experienced extreme and distressing anxiety, such that he was unable to leave the house for several weeks, and all because he felt afraid (unlike all the others: "everybody kissed 'im bar me") to kiss his dead dad. Without attempting to assess the story's ultimate significance, a task that would require a knowledge of Tommy beyond the remit of this article, what is undeniable is that such memories have significance and have to be accounted for. Any assessment of Tommy now has to make sense of both the cheery confidence and this new evidence of some underlying anxiety. As it happened, this fear of kissing a dead body found echoes in his anxieties about dying precipitated during two periods of illness. These anxieties about illness and death contrasted strangely with his declaration that his health was "fantastic" (a claim also at odds with his admission that a bad back occasionally left him crippled, forcing him to use a stick like an old man). Gradually, we saw these contrasts as part of a pattern in which unpalatable realities were idealistically glossed—a pattern that revealed important clues about his characteristic structure of defenses. Though we might have got there without this story, its dramatic impact was such as to ensure that we had to question appearances more searchingly than we might otherwise have done.

INTERVIEW 2

Interview 2 was fixed, if possible, 1 week after Interview 1. In between times, the two researchers listened to each tape together: those we had conducted ourselves and those conducted by the other. In this way, we tried to get both a subjective and an outsider perspective on the interview.[6] There would typically be many pauses while the significance of a part of the narrative was discussed, and we attempted to get a reading of the person that

was sensitive to all the details offered and did not iron out the contradictions in that person's account. From notes taken during this process, the interviewer constructed a series of tailor-made narrative questions for Interview 2. In these, we gave ourselves permission to explore themes that may have been significant through their absence rather than remaining within the confines of the account we had been given; for example, if no mention has been made of a person's childhood and parents. Often, though, it was a question of asking for further stories to illustrate themes that had already arisen. For example, June had said little about her parents, though it was evident that they were now very supportive. She had mentioned a time when she had no contact with them, as a result of sticking by her partner, who they knew was violent to their daughter. The question constructed to elicit narrative on this topic, although remaining as open as possible, was "What happened that led up to your falling out with your parents?"

The overall effect of this method was that, in the vast majority of cases, interviewees warmed to the whole event and to the interviewer because they experienced being paid attention to and taken seriously through their own, self-styled account. In June's case, from being rather closed at the beginning, after the tape was turned off at the end she commented that she had told the interviewer more (notably about the traumatic relationship with her ex-partner) than anyone except her mum. As well as reflecting the gradual buildup of trust over two interviews (and in this regard the second interview is significant in that it feels like resuming an established relationship rather than starting out as strangers), interviewees' preparedness to open out intimate material reflects the building up of an expectation that stories are what the researcher wants—that they are interesting, relevant, and valued. This expectation has to be actively built because the normal expectation is otherwise, that is, that an interviewer will come round with a batch of questions, for which one-word, or short, replies are required. Our overall impression was that most people liked telling stories—even about discomfiting events— once they felt reasonably trusting of the framework into which these were being received.

After this second set of narrative questions, we went through a set of structured questions with each participant if answers had not already been covered previously. Because the narrative interview format does not guarantee systematic coverage of issues, we judged this information necessary to enable comparisons across demographic groups and different localities, in our case high- and low-crime council housing estates.

ENDING OUR NARRATIVE

We started our research wanting to place an anxious, defended subject rather than a rational, unitary one at the core of our concerns, but somewhat

uncertain how to surmount the methodological problems thus posed. Our initial efforts using a direct approach, in the form of a conventionally inspired qualitative interview schedule, proved disappointing and we opted for the more indirect approach of eliciting narratives derived from the biographical-interpretive method used by German researchers. Their idea of hidden meaning being revealed through the gestalt of a story is analogous to the psychoanalytic concept of free association, in which the links between elements in the narrative are provided by unconscious meaning associations, which then provide clues to the significance of a person's account. Though we have only been able here to offer brief glimpses of the greater richness of our data secured through this switch to narrative interviewing, we have demonstrated elsewhere its ability to illuminate theoretical questions about the relationship between anxiety and fear of crime (Hollway & Jefferson, 1996c) and the cultural reproduction of anxiety (Hollway & Jefferson, 1996a). It is tempting to end here; however, at least two issues still need addressing, though here we can only begin to define them.

First, there is the tricky question of how we engage with narrators' defenses in such a way as to enable them to talk about issues that may arouse anxiety. A distinctive feature of the narrative interview is that it keeps narrators connected to actual past events. If they are unsettled by the event, it could be by their experience of contradictions in their own narrative—which may not have arisen in other situations—and they can choose to avoid considering them or to explore them further. Unless these events have been actively repressed because of their traumatic nature (as in cases of child sexual abuse), they are known to the narrator and, if anxiety resides in recalling them, defenses will have been established. Either the story will not be told (though the narrator's own free associations make it more likely that it will be) or the account will contain habitual defenses that make its recollection manageable. For example, in recollecting the traumatic incidents of physical abuse she had suffered, June was not really experiencing how bad it was: "It sounds bad now. But at the time it didn't seem so bad." The interviewer does not ask why ("Why did it not feel so bad at the time?"). If there are defenses (denial and isolation in this case) against feeling the real extent of the threat, that is an excellent reason for June not knowing why, and, what is more, the question would be experienced as a very attacking one. The interviewer can later look for supporting evidence for this denial hypothesis in the text. In June's case, the evidence is presented later: in the context of talking about how her mother got upset on her behalf, June says "[I] don't think about it. It's [like a dead thing]. It's just something that 'appened, but it don't seem like it 'appened."

Second, there is the interesting question of the relationship between the German sociologist-biographers' understanding of gestalt and our psycho-analytically derived understanding of anxiety. The principle of respecting the narrator's gestalt has close similarities with the psychoanalytic method of free association: by asking the patient to say whatever comes to mind, the psycho-

analyst is eliciting the kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to unconscious logic, that is, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional rather than rational motivations. Unconscious logic, according to psychoanalysis, is crucially influenced by the control of anxiety (through avoidance or mastery). This suggests that anxieties and attempts to defend against them, including the identity investments these give rise to, provide the key to a person's gestalt.

Once again, this is not to suggest that associations are elicited regardless of context. Obviously, the trust engendered in any interviewer-interviewee situation is a function of the gender, age, and other power-laden dynamics inherent in all social interactions, as well as the manner of framing questions. In other words, an interviewee's associations are always a contingent product of both the setting—a notion including the expectations generated in setting up the interview and the introduction of topics—and the power dynamics this institutes. At the most obvious level, there is the perennial issue of the sex, age, race, and class of both parties, and how these are read by the interviewee, both consciously and unconsciously. At present, we have approached this issue through attempting to be aware of the countertransference, an issue some feminist psychotherapists have begun to explore (e.g., Bernardez, 1996). In other words, although the interviewee may be utilizing established defenses, it is important to recognize also the dynamic character of defenses: how manageable is the recollection of an anxiety-provoking event also depends on the current situation, including the relationship within which the narrative is taking place, and whether that situation can help contain anxiety. The interaction between enduring, chronic anxieties and present, situationally induced ones in producing a given account requires further elaboration.

These exploratory lines of analysis represent our attempt to answer the initial question that this method posed: Given that eliciting narrative has been so successful for our purposes in practice, how can we understand its success?

NOTES

1. At a recent meeting of the fear of crime subgroup of the researchers funded by the ESRC Crime and Social Order Programme (of which three out of four are largely qualitative in approach), the view was expressed that qualitative work was appropriate at the beginning to theorize concepts that surveys would be working with, and again after survey findings to make sense of the pattern of distribution of fear of crime: what, for example, do we make of the recent survey finding (Hough, 1995) that women are more fearful of burglaries and men more fearful of car thefts?

2. Eliciting stories is not always a simple matter, especially from those who feel their lives lack sufficient interest or worth to justify a story. And, no doubt for a variety of different reasons, people's storytelling ability varies enormously. However, given the importance of the narrative form to all social communication, a story is often chosen to

answer even direct questions, especially when interviewees are uncertain what is required. It's a "well, this is the story of my relationship to your chosen topic, you decide whether it's what you're after" sort of reply. The implications of this for the traditional interview method are, in a nutshell, a recommendation to narrativize topics, that is, turn questions about given topics into storytelling invitations: "Tell me about your experiences of fear/anxiety, etc., or of times when you were fearful/anxious, etc."

3. Being almost invisible does not imply a belief in an objective interviewer who has no effects on the production of accounts. It means not imposing a structure on the narrative.

4. Because we do not claim to be using the biographical-interpretative method, or Schutze's autobiographical narrative interview method in a strict sense, merely borrowing its main methodological protocols, we call our method "narrative interviewing."

5. We found this often to be the case, but it was usually not until we had familiarized ourselves with the whole two interviews that we recognized it. It is an example of the whole giving extra meaning to a part.

6. A subjective perspective provides the kind of emotional involvement that could lead to distortions, but, if it is recognized and systematically used, it provides a further dimension of information. This dimension has been theorized through the experiences of psychoanalysts, using the concepts of transference and countertransference (see Hinshelwood, 1991). These refer to the unconscious transferring of other emotionally significant relationships onto the therapist by the patient and the therapist's responses to these transferences, as well as their own reverse (counter) transferences. The idea can usefully be applied to any relationship. In writing our postinterview impressions, it was useful as a way of becoming aware of the unfamiliar feelings with which we were left after the interview: in June's case, a strong wish to rescue her from her unenviable situation.

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Wendy Hollway is a reader in gender relations in the Department of Psychology, University of Leeds, United Kingdom. She has researched and published on questions to do with subjectivity, gender, sexuality, the history of work psychology, gender relations in organizations, and gender difference, anxiety, and the fear of crime, her ESRC-funded project (with Professor Jefferson) from which this article derives. Her published books are Mothering and Ambivalence *(1997) (edited with Brid Featherstone),* Work Psychology and Organizational Behavior *(1991),* Subjectivity and Method in Psychology *(1989), and* Changing the Subject *(1984) (with Henriques et al.).*

Tony Jefferson is a professor of criminology in the Department of Criminology, University of Keele, United Kingdom. He has researched and published widely on questions to do with youth subcultures, the media, policing, race and crime, masculinity, and gender difference, anxiety, and the fear of crime (with Dr. Hollway), his ESRC-funded project from which this article derives. His published works include Masculinities, Social Relations and Crime *(1996) (edited with Pat Carlen),* The Case Against Paramilitary Policing *(1991),* Policing the Crisis *(1978) (with Stuart Hall et al.), and* Resistance Through Rituals *(1976) (edited with Stuart Hall). He is currently working on a biography of the boxer Mike Tyson.*