Everyday Courage

Way, Niobe

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AS I RODE the subway each week to the school during the first year of the study, my mind was filled with questions about the validity, motivation, and limits of my project. What am I doing studying urban youth? Who am I to study them? What are they telling me? How will I represent their stories? Will I get it “right,” and what is the truth? During the same time, I was a doctoral student in psychology, passionately immersed in the academic worlds of feminist, postmodernist, and hermeneutic theory. The perspectives advanced in these theories, loosely representing what Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan term “the interpretive turn in the social sciences,”1 allowed me to eventually answer my gnawing questions. They offered me a window of clarity in the midst of my confusion. Feminist theory and postmodern thought, in particular, provided me with ways to make sense of my research project that resonated with my own perspectives on the world. They influenced not only how I conceived the project, but also how I analyzed the interview data, and ultimately, depicted the teens in this book. For this reason, it is critical for me to describe, over the next few pages, the beliefs held within this interpretive turn that shaped both the form and content of my study. Laying out the theoretical framework of my study is essential for understanding the teens’ stories that follow.
Criticizing the objective ideal in the social sciences, Rabinow and Sullivan write:

There is no outside, detached standpoint from which to gather and present brute data. When we try to understand the cultural world, we are dealing with interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations. Culture—the shared meanings, practices, and symbols that constitute the human world—does not present itself neutrally or with one voice, it is always multi-vocal . . . and both the observer and the observed are always enmeshed in it. . . . There is no privileged position, no absolute perspective, no final recounting.2

Like all other researchers, I came into my research on urban teens with a set of expectations and beliefs—a history, a gender, a race, a language, and a culture—that influenced how I understood and interpreted their stories. My stance as a researcher could not have been objective because I was not able to withdraw from my own perspective. In contrast to the beliefs characteristic of a more positivistic scientific tradition, the beliefs maintained within the interpretive turn assert that reality is not fixed and cannot be observed uninfluenced by the observer.3

Beginning with Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century, various philosophers and psychologists have put forth theories making reference to a “hermeneutic circle.” This “hermeneutic circle” centers on the idea that “understanding inevitably involves reference to that which is already known.”4 My study rests on the assumption, for better or worse, that we can never escape such a circle of interpretation. When we try to understand a new phenomenon, we are always coming into it with expectations and preconceptions. Furthermore, what we already know, or our pre-understanding, is itself not an unmediated knowledge of the empirical world but determined by the traditions and symbolic codes within which we live and which shape our lives and ways of making sense of it. Once this dialectical nature of understanding has been recognized, the illusion of a completely detached stance as a researcher is exposed as such. The belief in an absolutely blank mind—a mind without any biases, prejudices, or pre-understandings—is a powerful trope or figure for scientific research but an untenable research tool.
One outcome of this questioning of objectivity is that generalizations and universals that surpass the boundaries of culture, time, and region become suspect. As the feminist psychologists Carol Gilligan, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Annie Rogers have pointed out: “How can sex [or class, race, or culture] be a difference that makes no difference?” Experience, perception, or ways of speaking cannot be decontextualized, taken out of culture, time, and place. To discuss how a person speaks about her or his world means to take into account and understand that these experiences are intimately connected to her or his specific location in the world.

One of the problems in the existing research literature on various populations of adolescents is that researchers frequently infer or explicitly state that what they have discovered from their data is the “objective truth” and that their findings can, therefore, be generalized to larger populations. The implicit and explicit denials by researchers of their lenses and biases often lead to distorted and misguided conclusions about the researched population. A striking example of such problematic conclusions is the “deficit model” of development used by many social scientists, which assumes deficiency or pathology when a particular population is different from what is typically a middle-class norm. For example, ethnic-minority parents are often blamed for not instilling in their children the “right” (i.e., white, middle-class) educational values. This deficit belief system, however, is rarely made explicit in the actual description of the research, and consequently the findings appear “objective.” Employing this stance of objectivity, social science researchers have been able to maintain that urban populations are deficient or pathological because these populations appear deficient or pathological according to these unacknowledged biases. The alternative hypothesis has only recently begun to be explored—namely, that researchers have obtained certain results because they have worked within a deficit framework rather than within a culturally specific normative framework.

**Biases and Expectations: What Do We Do with Them?**

Recognizing that research always reflects the perspectives, ideals, and biases of the researchers need not lead to chaos or nihilistic indeterminacy. Biases allow researchers to maintain order and structure and gain access to
meaning. In short, they allow us to avoid chaos. Prejudices are commonly perceived to inhibit truth-finding rather than to enhance it. However, biases and prejudices are necessary for understanding. They allow us to take in and engage with the world. Biases offer a perspective, and only through having a perspective can we see and possibly understand the vantage points of others.

But what are the implications of such beliefs? Since we always have biases, and, in fact, need biases to perceive different perspectives, what does this mean for researchers? I believe, along with many feminist researchers, that researchers should constantly evaluate and reevaluate their biases, assumptions, and expectations. It is when prejudices are not reflected upon, and as far as possible, acknowledged in research that one is likely to end up with findings that do not accurately represent the research participants’ views or perspectives. Hans-Georg Gadamer, holding similar views, states: “Every textual interpretation must begin then with the interpreter’s reflection on the preconceptions which result from the ‘hermeneutical situation’ in which he finds himself. He must legitimate them, that is, look, for their origin and adequacy.” Instead of trying to “forget” one’s biases, prejudices, or expectations, one should engage with and challenge such biases and assumptions and determine their validity and limitations. In order to assess the “adequacy” of one’s biases, it is critical to maintain an openness toward the views held by the participants. Such an openness involves raising questions such as: Are the views held by the interviewee consistent or inconsistent with my expectations? If they are inconsistent, what are the implications for my own preconceptions or understandings? Gadamer warns us:

When we listen to someone or read a text, we discriminate from our own standpoint, among the different possible meanings—namely, what we consider possible—and we reject the remainder which seems to us unquestionably absurd. . . . We are naturally tempted to sacrifice, in the name of “impossibility,” everything that we totally fail to integrate into our system of anticipations. . . . [However] the essence of questioning is to lay bare and keep alert for possibilities.

For sound and meaningful interpretations, it is necessary for the “open” reader to remain receptive to interpretations that at first glance seem “impossible,” “absurd,” or unexpected.
In my own research, I attempted to remain alert to the unexpected. I took note when I was quick to dismiss an element of an interview as unimportant, uninformative, or “wrong,” or when I was confused by an interviewee’s statement. I sought to recognize, question, and challenge my own expectations and assumptions. The purpose of such a process is, once again, not to rid myself of such expectations or pretend that they can be left behind once they have been acknowledged, but to come to the edge of my own knowledge—to ask myself what did I know that, in fact, I did not know? What did I expect that did not appear in the interview? How far does the interview take me into territory that I have not yet charted?

Examples of my own biases include those that stem from my experiences of being a white, middle-class woman in the United States. These biases have led me to perceive the world as one in which power differentials exist between men and women, white people and people of color, and rich and poor people; in each case, the former has more power than the latter. Because of these power differentials, I believe that white women struggle more than white men on both a professional and personal level; that women of color struggle more than white women; and that poor or working-class people, especially those who are women of color, have a particularly difficult time surviving in the world relative to those who are more affluent. Nevertheless, as I listened to urban poor and working-class teenagers speak about their lives and the ways in which they do and do not struggle, I realized that my vision of the world did not include many of their views. Indeed, my understanding of surviving was challenged by various adolescents who had contrasting ideas of what it means to “survive.” Some of the adolescents told me they do struggle but in ways in which I did not expect; others stated that they do not find themselves struggling either in or out of school. Some did not even know why I would expect them to be “struggling.” My expectations that the adolescents in this study, particularly the ethnic-minority adolescents, would speak about struggling to survive, about having to make conscious and strenuous efforts to simply get through each day, were simplistic. Their lives were more varied than I predicted—my biases were not “adequate.”

Throughout my analyses, I reflected upon my expectations and my interpretations. What was I not hearing? What was I not taking into consideration as I made an interpretation? I tried to maintain this reflective stance during my analyses to keep myself open to what I did not know or what
my expectations prevented me from seeing. Having an awareness of and an openness to “the possibility that the situation may not fit any pattern of understanding in [my] repertoire” led me to more perceptive research findings than would have resulted if I had limited my understanding to those theories and ideas that were familiar to me. This process of continual reflection, I believe, enhanced my ability to understand more fully those to whom I was listening.

**Biases in Developmental Psychology**

Although biases based on one’s history, lived experiences, and present situation differ from researcher to researcher, there are certain biases or assumptions shared by many in the field of developmental psychology—the field in which I have been trained. In my study, I responded to three types of “professional” biases: (1) toward theory testing; (2) toward universal theories; and (3) toward specific theories of adolescence. My responses were, once again, influenced by the values maintained by the interpretive turn that I have been describing. Because these biases were both incorporated into my study and implicitly and explicitly challenged, I will elaborate briefly their content.

**Theory Testing**

The developmental theories of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, and Erik Erikson form the very meaning of “development” in the field of psychology. It is largely within these particular theoretical frameworks or several others depending on one’s question or population of interest that researchers are expected to work when they conduct developmental research. Developmental researchers are expected by others in the field to use a preestablished developmental theory—a theory that has been validated as representing a “real” phenomenon in development—to frame their research questions or to make sense of their data. To proceed without such a theoretical framework is frequently regarded as “unscientific,” “atheoretical,” or “not theoretically grounded.”

While social scientists over the past thirty years have emphasized the importance of data-driven or grounded theory—theory that is built upon what is perceived in the data rather than theory that drives the interpretation of the data—developmental psychologists have typically continued to
believe that the only valid knowledge is knowledge generated by testing theories. There has been a general neglect of “discovery research”—research that aims to discover rather than to test, prove, or explain. If one’s intention is to test a specific theory, using a particular theory to frame one’s research is clearly the appropriate path to take. However, if one’s intention is to listen for developmental patterns, especially among a population that has rarely been studied by researchers, using a preestablished developmental theory to examine one’s data does not make sense.¹⁶

Theory or hypothesis testing hinders researchers’ abilities to perceive the unique experiences of those in their study and makes it harder for them to see the complexities and contradictions in lived experience. A researcher may, in fact, become all but blind to such complexities by looking only for data that fit a theory rather than a theory that fits the data. In a compelling and convincing critique of the social sciences, Albert Hirschman lashes out at the “the compulsive and mindless” theorizing. He emphasizes that connections must come from the material itself and not from a presupposed theory of explanation:

[I recommend] a little more reverence for life, a little less strait jacketing of the future, a little more allowance for the unexpected—and a little less wishful thinking. . . . I am of course not unaware that without models, paradigms, ideal types and similar abstractions we cannot even start to think. But the kinds of paradigms we search for, the way we put them together, and the ambitions we nurture for their powers—all this can make a great deal of difference.¹⁷

While I sought, in my own study, to create theories from my data, I do not claim, following Hirschman, to begin my research from an atheoretical position. Given that my position as a researcher is bound up with the theories of my particular field, to claim such a starting point would clearly be naive. However, instead of deciding in advance which developmental theory would be most useful, I adopt a stance of theoretical openness. I am not looking for an assumption-free discovery, nor am I rejecting the usefulness of theory or hypothesis testing research; I am attempting to expand our theories to include context-sensitive and data-driven models of adolescent processes.

Martin Heidegger, whose work has greatly influenced and provoked much of the current interest in the interpretive turn, writes:
[The hermeneutic circle] is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle or even a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, foresight, and fore-conceptions to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.18

I interpret Heidegger as warning against the adherence to a theory or “popular conception” that is out of relationship with what or whom one is studying. My “constant task” as a developmental researcher is to base my theories on the data themselves as opposed to basing my understanding of the data on what I have been told is knowledge or “valid” theory. This phenomenological process will lead, I believe, to a deeper understanding of the experiences to which I am listening—“a most primordial kind of knowing.”

Universal Theories
A second bias found in developmental psychology that I tried to resist relates to what Jean-François Lyotard has called “metanarratives.” Lyotard, who has written extensively about postmodernism in literature and philosophy, presents a critique of metanarratives which he defines as attempts to explain a particular process by making reference to a “grand narrative” or overarching theoretical framework (e.g., Marxism or psychoanalysis).19 Lyotard claims that by relying on metanarratives, we tend to overlook the localized, shifting, and contextualized meaning that is present in everyday life. According to Lyotard, there are only local bases of understanding; there is no grand scheme or narrative that can explain it all. This rejection of metanarratives “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.”20 Lyotard calls for the aim of science to be not for consensus but for “instabilities” or for “differences.”21

In my view, many developmental theories are similar to Lyotard’s metanarratives. Developmental metanarratives, as I will call those developmental theories that present a predominantly linear, universal, invariate, and progressive model of development, typically attempt to explain the whys, hows, and whens of human development across the lifespan or across a period within the lifespan. They create a story of development that tries to...
explain at the “meta” level the stages or sequences of development. These theories focus on describing underlying structures or themes in development that are purportedly universal. By definition, they attempt to describe a developmental process that is decontextualized, taken out of time and culture. Given the impact of context on both development and our understanding of it, the use of these metatheories to frame development for all people is problematic at best. The metanarratives of developmental psychology inevitably claim more than they actually provide.

My questions, as I come to understand these developmental metanarratives, are: What is left out of or missing in these theories? What types of experiences and complexities are neglected or obscured? What is not yet understood? Unlike Lyotard, I am not arguing for the rejection of these metanarratives, for they have clearly detected important developmental processes. Rather, I seek to expand our capacity to conceptualize valid theories and to determine good developmental research.

Sandra Harding, a feminist philosopher, tells us:

> What we took to be humanly inclusive problematics, concepts, theories, objective methodologies, and transcendental truths are in fact far less than that. Indeed these products of thought bear the mark of their collective and individual creators and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race and culture.22

The metanarratives in developmental psychology cannot be challenged on the grounds that they are “marked” by such factors as gender, race, and class; all theories are marked. Instead, they can be contested on the grounds that not only do they deny their marked status, but they also inherently discourage “sensitivity to difference” in development. Considering Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s suggestions that all interpretive efforts operate within a hermeneutic circle, and combining their ideas with Lyotard’s and Harding’s, it becomes clear that an openness to the unexpected and the unfamiliar cannot be maintained if one listens only for what is expected theoretically. How can one hear differences if one’s ears are attuned only to that which is familiar or seemingly universal?

In my own work, I have been acutely aware of the professional demands to position my study within the rubric of a validated developmental metanarrative. Using such a universal framework to ground my research, however, was at odds with the purpose of my investigation. How could I put
the stories of a sample of adolescents who have rarely been studied into a framework that had been developed in a different context and time? Why would I use a theory that either bears no relationship to these adolescents’ realities, or specifically denies their realities in its search for universals? Although existing developmental theories are fundamental to our very definitions of development, and do successfully, at times, identify what seem to be common experiences within and across certain groups, I resisted listening with only one ear. I listened with both ears—the one familiar with existing “developmental metanarratives” and the other attentive to something new and unexpected. I listen with what Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century called a “passion for what is possible.”

Theories of Adolescence
A third professional bias that influenced my study relates to particular theories of adolescence. Unlike the other two biases, however, I engaged rather than resisted this prejudice. While there exists an abundance of theoretical and empirical work on adolescent development, there has been a preference among social scientists, teachers, and other professionals for specific theories of adolescence. Certain theorists have dominated the adolescent scene for many decades (e.g., Erik Erikson, Peter Blos, Harry Stack Sullivan) or over the past decade (e.g., Carol Gilligan, Robert Selman), and their ideas have profoundly affected the ways we think about adolescent development. The core beliefs of these theories are critical to spell out because they reside in our psyche and in the culture at large; and they determine, to a great extent, what is considered sound and accurate data on adolescents.

One of the most pervasive beliefs about adolescents initially proposed by psychoanalysts and neo-psychoanalysts that has been fiercely adhered to since its introduction is the idea that adolescents are struggling to find an identity. The aim of this struggle is to find a sense of self that is stable and continuous—adolescents want to answer the question, “Who am I?” The identity struggle of adolescents, the topic of hundreds of articles, novels, and movies, forms the core of how we define adolescence. Closely related to this concept of identity are the concepts of autonomy and independence. Adolescents are striving for autonomy, freedom, and independence. Indeed, adolescence has become synonymous with the arduous struggle for an independent selfhood or for an autonomous sense of self.
Adolescents are moving away from their parents emotionally and physically—“trying to free [themselves] from parents who made and partially determined [them],”\textsuperscript{26}—and are relying more on their peers for guidance and support.\textsuperscript{27} This vision of adolescence perceives this period in the life span as a time of searching, separating, and distinguishing oneself from others. It is also a model that is primarily based on studies of boys and has been criticized by numerous psychologists as being a “male model” of development.\textsuperscript{28}

Responding to the absence of girls and women in developmental research, Carol Gilligan and her colleagues began to investigate the experiences of girls and women. Gilligan and her colleagues found that girls are struggling to stay connected to themselves and to others during adolescence. Adolescent girls typically find it difficult to be themselves—to be authentic—and to be in relationships with others. The research of Gilligan and her colleagues indicates that adolescent girls often feel the need to silence their real thoughts and feelings in order to be cared for by others.\textsuperscript{29}

Their work, along with similar research on girls and the research on adolescent boys, have reinforced the widely held belief that adolescent girls are more relationship oriented and adolescent boys are more interested in separation, independence, and autonomy.\textsuperscript{30} For example, adolescent girls have intimate and self-disclosing friendships, whereas adolescent boys have competitive relationships with their male peers that focus on sports and playing games.\textsuperscript{31} While these assertions have frequently been based on comparisons across studies using entirely different research methodologies,\textsuperscript{32} they are firmly maintained and repeated frequently in the research and popular literature on adolescents.

These concepts and beliefs about adolescent boys and girls pervade our understanding of what it means to be an adolescent and have significantly affected my study. While I have attempted to generate theory from the data, I have never been theory neutral or absent. I have been responding to the theories I have been taught. I was struck by and drawn to stories in the teens’ interviews that tell a different story from what we have heard. Yet, I was also pulled to stories that tell a similar story. And, as the reader will hear shortly, both types of stories are present in the interviews. While I sought to derive data-driven themes, these themes are always implicitly and explicitly a reaction to our popular theories of adolescence.
The Decentered Experience

Following feminist theory, I resisted framing my project within the unitary truths implied in many developmental theories, and refrained from creating my own unitary and totalizing truths as I listened to and analyzed the interviews. I tried to avoid creating theories that exclude or do not consider the fragmented, contradictory, ambiguous nature of human experience.

Recent feminist writers have emphasized the need to question and even break apart notions such as the unitary self. The “self,” feminist theorists such as Linda Nicholson and Susan Suleiman have argued, is not a unified concept but has many conflicting sides—sides that are at times incommensurable and contradictory. Like the self, one’s experience in the world also has many sides. Jane Flax encourages us to “tolerate and interpret [such] ambivalence and multiplicity. If we do our work well, reality will appear even more unstable, complex and disorderly than it does now.” I would add that developmental psychologists would also benefit from embracing a psychology, espoused by many psychoanalysts, that recognizes the multiple and contradictory ways in which the people we study experience their worlds, along with the numerous and conflicting ways we study and listen to people’s experiences.

A problem evident in much of the research on urban adolescents from low-income families is that these adolescents are often portrayed as one-dimensional and static. They are frequently described by researchers as “hopeless,” “present-oriented,” or having low or high self-esteem without any acknowledgment that these adjectives or phrases may only be true for some of these adolescents part of the time. As suggested in my study, an adolescent may be “hopeless” when speaking about the state of the world, but optimistic when speaking about her or his own future; “present oriented” when speaking about an abstract future, but “future oriented” when discussing her or his own life; having low self-esteem when discussing relationships with friends in general, but having high self-esteem when speaking about a best friend.

In the present study, I listened for the shifts and conflicting aspects of the adolescents’ perspectives or worldviews. The “sense of self” among these adolescents was not static but moving in many different directions at once. In my analyses, I aimed to capture some of this movement. I, as a
reader, was also going in many different directions and, therefore, I noted in my analyses the various interpretations or experiences I had as I read the adolescents’ interviews.

Although my findings are centered on various themes that I detected in the interviews, none of the themes I discuss are neat and compact. For example, one of the themes concerns the outspoken voices of the girls in the study. What the girls’ interviews also suggest, however, is that these outspoken voices are only evident in certain contexts and relationships. Representing their voices as exclusively outspoken oversimplifies and thus distorts their stories. In my analyses, I note the nuances within each theme so that their stories do not get reduced to a simple set of patterns. Furthermore, there was, at times, a lack of clarity in the narratives (mine and theirs) and, therefore, my discussions often reflect these tensions: Was the theme really there? Was I only seeing it because I wanted to see it? When and why was it not there?

While I argue for heightened awareness of complexity, Susan Bordo warns us, and I concur, that there is always a limit to this “dance” of ambiguity.34 At some point, there are patterns in the ways in which we experience or see our worlds, and these patterns may exist across or within specific class, race, gender, and regional categories. These patterns are not, however, evidence of a unitary self or story, rather they are evidence that experience is always traversed by consistency as well as inconsistency, ambiguity as well as clarity. The focus of my study is on capturing differences as well as commonalities in the ways in which the adolescents speak about their worlds over time.

My Purpose, Given My Form

What does it mean to adopt these “interpretive turn” beliefs in my research? What is the aim of such ambiguous, nuanced, and patterned interpretations? I do not seek to provide an “objective” or “subjective” account of the adolescents’ narratives, but rather one that is engaged and concerned—an account that contextualizes their voices and mine within the culture that we share and that separates us. I aim to expand the repertoire of possible descriptions of adolescents rather than to find the single “right” description for all adolescents or for all urban poor and working-class adolescents. I want to offer my perspective on some of the ways urban adoles-
cents speak about their worlds. To use Richard Rorty’s words, my intention is to continue a “conversation rather than [to] discover Truth.”35 I want to add to the ongoing discussion about what adolescents think about as their bodies and minds undergo decisive changes and their lives progress: What is important to them? How do they speak about their lives as they grow older?

Practice

The practice or methodology of my research is embedded in the beliefs I have just outlined, and more specifically, in the work of researchers such as Michelle Fine, Joyce Ladner, and Carol Gilligan, who have put these insights associated with the interpretive turn into practice in their studies of human lives.36 Although not all of these researchers have examined the experiences of urban adolescents in particular, all have been deeply influential in the formulation of my questions, my choice of methodology, and the general process of my research. They have provided insight into the ways or methods of exploring and understanding the richness and complexity of life.

Robert White, during the 1950s, was one of the first social science researchers to stress the importance of studying lives in progress. He believed that personality is a constantly evolving system: Both the person and the environment affect each other and undergo continuous change.37 Tracking this change and evolution is critical, according to White, for understanding human development. Furthermore, he asserts that personality is inherently complex and that the method used for studying lives ought to reflect that complexity. He chose the case-study approach over survey methods because he believed that through case studies the intricacies of a person’s personality can best be revealed.38

More recently, Carol Gilligan has underscored the importance of studying lives in progress, and has emphasized, in particular, the importance of listening to individuals speak about their lives. Gilligan and her colleagues at the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development have been a primary source of inspiration and guidance for this study. By paying close attention to their empirical studies, I was able to formulate ways to address the gaps in our knowledge about urban adolescents. Gilligan and her colleagues have spent almost two decades conducting research
on the lives of adolescent girls and women and, like the previously cited studies, their approach emphasizes the importance of lived experience. They also focus on coming into relationship with the girls they are studying rather than simply observing and recording the participants’ behaviors or responses. Gilligan and her colleagues perceive the research process as inherently relational—the researcher is as much a part of the “findings” as the research participant. Consequently, discussions of the relationship between the researcher and the researched form a significant part of their analyses.

Through their methods of analysis, they underscore the complexity of development, the “nonlinear, nontransparent orchestration of feelings and thoughts.” And in order to reveal such complexity, they concentrate both on what was said (by the interviewee as well as the interviewer) and how the person expressed herself or himself. Their method, furthermore, is explicitly attentive to societal and cultural contexts. They believe the words of adolescents cannot be separated from the culture and the societal context in which they are spoken.

Psychology has lost an awareness of voice and vision, and with it the recognition that a story can be told from more than one angle and a situation seen in different lights. In the absence of voice and vision, the ability to render differences fades into the stark alternatives of a universal standpoint—the presumption of a God’s eye position—or the abandonment to riotous relativism—the claims to have no perspective or terms. We propose to solve our conundrum—to embed psyche and to speak about difference—by recovering voice and vision as concepts that link psyche with body, with relationship, and with culture.

Psychological theory, and developmental theory in particular, has privileged only certain types of metaphors; namely, the metaphors of stages, steps, positions, and levels. These types of metaphors, found in many developmental metanarratives referred to earlier, have missed the polyphonic nature of human experience. Gilligan and her colleagues call for a change in the language of psychology from one of stages, sequences, and linear development to one of musical metaphors such as “point/counterpoint” or “fugue.” The metaphor of a fugue suggests a way to listen to many voices “as themes, and variations on themes” heard in the narratives of people speaking about their lives. These musical metaphors, they assert, better capture the varied nature of human interaction and experiences.
Gilligan and her colleagues have taken the beliefs that characterize the interpretive turn and created a method of listening called “The Listening Guide” (described in the next chapter). Their method of listening underscores the relational nature of research, the possibilities for both understanding and misunderstanding within this relationship, and the abilities of people to speak about their worlds in more than one way.

They warn their readers about the dangers of “striving for safety [or] clarity . . . at the expense of voice or vision and thus of oversimplifying or reducing the experience of conflict.”42 My own study was motivated by the wish to recognize and retain the potential for complex self-awareness that is usually sacrificed in accounts of urban adolescents for the sake of clarity. Gilligan and her colleagues’ approach treats the research participants as authorities in their own experiences by revealing their voices in the text rather than replacing them with summaries of their stories or interpretations that cannot be questioned by the reader. They are also wary of psychological theories that attempt to explain development before they have “listened to” development. Through “The Listening Guide,” Gilligan and her colleagues encourage the listener to hear the ambiguities, the subtleties, and—in order to avoid the “riotous relativism” of nihilistic indeterminacy—the patterns in each person’s interview.

Questions about Power

This relational, voice-centered research approach compelled me to raise questions about what it means to be a white, middle-class female researcher studying poor and working-class adolescents who are primarily of color. Was I perpetuating a historical inequity that places the white researcher in charge of conveying the words of those with less power? Gilligan raises similar questions: “Who is observing whom and from what vantage point? Who is speaking about whom and in whose terms?”43

In relationship with the adolescents I interviewed, I find myself in a different position from researchers who come into their respective environments intending to stand outside of the research relationship in the name of objectivity, to study their “subjects,” and to depart with “truths” to disseminate to their colleagues, the interested public, and eventually the policymakers who shape their subjects’ lives. I understand the process of the
interview to be a process of jointly constructed meaning. I listened to the adolescents knowing that I listen to how they respond to my questions and to my interests concerning their experiences of their worlds. I am not objective and the adolescents do not respond objectively or neutrally about their experiences. Each of my questions and each of their responses was filled with our own assumptions, expectations, and desires. Although I had the power to choose the questions and to interpret their responses, the adolescents in turn had the power of knowing their own experiences and deciding what to tell me and what not to tell me or the other interviewers. Even if we are socially constructed beings largely shaped by the cultures in which we exist, we are engaged in a relationship in which each of us has power over what we say and how we say it.

I do, however, have power in these research relationships: power to decide what to include in my analysis and what to exclude; power to take the words of the adolescents and create meanings to which they cannot respond because I did not ask for their responses. But I assume this power with great care and trepidation, realizing throughout my analysis that I can misunderstand or misrepresent what they are saying. This knowledge makes me especially careful to “stick close” to the interview texts. I quote from their interview transcripts, often at length, so that their voices can be heard throughout my interpretation. A common criticism of qualitative research has been that researchers paraphrase the narratives too much and, consequently, do not provide enough textual evidence for the themes being discussed. Broad strokes are made about human experience, and little detail is provided concerning the narrative(s) that provoked these assertions. I was mindful of such criticism as I analyzed and presented my findings. I paid particular attention to ensuring that my reader could see the narrative to which I was responding. I made interpretations only after I had reread each section of each interview repeatedly and believed that I could provide evidence in the interviews of a particular interpretation. I was wary of my own leaps of inference that take me away from the adolescents’ actual stories and into the tunnel of my own expectations. As I interpreted their interviews, I was continuously engaged in self-reflection: How have I found this theme? Where does this theme come from?

The critical question of what it means to study a population different from my own racial/ethnic and social class background becomes less problematic when I acknowledge that my research is about relationships—rela-
tionships between me, as reader, interviewer, and a former counselor in the school, and the adolescents in the study. My power is limited by these relationships. This research project is about what the adolescents were willing to tell me and the team of interviewers (who will be introduced in the next chapter) in response to our questions. My analysis is not about what the adolescents said, but what they said to us.

**But Were They Honest?**

Since I am not able to stand outside of the research relationship, I cannot claim that what the adolescents told us is what they truly feel. However, three of the four interviewers (including myself) had worked as counselors in the school chosen for this study and were thus a familiar, and perhaps more trustworthy, presence to a number of adolescents. A consistent presence and extended relationship with many of the students in the school—although not with those who were interviewed—made it easier for my colleagues and me to engage with the adolescents we interviewed and most likely made it easier for them to relate to us. Our status as both outsiders and insiders, I believe, enhanced the students’ candor and forthrightness. Had we been fully integrated members of this community, we might have been perceived as too risky since we could have spread their stories to others in their community. On the other hand, had we been complete strangers we might have been perceived as untrustworthy. Over several years of interviewing, I came to believe that the adolescents were sincere with us since most of them appeared to speak candidly about many sensitive issues, including their frustrations at home, with their romantic partners, with their teachers, and even with our questions at times. It is also significant, I believe, that we spoke with the adolescents over a period of three years and thus created continuing relationships within which it may have become safer to speak.

The tenets of the interpretive turn have significantly influenced the ways in which I conceive of and conduct this study. They have led me to raise questions about power; challenge, reflect upon, and engage with my own biases, expectations, and prejudices; and reframe the research endeavor as a relational process. These beliefs are firmly integrated into the specifics of my research project to which I will now turn.