

**Entering into a “Community” of Experience and Meaning:
A Review of *Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research:
The Gateway Approach* by Carolyn Lunsford Mears**

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In Interviewing for Education and Social Science Research: The Gateway Approach, Carolyn Lunsford Mears outlines an approach to in-depth interviewing in qualitative research that draws upon educational criticism, oral history, and poetic display. Mears describes this narrator-centered approach as including the development of an insider’s perspective and the use of excerpted narratives. She also provides useful guides and examples in the appendices to the book, making the text especially helpful to the novice qualitative researcher. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Interviewing, Narrator, Narratives, and Gateway

In the course of describing “the gateway approach” to interviewing in qualitative research, Carolyn Lunsford Mears (2009) has written a book that itself could serve as an entryway into conducting qualitative research for the novice researcher. I will touch on ways in which the book opens doors to readers below, but I will first address the author’s primary purpose. Mears presents the text as a guide to a qualitative methodology she first employed in conducting her dissertation research. As the mother of a student who was at the high school where the Columbine tragedy occurred, Mears sought to explore the experience of parents whose children have been exposed to a school shooting. She opens the book with an account of her journey as a parent and scholar searching for understanding and for a way to help others understand the experience of those directly impacted by the tragedy. She and other parents found some of the studies and reports of the event lacking in their understanding of the experience, and this impelled her to find a way to explore and present the experience of parents in a new way.

In subsequent chapters of her book, Mears (2009) details for readers the methodology she utilized in conducting her study and discusses how this approach could be a viable option for other researchers. Mears presents an approach to interviewing, data analysis, and reporting designed to create deeper understanding of the experiences of others in all their complexity and multiple meanings. “Gateway is not about finding the average of what has been experienced, but instead seeks to illuminate the diverse expressions and responses to that situation” (p. 71). Mears sees the approach she has developed as a means of access to that deeper understanding and meaning, not only for the researcher, but also for the participants and for those who consider the study’s findings.

In its focus on lived experience and the search for meanings and understandings, this research methodology is grounded in qualitative research. At the same time, rather than turning to one of the qualitative traditions such as ethnography or phenomenology to explore her subject, Mears (2009) draws upon elements of educational criticism, oral

history, and poetic form in crafting an approach that she feels is well-suited in particular for those researching disaster or trauma. From the theories of educational criticism, Mears adopts the ideal of a researcher building sufficient knowledge and appreciation of the subject under study to have an informed perspective. Building upon this foundation of knowledge, the researcher then engages in three in-depth interviews, and in the course of data analysis selects excerpts from the interview transcriptions that best capture the significance of the experience for the narrator. These are crafted using poetic transcription into excerpted narratives, which are then shared with the narrator to confirm accuracy. Each step in this research process is detailed in individual chapters within the book.

Describing her designation of the model as “the gateway approach,” Mears (2009) explains, “I decided to use the term *gateway* in describing the approach, since it provides a means of connection, a way toward deeper understanding of a metaphorical ‘community’ of experience” (p. 9). This spirit of connection moves through the book. Mears emphasizes the connection between researcher and participant, seeking to break down barriers between researcher and participants through empathy and the development of an insider perspective. In her own study of the experience of parents of Columbine students, Mears was of course an insider. For those who are not, however, she describes ways to approximate this perspective. The role of the narrator check also maintains a connection between researcher and participant in the analysis and reporting stages of the research process.

Mears (2009) advocates the gateway approach as providing a connection between participants and those reading the report of a study’s findings. The poetic display of each narrator’s voice, as well as analysis strengthened by aspects of educational criticism, work together to provide deeper insight into an experience for those were not part of it. Mears feels that the presentation of data in the gateway approach “evokes what it felt like to be a part of that experience” and invites “others to learn from this world of meaning and significance” (p. 72).

This notion of connection applies also to the way in which Mears (2009) seeks to connect the new qualitative researcher, or those who have not yet practiced in-depth interviewing, to this form of qualitative research. Mears cautions readers at the outset of the text that she presents her approach to in-depth interviewing in an informal style, but her thoughtful, clear writing style should ease readers through the gateway of qualitative research. In addition to providing easy access to her ideas through her writing style, Mears walks readers through several doorways of the research process, such as clarifying the purpose of the research, developing research questions, and considering the ethics of interviewing. In this regard, the book serves as a portal for the novice researcher, with chapters focused specifically on how to prepare for research, how to address ethics and successfully navigate the Institutional Review Board process, and how to conduct in-depth interviews. In addition to these “how to” chapters, Mears provides a number of appendices for the reader with helpful information including recommended reading, a sample informed consent form, and a checklist for gateway research. In these ways, the text may particularly be a useful aid to those students conducting their dissertation research.

In keeping with her emphasis on empathy, Mears (2009) shows sensitivity to the potential concerns of readers. For example, she addresses the question of whether a

researcher must be a poet to be able to employ the poetic transcription of the gateway approach. She assures the reader that one need not have poetry writing skills or even like poetry! Rather, she explains,

An excerpted narrative isn't poetry—it is a data display that distills and sequences particularly meaningful words and phrases from an interview transcript in order to make it accessible to readers and to transform it into a coherent presentation that can be analyzed for research. White space around the phrases does make it look like poetry, but its intent is to focus and direct attention, highlighting the essential elements among the many words used to describe an experience. (pp. 74-75)

Mears also points out that a gateway study does not require a complete life story for each participant. For those who are interested in the approach but not planning a study of a disaster or trauma, Mears suggests that the approach has broader applicability and would be appropriate for “investigations that seek to explore human experience, social change, public policy, personal challenges, or program effectiveness,” among others (p. 75).

While I agree that the gateway approach could be used in a variety of studies, as a researcher in the field of culture and ethnic conflict, I also can appreciate why Mears (2009) felt the need to develop a more narrator-centered approach in her study of a particularly traumatic experience. When dealing with sensitive topics and those who have experienced tragedy, the more a researcher can do to approximate an insider perspective prior to conducting the interview, and to be empathic in the course of the interview, the better. In this regard, I did wonder whether researchers interested in the gateway approach might adapt the interviewing format somewhat if they find that multiple shorter interviews or one or two lengthy interviews are preferable or more comfortable for participants describing a difficult or painful experience. I certainly agree that retaining the words of participants in the presentation of data and checking with participants for the accuracy of how their experience is being presented should enhance the depth of understanding the report is likely to contribute to the body of knowledge on that subject. Mears offers one useful approach to achieving this fundamental goal of qualitative research.

References

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