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Learning For and From the Field: The Experience of Being a Research Interviewer

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Abstract

This paper provides a narrative on the experience of being a research interviewer on a federally-funded state-wide study of group homes for youth. Despite the centrality of interviewers for much of the research on a wide range of children's services, very little attention has been given to how interviewers experience this role and what supports they need to enact it effectively. The article discusses various aspects of the interviewer job, discusses management and supervisory approaches that support interviewers, and provides lessons learned and anecdotes to illustrate key points. An introduction and concluding thoughts by the study's Principal Investigator provide an overview and potentially relevant lessons for the broader research field.

Keywords

interviewer; training; data collection

The Experience of Being a Research Interviewer

In contemporary research on children's mental health interventions, primary data collection is an essential component for developing the knowledge base. There are serious concerns about administrative data (both in terms of quality, scope, and availability on key domains), there are not enough previous studies in most areas to permit secondary or meta analysis, and the complexity of interventions, contexts, and pathways through treatment require extensive field-based data collection to examine key research questions and test hypotheses (Farmer, Chapman, Phillips, & Burns, 2001)

Despite the centrality of such field-based work, relatively little attention has been paid to this aspect of the research enterprise. What literature does exist has focused mostly on interviewing techniques (Cannell, Miller, & Oksenberg, 1981), the importance of demographic characteristics and interviewer/respondent match (Hatchett & Schuman, 1975; Cotter, Cohen, & Coulter, 1982; Catania, Binson, Canchola, Pollack & Hauck, 1996), and general guidelines for interviewing (Williams, 1964). However, there has been much less attention to the perspective of the interviewers themselves – how they experience the role, the learning curve involved in the process of becoming an interviewer, management and other contextual factors that enhance or impede their role enactment, and how this

experience may help to influence the views and career paths of the next generation of researchers and practitioners.

The current manuscript was developed from an extended conversation between research interviewers, project administrators, and principle investigators of an ongoing state-wide study of group homes in a southeastern state (Farmer, Murray, Ballentine, Morris, & Burns, 2011). This study is the most recent in several decades of field-based research conducted by the lead investigators and project coordinator. For the research interviewers, however, it was their first exposure to the field of children's mental health and to the world of field-based longitudinal primary data collection.

The following presents this experience from the perspective of one of the study's full-time interviewers. Like many investigators on federally-funded studies, the study hired recent college graduates as field interviewers. We have found that their energy, enthusiasm, and desire to learn more about the general field of children's services and mental health before they head back to academia for graduate school combine to produce a high level of dedication, willingness to work long and often non-standard hours, and an inherent inquisitiveness about the process and the participants that helps to propel them and make them delightful to work with. For such interviewers, though, it means that this experience is their first extensive and intensive encounter with (a) individuals with serious mental health problems, (b) the bureaucracy of service systems, and (c) being employed full-time as an adult. While this combination offers tremendous opportunities, for both the project and the interviewers, it also presents a series of challenges that need to be kept in mind to make this situation work.

Overview of the Study and Interviewers' Role

The study referred to in this manuscript is a quasi-experimental, longitudinal, federally-funded study of processes and outcomes for youth in group homes (Farmer, et al., 2011). The study recently concluded data collection. The study included 52 group homes that are operated by 14 agencies. Within these homes, the study recruited over 550 youth. Data collection included in-home interviews with staff and youth (every 4 months), structured observations of in-home processes, telephone interviews with pre-admission caregivers, telephone interview at 4 and 8 months post-discharge with the youth's caregiver (or with the youth, if he/she is 18 or older and living independently), and extraction of data from agency records for each youth.

The study employed two full-time interviewers throughout the study. In-person interviews were conducted via scheduled visits to the sites every four months. Interviewers were responsible for all aspects of participant enrollment and data collection (e.g., obtaining consent from children's legal guardians, recruiting staff, families, and youth into the study, conducting telephone and in-person interviews, extracting data, all record keeping [in both hard and electronic formats]). Scheduling of data collection visits to the group homes was done by the study coordinator, but all planning, preparation, and management of the data collection visits was the responsibility of the interviewers (to clarify roles, each interviewer assumed the lead in half of the agencies). For each site visit, the interviewer-in-charge was responsible for making sure that the web-based tracking program was up-to-date with the current youth roster, assembling all materials, scheduling when staff and youth in each home would be interviewed, creating a plan and division of labor, and completing all paperwork, filing, etc. upon return to the office after the visit. For the largest sites, on-site data collection was a team effort, with the two interviewers, as well as the project coordinator and project assistant traveling to the site to conduct interviews with multiple staff and youth (often in homes that were distributed throughout a community). Each interviewer was also

responsible for completing all pre-admission and post-discharge telephone interviews with a guardian of the youth who reside in her assigned agencies' homes. Hence, the role required a rather complex set of skills – organization, management, salesmanship, interpersonal communication (with youth, staff, and families/guardians), perseverance, flexibility, stamina, intelligence, etc.

The following provides a first-person account of this experience from the perspective of one of the study's interviewers. The concluding section provides comments and reflections from the study's principal investigator on the interviewers' role and experiences, as well as the importance of recognizing and examining this role, both as a key element of successfully conducting large-scale research and as a potential training ground for the next generation of researchers and mental health professionals.

Life of an Interviewer

I have worked as a research interviewer on a study of youth in out-of-home care for nearly three years. This was my first job after I finished my undergraduate education in sociology. I wanted to learn more about social services, and I had a strong interest in working with youth. I was drawn to this particular study because an important aspect of data collection was collecting data from and about the youth and understanding their perspective on the treatment they were receiving. I suspect that I was hired for this job because of my high energy level, my desire to learn about real issues in the community, my excitement in both working with the youth and with traveling to complete the interviews, and I was a cheap hire because I was a recent graduate.

Going into this job I would have liked to know a little more about what it was like to collect data in the field. I became an interviewer three months after data collection had started. Therefore, I wasn't involved in the initial interviewer training and study start-up period. When I began working, I was quickly trained and then began doing all aspects of the interviewer job. I learned by asking questions; if I made a mistake we corrected it. I learned from the experience, and I went on to the next data collection site. I was told about types of devastating case histories that many of the youth in group homes would have, about potentially dangerous situations (and how to avoid or deal with them), and ethical considerations, but I did not have the chance to ask questions of someone who had done this job before. This paper is a way to start that conversation for those who follow in my footsteps.

Visiting Homes

I will never forget walking into my first group home. All the youth who lived in the home met me at the door, introduced themselves and shook my hand. It was a two-story house, painted and furnished like a picture from a catalogue. Each girl had her own room, and the house was filled with books and games. There was a closet downstairs filled with prizes the girls could earn if they were on task with their goals. I will also never forget the second site I visited and how different it was from the first. The houses of this group home agency were dispersed across an urban community. The furniture in the houses was stained and in disrepair, the youth ate fast food for dinner, and there were no activities readily available for the youth to do besides watch TV. This was only the beginning of my learning about the variation among group homes.

For the most part, our on-site experiences involved visits to the group homes. However, we also visited homes of some post-discharge caregivers to try to find youth who "disappeared" after discharge. Approximately a year into the study, we (the interviewers) began completing post-discharge home visits for youth whose guardians we could not contact.

Prior to visiting a guardian/care giver's home we went through a process to ensure the home visit was a last resort (see Ballentine, Morris, & Farmer, 2012, for a detailed description of this process). If we could not find the youth and/or guardian/caregiver via phone, mail, or other approaches, we would do a home visit. This experience was eye-opening. We encountered Dixie flag regalia covering houses, "No Trespassing" signs, "Beware of Dog" signs (and the frightening dogs accompanying them), broken windows, and the list goes on. We always went on these visits in pairs, never alone. Walking up to the door was often intimidating. We wore our best business casual and our nametags to look professional. Still, as white women in our early twenties in a rented car, we looked very suspicious in trailer parks and other neighborhoods that we visited.

Importance of Relationships

We quickly learned that it was very important to get to know the staff in the participating homes. In some homes staff came and went quickly, but for the homes with consistent staff it was both enjoyable and beneficial to build a relationship with them. In our first meeting with a staff member, we explained the study to them and went through the staff consent form. In the interview, we asked about their job; we quickly learned that in the group home world, the staff's job is their life, to a large extent, so they were essentially exposing their lives to us. The staff generally asked us if we were in school, and about our position at the university. This mutual sharing about our professional lives led to trust building in the relationship quickly. After we interviewed the same staff multiple times they would often look forward to our visits, tell the youth about the study, and be more willing to arrange their schedules to accommodate us during our site visits.

A factor that helped in building relationships with staff and agencies was the consistency of interviewers. Our study had two primary interviewers who stayed with the study throughout data collection. This allowed the group home staff to see and recognize the same faces every visit. We feel this allowed us to get the best data because having consistency of the interviewer and interviewee would capture differences over time related to responses, and unrelated to changing individuals. Another way we built a positive relationship with the staff is through our study incentive; we paid the staff for completing the interview. This showed that we valued their time and may have increased their desire to participate in the study.

When interviewing we had to be aware of nonverbal cues and make sure we were not being insensitive to the staff's needs or the youths' needs. We asked the staff about a good time to interview the youth, and we made sure that we put as little burden on them as possible. We made sure to interview the youth at the home at a time that was reasonable for the staff and let them know we wanted to do what was best for them. We did most of the paperwork in the study, leaving little else for the staff to do other than to answer our questions while we were present. Sometimes we had group home staff who incorrectly explained our study to others in the agency, and staff who called our study by the wrong name after we had been interviewing there for over two years. This showed us how low of a priority our study was in these heavily burdened group home staff's lives. In such cases, we would explain the study again and politely correct any inaccuracies or misunderstandings. Even though sometimes the staff did not remember exactly why we were studying them, after they became familiar with our names and faces, they warmed to our visits and made our jobs very pleasant. In an attempt to make our study more of a priority in the staff's lives, and also to let them know that we valued their time, we paid the staff for each in-person interview we completed during the study. At the beginning of an interview, when reviewing the consent form, we let the staff know about the monetary incentive, and this often caused their excitement level to increase in regards to completing the interview.

In addition to building a relationship with staff and agency personnel, we built relationships with the youths' pre-admission and post-discharge caregivers. It was a bit more difficult to develop a relationship with caregivers because we usually only talked with them on the phone. On the phone we built rapport with the caregiver by explaining the study, assuring them that all information was confidential, and actively listening to them. In some cases parents and caregivers had a lot that they wanted to say about the youth in their care. They had often been through tough times with the youth and were not comfortable discussing it with many people. Since we were interested in the youth and their experiences, this gave these caregivers a chance to open up to someone about their experiences with their youth, and they would sometimes go beyond the interview guidelines to tell us their story. In this instance, we did not want to just cut off the parent/caregiver. It was important that the caregiver felt like they were heard and that we cared about their situation and what they were going through. When it felt appropriate, we would find a way to guide the participant back to the interview questions, and gently end the interview when the questions were complete. The telephone interview generally took 15-20 minutes to complete, but when a parent/guardian was particularly stressed or open to telling us their story, some interviews took 45 minutes or more to complete. So, when we conducted these telephone interviews, we had to be prepared with enough time just in case a parent/guardian wanted to open up to us.

Transitions: From Field to Office

The transition from field work to office work was difficult. I enjoyed going into the field, meeting youth and staff and asking them about their lives. I got a lot of energy from this interaction, and it was fast paced. We had to be on our toes and expect the unexpected. Entering data and filing forms in the office was a whole different job. We also spent a lot of time in the office calling guardians for phone interviews, trying to find guardians, and getting ready for site visits. A person thinking of working in an interviewer position should recognize the need for both of these types of work and be strong at both people skills and thinking on their feet as well as organization and completing tedious office tasks. It also helps to have a team made of people who have different strengths, so where one person does not excel at a particular job, the other can add their expertise.

A task our team excelled at was learning from each site visit and experience in the field. When the two interviewers returned to the office from a site visit, we debriefed with our supervisor on everything that happened. If there were challenges with the visit, the team discussed them and problem-solved. This helped us to address concerns quickly, and also informed protocols to help rectify the situation in the future. For example, our team discussed scheduling challenges with sites. Some days we would arrive at a site and they had no idea we were coming. We would talk with the agency-level liaison to schedule the visit, but the message did not reach the group home staff until the day of our visit, or sometimes as we were walking in the door. This prompted us to have a discussion with the group home supervisors to reiterate the importance of informing the group home staff of our visit ahead of time so that we could interview all the youth and not disrupt any previously made plans. Every time an issue happened we learned from it, fixed it for the future, and moved on. By the end of the data collection period, we knew what to expect from each agency and things worked extremely smoothly.

Supervision

In my opinion and experience, supervision was critical to my ability to be a good interviewer. During the busiest 18 months of interviewing, we spent part of nearly every week at sites across the state collecting data. During these trips, between driving and collecting data, we often worked 14 hours or more each day (sometimes for several days in a

row). Our supervisors recognized the importance of “comp time,” and if we needed to take the day off after two straight days in the field, they were very open to allowing us time to recuperate.

Also, our team was incredibly supportive even when we did not agree about things. When tackling new problems, we respectfully listened to each others’ opinions, talked about the options, and decided together. At our office there was an overall culture of openness. We were encouraged to share our opinions with the team. We recognized each others’ strengths and were given positive feedback when we were doing our jobs well. During weekly meetings, when we reviewed progress on data collection, the supervisor and principal investigator would praise us for the amount of data we had been successfully collecting. It can be discouraging doing this kind of work when people often move, have disconnected phones, etc., and it can be a challenge to locate the caregivers of the youth when they frequently move. Although sometimes it was hard not to feel that it was a personal reflection of our work, it was important to get recognition from our supervisor and principal investigator that this is challenging work and that there is a certain point at which we could do no more and had to leave that particular interview as missing. It was good to have support that this reflected the complexities and barriers in this line of work, not our inability to do our job. All these things caused our team to feel appreciated, bond, and further our productivity and commitment to the team and the study.

The schedule of this work could become frustrating at times. After working long hours in the field our personal lives were sometimes negatively affected by our schedule. Some months we would successfully complete very few of our calls, which also contributed to negative energy at the work place. On top of these issues, also being twenty-something young women, personal strife is almost inevitable. These frustrations in our lives sometimes travelled along with us to the office. Our supervisor was a Social Worker, and her experience in therapeutic settings prior to coming to the research world enabled her to skillfully talk with us about our personal and professional struggles. When we went into her office, and she closed the door, that was the official signal that it was time for a “session”. Sometimes my coworkers and I would pretend like we were fine and go about our day, but somehow she always knew when something was off. It was sometimes embarrassing to breakdown and cry in her office. But usually, in the end, we really did need to talk about the issue and have a “mental health day.”

This might sound trivial, but one thing that made our meetings productive was that our supervisor provided food for the team every week for our morning meeting. Adding food to the morning meeting provided an atmosphere of fellowship and sharing. Overall, it contributed to the feeling that we were a team and it helped make the meetings feel relaxed and something we looked forward to.

The team also helped us work better by actively working together and adjusting when work patterns were not beneficial. For example, the original research design called for us to visit each site every three months. About half of the sites took two days to complete, and these days were often well beyond a “normal” 8-hour work day. When we returned from each visit we were exhausted, were falling behind on other parts of our job, and were beginning to get burned out. We also found that the agencies felt like every three months came around very quickly, and they seemed to feel over-burdened by so many visits. So we brought this issue up with the team. The principal investigator and project coordinator had already noticed how frazzled we seemed, and the project coordinator also shared our concerns about burden on the agencies. After reviewing our options, it was decided that we could shift our schedule to visiting each site every four months, without creating problems for the study’s design or aims. This allowed us to have more time to recuperate, complete necessary office

work, reduce burden on the sites, and be more efficient during the visits. Thus, our team was flexible and took into account the needs of the interviewers and the needs of the study participants when developing and adjusting protocols.

The supervisor/interviewer relationship was really important to getting this kind of work accomplished. The supervisors worked to make sure each interviewer was completing her interviews while supporting us the way we each needed. We developed a close, positive relationship with our supervisors in which we were heard, our needs were met, and this helped work to run smoothly.

Lessons Learned in the Field: Challenges and Solutions

Site Visit Organization—One challenge I was faced with as an interviewer was developing a system for organizing all the materials for site visits. When you go into the field you need to have all the necessary materials with you; when you are three hours from the office, you cannot simply drive back and pick up something you forgot. There was a checklist developed for all of the essential materials needed for visits that I was trained to use, but no organization system for those materials was originally created. So we developed an organizational system that included plastic sealing folders with all the materials for each interview enclosed inside. Each interviewer got all the materials and completed all the interviews required in that one folder. This was helpful when multiple interviewers had to split up and go to different locations to complete their interviews.

Another organizational piece we devised along the way was the site visit information sheet. This sheet included the name of every youth at the site, their consent status, and whether or not we needed to complete a record review on them. Each member of the study team present at the site visit was given a copy of the sheet so everyone knew the status of each youth. This was helpful when the interviewers had to interview in separate locations so everyone on the team was informed about each case (so we did not miss anyone or interview any youth who were not participating). On site visits all members of the team had cell phones so we could reach each other if a problem arose. Also, the site visit organizer had the telephone numbers of the group home agency so we could reach someone at the office if we needed to. These detailed protocols and procedures were developed after problems arose in the field. After we developed this organizational system it made getting ready for the site visit easier, and we felt more confident that we could handle any issue that came our way.

Interviewer Protocols—This job was made exponentially easier by first getting a step by step system for how to do things. “How to’s” were made for every scenario, from what to do when we found out about a new youth admitted to one of our group homes, to how to conduct a site visit. New “how-to’s” were created after we came across problems in the field and aided our attempt to always be better at our jobs. Creating these step-by-step formulas took the guesswork out of the process and relieved stress around each situation. When collecting multiple data points on a high number of study participants there is an increasing risk for human error. We wanted to reduce this risk by creating, and eventually memorizing, step-by-step guidelines for a participant to flow through the study. Once we had been interviewing for a while we got the flow of the process and these “how to’s” were second nature. Having them written in detail was helpful later in training a new member of the team for this position.

To divert these potential organizational catastrophes, it may be beneficial for a research team to sit down with the research interviewers prior to beginning a study and outline protocol for consent, organizing site visits, following youth, etc. This way when little things arise, protocols can be added or changed, but there is a basic timeline and structure for how each participant should progress through the study.

Expect the Unexpected: the Perils of Travel—In this job we traveled all over the state to meet with parents, child welfare workers, group home staff, youth, and agency representatives. We drove to each group home and house visit; the length of the drives ranged from 30 minutes to three and a half hours to arrive at a site. We had to be ready for anything. For example, on one visit we were driving to the site and we got a flat tire. We had to figure out how get the tire fixed, exchange the car with the rental company, and to also be on time to our visit. We had to be professional even though we had a stressful morning. The next day we got into the new rental car to drive to another visit and realized that one tire on the new car had low pressure. We then had to go get this tire fixed and still be on time to our next site visit. After this debacle we learned to always check the car tires before we drove to a site. We also learned that it is really important to leave extra time during a trip before our expected arrival time just in case something happens: we could always find some way to kill time until it was time to be at the site, but it was really stressful if we had to rush to get to the site on time. Interviewers need to be able to handle these tough situations, stay calm, and problem solve so the data can be collected.

Flexibility is Key!—Another important thing that we learned as interviewers is that flexibility is key when working with people in the social services field. We were dealing with child welfare workers who had overburdened caseloads, parents who were often struggling, and agencies that were busy trying to adequately serve youth and keep their beds filled. With child welfare workers we had to be aware of days they were more likely be in court and not able to answer their phones for interviews, or what times of day they would be in their office. With parents we had to call on nights and weekends so we could catch them outside of work. We had to communicate with agencies that we wanted to do what was best for them. In thinking about scheduling site visits, we wanted to accommodate to the agency because we understood they were incredibly busy and research was low on their priority list.

On site visits we had to be flexible to the things that may arise during the day. If a youth was at a meeting until later that evening, we would either arrange to come back later that evening to interview them or schedule a time to do a phone interview with them. We were flexible to their needs, but also made sure that we collected the data we needed. During visits we had to be ready to play basketball and meet the agency director in the same day and not be fazed by an unexpected ribbon cutting ceremony (and yes, this all happened to me in one day!).

Along with being flexible to the schedules of our participants, we also had to be flexible and understanding when it came to their comfort level with the study. Some children in our study were in the custody of their parents, but many were in the custody of the state. Some parents were uncomfortable with participating in a study, but historically social workers have been more protective of their clients and have been suspicious of research studies. The social workers we called were strong advocates for their youth. We told child welfare workers about the assent process with the youth so they would know that the youth could choose whether they wanted to participate, even after the child welfare worker had given guardian consent. Since social work directors often signed consents, individual social workers may have been unaware consent had been signed for their client. One way we remedied this situation was by visiting the county-level child welfare offices that had many youth participating in the study. We took this as an opportunity to meet the individual social workers, talk with them about the study, answer any questions they had, and also let them put a face with the name of the people calling them to complete consents or interviews. If we called the social worker to complete an interview and they wanted to see the consent, we would fax them the release of information form so they could see we have a signed permission to talk with them. It is important to be understanding and respectful of agency policies that are designed to protect youth. No data are more important than respecting youths' rights.

Sensitivity to Participants' Needs—Over time we became masters at reading non-verbal cues. We could sense annoyance from the group home staff; this was important when assessing how long to stay in a home and when it was really time for us to leave. The ability to read a youth's stress level from their facial expressions and voice tone was important on many levels. Some of the youth we were interviewing had a history of violent outbursts, so it was important for our safety and theirs that we knew when to end an interview. We did not ask triggering questions such as abuse history, reason for being in the group home, family relationships, etc., and we never had a youth have an outburst in an interview. That being said, there were a few instances when I could look at the youth and tell that the interview was a bad idea. We were trained that if we felt that the interview was not good for the youth, then we should end with an easy "off the cuff" question (ex: what is your favorite thing to do right after school?) and then end the interview. We were also trained to wear appropriate business casual clothing, no dangly jewelry, and we were not to let a youth come between us and the door of the room where we were interviewing. If the youth looked upset, I asked how they were feeling, and I reiterated that they did not have to do the interview if they did not want to. This happened rarely in the study, but it is still important to consider when working with youth. Reading youths' faces was also important in assessing if the youth understood the question or not. When this came up repeatedly on a particular question, our group problem-solved and formulated a uniform probe we could use so we did not influence a youth's answer.

The Heartbreaking Nature of this Work—Considering the youth and their need for out of home placement, abuse and neglect is a common reality in these youths' lives. In this study we obtained abuse history from the client's record. Prior to this job I had read stories of abuse but had not, to my knowledge, met a youth who had been abused. I remember the first time I did record reviews. I had met all the youth at the site that morning and interviewed them. Later when we went through their records, I was shocked at all of the things they had been through in their lives. I wanted to cry and go back to the home and hug each youth. But as an interviewer, all I could do was sit there and write the information down. My role as an interviewer was not to help solve the immediate needs of the youth. The only time we directly helped is when there was a current safety issue in the home.

During some of my interviews youth would start to open up to me and tell me about things going on in their lives, or start to talk about their past. Sometimes they even asked me for advice. In these situations I told the youth to talk with their group home parent about the issue, and I redirected them back to the interview. I had to remember, and my supervisors often reminded me, that the purpose of our research was to learn about services and to collect information that will, hopefully, help improve services for youth. I wanted to help while realizing my role was to collect information. I still remember a lot of the youths' names. I think about them and often wonder how they are doing. Meeting these youth, reading their cases, and learning about their situations from their social workers, parents, and caregivers has been motivating in my life and inspired me to pursue my Masters in Social Work.

Personal Rejuvenation—The interviewing job is an arduous one. On site visit days we worked anywhere from 8 to 14 hours driving, interviewing, reviewing records, and observing homes. By the end of the day the team was exhausted. One way we recharged was by having personal space. The study team decided not to save money by making the interviewers share hotel rooms, but instead allowing us to have our individual oasis to process through the day and relax.

Another way the team supported us was by checking in with us on a regular basis. They were proactive in asking how we were doing, which made us feel more comfortable in

talking with the team when problems arose. This allowed us to quickly create solutions and continue collecting huge amounts of data. Finally, comp time was taken regularly, whenever more than 40 hours were worked in a week. Talking with fabulous youth and then having a three day weekend helped us you forget driving three hours and starting the day at 6 a.m.

Reflections by the Study's PI

I had been directing field-based research and interviewers for nearly two decades when this study began, and I thought that I understood interviewers' needs and experiences. However, talking with our current interviewers and reading this discussion was quite eye-opening. It reminded me of just how critical this role is for the research that we do – once the data are entered into a data set, all of the complexities of the interviewing experience essentially disappear. Hence, I was reminded, again, of just how critical it is that interviewers are well trained, supervised, and treated. If they are not motivated to do an excellent job and supported to make this possible, all other efforts to analyze, interpret, and disseminate the data are likely to be futile.

On reading this, several “lessons learned” seem relevant to the broader field. First, just because the PI and supervisors have been through this process many times in the past, for the interviewers it is often the first time they are encountering the types of youth, settings, and activities that make up the interviewing process. From our past experience, we tried, in training, to alert them to the pitfalls and challenges of the position (e.g., types of behavior/emotional problems youth would have, how to be safe in an interviewing setting, the researcher role (vs. the helper role), specific tasks, requirements, and priorities). But reading this discussion, it is very clear that, even with this pre- and in-service training and a high level of supervision, the interviewers felt that there were many things that they had to figure out and develop protocols for on their own. Providing them with more guidance on the nitty-gritty of doing their job would certainly have made the first year of the study much less stressful for them.

Another issue that came up in this narrative (and has been repeated in other studies) is the issue of the interviewer's role. Many recent college graduates take interviewer positions because they want to get some research experience before returning to graduate school (or as a way to figure out what discipline they want to go to graduate school to pursue). For the most part, they are much more interested in the youth than they are in the science. It is very difficult for young adults to develop an appropriate view of their role and to maintain a professional attitude when confronted by youth who have so many challenges and needs. The current study has been very fortunate to have, as its project director and primary supervisor for the interviewers, an LCSW with 20 years of clinical experience and over a decade of research experience. Much of what was discussed in terms of supervision, debriefing after each site visit, checking in to make sure the interviewers were OK, etc. were based on this supervisor's very nurturing view of her supervisory role. As PI, having this supervisory role played in this way was tremendously helpful – I was always confident that the interviewers were being fully supported and I was freed up to focus more on the science and less on the well-being on the field staff. This, again, is recognizing the strengths of various individuals and fitting those together to provide the needed foci within the team.

This brings up a key point for lessons learned – interviewers (at least recent college graduates) are simultaneously navigating their own transition to adulthood as they are embarking on their role as interviewers. Hence, there is a good deal of “obvious” work-related behavior that needs to be taught (e.g., how to be a professional, how to be persistent but not annoying, how to set up a schedule, how to create an organizational structure that makes your job easier, etc.). There are also ups-and-downs of the other life spaces (e.g.,

relationships with parents, boyfriends/girlfriends, roommates, moving) that are central to the interviewers' worlds. It is critical that supervisory staff are very facile at recognizing these issues (much as the interviewers get very good at recognizing stress and clues from respondents) and that interviewers can feel fully supported, while learning and recognizing appropriate boundaries between work and non-work issues. This is a tricky set of issues with field-based interviewers, because they spend vast amounts of time with each other traveling to and from sites, so, if things work well, they get to know each other very well and, as in the current study, became friends as well as co-workers. The role of the supervisor is key here to model, guide, and reinforce appropriate boundaries so that interviewers feel supported and able to work through the various issues they are confronting, but also recognize their role as professionals.

Another issue that this narrative brought up was the difficulty of bringing staff on after the study has started. As she noted, the primary author of the narrative came on to the project after we had been in the field for about 3 months. While the study was still very early in its field work, we had already completed the full-blown interviewer training that preceded the start of field work. At the time, we knew that we were throwing her into the "deep end," but reading this made me aware of just what a challenge that was and how it did not need to be so abrupt. We did a brief pre-service training with her and then had her shadow other staff as they did interviews. While this is a common approach, it created a very steep learning curve (with little protected time to make mistakes) and set up a dynamic between the two interviewers that was difficult. Again, intervention by their supervisor and additional training resolved this issue, but it suggests that it may well be worth the extra effort to fully repeat initial interviewer training for each newly hired interviewer.

As PIs and supervisors, we were very aware of the challenges and exhaustion that come with long site visits and days of interviewing. What we were not prepared for was how much the interviewers loved the adrenaline of those experiences and really disliked the office-work portions of the job. While interviewing is taxing, it also provides intense interactions with interesting people, carries a sense of adventure, and provides a structure for being very productive. Organizing paper work, on the other hand, is boring. There is probably no solution to this issue, since to remove the office-based portion of the position would make it a part-time job, and that would create a whole host of additional issues with hiring and supervising. But, it is important to recognize this disparity and to provide additional mentally-stimulating tasks for interviewers to do in their office time.

This leads to the final reflection on this piece and this set of issues. Interviewers need to be viewed as full-fledged and critical members of the research team. While they have very specific tasks that they are responsible for, these tasks present a combination of stress, exhilaration, exhaustion, adrenaline, tediousness, fascination, and boredom. They have to remain incredibly dedicated to the unending work of keeping participants interested and willing to be involved, maintaining commitment to achieve acceptable participation and follow-up rates, and asking the same sets of questions again and again. To do this, it is imperative for them to feel fully engaged in the study and to understand the importance of the science. This means that meetings with staff should include as much feedback as possible on study progress and, as they become available, opportunities to be involved in dissemination of results (via presentations and publications).

The process of jointly working on this manuscript provided an opportunity to reflect on a set of processes and relationships that are often taken for granted in research. Most PIs are not trained in supervision or management during graduate school. For those of us lucky enough to work with senior colleagues who do this type of research, we have those experiences to draw on, but each PI has his/her own personality and way of managing staff. It is important

for us to step back to figure out what needs to be in place to fully support field staff and to determine a workable division of labor about who will provide what. Running a research study requires a wide range of skills, and few individuals have them all. Hence, creating a system that will work, bringing on board colleagues and staff to complement strengths and needs, and recognizing the human element that everyone brings to this process is essential.

The fascinating thing about working with interviewers who are recent college graduates is that they have the “I want to change the world” approach that is needed to move both research and practice forward. In many cases, the interviewing experience provides a key learning opportunity and spring board for their future careers in practice and/or research. They provide the conduit between the research study and the field, and they are responsible for making sure that the data that eventually get analyzed and disseminated are adequate and accurate representations of what’s occurring. Understanding what they need to do this well is a critical, but underdeveloped, component in our understanding of research methods, implementation, and influence.

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