2 A Methodology for Listening

In the following chapters we will allow 100 adolescents to speak for themselves. We will present several quotes from each of them and identify similarities and differences among their perceptions and behaviours. We will use their own words, not responses they have selected from multiple choices on a survey, but our discussions with them were directed and structured, not casual conversations. The kind of detailed discussion and multiple comparisons achieved in this study required an innovative methodology. This chapter describes that methodology: how the adolescents were chosen and interviewed, the management of the voluminous data that resulted, the process used in selecting excerpts from the interviews, and how to evaluate adolescents’ assertions about their lives.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our goal—as the title of this book indicates—was to get to know very well the daily lives, social worlds and biographies of as many teenagers as possible, in order to learn about the role of drugs in adolescent worlds. From a methodologist’s point of view, these are contrary aims. To be able to talk about adolescents in general one would need a large random sample, but to explore persons’ lives in any depth, one limits oneself to a small sample. Generalizations result from sampling for geographic and demographic diversity; rich descriptions of adolescent worlds (or ‘subcultures’ or ‘peer groups’) result from observation in a confined area. Comparisons of groups, such as by age, gender or level of drug use, call for large stratified samples and instruments which provide standard-
ized, quantified data, while the need for trust and close rapport with subjects suggest a small sample of persons observed and interviewed informally.

Our solution will be condemned by methodological purists because it meets all of the requirements of none of the customary sociological designs. Instead, we chose to include in the design as many desirable features as could reasonably fit in a single study. The research is traditionally ethnographic in its emphasis on participant observation and depth interviewing, but positivistic in its use of scheduled questions and computer-assisted data analysis.

Drug-use and distribution patterns in America are known to vary a great deal, for example, from the lower East Side of New York City (Johnson et al., 1985) to the farms of the Midwest. In order to ensure that the findings of this study would be useful in informing general social policy we planned to avoid these extremes and to choose a city which was similar to a large number of other cities in size, ethnic composition, occupational distribution and income levels. The community selected, which we call Yule City, offers 'mean demographics' for the United States. It is a place which is consistently high on lists of ideal cities for consumer marketing and opinion surveys, because its population of 600,000 represents a mean demographic profile for variables such as ethnic group diversity, income and education levels, crime rates and lifestyles.¹

After careful study of census, educational and drug-survey data on the various schools and neighbourhoods in the city, we chose for our major data-gathering operation what appeared to be the most representative quadrant of the city. This area, of about six square miles, includes, in substantial numbers, members of the various ethnic groups, all levels of drug users, youths in every academic achievement level and neighbourhoods ranging from public housing projects to upper middle enclaves. This part of the city is served by a middle school with 500 students and a high school with 1100 students. By concentrating on one area, we were able to get to know the neighbourhoods and a high percentage of the adolescents who live there in some depth.

When one seeks a close-up view of adolescents and proscribed behaviours, neither the design nor execution of the study is likely to proceed easily. In our case, the challenges began with