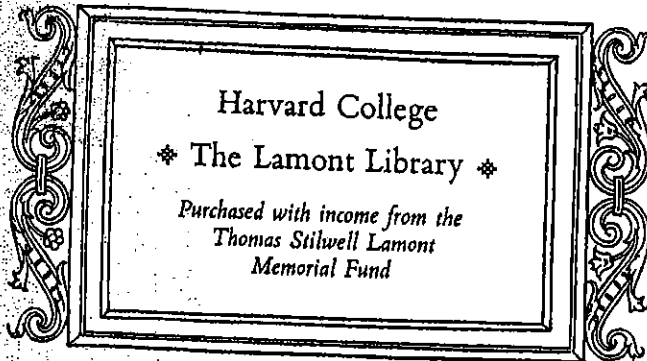


LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

THE ART AND METHOD OF
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES

ROBERT S. WEISS



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

WHY WE INTERVIEW

Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through interviewing we can learn about places we have not been and could not go and about settings in which we have not lived. If we have the right informants, we can learn about the quality of neighborhoods or what happens in families or how organizations set their goals. Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they lead their lives.

We can learn also, through interviewing, about people's interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition.

Interviewing gives us a window on the past. We may become aware of a riot or a flood only after the event, but by interviewing the people who were there we can picture what happened. We can also, by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us: foreign societies, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of couples and families.

Interviewing rescues events that would otherwise be lost. The celebrations and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no record except in their memories. And there are, of course, no observers of the internal events of thought and feeling except those to whom they occur. Most of the significant events of people's lives can become known to others only through interview.

SURVEY INTERVIEWING AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Interviews can be as prepackaged as the polling or survey interview in which questions are fixed and answers limited: "Do you consider yourself to be a Republican, a Democrat, or something else?" There is a high art to developing such items and analyzing them, and for years this has been a respected way to collect interview information.

The great attraction of fixed-item, precategorized-response survey interviews is that because they ask the same questions of every respondent, with the same limited options for response, they can report the proportion of respondents who choose each option: 40% Democrat, 38% Republican, 15% Independent, 7% Other or Don't Know. Furthermore, the standardization of question and response permits comparisons among subgroups, so that, for example, the responses of men can be compared with those of women. Categorized responses to fixed-item interviews can also serve as the raw material for statistical models of social dynamics.

Studies whose ultimate aim is to report how many people are in particular categories or what the relationship is between being in one category and another are justly called *quantitative*. They are quantitative not because they collect numbers as information, although they may (for example, in response to the question "How many years have you lived at this address?"), but, rather, because their results can be presented as a table of numbers (for example, in a table entitled Proportions of People in the Labor Force, Grouped by Age, Who Have at Least Some Self-Employment Income).

Quantitative studies pay a price for their standardized precision. Because they ask the same questions in the same order of every respondent, they do not obtain full reports. Instead, the information they obtain from any one person is fragmentary, made up of bits and pieces of attitudes and observations and appraisals.

If we want more from respondents than a choice among categories or

brief answers to open-ended items, we would do well to drop the requirement that the questions asked of all respondents be exactly the same. For example, if we are free to tailor questions to respondents in a study of working mothers, we can ask a working mother who has a special-needs child about the quality of the school program she has found, and we can ask a working mother whose children are not yet school age about the worries of leaving her children in day care. And we can make clear to each respondent when we need further examples or explanations or discussions. Furthermore, we can establish an understanding with the respondents that it is their full story we want and not simply answers to standardized questions.

Interviews that sacrifice uniformity of questioning to achieve fuller development of information are properly called *qualitative* interviews, and a study based on such interviews, a qualitative interview study. Because each respondent is expected to provide a great deal of information, the qualitative interview study is likely to rely on a sample very much smaller than the samples interviewed by a reasonably ambitious survey study. And because the fuller responses obtained by the qualitative study cannot be easily categorized, their analysis will rely less on counting and correlating and more on interpretation, summary, and integration. The findings of the qualitative study will be supported more by quotations and case descriptions than by tables or statistical measures.

In general, if statistical analysis is our goal, we would do better to use a survey approach. The survey approach is preferable if we want to compare some specific aspect of different groups: to compare, for example, the job satisfaction of workers in different firms. It is also preferable if we hope to use statistical analysis to identify linkages among phenomena, especially where the phenomena are unlikely to be recognized by respondents as linked. An example would be the contribution of parental loss in childhood to vulnerability to depression in adult life.

On the other hand, if we depart from the survey approach in the direction of tailoring our interview to each respondent, we gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides.¹ We permit ourselves to be informed as we cannot be by brief answers to survey items. The report we ultimately write can provide readers with a fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents.

We need not restrict ourselves to just the one approach. Standardized items can be appended to qualitative interviews.² And usually we can produce numerical data from qualitative interview studies that have explored the same area with different respondents, although we may have to

engage in a time-consuming and cumbersome coding procedure and tolerate lots of missing data.

The following excerpt, from an interview conducted for a study of adjustment to retirement, provides an example of the material that can be obtained in qualitative interviews. The respondent is a woman of 66, formerly a department head in a firm in the creative arts, retired for almost 2 years at the time of the interview. This is the third interview in which she was a respondent. The first had been held before her retirement, the second a few months after it.

The interview took place in one of the research project's offices. In this excerpt the interviewer and respondent have just taken a few minutes to recall the project's aims, and now the respondent is describing her current situation:

RESPONDENT: My life is—the euphemism I guess today is “couch potato.” I stay home; I try to go out as infrequently as I can. When I say “out,” I mean, like shopping . . . um, going any place. I listen to a lot of music. I read a great deal. And I watch television a great deal. I don't see anyone. I do speak to my daughter; I speak to her on the phone. That's it! All the things that I thought I would do, if I weren't in a working situation . . . I'd be writing, I'd create, I'd start a business. I had so many ideas while I was still working. I sort of—now maybe this is fanciful thinking—but I sort of pride myself on being a person who comes up with ideas fairly easily. When I say “ideas,” I mean practical, good ideas and creative ideas. But I have no opportunity to . . . Oh, my only hobby is crossword puzzles. [*chuckles*] Which is more of the same, just sitting there in isolation.

I'm not unhappy with my situation. But just that I feel like that the past year . . . wasn't unpleasant—none of it is unpleasant—but it really didn't matter whether I . . . had been alive last year or not. Except in terms of what I can offer to my daughter, who's in Syracuse. I haven't been to visit my daughter and her husband in almost a year. Well, partly it's because of health. I'm afraid to drive a full six and a half hours. Because I do get very, very dizzy and have to pull up to the side of the road. So, you know, it's difficult. But, you know, if I really wanted to open my door, I could take a plane. I could take a taxi over to the airport, and I could fly there. I mean, I could be doing things. I could find alternative ways. But I just don't want to. I don't know if you remember, but I've sort of let myself go. I'm all gray now, practically. Which is okay. If you decide to be, I'm going around in sneakers. I don't have a pair of shoes anymore. It's not a sloppiness. It's just like I'm wearing house slippers all the time, you know, except that it's acceptable in the street. It's like nothing really matters that much. I was

going to put on shoes—I mean, you know, real pumps, I mean, the kind that I used to wear—when I came here. And I . . . it was like I was torn between pride in my appearance and the fact that it doesn't really matter. As long as I can be comfortable.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. It's like you've gone through a metamorphosis?

RESPONDENT: Yeah. But the problem . . . I can understand my reacting this way for a brief time. Hey, I'm going to have the luxury of sloth. And no demands. I'm going to do whatever I want to. If I want to sleep late, I'll sleep late. If I want to stay up 'til two or three in the morning, which I do . . . [*chuckles*] I could understand that as a reaction. The fact that it's extended like almost two years just doesn't worry me. Because if it worried me I'd do something about it. I just don't think about it. It's just that I don't see any changes coming into my life, unless someone knocks on that door for me. And that's not going to happen.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Is this a way to capture what you're feeling about it: that it doesn't worry you, exactly, but it perplexes you?

RESPONDENT: Yeah, I just don't understand it.

INTERVIEWER: Is that right?

RESPONDENT: Yeah. I really don't understand why I've become a nothing person. Even just talking to you, now, I'm rambling. I'm not sure I even know how to talk to people anymore, in terms of conversation. I used to be pretty good at it. You know, I would go to all kinds of functions at work. I thought I handled myself fairly well. And now I don't. If I were invited to a party now, I wouldn't go. My nephew's getting married. I just got an invitation last night in the mail. And my first reaction—I have to be honest with you here; I would never say this to anyone else—wasn't joy for him. That was my second reaction. My first was fear. He wanting me to come to Iowa for the wedding, to meet people, to be with my family, friends, and so on. I'm not going to go. I don't want to be seen this way. I don't want to be with people. I had a call from my college roommate about a year ago. And I haven't called her back. I don't call anyone back. I've severed all my phone friendships, even. She's retired . . . just, I mean, at that time she had just retired, and she was sending away for Chamber of Commerce “What's On,” and “What's to Do.” And I admired her. And I was able to enter into the conversation with her, you know, how exciting it sounded. And once I hung up, that was the end of it. And she's not going to do anything either.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you say that, that she's not going to do anything?

RESPONDENT: Because the first thought that you have is, “Here's an opportunity for a new life.” But I think it takes either tremendous confidence

in yourself to start a new life on your own without any support or you have to be a certain kind of person who's always been a doer and you keep doing. I think most people don't know how to start a new life. School's told us what to do, bosses've told us what to do, husbands've told us what to do. It's very difficult to tell yourself what to do.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Suppose somebody suggested to you, say, volunteer work. What would that mean to you?

RESPONDENT: [short pause] My daughter said that to me yesterday. Which is very funny. She despairs, not so much of me, but in terms of my attitude. Which is a non-attitude. Again, I've always hated limits, and here I'm asking for them. Isn't that odd? Freedom, total freedom, is what I've always espoused. But if you were to say to me, "There's a need for some more people to take care of this hospice or to work in this hospital and so on. Could you help out next Tuesday?" Hey, of course. But when I've looked at the volunteer lists—and there's so much need—it's two things. I don't know where to go. Because I don't know anyone. And second, part of it goes back to not wanting to open that door to be among people. I feel that I've gotten so heavy, so gray, I don't even want people to look at me.

INTERVIEWER: Could you walk me through that conversation with your daughter where she made the suggestion to volunteer?

RESPONDENT: We were talking about my mother, who died a couple of years ago. And we used to visit Ma, who lived in an apartment complex for the elderly. And there were all kinds of activities on the premises. You know, they had classes and they had socials and they had dances and so on. And we would try to coerce her into joining. You know: "Don't sit by yourself all day in your apartment. Take a class in ceramics. Do this, do that." And . . . and "There's a Thanksgiving Dance; go down and join them." And she wouldn't want to do that. And we felt it would be so much better for her if she were more active, if she did meet other people and did participate. And I said that I . . . I suddenly understood how Ma felt. And that we were wrong in imposing our values, just because we needed people and we needed activity, on her. And I said, "Now, for the first time, I can really understand why she would prefer reading a book to going to a card game." And my daughter said, "There has to be some way in which you can use your mind and feel that you still make a difference. And why don't you volunteer?" I like the thought of helping others. But I don't know now that I'm as capable of giving as I once was. When I was feeling good, I wanted to share that feeling good. I'm not feeling empty. I still care about my daughter. I still care about the sick person. I still care about what's going on. I still . . . even on my pension, I still make charitable kinds of

contributions. Because I do care what's happening in this world. It's just that I don't know whether I can give anything.

INTERVIEWER: What did your daughter say?

RESPONDENT: Well, she feels that I ought to try. She feels that I ought to go . . . someplace. If I find it unpleasant, I can always stop. It isn't like taking a job. But it's that tremendous inertia. It looks like I'd have to climb a mountain to take the first step out. I think once I made that step I could do it. It's climbing a psychological mountain. [pause] Maybe it's just the fact that I feel so alone. You know, maybe there's a difference when a person is retiring and has someone—or some ones—there to help.

The excerpt displays the depth and development achievable in qualitative interviewing. It also suggests the contribution qualitative interviewing can make to understanding a situation. Although we would need corroboration from interviews with others among the retired to have confidence in generalization, we see in this interview a process by which retirement makes it easy for those who live alone to slide into isolation.

The process begins with the removal, following retirement from work, of the obligation to participate in social activity. To be sure, the newly retired person may for a time find solitude rewarding after the stresses and demands of work life. Solitude can then be a welcome opportunity for reading and lazing and puttering around the house. But as social withdrawal becomes more established, the prospect of having to mobilize energy to interact with others may bring increasing discomfort to the person who is alone. The person may, like the woman in the interview excerpt, be uncertain of having anything to give and so of being worthy of respect, and may think, "Why subject myself to discomfort when it is possible just to stay home?" Withdrawal thus becomes self-reinforcing.

What we have gained from this qualitative interview is an observer's report of one possible impact of retirement. The report could have been provided only by the respondent herself; only she was in a position to make its observations. And the report could have been developed only in an interview that encouraged the respondent to provide a full account.

Qualitative interviews can have different emphases. In this interview excerpt the respondent provided information about her internal state: her mental and emotional functioning, her thoughts, and her feelings. If the interview had been collected in a study with a different focus, the re-

spondent might have given more emphasis to external events, for example, the functioning of the retirement program provided by her company. Qualitative interviews may focus on the internal or the external; what is common to them all is that they ask the respondent to provide an observer's report on the topic under study.

The style of the qualitative interview may appear conversational, but what happens in the interview is very different from what happens in an ordinary conversation. In an ordinary conversation each participant voices observations, thoughts, feelings. Either participant can set a new topic, either can ask questions. In the qualitative interview the respondent provides information while the interviewer, as a representative of the study, is responsible for directing the respondent to the topics that matter to the study. Note that the interviewer in the excerpt asked, about the college roommate, not what her work had been or where she was now living, but why the respondent believed that she too would fail to achieve the active postretirement life she was planning. The interviewer was also responsible for judging when the respondent's report was adequate and when it needed elaboration, and, should elaboration have seemed desirable, for helping the respondent expand her responses without constraining the information she might provide. As would be the case with any interviewer in an interview that was going well, the interviewer here said much less than the respondent. The interviewer at no point engaged the respondent in the small exchanges of ordinary conversation by, for example, matching one of the respondent's observations with an observation of his own. Nor did he at any point introduce his own experiences, not even to note, by saying something like "Yeah, I know what you mean," that he had had experiences similar to the respondent's. It was the respondent's account that was important.

The interviewer was often encouraging. If you were to listen to the tape of this excerpt, you would hear an occasional murmured "Yeah" and "Uh-huh," by which the interviewer not only indicated that he understood but also affirmed that, yes, this is the right sort of material. The interviewer's voice was mostly serious, respectful, interested. The respondent's voice was mostly relaxed, unhurried, reflective, and inward. If you had watched the interview, you would have seen the interviewer smile when the respondent reported an incident she believed comic and become more sober as she described her withdrawal. But mostly the interviewer expressed a desire to understand whatever it was the respondent was saying.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN UNDERTAKING A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

REASONS TO CONDUCT A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

Research aims should dictate research method. Here are research aims that could make the qualitative interview study the method of choice:

1. *Developing detailed descriptions.* We may want to learn as much as we can about an event or development that we weren't there to see. For example, we may want the fullest report possible of how it happened that someone began drug use, of what the daily round is like for someone who is retired, or of the events of a prison rebellion. We may well want to interview more than one informant and integrate their reports, but we will in any event want from our informants the fullest, most detailed description possible.
2. *Integrating multiple perspectives.* We may want to describe an organization, development, or event that no single person could have observed in its totality. We may want, for example, to describe the structure and functioning of a federal agency or the impact on a community of a flood. Although interviews are necessary, standardized questions won't work, because every respondent will have different observations to contribute. Historians, biographers, and journalists deal regularly with problems of this sort and regularly do qualitative interview studies.
3. *Describing process.* We may want to know, about some human enterprise, how events occur or what an event produces. Economists assume that retailers set prices to maximize profit. But is this in fact the basis for price setting, and if it is, just how do merchants go about deciding how to maximize their profits? Qualitative interviews with merchants can make evident the processes they use.² Or we read in the newspapers about "deadbeat dads" and assume that divorced fathers who withhold child support must be indifferent to the welfare of their children. But is this the case? What leads some fathers who no longer live with their children to fail to contribute to the children's support? Again, qualitative interviews can elicit the processes antecedent

to an outcome of interest. Each of the questions in these examples is a particular expression of the more general question "What are the processes by which an event occurs?" We might also be interested in the consequences of events; for example, how do husbands and wives go about resolving marital quarrels?

4. *Developing holistic description.* By putting together process reports from people whose behaviors interrelate—putting together the reports of retailers and customers or of institutional psychiatrists and institutionalized patients—we can learn about systems. Qualitative interview study may well be the method of choice if our aim is to describe how a system works or fails to work. Thus, we might rely on qualitative interviewing of members of a family to understand the nature of their family life, and qualitative interviewing of members of an organization to understand how the organization works, how it moves toward goals or is paralyzed by internal friction. In general, the dense information obtained in qualitative interviewing permits description of the many sectors of a complex entity and how they go together.
5. *Learning how events are interpreted.* We might want to learn not so much about an event as about how it is interpreted by participants and onlookers. For example, we might be interested in studying responses to a film. Here we already know the "event" but want to learn the reactions of those who were its audience.³ We might want to know how they thought about what happened in the film, what sorts of causes they identified, and what sorts of consequences they worried about. Qualitative interviewing enables us to learn about perceptions and reactions known only to those to whom they occurred.⁴
6. *Bridging intersubjectivities.* We might want to produce a report that makes it possible for readers to grasp a situation from the inside, as a participant might. Qualitative interview studies can approach the "you are there" vividness of a documentary. They can foster the kind of understanding that might be expressed as "Had I been in that situation, I'd have acted that way too." Quotations from interview material can help the reader identify with the respondent, if only briefly, by presenting events as the respondent experienced them, in the respondent's words, with the respondent's imagery.⁵
7. *Identifying variables and framing hypotheses for quantitative*

research. Qualitative interview studies can provide preparation for quantitative research. Those who do quantitative research require variables to measure, issues about which to frame questions, and hypotheses to test. Variables, issues, and hypotheses can come from prior research, be inferred from theory, or be proposed on grounds of common sense, but where none of these does well enough, qualitative interviewing often is asked to fill the gap. The descriptions of process and system that are likely to emerge from a qualitative interview study can inform quantitative investigators about what matters in their intended topic.⁶

Young investigators are sometimes discouraged from undertaking qualitative research studies because of the time they require and their purportedly limited scientific utility. Let us consider each of these issues.

TIME

Qualitative interview studies have the reputation of being labor intensive. Indeed, if undertaken as a Ph.D. thesis, where there are likely to be large ambitions and limited resources, a qualitative interview study can stretch on and on. Several months may be required for the interviewing, and the analysis of the interviews can take even longer.

But journalists, working against deadlines, find any number of shortcuts available for the completion of qualitative interview studies: They can limit their interviewing to those whom they can reach quickly, and they can do much of their interviewing by telephone. They can not only analyze as they go—most people who do qualitative interview studies do this—but also work out their story in their minds. Once their interviewing is done, they may need to devote only a bit more time to thinking about the meanings of their material before they move to writing about it. A qualitative interviewing study can be enormously time consuming, but it need not be.

It should also be noted that the time required by qualitative interview studies tends to be well invested. Most of it goes into an effort to understand the issues of the research. It is entirely possible for investigators who do quantitative work to end a study knowing more about the statistical packages they have used for computer analysis than about the topic of their study. By contrast, those who do qualitative interview studies invariably wind up knowing a lot about the topic of their study.⁷

VALUE AS CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

As I noted earlier in this chapter, a qualitative interview study is poorly suited to the production of statistics or the numerical raw materials for statistical models. In consequence, economists and others committed to the development of statistical models sometimes disparage the reports produced by qualitative interview studies. They may characterize these results as anecdotal, because they rely on accounts provided by a relatively small sample of respondents, or as impressionistic, implying not only that they are imprecise but also that they are more a product of art than of objective scientific method.⁸

The disparagement is unwarranted. Much of the important work in the social sciences, work that has contributed in fundamental ways to our understanding of our society and ourselves, has been based on qualitative interview studies. Qualitative interview studies have provided descriptions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way, including the human consequences of a disastrous flood⁹ and the experiences of participants in the women's movement.¹⁰ What we know about the effects of crises in personal lives comes largely from such studies,¹¹ as does much of what we know about the dynamics of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹² Nor should qualitative interview studies be thought of as only exploratory and ground-breaking, preliminary to other more structured approaches. While it can be valuable for the results of qualitative interview studies to be verified by other methods, it can also be valuable for the results of studies done by other methods to be illuminated by qualitative interview studies.

A COMPROMISE? FIXED QUESTION, OPEN RESPONSE

Investigators who are attracted to the richness of the materials produced by qualitative interview studies but concerned about what may seem to be their looseness sometimes conclude that fixed-question-open-response interviewing provides a desirable compromise. Here respondents are asked carefully crafted questions but are free to answer them in their own words rather than required simply to choose one or another predetermined alternative.

The hope of those who elect the fixed-question-open-response approach is that it will systematize the collection of qualitative material and facilitate the quantitative treatment of the material. In this approach qual-

itative information (albeit more in the form of summary statements than developed stories) will be collected, but because everyone will have been asked the same questions, the responses to each question can be categorized and worked with statistically. This approach makes it possible to report proportions and correlations as well as experiences and meanings.

Unfortunately, the fixed-question-open-response approach to data collection turns out to sacrifice as much in quality of information as it gains in systematization. The interviewer is not actually free to encourage a respondent to develop any response at length. A very long response, just like a shorter one, will have to be fitted into code categories, and interviewers, aware of this, tend to limit the length of respondents' answers.

Furthermore, the very style of question asking weighs against full response. Not only must interviewers ask every question of every respondent for whom it is appropriate, but they must also follow the same ordering of the questions. The interview is directed by the schedule rather than by the respondent's associations. The result is that the respondent, rather than being free to tell the story of what happened, is forced into a stance of answering a question, waiting for the next question, answering the next question, and so on.

Consider how the respondent in the excerpt given earlier in this chapter would have been dealt with in an interview using the fixed-question-open-response format. The respondent might have been asked, "Could you tell me whether your retirement is satisfactory or unsatisfactory?" Suppose the respondent replied, as she did to a similar question in the qualitative interview, "My life is—the euphemism I guess today is 'couch potato.' I stay home." The fixed-question interviewer would very likely then have asked, "Well, is that satisfactory or unsatisfactory?" On being told it was all right, the interviewer might have gone on to the next question. Suppose, however, that instead of going on to the next question, the interviewer had used the standard probe "Why do you say that?" to obtain further material. Now the respondent might have said, as she did in the qualitative interview, "I'm not unhappy with my situation." Almost surely that would have been the end of the discussion of the couch potato issue. The fixed question-open-response approach would have succeeded in getting a headline but would have missed the story.

The material obtained in fixed-question-open-response interviews has another defect: it tends to be generalized rather than concrete. In our example of the retiree we probably would not have been told the significant detail of the respondent's having traded her pumps for sneakers but

would instead learn only that she would "just rather stay at home." Indeed, because the study directors of a fixed-question–open-response survey want a brief response that covers a lot of ground, they write their questions to elicit generalizations. Thus, a typical question would be "Taking it all together, what has been the most important determinant of the way you feel these days?"

Even though fixed-question–open-response interviewing may at first appear to be a systematic approach to qualitative interviewing, it is not. It is a different approach entirely. While studies using this approach may avoid some of the vulnerabilities of qualitative interviewing studies, they also lack their strengths.

THE PHASES OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING RESEARCH

Qualitative interview studies generally begin with decisions regarding the sample to interview, move on to data collection, and conclude with analysis. But more so than is the case in quantitative research, the phases of work in qualitative research overlap and are intermeshed. Analysis of early data contributes to new emphases in interviewing, and the new data collected by the modified interviewing then produces new analyses. The investigator may draft brief reports early in a study, instead of waiting until its report-writing phase, and interviewing can continue even through the report-writing phase. Nevertheless, the focus of the research effort necessarily shifts as the study progresses from its early stages, when recruitment of respondents is likely to be a major issue, to its concluding stages, during which the investigator is primarily concerned with how best to interpret and report the data.

The chapters that follow trace the likely sequence of the investigator's concerns in a qualitative interview study: sampling, preparing for interviewing, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, and, finally, writing the report.

CHAPTER 2

RESPONDENTS: CHOOSING THEM AND RECRUITING THEM

AIMS AND SUBSTANTIVE FRAME OF THE STUDY

Any research project hopes to make something known that was previously uncertain: to answer a specific question, such as how patients react to a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness; or to illuminate an area, as by showing how the family life of single parents is different from the family life of married parents. In pursuit of its aims, the research project will almost surely have to explore several related topics. To investigate how patients react to a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness, a project might explore how the patient was told, by whom, and within what context, what the patient's anticipations were, how the patient interpreted the news, and how those close to the patient dealt with the news. The set of topics the study explores, taken together, might be said to constitute the *substantive frame* of the study.

The initial step in a study is to decide, provisionally, what its aims will be and what topics will be included in its substantive frame. Once these are decided, who should be talked with, and about what, can be worked out. As the investigator learns more about the area of the study, the study's aims and frame may well be modified. One good reason for doing pilot interviews is to clarify the aims and frame of the study before interviewing its primary respondents. Even with pilot interviewing, how-

ever, the boundaries of the study's frame are likely to shift as more is learned, although as the study proceeds they should shift less and less.

The breadth of a study's substantive frame is often a compromise between the investigator's desires for clarity of focus and for inclusiveness. The narrower the substantive frame, the easier it is to say who should be talked with and about what. The broader the substantive frame, the more the study will eventually be able to report and, presumably, the more significant will be the study. Melville included the biology of whales and the technology of whaling within the frame of *Moby Dick*. Doing so enlarged his story from an account of one person's obsession to a mythic enactment of man's self-aggrandizing and self-destructive assault on the wonderfully complex natural order. However, in social research, when balancing clarity of focus on the one hand and ambition on the other, clarity of focus might be given preference. It's hard enough to do a limited study well.

Quite apart from the issue of its breadth, deciding just what areas the substantive frame should include can be difficult. Not only is it likely that an initial listing of areas of useful information would be incomplete, but there may be several different approaches that could be taken to explanation or description, each of which would require development of different areas.

Early in my career I was asked by a consulting group to undertake a study of a university-based executive development program. The aim was to help the administrators of the program understand the program's problems and strengths. Without giving the matter a lot of thought, I defined the study's frame as the experiences of the executives during their residency in the program, and so I investigated relationships among the executives and between faculty and executives, the executives' reactions to classes and colloquia, and the home life of the executives while they were in residency. Only later did I learn that the program's administrators would have preferred a frame that included the use executives made of the program when they were back at their jobs. The administrators, reasonably enough, wanted to know whether the program was doing the students any good. Because I did not develop the study's substantive frame in consultation with members of its primary audience, I omitted issues of critical importance to them.

If there is a clearly defined audience for the study—if, for example, the study has been commissioned, as it was in this instance—the study's proposed substantive frame might be examined from the perspective of

that audience. If representatives of that audience are available, the frame might usefully be discussed with them.

The study's substantive frame decides who should be interviewed and what they should be asked. The "Who should be interviewed?" question will be considered in this chapter; the "What should they be asked?" question will be considered in the next.

PANELS AND SAMPLES

There are two distinct categories of potential respondents: people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event; and people who, taken together, display what happens within a population affected by a situation or event.

Suppose the aim of our study is to describe an event or development or institution: the management of a political convention, the operation of a nursing service, or the system governing the granting of divorce. We would do best to interview people who are especially knowledgeable or experienced. To enrich or extend our understanding, we might also want to include as respondents people who view our topic from different perspectives or who know about different aspects of it. Our aim would be to develop a wide-ranging *panel of knowledgeable informants*. Each member of the panel would be chosen because he or she could significantly instruct us.

Take the study of a bill that made it through Congress. We might want to report, eventually, on the bill's success as a way of illuminating governmental functioning. To produce a dense description of what happened, we might talk with members of Congress who backed the bill and with people on their staff, with members of Congress who opposed the bill and people on *their* staff, and with reporters who cover Congress. We would try to talk with everyone in a position to know what happened in the hope that each would provide part of the story and that all of their accounts together would provide the story in full.

Our approach would be different if we wanted to study the experiences or behaviors of people who have some common characteristic, people who are, in this respect, in the same boat. Suppose we wanted to know about the experiences with retirement of a sample of former professionals or how single parents manage everything they have to do or what is the impact on people's morale and functioning of going through marital separation. For these studies what we need is a sample of people who together can represent the population of concern. If before we wanted a

panel of knowledgeable informants, what we want now is a *sample of representatives*.

Often the study of an issue can be cast in a way that requires a panel of informants but with what seems to be only slight redefinition can be recast to require a sample of representatives. Take the issue of child visitation after divorce. If we define the study's aim as learning what is the institutional structure that governs what is done, we would want a panel of informants: scholars of family law, judges, lawyers, family court officers, and, possibly, a few parents. But if we define the study's aim as learning how divorced mothers and fathers arrange visitation and how they are affected by their arrangements, we would want a sample of divorced mothers and fathers who might together represent the range of parental experiences.

We might, of course, decide to do both studies. We might want a panel of informants to tell us about the institution of child visitation and a sample of parents to tell us how it works in practice. We would then be doing two distinct studies. They would enrich each other, but our work load would be greater.

Sometimes a respondent can be treated either as a representative of a population or as an informant, although not both at the same time. In a pilot study I did of burn victims a respondent was first an informant on the nature of advocacy organizations for burn victims—he was a member of one—and then, in a later interview, a reporter on what it had been like when he himself was burned. My relationship with the respondent was a bit different in the two interviews: in the first he was an expert instructing me; in the second he was a former victim whose story I was helping to elicit.

THE PANEL OF INFORMANTS

The idea in a panel of informants is to include as respondents the people who together can provide the information the study requires. How do we decide just who these people are? The kind of entity we want to learn about makes a difference.

1. *Events.* We may want to report on a happening like a flood, an epidemic, a riot, or a football game; that is, an event that involves people of different backgrounds, with different perspectives, who became involved in different ways. To get a sense of the scope of the event we

might begin with professionals or experts: meteorologists in a study of a flood or public health officers in a study of an epidemic. The professionals and experts can suggest the issues that have been attended to in the past and that ought to be attended to now. There may be a literature with which we should become acquainted, and the experts may be able to direct us to studies of similar events. Following this, it would make sense to find people who were caught up in the event, so that we could learn how it was experienced.

2. *An organization.* We might want to study an institution or an organization of coordinated effort: a lying-in hospital, a school, the Navy. Here people in well-defined roles meet to produce planned events. In a study of this sort we can expect to encounter subgroups, or cliques, and politics. Interviews should be held with people in different jobs on different levels, in different relationships to the institution, and from different informal groups.

A study of an organization requires that the investigator succeed in obtaining informants without being perceived as an intrusive foreign presence. How to survive in the field is discussed in books on field methods, but it may be useful here to note that success is dependent on a certain amount of social grace, including sensitivity, considerateness, and tact; self-confidence; awareness of the politics of the institution; and persistence. Of great value is the ability to move through the institution without being blocked by barriers designed to protect its staff from bothersome outsiders. Being unobtrusive can help. It has been said of one brilliant field worker: "Other people have presence; he has absence." But a self-confident presence can also work.

3. *A loose collectivity.* We might want to study a collection of people in touch with one another but not as closely linked as those in an organization; for example, a community, a network of associates, or the residents of a neighborhood. With luck it may be possible to find someone who is central and knowledgeable and who can provide both orientation and sponsorship, like William F. Whyte's Doc.¹ Failing this, any member may provide entry, but the sponsorship of higher-ranking members will count for more.

4. *A social institution.* Many social forms, like marriage or parenthood or the profession of politics, help shape people's lives. To learn about these forms, we have to interview a sample of the people who have been

affected by them. In addition, it is likely that there are people who are studying the social institution, and there may be others who serve as therapists for people negatively affected by it. At least a few of these professionals should be consulted.

The Key Informant

A good person to start with in any study requiring a panel is a knowledgeable insider willing to serve as an informant on informants. But others who might help include a knowledgeable marginal or disaffected figure within the system. Such a person may be more willing to describe the system's failings than would someone central to the system and committed to it. Still another possibility would be a retiree, a person who has a career's experience with the system and now has time to reminisce.² I myself prefer the informed insider, assuming I can find someone like that who is willing to coach me. But all sorts of people can help.

Orienting figures may need to feel confident of you before they can comfortably be candid. Being vouched for by a mutual acquaintance can be useful. Failing that, it can help to be able to say that someone known to both of you suggested the contact. The implied sponsorship of government or foundation funding for the project may also help.

But it can happen that people you would like to consult prove inaccessible to you; your calls are fielded by a lower-level staff member who turns you away. When this has happened to me, my response has been to think about getting the experience into my notes and to try again. When it keeps on happening, I try to be philosophical about being frozen out, do something else for a while, and then reconsider my strategy. But, in truth, the experience is hard on morale.

Sometimes there is no obvious orienting figure, or there is no need for one because the people to be interviewed are immediately apparent. In a study of a disaster there will be officials and professionals whose job it is to deal with the disaster and the people who are affected by it. Orientation may not seem necessary. Or it may happen that you simply cannot find someone to direct your efforts. How then should you proceed? Two principles suggest themselves: One principle is to start with people who are available to you and easy to interview, especially if having interviewed them will make you more informed and legitimized when you proceed to interview others. A second principle is to have your early

interviews with people who are of marginal importance to the study so that if you make mistakes it won't matter so much.

How Large a Panel?

In a study in which there are a great many potential informants it might seem as though interviewing could go on forever. In a study of the functioning of today's divorce laws, with judges and lawyers and divorcees and their families all to be interviewed, when do you quit? When do you decide you have interviewed enough people? The best answer is that you stop when you encounter diminishing returns, when the information you obtain is redundant or peripheral, when what you do learn that is new adds too little to what you already know to justify the time and cost of the interviewing.

Biographers, whose research by its nature requires a panel of informants, regularly have the problem of deciding when to stop interviewing. After having interviewed the occupational associates of the biographer's subject, the subject's close friends, the members of the subject's immediate family, and the people who were close to the subject as a child, should the biographer continue with the college roommate, the distant cousin, the fleeting acquaintance? Even the most indefatigable biographer must call a halt somewhere. In general, when further inquiry will add little to the story, stop inquiring.

REPRESENTATIONAL SAMPLES

Suppose that we want to interview not a panel of people in peculiarly good positions to know but, rather, a sample of people who together can adequately represent the experiences of a larger group.

Probability Sampling for Qualitative Research

One approach is to develop a sample that can be argued on grounds of mathematical probability to be not too different from the population in which we are interested. If everyone in a population has the same chance of turning up in the sample, we have a probability sample.

If the people who make up a probability sample are chosen in such a way that each choice is independent of every other choice, and the sample includes at least 60 respondents, then the sample is likely to be a fairly good

representation of the population in the sense that every important characteristic of the population is likely to have one or more representatives in the sample. A sample of this sort and size will, 19 times out of 20, include at least one instance of any phenomenon that occurs at least 5% of the time in the larger population. (The probability that a one-time-in-twenty phenomenon will not appear at all in a simple random sample of size 60 is .046.) Larger samples are still more likely to provide adequate representation.³

A sample can be a probability sample only if respondents are selected randomly. Random selection is not the same as haphazard selection. Random means, rather, that the members of the sample were selected by a procedure that could equally well have selected absolutely anybody in the population. One such procedure would be to choose names from a population list. For example, we could draw a sample of the community from the list of names in the telephone book. Our actual procedure might be to let a table of random numbers dictate page numbers, column numbers, and line numbers in the book. We would have to worry, though, about overrepresenting people who had multiple listings and about not representing at all those who had no phones or whose numbers were unlisted. As this example may suggest, designing a probability sample is a fairly specialized activity, and someone who hasn't done it before might do well to consult a sampling statistician.

Often, the list of names we have is limited to a company or a region. Can we generalize to people in other companies or regions? Yes, but not by claiming that the sample is likely, on grounds of statistical probability, to be representative. A sample can be a random sample only of the population from which it is drawn. If we want to generalize beyond that population, we must invoke other rationales.

Samples That Attempt to Maximize Range

We may not want a probability sample from a population even if we are able to obtain one. The larger a probability sample, the more likely it is that it will reproduce in miniature the population of cases from which it is drawn. Instances that occur frequently in the population will occur frequently in the sample. But if instances that occur frequently are very much like one another, the sample will be filled with near duplicates. Precisely because it replicates the population, a probability sample might produce more typical cases, and fewer atypical cases, than we need. We will be learning again and again about the same thing.

Rather than choose respondents randomly, and thus risk unwanted duplication in our sample, we may prefer to select respondents purposefully so that we obtain instances of all the important dissimilar forms present in the larger population. We may further want each of the dissimilar forms represented about the same number of times, so that we have the same knowledge base for each. This kind of sample might be referred to as a sample chosen to maximize range.

We are particularly likely to want a sample chosen to maximize range rather than a probability sample if our sample will be small. If we plan to work with samples much smaller than 60 (samples of 30, say) we may not trust random selection to provide us with instances of significant developments that occur infrequently.

With large samples we may choose to maximize range in order to avoid having too many instances of the same type, and with small samples we may choose to maximize range in order to ensure that our sample contains instances of infrequent types. In sum, whenever we conduct qualitative interview studies, we ought to consider sampling to achieve range as an alternative to random sampling. There are advantages to each approach to sampling. Random sampling will provide us with a picture of the population as well as of particular instances, and sampling for range will ensure that our sample includes instances displaying significant variation.

But if in sampling for range your aim is to obtain instances displaying significant variation, you must know in advance what might constitute significant variation and how to find the people who display it. Take, as an example, the problem of learning what the impact is of moving into a new community. You might consider any of the following suggestions:⁴

1. Look for contrast in what may be significant independent variables. If you want to show that adaptation to geographical migration is dependent on the length of time available for planning, make sure you have in your sample instances where there was a good deal of anticipatory time and instances where there was little.
2. Look for contrast in what may be significant dependent variables. If you want to contrast those who have adapted to geographical migration and those who have not, include instances of each.
3. Look for contrast in context. If you suspect that the experience of a newcomer is heavily dependent on the extent to which networks are already established in the community into which the

newcomer moves, do some interviewing in a new development and some in a long-established neighborhood.

4. Look for contrast in dynamics. If you want to show that one of the problems experienced by newcomer couples is that the husband is absorbed by the need to prove himself in his new workplace and so becomes emotionally unavailable to his wife, include in your sample couples in which the husband is unemployed or self-employed or in which the wife has the more demanding career.

If you have a list of possible respondents to work from, you may be able to establish informal quotas that will maximize the heterogeneity of your sample in some respect. You can decide what sort of contrast you want among your respondents and, as you recruit from the list, give preference to the potential respondents whom you need to fill your quotas.⁵ To know whether potential respondents have characteristics you want, you can include "filter" questions in the telephone calls you make to arrange for interviews. In our study of retirement, for example, we used the filter question "Might you retire within the next year or so?"

One argument for generalizing to a larger population from a sample chosen to maximize range depends on being able to claim that the sample included the full variety of instances that would be encountered anywhere. If we find uniformities in our sample despite our having adequately represented the range of instances, then those uniformities must be general. If we find differences among types of instance, then those differences should hold in a larger population. We will not be able to say anything about the proportion of instances of different types in a larger population, since the proportion in our sample might be very different from the proportion elsewhere. But we can say what the various types are like, no matter where they appear.

Convenience Sampling

The third approach to obtaining a sample of respondents, in addition to choosing them on a probability basis or choosing them to provide a useful range of instances, is to accept pretty much whomever we can get. This is a sample of convenience.

Some people who do qualitative research are willing to base their reports on informal interviews with friends, family, and chance acquaintances.

Their examples are introduced with a phrase like "An acquaintance of mine told me that . . ." Nor is this the approach only of those who have no ambition to contribute to general understanding. In attempting to learn about a group difficult to penetrate—gypsies, migrant workers, the very rich—it can be a breakthrough to find *any* member of the group, any member at all, willing to serve as an informant and respondent.

Sometimes the kind of people wanted for study are unusual in a population and, in addition, not listed anywhere. In the paragraphs below I give some suggestions for nevertheless obtaining a sample.⁶

You may know a few people in the population you want to study. Start with those who are available to you and ask them for referrals. If you don't know anyone in the population you want to study, ask for help from people you think are likely to know such people. Or tell all your friends and acquaintances that you want to find someone who could be instructive about your topic. This use of referrals to build a sample is described by Diane Ehrensaft, who wanted to interview parents who were sharing child-care responsibilities:

Through word of mouth and my own personal contacts, I began to generate a pool of people who fit the bill of two people, a man and a woman, sharing the position of primary parent in their family. I had no trouble finding potential couples to talk to. People told me eagerly about friends or friends of friends, and I soon found myself generating, both geographically and socially, an arena well beyond my own circles.⁷

If the people you want to interview are likely to know others like themselves, you can ask *them* for referrals. Then the referrals can provide still further referrals. This technique is known as *snowball sampling*.

Another method of locating respondents is to advertise for volunteers. Better still, you might arrange for a story about your study to appear in a newspaper. In a study of retirement I needed to interview women who had retired from administrative and managerial jobs. A story about the study and my desire to interview appropriate women appeared in a newspaper and brought several volunteers.

You might find a congregating place for people of the kind you want to study. For example, if you want to learn about people who do something illegal, you may be able to find people in jail for the crime—although they will be, by definition, the ones who didn't get away with it. That's how Donald Cressey was able to learn about embezzling.⁸

People who suffer from an affliction may have formed a support group.

Leaders of support groups can suggest potential respondents and are also likely to be repositories of information regarding the condition. It is almost always a good idea to check an encyclopedia of associations to see if a group has been established that specializes in your concern. If the group is in your locale, you might be able to visit.

Social agencies, schools, and hospitals can sometimes provide the kind of people you are interested in. To be sure, you will probably be required first to undergo the scrutiny of gatekeepers, research committees, and committees for the protection of human subjects. It helps to be on the staff or to work with someone on the staff.⁹

These suggestions are not intended to minimize the ingenuity that may be needed to find appropriate respondents. For a pilot study of newcomers to the Boston area I started by asking the gas company for a copy of its most recent list of "turn-ons" and was told that the company guarded the list closely. It took the intercession of a university vice president to obtain the list, and I then discovered that it was several months out of date and thus useless as a list of people who had just moved in. I thought of contacting local newcomer clubs, but before doing so I made connection with a Welcome Wagon representative. She supplied me with names of newcomer couples in her area until the central office of her national organization reminded her that the information she was sharing was proprietary. Luckily, we had by then completed all the interviews we needed.¹⁰

Arguments for the Generalizability of the Findings of Convenience Samples

A problem with all samples selected only because they are conveniently obtained is that we may not have good bases for generalization. With a probability sample, generalization is straightforward, based on mathematical argument. With a sample in which it has been possible to maximize range, it can be argued that instances of every important variation have been studied. With other sorts of samples other arguments must be relied on. Here are five arguments that might be advanced to justify the attempt to generalize from the findings of convenience samples—and one that should not be, although it sometimes is.

Respondents' Own Assessments of Generalizability. Respondents may be able to judge the extent to which others in their situations behave simi-

larly or differently and have the same or different experiences. Their appraisals are not conclusive. A respondent who says, "I'm like most other people I know in my situation" is not necessarily right. "Pluralistic ignorance", in which people are like one another and don't know it, certainly exists, and so does underestimating the way in which one is different. But knowledgeable appraisals may be more likely. The question to ask about a respondent's appraisal is whether the respondent is in a position to know. I would trust an executive who says that most executives check around to learn the size of the end-of-the-year bonuses being given to others in order to know how to value their own; it is something an executive would be likely to observe. Sometimes respondents can offer evidence for their appraisals: they have talked with others in their situation about the topic or have observed others' behavior with respect to it.

Similarity of Dynamics and Constraints. Insofar as the dynamics of the group we study and the constraints to which they are subjected decide their behavior, we can expect the same behavior from any other group with the same dynamics and the same constraints. On this basis we might argue that what was learned about postdivorce father-child relationships from a study that was conducted in a New England city could be generalized to postdivorce father-child relationships throughout the country. The relationships, it could be argued, would involve the same emotions of parent and child and would be subject to the same constraints of post-marital life.

Depth. An idea that may be intuitively appealing is that underneath the accidents of individuality lies an identity in structure and functioning among all members of our species. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, referring to an orator, "The deeper he dives into his privatest secretest presentiment—to his wonder he finds, this is the most . . . universally true."¹¹

The problem, of course, is to know when we are dealing with a deep and presumably universal phenomenon. One guide might be to ask whether the phenomenon is necessary to the functioning of whatever it is we are studying or is closely linked to something necessary or is an expression of it. Yet we must be aware that we are working with theory, and we might be wrong.

The study of bereavement provides an example. We might assume that grief results from loss of a relationship of attachment, a relationship in which there is a sense of strong linkage between the self and the other,

almost of being augmented by the other. We might also assume that both the capacity to form attachments and the emotions attending their loss are universal or nearly so. We would therefore believe that findings regarding the experience of grief would be generalizable, whatever the quality of the respondent sample. In contrast, we might suppose that mourning practices, the way people display their grief, are easily modified by time and place. We would, therefore, want a representative sample before generalizing about mourning practices. But it should be noted that our belief that we need a better sample for a study of mourning practices than for a study of grief depends on a theory regarding the nature of attachment, loss, and mourning.

Theory Independent of Qualifiers. Akin to the argument based on the purported depth (and therefore universality) of whatever it is we are describing is the argument that there is no justification for questioning the exportation of a theory based on our sample. We might acknowledge that our sample is not representative but argue that there is no reason for the theory to be limited to the sample from which it was developed.

Donald Cressey studied embezzlers in prison to learn about embezzling. His was hardly a representative sample of all embezzlers, since it included only those who had been caught and convicted. (But how else find a sample of embezzlers at all?) Despite this skewed sample, Cressey offered generalizations about the source of all embezzlement, not just unsuccessful embezzlement. He said that embezzling occurs when someone in a position to embezzle can justify violating others' trust in order to solve a nonshareable problem. He argued that his theory could be applied to all embezzlement because it was inherently plausible, it was invariably consistent with his data, and—although he left this implicit—there was no reason his theory should be true only of imprisoned embezzlers.¹²

Corroboration from Other Studies. The findings and conclusions of other studies can sometimes buttress those of our qualitative interview study. They will not be able to corroborate every point of our study—if they could, our study would have been unnecessary. But the more we have of such corroboration for our findings, the more credible our findings become. This is especially the case when the results of a quantitative study can anchor a discussion based on qualitative interviewing. For example,

a discussion of single parent overload might be anchored by a quantitative study's findings regarding the disposable time available to parents in various types of households.

An Invalid Argument for Generalization from Convenience Samples

A sample that is not chosen randomly cannot be claimed to be representative even if some of its demographic characteristics match those of the country as a whole. One author described using snowball sampling to obtain a sample of respondents who, with a few exceptions, lived in West Coast urban areas. The author then argued that the sample should be taken as representative of a national population because it matched the national population on age at time of first marriage, number of children, length of marriage, and proportion divorced. However, absence of significant difference between a sample and a larger population on one or on a dozen characteristics does not make a sample representative of the larger population on characteristics that have not been examined. A snowball sample, for one thing, will always underrepresent those who have few social contacts and will therefore underrepresent every belief and experience that is associated with having few social contacts.

Comparison Cases

In qualitative interview studies, anyone who has anything to teach us is a desirable interviewee. Often it is useful to interview at least a few people who might constitute comparison cases. In a study of men in responsible positions, we were several times misled by the filter questions we used to establish that a potential respondent was actually in a responsible job. As a result, we mistakenly selected into our sample men in occupations different from those we wanted to learn about. We interviewed the men anyway and found their contrasting experience to be instructive. And in a study of single parents, we intentionally interviewed people in intact marriages as a way of understanding better what we were being told by single parents.

Should you have a full-scale comparison group? Often, it is all an investigator can do to collect information from an adequate sample of people in a situation; to also collect information from an adequate sample of people *not* in the situation can seem an unmanageable burden. It may

also seem unnecessary. Why give time and energy to the study of people who by definition aren't the people you want to learn about?

And yet, how can you be sure that phenomena you associate with the situation you are studying are in fact more frequent there than among people who are not in that situation? In studying single parents it appeared to me that their children were asked to do a great deal. It made sense that this would be linked to the understaffing of the single-parent home and to the special need the single parent would have for the children's help. But, just to be sure, I did some interviewing of parents in two-parent homes. I discovered, to my surprise, that parents in two-parent homes expected their children to do the same sorts of chores that parents in single-parent homes expected their children to do. The difference wasn't in the parents' expectations, it was in the firmness of those expectations. Parents in two-parent homes would excuse their children from chores if the children had something else to do and would accept forgetfulness as an explanation for noncompliance. Parents in single-parent homes could not tolerate their children's noncompliance. In the two-parent home parents wanted their children to help so that the children would learn to be responsible. In the single-parent home the parent needed the children to help because the parent could not manage otherwise. It took comparative data to make this clear.

Judith Wallerstein is properly recognized for her contributions to our understanding of the stresses experienced by children following parental divorce.¹³ But many of her readers have wondered whether children whose parents maintained intact marriages might not share some of these stresses and whether children whose parents are unhappily married might not experience still other stresses. Without comparison cases there is no way to be sure.

An investigator who does not have comparison cases may argue, explicitly or implicitly, that a development in the group under study must be peculiar to that group because its presence outside the group has not been noted. Or the investigator may argue that the process leading to a special development is apparent, that the process could occur only in the group under study, or that members of the studied population affirm that they too have noticed that they are different in this special way. Any of these arguments can help, but none is likely to be as convincing as arguments based on comparative study. Is marriage better in couples who share parenting than in couples who do not? Diane Ehrensaft tries to answer this question affirmatively on the basis of her sample of shared-parenting

couples.¹⁴ But she did not have a comparison sample of marriages in which couples do not share parenting, so her argument comes close to being, "Well, their marriages look better." She also says that if you consider the logic of the situation, the marriages would have to be pretty good or the couple couldn't keep doing shared parenting. And there doesn't seem to be a high divorce rate among them, although it's hard to know. Without a comparison group, this is the best she can do.

Even if resources have already been stretched by the effort to obtain adequate representation of target cases, it is likely to be a good idea to include at least a few comparison cases. Statistical comparison may not be possible, but even so, the comparison cases can correct what would otherwise be a tendency to exaggerate the peculiarities of the sample that is the focus of the study.

Conceptually Important Cases

Sometimes cases that occur infrequently should be sought out because they are significant conceptually. Take house husbands. I have occasionally presented findings from a study I conducted of occupationally successful men that dealt with, among other things, the division of household labor in their homes. I would report that these men operated from traditional understandings, though with flexibility, and that I imagined that other men did as well. Regularly, it seemed, someone in the audience would ask how I could maintain that position, given the existence of contented house husbands. "I know a man," I would be told, "who stays home and takes care of the kids while his wife goes out to work. And he is perfectly happy with the arrangement."

House husbands, men who devote themselves to child care and home maintenance while their wives work, are statistically unusual. In a random sample of a hundred families you might find two or three.¹⁵ But house husbands play a role in people's thinking about family life, and if you are going to lecture on the division of marital labor, it is probably a good thing to have interviewed a few house husbands.

I found two house husbands by asking around when attending conferences on "men's issues." I later met another house husband through personal acquaintances. I don't pretend now to be an expert on this way of dividing domestic labor, but I do have real images in my mind when I talk about house husbands. Now if I am asked about house husbands, I can make clear my limited information but then describe the adaptations

I have witnessed. I can say that each of the men I talked with had assimilated his roles and responsibilities to a sense of coping, of making things work, that struck me as masculine in style and that, in addition, each maintained a sense of being involved with the world outside the home: one as a writer, the second as a pioneer helping to establish a new form of masculinity, and the third as a former and future head of a small business who had decided with his wife that his wife's greater earning power justified his staying home for now.

An N of 1

Compared with survey research studies, qualitative interview studies collect more material from fewer respondents. Studies of a single case take this to an extreme. The single case may be advanced as valuable because it so effectively displays the complex interplay of particular circumstance and the regularities of the human condition. Furthermore, the density of detail possible in the presentation of the single case makes for drama and immediacy, which can foster an emotional level of understanding based on identification. Authors of studies of single cases may also want to generalize some of their observations. The justifications for generalizability they offer would be those offered for qualitative interview studies done with small convenience samples; for example, that the constraints the subject experienced and the motives the subject expressed were common to all those in the subject's situation.

To these arguments for the single case may be added the idea that the case displays a life significant in itself. Furthermore, insofar as the subject may have been witness to significant events, the subject may provide not only autobiographical material but also a valuable observer's report.

Consider the book *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*, by Nell Irvin Painter. In it Painter presents edited and rearranged materials from dozens of interviews with a respondent who was "a black workingman in a southern city in mid-century." More than that, he had been a union organizer, a member of the Communist party, a husband and father, and a man with his own ambition to write. His singularities weaken the extent to which he can be taken as exemplary of men in his situation, yet his story makes vivid the economic, social, and emotional problems confronting all black workingmen of that time and place.

One problem in dealing with the case study is to decide to what

substantive frame it should be assigned. Helen and Everett Hughes raise this issue in their introduction to Helen Hughes's interview-based life history of a female drug addict: "The story she [the informant] left can be read in a variety of ways: as a psychiatric case study, as an account of the use of narcotics in an American city, and so on. But beyond this, it is a story of one person's journey through the city and of what that journey did to her."¹⁶ The Hugheses here note three frames to which the case study may be assigned: personal pathology, narcotics user, urban dweller. Undoubtedly other frames could also be considered, such as "young woman without family or funds." Perhaps we learn about issues within all these frames, but unless we have one frame clearly in mind, the lessons of the case tend to fade.

Plummer has remarked that case study research tends to be "the strategy of the poor—of the researcher who has little hope of gaining a large and representative sample from which bold generalization may be made."¹⁷ However, case research can absorb as much data-gathering effort and analytic time as would research based on larger samples. Case research is different primarily because it anchors its potential for generalization in the welter of detail of the single instance. Generalization can then become uncertain (and rest heavily on the theory we bring to the case), but in compensation we have the coherence, depth, development, and drama of a single fully understood life.

RECRUITING RESPONDENTS

Having decided on the people you want to interview, you must now gain their cooperation. How do you do it?

Sometimes a telephone call alone can be enough. There can be appeal in a request for an interview. People may welcome the chance to make their situation known or just to have a break in the day. People marooned at home tend to welcome interviewers. So do people with time on their hands, like the hospitalized or the retired. So may people in crisis, such as people going through marital separation, although this is chancy and may change for the same person from day to day. But most people, given adequate assurance about the legitimacy of the interviewer and the confidentiality of what they say, are willing to talk.

On the other hand, interviewers may need the right sponsorship or topic or approach to avoid being turned down by people whose occupations have accustomed them to asking the questions, including physicians

and the police. Indeed, all sorts of things, including geography, can increase the likelihood that a request for an interview will be turned down. In a study of the uses of planned environments such as museums and fairs, my first interviews were on the grounds of the Seattle World's Fair. I found it easy there simply to stop people and ask them about their experiences. My clipboard was a sort of badge, identifying me as a person whose job entitled him to ask questions, and people seemed happy to talk to me. Doing the same thing in the same way at the New York World's Fair a couple of years later, I found people much less willing to talk with me. New Yorkers, apparently, had learned to be skeptical of inquiring strangers—with or without clipboards. But I had no trouble conducting the same sort of interviews at a restored village not far from New York. It may be that in the small space of the restoration it was more evident that I had management approval.

A number of devices can increase the likelihood of recruiting people. We have already noted that it can help in establishing a relationship with an orienting figure in an informant study if you are able to name a mutual friend or colleague and say "So-and-so suggested I call you." The usefulness of a vouching figure extends to members of representational samples. A sociologist found it easier to interview IV drug users after a member of his team who was himself a former drug user spread the message that the sociologist would be around and was all right.

There is a downside to the use of intermediaries that applies, though with less force, to the referrals of snowball sampling. The respondent's presentation of self may be affected by his or her awareness of the intermediary's sponsorship. This may be especially true if the intermediary helps arrange the interview.

Sponsorship by impressive groups or by public figures does not have this drawback. Such sponsorship should, of course, be appropriate to the study if it is to be useful. For a study of businessmen, a business association would be appropriate; for a study of family life, a sponsoring group of priests, ministers, and rabbis. A grant from a government agency is usually viewed as testimony to legitimacy, as is a position at a university. Boards of advisers can serve, in part, as endorsers.

In most of the studies I have done my only sponsorship has been whatever might be implied by government funding and university affiliation. It seemed to me not worth the time it would take to obtain anything more. But studies whose subject is likely to put off potential respondents might be helped by reassuring sponsorship.

When my colleagues and I have tried to obtain the participation of respondents for a community sample of representatives, we have generally sent the potential respondents a letter explaining the study, arguing for the importance of their participation, and saying someone would telephone. Despite the letter, the call from my office to potential respondents often appeared to surprise them. One of the people working with me hit on the idea of starting the conversation with, "We sent you a letter last week. It could easily have gotten in with your junk mail, but do you happen to remember it?"

A checklist of items the investigator might be prepared to tell respondents in a first phone call could include the following: who the investigator is (which ordinarily means what the investigator's job or position is), the reasons for the study, the study's sponsorship, how the potential respondent's name was found, why the potential respondent was selected, what the purpose of the interview is, what will be asked of the respondent, whether confidentiality is guaranteed, and whether the interview will be tape-recorded.¹⁸ It is sometimes useful to ask a few questions to decide whether a potential respondent meets a study's eligibility requirements: is in the right age range or occupational bracket.

In a few studies, I have begun with a telephone call and told potential respondents that a descriptive letter would follow. In other studies I have simply telephoned, without any letter sent at any time. People who do survey research tell me that they prefer not to telephone for an appointment, since that makes it too easy for the respondent to refuse to see them. They would rather just show up. I doubt that just showing up would work for qualitative interviewing. But here, as elsewhere, if in a particular study it seems like a good idea, try it. How else can you learn what works?

Where it is especially important to obtain an interview with a particular respondent it can make sense to engage in a concerted sales effort. A writer of books based on interviews wanted to interview me about loneliness, an issue on which I'd worked. The writer's assistant called to tell me that the writer wanted to interview me and that some of the writer's books and articles were being mailed to me. A few days later I received a package containing a paperback collection of the writer's interviews, copies of magazine and newspaper reviews praising the writer's books, and a copy of a magazine story about the writer. A couple of weeks later I received copies of two more of the writer's interview collections. About two weeks after that I received a call from the writer, asking for the interview. I could hardly not agree.

On another occasion an English journalist who wanted to interview me called from England for the appointment. Transatlantic calls get my attention, and I think I am in this regard typical. I wouldn't go so far as to recommend that appointments with difficult-to-recruit respondents be made from a transatlantic telephone, but there is much to be said for letting respondents know that their participation will be valued.

Also important in recruitment success is an ability to keep pitching the study until acceptance is obtained. In the study of occupationally successful men, we wanted to interview our respondents three times over the course of a couple of months. That was a lot to ask of busy men. We began by sending a letter to potential respondents selected on the basis of occupation from street lists of upper-income suburbs. Our interviewers then telephoned the men for appointments. A dozen or so efforts produced discouraging results: about two-thirds of those we contacted turned us down. After a few turndowns interviewers dreaded making the calls.

If we had accepted this low response rate, we would have studied only men who were unusually friendly to the idea of being interviewed. I tried doing recruiting myself. My acceptance rate ran about 50%, but one acceptance for every two calls was still a low response rate. And I too was dispirited by the frequent rejection.

However, one staff member (I will call her Mrs. Adams) seemed to be doing fine with recruiting. She reported the astonishing acceptance rate of 80%. I asked her to show me how she did it.

I role-played a potential respondent. When Mrs. Adams asked me if I would participate, I said I was too busy. Mrs. Adams seemed not to notice. She continued in a pleasant and engaging fashion to describe what the interview would cover. I said, "No, I'd rather not participate." Mrs. Adams said, "Yes, of course, I understand, but I want to tell you why the study is being done and who is doing it." And she went on to tell me about the sponsorship of the study and the kinds of questions that would be asked and how important it would be to have my perspective. She said that the interview would help establish the nature of the stresses in managerial and administrative work and might contribute to their amelioration. She said that I would find the interview interesting and that it would be held whenever and wherever suited me. By now I was intrigued by the study and flattered to be so wanted, as well as just a bit exasperated by being unable to escape. I said, "All right, let's set a time."

Surprisingly, Mrs. Adams, although a demon recruiter, turned out not to be a very good interviewer. Her ability to seem responsive while

continuing firmly on her own track, which made her a wonderful recruiter, produced difficulties for her as an interviewer. In recruiting she got people to see the world her way. In interviewing she tried to do the same thing. The transcripts of Mrs. Adams's interviews showed her talking as much as did her respondents. She would continue with a line of questioning even when the respondent had begun to talk about something else. She would become impatient when a respondent hesitated and would supply what she believed to be the thought for which the respondent was searching; and, because she didn't listen well, her suggestions could be way off the mark. After enough of this treatment, the respondent's answers would become brief, but Mrs. Adams seemed not to notice.

Mrs. Adams and I had many a struggle before she accepted that it was undesirable to interrupt a respondent's account. Once she accepted this principle, she became reluctant to redirect respondents at all, with the consequence that her respondents could wander into total irrelevance.

And yet Mrs. Adams's willingness to continue an interview despite the respondent's indications that everything had already been said meant that several times she obtained important material other interviewers would have missed. The moral, I guess, is that in social research, as in life, never undervalue persistence.

CHAPTER 3

PREPARATION FOR INTERVIEWING

WHAT DO YOU INTERVIEW ABOUT?

I was trying to think through how qualitative interviewers formulate the questions they include in their interviews when I had to break off to go to a lunch with a colleague who has since become a friend. My colleague does a fair amount of interviewing and is, I think, good at it. I decided that I would interview him about how he formulated his interview questions. I could at the same time monitor the source of my own questions.

While walking to the restaurant I could recognize in myself an almost kinesthetic sense of the material I needed for this chapter. I needed dense descriptions that would fully display the process of question formulation. This self-observation suggested that a first step in question formulation is a sense of what would be the right kind of information.

A few minutes after we sat down to eat, and without much introduction, I asked my colleague how he went about learning from respondents. I was about to say that it might be good to talk about a specific incident, but he was already answering my question. However, he seemed to think I was interested not in the pedestrian issue of how he decided to ask this question or that one but rather in the deeper, more fundamental, issue of how he presented himself and his project to respondents. He said, "I show that I want to learn and that I'm worth teaching. That I know something, but not everything. So they can inform me, and I'll understand." ◀

This was not what I needed to know. But I felt too uncomfortable to say, "How, exactly, do you work out what you will ask? Tell me about your most recent interview and how you did it." In ordinary conversation it's rude to pin people down by asking for specific incidents. So I asked the rather general question "How do you get to the questions you actually ask?" After a moment my colleague said, "I try to get to know the person. It isn't like there's just one question I'm going to ask."

Again, not what I needed to know. Now I did ask, "How about the most recent interview you did?" And then, maybe because I wanted permission for my questioning, I added, "Could I ask about that? How you decided what you'd ask?"

Instead of answering my question, my colleague held it up for inspection. "That's a good question," he said. Then he thought about it. Then he told me a story: He had spent a lot of time with the head of a government agency, from whom he hoped to learn about the workings of the agency. He went to meetings with the man and regularly talked with him in the late afternoon. Finally, after one such talk, the official told him that he now understood what it was my colleague wanted to write about, that he could see that the story would be important and valuable. But he wasn't going to let my colleague do the story because it would be an embarrassment to him and his agency. He liked my colleague and wished him well but would see to it that no one in his agency or anywhere else in government would cooperate with him. "And," my colleague said to me, "that was the end of the enterprise."

I wondered if my colleague, in telling me this story, was also telling me that he didn't want to be interviewed and would like to wish me well and send me off. Still, here we were at lunch, with another three-quarters of an hour before it would be time to return to our offices. I thought I would try once more. I noticed that I gave extra effort to being agreeable. I relaxed my voice and tried to make the next question casual, as though my questioning were no big deal, just that I happened to be working on a book about interview studies and found the issue interesting. I said, "I remember your saying, a while ago, that you were going to be doing some interviewing. Can you think about a specific interview? Maybe the one that was most recent. How did you work out what you would ask? Did you work out your questions in advance?"

And now, for some reason, my colleague told me what I wanted to know. He said, yes, he could think of a specific interview. A week before

our lunch he had interviewed someone for a book on which he was working. The morning of his interview he had listed the ten to twelve questions he wanted answered. He was able to list them because he knew, in general, the kind of information that would give his account substance. The questions he listed were the ones important to the book that he thought his respondent could answer.

This incident seems to me to display the determinants of the questions we ask:

1. *The problem.* Here my problem was to find out how interviewers work out what questions they will ask.
2. *A sense of the breadth and density of the material we want to collect.* This is the substantive frame of the study plus a sense of the extent to which we want dense detail within it. We may want our materials to be extensive and definitive or neat and narrow or something else. I came to my meeting with my colleague with that almost kinesthetic sense of wanting dense description pretty much limited to the process of question formulation. I didn't intend to learn, for example, whether my colleague's interview practices had changed over the years. I was bringing a narrow substantive frame to my inquiry, but I wanted density within it.
3. *A repertoire of understandings based on previous work, study, awareness of the literature, and experience in living.* That I was myself someone who did interviewing as part of his work made me a more informed and alert inquirer. For one thing, I understood the interview situation well enough to recognize that deciding what to ask about can be a problem.
4. *Pilot research.* This was my first try at investigating how someone else formulated questions. Some of my fumbling might be chalked up to this being my first interview on this topic; I did not yet know what to ask and how to ask it. Had I done a second interview with another respondent, I'd have had a better idea of what to ask.
5. *A sense of what will give substance to the eventual report.* My colleague said he chose questions not only because he thought the respondent could answer them but, even more important, because he anticipated that the answers would give substance to his eventual report.

The last consideration is perhaps the most important: The material we collect is of value insofar as it will contribute to a good report. But what would constitute a good report?

A GOOD REPORT

A good report would inform its audience about matters of importance to them. It would tell them about experiences that affect them, provide them with explanations for things that have puzzled them, and give them maps to situations they may enter. It would contribute to their competence, their awareness, or their well-being.

To do this, the report must go beyond mere provision of information; it must have form, so that its information can be grasped as a whole. A telephone book can be consulted, but not grasped. A good report should make sense as an entity as well as in its items of information; its parts should fit together; it should have coherence.

Coherence happens when the separate pieces of the study fit together so well that we move naturally from one to the next. There is a story or a line of argument or an integrative framework such that each piece of information is the right next one to have as we develop an understanding of an inclusive entity. This inclusive entity may be a story, with a beginning and an end, like the history of an innovative program in an organization, or it may be a functioning unit, like a family. If our report has coherence, our readers will recognize that each piece of the study is important to learn about because it contributes to their understanding of the whole.

There are, in general, two approaches to achieving coherence: One, which uses passage through time to provide structure to the report, can be characterized as *diachronic*. The other, which makes no use of time and so must find some other basis for coherence, can be characterized as *synchronic*.

DIACHRONIC REPORTS

Diachronic reports begin at the beginning and proceed from there. They may describe, for example, how young people leave the vicissitudes of adolescence to enter early adulthood or how stepparents move from wary role-playing to genuine family feeling. They tell stories in which things happen as time goes on.

Diachronic reports may describe phases of development or change; for example, the phases of recovery from grief. They may consider the careers by which people achieve a particular end point; for example, arrival in a mental hospital or in an executive suite. Or they may focus on an event and its impacts beginning, say, with a tropical storm, noting the methods used by the weather bureau to predict its course, then moving to the experiences of sailors on ships caught in what has become a hurricane, then describing the impact of the storm's winds on coastal towns, and on to the cleanups and insurance claims and stories of lucky survival.

Diachronic reports sometimes provide explanation: why applicants chose this particular college or why a disaster occurred without forewarning. They can be responses to our desire to ask the retrospective question "How come that happened?" as well as the prospective question "What happened next?"

Diachronic story lines that attempt to provide explanations have been called "accounting schemes."¹ Suppose we want to explain why it is that some men achieve high business positions. We might include in our accounting scheme a description of the challenges the men confronted, their motivations to succeed, the resources they could call on, and how they finally won through. The story we would end up with would be one of men whose drive, intelligence, and luck brought them success.

Alternative accounting schemes can almost always be devised. To explain why some men achieve success in business we might instead describe how these men learned the interpersonal and technical skills that later aided their rise. The story we could end up with would be one of the familial and educational influences that led to success.

Accounting schemes are not theories about how reality works. They are, rather, sets of categories waiting to be filled by fact. In consequence, accounting schemes are not to be judged as true or false. They should rather be judged by the extent to which they are useful in organizing what we have been told into a story that makes sense and that gives proper weight to the issues that we have learned from our interviewing are important. If we should find in the course of our interviews that a particular accounting scheme doesn't work—the issues it suggests don't seem important whereas other issues seem to matter a lot—then we ought to jettison the scheme. It isn't useful enough.

SYNCHRONIC REPORTS

Synchronic reports attempt to achieve coherence without the armature of time. Generally, they do so by dividing whatever they are about into its significant sectors and moving in logical sequence from sector to sector. A report on the lives of successful men might begin with the sector of their work, since it provides a basis for their participation in the other sectors critical to their well-being. It might then describe the functioning of the men in the sector of marriage, and in their relationships with their children. It might then move outward to their relationships with other kin and to their friendships. In a similar way a report on an organization might describe the functioning of its various departments, perhaps beginning with its leadership, and moving then to the contributions, the internal problems, and the interdepartmental frictions of its operating units.

Contributing to the coherence of synchronic reports can be themes or patterns that underlie developments in every sector. A report might attempt to show, for example, that each member of a family expresses the same unvoiced concern. Or a report might assert a logical connection among an organization's sectors by arguing that one sector is basic to the others or that the sectors are linked by the flow of work.

Sometimes synchronic stories are based on a functional approach. The aim in a functional approach is to explain how something works.² The approach requires seeing whatever is to be described—a family, a school, a company—as having goals that it seeks to achieve, or functional requisites that must be met if it is to survive. The members of these entities can also be described as having personal goals, in which event the analyst may be able to describe both the intermeshing and the conflict of personal and communal goals.

One goal of any entity, in this way of seeing things, is self-maintenance: keeping on keeping on. Answering how self-maintenance is achieved could constitute one part of the story. If it is a family that is being described, this might mean giving attention to how funds are brought in and expended, how routines are maintained, and how the work of the family is done.

Every entity will have action goals, ends it wishes to achieve, as well as the goal of self-maintenance. An action goal for the family might be to launch its children into the larger society. A part of the story of a family might be a description of its efforts to achieve its action goals and its success or lack of success.

Some aspects of the entity could be taken as fixed for the period of the study. They might include, for example, the roles and relationships of members. The story could describe how these arrangements facilitate and impede goal attainment.

The risk in synchronic reports is that they will lack a strong conceptual framework, and so will appear to be merely a collection of observations. True, stories that show how a system works can be interesting and may be what a particular study requires, but it is easier, all else being equal, to hold a reader's attention with the sort of plot-unfolding story line that a diachronic approach makes possible.³

FROM SUBSTANTIVE FRAME TO INTERVIEW GUIDE

Suppose the aim of our study is to learn about and report on the visitation experience of separated or divorced parents. As we think about the story we want to tell in our report, we find that we give it a diachronic form. We anticipate beginning with the parental relationships maintained by respondents when they were married. We would then trace the changes in the parents' relationships with their children as the parents moved toward separation. We would describe what led the parents' marriage to dissolve and what arrangements the parents made then for their children's care. Finally, we would describe how the parents' custody and visitation arrangements evolved over time.

We might have considered other frameworks for the report. We might have considered using a diachronic approach in which we would contrast the histories of visitation arrangements that produce repeated appeals to the court with the histories of visitation arrangements that seem more satisfactory to the parents. Or we might have considered using a synchronic strategy of contrasting the parents' and children's experience in conflict-free visitation arrangements with their experience in conflict-laden visitation arrangements.

But let us suppose that we have decided that our report will move from the parents' early familial relationships to their relationships with their children after the ending of the parents' marriage. Let us further suppose that our interests, experience, hunches, or preliminary work make us want to include as one area within the project's substantive frame the level of parental investment in the children. One reason we might want to learn about parental investment is that we believe it can affect how the parents arrange custody and visitation.

To develop information about parental investment, we must first decide the narrower components of the area about which we can question respondents. We also have to keep in mind that parental investment and its possible expressions could include enough topics to fill an interview all by itself, and if we want our interview to deal with other matters as well, we will eventually have to limit ourselves to the aspects of parental investment most relevant to custody and visitation. But let us begin by being inclusive. We might arrive at a list of topics-to-learn-about like the following:

1. The parent's thoughts and feelings regarding the children when the children were born and on any later occasion when the parent became aware of emotional investment in the children.
2. The parent's present thoughts and feelings regarding the children, including fears, worries, hopes, gratifications.
3. The extent to which the parent's planning and activities are organized around the parent's relationships with the children. Are the children central or peripheral in the parent's planning and activities?
4. The extent to which the children play a role in the parent's self-image and self-presentation.
5. The parent's thoughts and feelings when separated from the children.

Each of the topics in the list suggests lines of inquiry that can be pursued with respondents. By listing these lines of inquiry we can construct a guide for the interviewer when exploring this area with a respondent. The listing of lines of inquiry might look like the following:

1. *Past thoughts and feelings.* What were R's [the respondent's] thoughts and feelings regarding the children when the children were born? [Possible questions: "Can you remember when your child was born? Could you walk me through what your thoughts were? What your feelings were? Did you say anything to anyone? To the other parent? Do you remember when you first held the child? How did that happen? What went through your mind? What were your feelings?"] Was there a point where R really felt like a parent? What happened to produce this?
2. *Current thoughts and feelings.* Ask about occasions when R is with the children. What goes through R's mind at such times? What are R's feelings? Ask about most recent time R had worries

about the children. What was the incident, what were the worries? Has R had fears in relation to the children? When? What did R fear? Has R had hopes? Ask about most recent time R was gratified by the children. What was the incident, what were the gratifications? Ask for times when R was dismayed or embarrassed by the children, when R was angry with them, when R felt burdened by them, when R was proud of them.

3. *The children and R's plans and activities.* To what extent is R's daily routine organized around the children's needs and activities? Ask about R's most recent workday and most recent weekend. How much are the children in R's mind while R is at work? At other times? Does R have any impulse to telephone? What happens in telephone calls? In the most recent telephone call, what was said? Does R make a special occasion of the children's birthdays, milestones at school? Ask about most recent such events.
4. *R's self-image and self-presentation.* Ask for incident when R has felt most like parent. Ask for most recent incident when R talked to friends or family about self as parent or about children. Was there such an incident in the last day or two? Is an incident of this sort frequent or infrequent?
5. *Separation from children.* Ask R about times of separation from the children. How did the separation occur? What were R's thoughts and feelings? Did R attempt to maintain contact by telephone? What were R's feelings on rejoining the children?

The study's substantive frame would, of course, require investigation of other areas as well as parental investment, including, at the least, the history of the parents' visitation arrangements, the parents' experience with the visitation arrangements, and the reactions of the children to the arrangements. For each of these other areas we would work out, just as we did here, the narrower issues and topics about which we might ask questions, and then work out lines of inquiry for the interview.

It might be that interviewing in the area of parental investment would fill all the time set aside for a single interview and, to learn about other areas we would either have to narrow what we ask about in the area of parental investment or schedule more than a single interview with respondents. If we were devote an entire interview with respondents to discussing parental investment, the preceding list of topics might serve as

an interview guide. If we intended to cover other areas as well in the interview, we could reduce the number of topics in our guide which deal with parental investment.

An *interview guide* is a listing of areas to be covered in the interview along with, for each area, a listing of topics or questions that together will suggest lines of inquiry. The guide functions for the interviewer as a prompter might for an actor. If the interviewer is fully in control of the interview topics, the guide itself can remain unused. But if the interviewer begins to be uncertain about what questions might come next, or whether an area or a topic has been skipped, the guide is there to be consulted. The interview guide may also be consulted at the very end of an interview as a last check that everything has been asked.

One of the functions pilot interviews can perform is field testing a draft of the interview guide. A single pilot interview can suggest where a guide is overweighted or redundant and where it is skimpy, but three or four pilot interviews might be the minimum for safety. Even with such testing, the guide is likely to undergo modification as more is learned through interviewing about the area of the study.

The best guides list topics or lines for inquiry so they can be grasped at a glance, with just enough detail to make evident what is wanted. The guide may suggest specific questions to start discussion in important areas, but that isn't necessary. Where the interviewer is thoroughly familiar with the study's aims, guides can be sketchy, listing only topic headings. Where interviewers cannot make independent judgments regarding how best to direct their inquiry, as when the interviewers are not part of the investigative team, the interview guide must be developed in more detail. The amount of detail in the example above might be about right for an interview conducted by someone not fully aware of the study's aims. But still more detailed and dense guides seem to me difficult to use in an interview setting. It wouldn't do for an interviewer to have to say to a respondent, "Would you wait a moment while I read again what I'm supposed to ask?"⁴

When the guide is more fully detailed, interviewers may have to be cautioned not to shift from qualitative interviewing to survey-style interviewing in order to cover everything. Focusing closely on the guide, at the cost of attention to the respondent and the flow of the interview, is always a mistake. Some of my worst interviews have been produced by a conscientious attempt to cover the topics in a guide. Permitting the respondent to talk about what the respondent wants to talk about, so long as it

is anywhere near the topic of the study, will always produce better data than plodding adherence to the guide. Even though the interviewer should try to cover the guide, the interviewer should be prepared to concentrate attention on matters on which the respondent is especially able to report, even at the cost of skimping on other matters.

Years ago, before tape recorders, when I was taking interviews in shorthand, the interview guide would be the last page of my shorthand book. Now it is a page or two on a clipboard. Sometimes, if I know an area well or if the interview is entirely exploratory, I do without a written interview guide, although I have one pretty well worked out in my mind. But I like to have a written guide available to me, even if I do not use it in the interview. It is there to provide preparation for the interview, before the interview begins, and it can be a checklist to be used at the end of an interview to ensure that nothing has been missed.

Here is a guide intended to direct the first of three interviews with occupationally successful men. It provides the basis for discussing the meaning of work and the nature of work stress in the men's lives.⁵

1. A DAY AT WORK

- a. Ask R [the respondent] to walk you through a day at work—the previous day, if possible. When did R get in? What happened then? When did R leave? What thoughts on leaving? Did R take work home?
- b. Develop indications of emotional investment, tension, stress, and distress.

2. TASKS AT WORK

- a. Where is R in the work flow system? How does R's work come to him—who brings it or assigns it, and how? How does what R does involve him with others?
- b. Describe R's relationships with superiors, peers, subordinates, and clients—as they are typically, as they are at their best, and as they are at their worst.

3. HOW R CAME TO THIS WORK

- a. What led R to his current line of work? (We don't need a detailed work history; a summary is good enough.)
- b. Find out how R came to his current job and what his feelings about his current job are.

4. GRATIFICATIONS AND BURDENS OF WORK

- a. What is R going for in his work? Obtain incidents in which R's work was gratifying to him. What were the gratifications? If not noted, ask about challenge, achievements, contributions.
- b. What does R have in mind as he does his work? Instances of "flow"? Ask, if appropriate, "Can you think of a time when you lost yourself in your work?"
- c. Obtain incidents in which R was unhappy at work and when work produced distress.
- d. Obtain incidents of stress. How did these incidents develop? What was their outcome?

5. RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

- a. How does R see his standing at work? How does he come to know it?
- b. Obtain incidents in which R's work was responded to by others. If not volunteered, ask about performance reviews, salary and bonuses, verbal recognition.

This interview guide generally led to interviews of 2 hours or a bit less. Usually between four to six areas can be covered adequately in a 2-hour interview. If we want to cover more areas—or if one or more of the areas requires extensive discussion—we would probably do best to anticipate having more than a single interview session.

QUANTITATIVE ITEMS

Often, as I noted in chapter 1, there is good reason for including quantitative items in qualitative interviews. Quantitative items can help anchor a qualitative discussion. Without quantitative information we might have to make imprecise statements like "Many of our respondents felt their present circumstances to be undesirable." With quantitative material we instead can say, "Asked to rate their present circumstances on a scale going from the best time in their lives to the worst, over 30% of respondents rated their present circumstances in the lower third of the scale." The second is by far the stronger statement.

Furthermore, quantitative items—or, at any rate, items asked of everyone—make it easy to segment the population of respondents, for example,

into those 40 and younger and those over 40, or into those who say their marriages are very good and those who say they are only good or fair. Quantitative items also can be a basis for further qualitative exploration. In the study of occupationally successful men I found that standardized questions about stress symptoms and depression symptoms provided a useful starting point for learning about times of stress and depression. At the end of the third interview we asked the men we were interviewing to respond to our symptom list. If in response to the item "Has there been a time in the last year when you felt low or depressed?" someone answered yes, the interviewer could then ask what was happening at the time. Important information often emerged.

I don't like beginning qualitative interviewing by asking for census data ("What was your age at your last birthday?" and "Would you say you work at paid employment full-time, part-time, or not at all?"). It sets the wrong tone. Questions of this sort suggest that you want "just the facts, ma'am." Once such an understanding is established, it becomes that much more difficult to establish that you want a full and detailed narrative account. But when an interview is over, it doesn't hurt to ask for whatever census data you think may prove useful. It is then natural to say, "Could I ask a few more questions, about your age and the like?"

STANDARD GUIDES AND TAILORED GUIDES

A standard interview guide should do for interviews with respondents who are representative of a population. While each respondent may elaborate part of the interview in a way no other respondent does, this need not be anticipated in the guide. People who are informants on some part of an event, on the other hand, must be interviewed on what they know that no one else does. If you are interviewing a panel of informants, you will probably have to draft a new guide, with the particular respondent in mind, for each interview. And the interviewer should be prepared to drop the guide entirely if the interview takes an unexpected direction.

EARLY INTERVIEWS AS LEARNING EXPERIENCES

When we try to imagine developments in a situation we don't know first-hand (such as what it is like to be a member of a submarine crew), we must adapt images from experiences we have had. We construct our initial understandings from the heroes, villains, and other characters who are

members of our internal repertory company; the places we have been ourselves or have read about or have seen on television; and the plot developments our lives have taught us to anticipate. Our construction is never exactly right. When we actually interview someone in the situation, we inevitably discover that we didn't understand fully, and perhaps not at all.

In virtually every new study I do I am thrilled by the surprise of things turning out to be different from my expectations and yet just the way they should be. This can be the case even when I have myself experienced the situation, because I find that others have experienced it differently in ways I could not guess. Interviewing is our only defense against mistaken expectations. Anyone entering a new conceptual area should make every effort to obtain, early in the study, images and ideas based on experience rather than surmise. As soon as possible, the investigator should conduct pilot interviews.

Just because initial expectations are so likely to be inaccurate, interview guides for pilot interviews can be largely misdirected. Areas asked about can turn out to be dull and unproductive while areas not included in the guide turn out to be critical. The interviewer, especially in the first pilot interview, may experience bad patches, where it is hard to make connection with the respondent and hard to know how to proceed. However, after only a first or second interview, the way things are begins to fall into place. Eventually, it will be obvious what is important; initially, it rarely is.

One implication of these observations is that pilot interviews are highly desirable. Another is that even when interviewing for the study proper starts, interview guides should be seen as provisional and likely to change as more is learned. In a study of a representative sample, where the same guide is to be used with the entire sample, the guide may not stabilize until the fourth or fifth pilot interview. Even then the guide may undergo further modification as the study develops. In my study of well-functioning men it wasn't until we were halfway into our interviewing that I realized we weren't learning nearly enough about marital quarrels and other problems of personal life.

Just as interview guides take a while to stabilize, so too can research aims. Every funding agency requires that investigators know what they are after and be able to list the aims of the study in their proposals. Sometimes there are indeed specific questions the investigator hopes to answer. Yet it is often the case that the investigator knows only that the area of study is attractive, possibly because it is important and yet murky,

possessed of mysteries. It is as though the area dares the investigator to discover what is going on. You couldn't very well write *that* into a research proposal.

When the investigator's reason for undertaking a study is not much more than a belief that a situation is intriguing and worth studying, one of the problems of the research enterprise will be to find the research problem that justifies the research. Findings and problem may emerge together. An investigator's initial aim in a qualitative interview study of blue-collar marriages might be simply to know more about blue-collar marriages. Eventually, the investigator might be able to define the study's aim as learning what happens in situations where the husband's ability to provide an income, and in this way to be a reliable husband and father, is always in question. There must be some aim for the study to begin, but sometimes it is only toward the end of a study that its focus becomes well defined.⁶

TO TAPE OR NOT TO TAPE

Investigators' policies regarding the use of tape recorders vary enormously. At one extreme is the investigator whose books are compilations of interview excerpts, who brings two tape recorders to an interview, each with its lapel mike, clips each mike on the respondent's shirt front, and sets both machines going. At the other extreme are investigators who treat a tape recorder as an intruder in the interview.

Tape recorders remind people that there will be a record of what they say. Even when people seem to have stopped attending to the tape recorder they can feel constrained by its presence. Most experienced qualitative interviewers have had a respondent who, upon using a word that is obscene or vulgar, turned to the tape recorder to apologize to the transcriber. And almost every qualitative interviewer has had a respondent who hesitated before sharing a confidence and then said something like "Would you mind turning off the tape recorder, because there is something I want to tell you I don't want to have on the tape?"

And what do you do with the tapes when you've got them? They take hours to transcribe, and then you find that the important material is hidden in the paragraphs and pages of verbiage. Nor do you really need it all. Some first-rate investigators insist that they can remember enough after an interview to write an adequate report.⁷ And one investigator I know believes that there is a useful discipline in taking notes. A tape

recorder, she believes, encourages you to let your mind wander because you know the recorder will capture what the respondent is saying; note taking requires you to focus.

My experience is different. I find that using a tape recorder makes it easier for me to attend to the respondent than when I take notes, just because I don't have to worry about getting down all the respondent's words. (To be sure, I am sometimes instead distracted by worry that the recorder has failed.)

But most important to people who tape-record is that notes never capture exactly what was said. Note taking tends to simplify and flatten respondents' speech patterns. The conversational spacers ("You know what I mean?") are dropped in note taking; so are respondents' false starts and stray thoughts and parenthetical remarks. The vividness of speech disappears.

Content is likely to be lost as well. While I have a fairly good shorthand for a nonstenographer, when I try to take verbatim notes I regularly omit the unimportant and much of the parenthetical ("I shouldn't be telling you this, but . . ."). Often, I am also forced to omit detail. Suppose a retiree is describing a morning routine: "I get up earlier than my wife and go down to start breakfast and then put it on a tray and bring it upstairs. And we just sit in bed talking and having breakfast and reading the paper and my wife will start the crossword . . ." If this is given to me rapidly and I am taking notes, I will get down the very first words but will surely miss a good part of what follows. Indeed, if a respondent is speaking rapidly, I will often have to skip material to keep up.

I now regularly tape-record.⁸ I do this because I am accustomed to working from verbatim transcripts and value the fidelity of the transcripts of tape-recorded material. I also value being spared the drudgery of transcribing shorthand notes. I began doing qualitative interviews before portable tape recorders were in general use, and I have done more than my share of transcribing shorthand notes into a typewriter or desk tape recorder. It is a time-consuming and wearing job. Although my shorthand has improved, I wouldn't want to have to do all that transcription again.

Whether to tape-record or not depends on what you intend doing with the interview material. If you want verbatim transcript, because you intend to quote respondents' comments in your report, then you should make every effort to use a tape recorder. You will very likely later edit what the respondent said, but you will have control of the editing. Note taking enmeshes editing and recording and leaves you with no way to

know what changes you have made in the respondent's actual comments.

You should also consider tape recording if you want not so much to learn about events as to capture how a respondent saw them or reacted to them. Then the nuances and complexities of speech that are likely to be missed in note taking may be important for you. And certainly if you want a record of what was said because your version may some day be questioned, you would do well to use a tape recorder.

But if all you want are facts and you don't care about phrasings, you may be better off with notes. And if a tape recorder would be intrusive, then of course you should take notes and let the tape recorder go. For example, a study of how small entrepreneurs organize their business, where there is no anticipation of writing a report using quotations and where the respondents might be put off by a tape recorder, would be better done from notes.

Tape recorders can be, for some people in some circumstances, deterrents to candor. If your study requires you to learn things about people that could discredit them—let alone get them indicted—forget about using a tape recorder. Indeed, if you want to learn about actionable mistakes at work (such as the kinds of errors by physicians that would make them vulnerable to malpractice suits), even taking notes can put respondents off. You might do best, should you enter such an area of study, to slow your note taking and instead try to remember what you're being told—and then write down as much of it as you can immediately after leaving the interview.⁹

TRANSCRIPTION

If you do tape-record, you must decide how much you will transcribe. Only as much as you need, of course, but how much is that? And how can you know whether you will need something until you see it?

One approach is to transcribe everything and use the transcripts as a set of materials to be mined, accepting that a good deal will be dross. This approach puts the analyst's convenience before the time and money required for the transcription, and in an ambitious, well-funded study it is the way to go.

If a study's budget is limited, consideration might be given to listening to a tape once, transcribing only what seems likely to be useful and paraphrasing the rest or noting something like "From minute 24 through 29 discussion of relationship with boss." Another approach is to take

notes on what is contained on the tape, never transcribing at all except for quotations to be used in the report. Still another approach is to take notes during the interview even though it is also being tape-recorded. The notes, when typed, can provide an index to the tape, and transcription can be done as needed.

Not long ago I participated in a study whose budget was too tight to fund the costs of transcription of interviews, let alone the travel costs of face-to-face interviews with respondents spread across the country. The aim of the study was to diagnose the source of a malaise within a national organization and to prescribe its remedy. I conducted taped telephone interviews with half a dozen organization members. I took sketchy notes on the interviews but did not transcribe any of the tapes. While writing my part of the report I listened to a couple of the tapes to remind myself of their contents and also drew from them a few telling quotations. Mostly, I relied on what I had learned while conducting the interviews and could consult my notes to be reminded of the remainder.

As in so much else in qualitative interview studies, there is no single right way. Everything depends on what is to be accomplished, the level of resources, and the nature of constraints.

HOW LONG SHOULD AN INTERVIEW LAST?

Most survey studies try to keep interviews to an hour or less. But qualitative interviews can run as long as 8 hours—with breaks, of course. If the interview is easy and sustaining, the respondent interested and cooperative, and the material instructive, and if there are no time constraints, a reasonable expectation is that the interview will go for an hour and a half or 2 hours. I do not often observe respondents getting tired or restless at the 2-hour point unless something has gone wrong in the interview. I may be tired, but respondents seem more often to be enlivened.

If there is tension in the interview because the respondent is ambivalent about being interviewed, then holding the interview to an hour might be right. If you don't know what to anticipate, you might ask respondents to plan on an hour and a half, with the option of ending earlier or going on for a bit. Half an hour seems about the minimum time for an interview. Although any interchange, no matter how brief, can produce an interesting observation, I find it difficult to develop a coherent account in an interview of under half an hour.

Once in a while a respondent seems willing to go on longer than I am.

I believe it is good policy to support the fullest report a respondent can give and to continue an interview as long as it is productive. Nevertheless, interviewing can be wearing, and I can only do it for so long. When I become too tired to be fully in touch with what I am being told and it is possible for me to schedule another interview, I call a halt and make another appointment. But if the respondent lives far from me, and I'm not up for another two-hour drive out and two-hour drive back, or if there is no possibility of rescheduling, I'll stay with an interview as long as there is material to cover.

HOW MANY INTERVIEWS WITH THE SAME RESPONDENT?

It is almost always desirable, if time and costs permit, to interview respondents more than once. You have to keep your frame pretty narrow if you plan to cover it all in a single sitting. Furthermore, a first meeting is partly about establishing the research partnership. Interviewer and respondent get to know each other, get a sense of the rhythm of interchange, and establish the outlines of the respondent's story. When they meet again they know each other better. Also, in the intervening time the respondent may have begun thinking about the areas discussed, and memories may have surfaced. Or the respondent may have been made more sensitive to the issues of the interview and may therefore have newly noted incidents worth reporting.

With increasing contact and increasing confidence in the research procedure respondents are likely to be more willing to report fully. In the study of occupationally successful men it was only in a fourth interview that a respondent talked about his wife's alcoholism. In a study of women who were single parents, where we interviewed a small sample every 2 weeks for about 5 months, we normally did not learn about the emotional ups and downs in relationships with boyfriends until the fifth or sixth interview.

Only infrequently does the cost of a second interview with a respondent outweigh its usefulness. Third interviews are generally also worth doing. Of importance here is the number of areas to be covered in the interviewing. Fourth and fifth interviews are likely to produce a sense of diminishing returns, except when they provide information on continuing stories in respondents' lives. It is not that nothing at all is learned from fourth or subsequent interviews; respondents can always report on new

events or new aspects of already described events. The question is whether the investigator might not gain more by interviewing additional respondents.

Sometimes it is desirable to interview a few respondents many times but most respondents only a few times. That can provide the study with both extensive case reports and a reasonable sample size.

DO YOU PAY RESPONDENTS?

Some funded studies now pay respondents for their time. A New York City study of drug users, for example, paid respondents twenty-five dollars plus two subway tokens for completed interviews. My impression is that with very low income respondents the opportunity for payment can be an important incentive for participating in a study.

In a study with middle-income respondents we acknowledged the contribution respondents made to the study by giving them a gift certificate to a restaurant after our first interview. Most were pleased and it may have aided rapport when we returned for further interviews, but I doubt that it was necessary for us to have done this.

My guess is that in most studies the reward for a respondent is the interview itself and the contribution he or she can make to the study. Payment doesn't seem to make a difference in a respondent's willingness to participate. If the interview goes well, payment is largely irrelevant to the respondent's experience, except for those who truly need the money; if it doesn't go well, payment won't make the experience better. Still, a gift to acknowledge a respondent's contribution is likely to be appreciated.

WHERE DO YOU HOLD THE INTERVIEW?

An argument can be made for interviewing people in the investigator's office: if you interview people in their home you're not going to hear much that is inconsistent with their commitment to their home roles and if you interview people in their offices they are less likely to discuss problems with coworkers. Since most people seem to prefer your coming to them, most of my interviewing has been in respondents' homes. Some investigators think that's fine; they can observe the setting within which the respondent lives, may meet members of the respondent's family, and may observe the respondent in interaction with them.

On the rarest of occasions the safety of interviewers may come into question. Interviewing respondents within their homes can pose a slight but nevertheless real risk, perhaps especially for women. I have told people who have interviewed for me to trust their intuitions, and to end the interview if they feel uneasy. Once a woman who was interviewing for me did not want to return for a second interview with a male respondent. She had no special reason; she just hadn't felt comfortable with him. That feeling of discomfort was enough to go on. She may have been responding to minimal cues she was not able to identify, or she may have developed a sense of the respondent that told her the situation was dangerous. We found a male interviewer to take over for her.

With few exceptions, however, respondents who have agreed to be interviewed in their homes will go to some effort to be hospitable. Indeed, by far the most common response to a stranger within one's home is friendly interest and desire to be of help.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Reasons of economy may make it seem desirable to interview by telephone. I have conducted many telephone interviews and regularly find that useful information can be developed. It helps for me to have met the respondent or at least to be able to identify myself with a project the respondent recognizes, so that the respondent knows I am who I purport to be. But even with my identity established, I don't feel as much in touch with the respondent in a telephone interview as I do in a face-to-face interview. My shallower connection to the respondent generally produces a shorter interview. In one study in which I did both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews, the face-to-face interviews ran an hour and a half or more, while the telephone interviews ran about 45 minutes, and sometimes less.

A research project that compared telephone and face-to-face interviewing found that telephone respondents broke off contact more quickly, were both more acquiescent and more evasive, and were more cautious about self-revelation.¹⁰ But a team that has done a great deal of telephone interviewing describes it as "the next best thing to being there."¹¹ This strikes me as right: it's better to be there, but telephone interviews are the next best thing.

CHAPTER 4

INTERVIEWING

GETTING STARTED

You have called the respondent to confirm that you are expected. You have checked your tape recorder. You have put your interview guide, fastened onto a clipboard, in your briefcase, first glancing at it to remind yourself of the interview's aims and content. You get in your car, a street map beside you. You find the respondent's home, park, ring the doorbell. The respondent comes to the door. You introduce yourself and are directed to a place to sit.

Your first concern should be to establish a good interviewing partnership. The way you act and what you say should communicate that you expect to work with the respondent to produce the interview. For example, as you bring out your tape recorder, you might ask, "Is using the tape recorder okay?" The point isn't the particular remark but, rather, the assumption of a collaborative relationship.

I bring two signed copies of a consent form to interviews. I give both to the respondent and say, "These are two copies of our consent form. Could you read one of them, and if it is all right would you sign it and give it to me and then hang on to the other?" Then I ask something like "Is there anything about the study you would like me to tell you before we begin?" Sometimes respondents want to know how they happened to be contacted. I then describe the sampling procedure. I almost always also say something about the general goal of the study, such as "We're trying

to learn about the experience of retirement and so are talking to people who know about it because they're doing it." I usually name the study's sponsor or give my academic affiliation to provide additional evidence that the study is legitimate.

When I can, I begin the interview where the respondent seems already to be. In a study of retirement, if a respondent mentioned, before I turned on the tape recorder, "I'm not actually retired; I've got a couple more weeks to go on the job," I might ask, after starting the tape recorder, "What's it like, being two weeks before the end of the job? Is that something you think about?" I might then go on to ask how the issue of retirement had arisen while the respondent was on the job, how other people had indicated that they were aware that the respondent was leaving, and how the respondent's job had changed since he scheduled a retirement date. If there is no evident place to start, I might begin by asking how the respondent happened to enter the situation about which I want to learn. "I would like to ask what your experience has been in retirement, maybe starting with how you happened to retire when you did."

In a pilot study of people who are HIV positive I generally started with how it happened that respondents got tested rather than how it happened that they became HIV positive, since their experience as people who were HIV positive actually began with the testing, not with the infection. Here is the start of my interview with one HIV-positive respondent:

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: The idea of the study is to find out what happens to people as a result of their being tested and finding out that they are positive. What effects, if any, does that have on how they think, how they see the world, what they do. It's the kind of information that nobody has except the guy who's going through it. Nobody else has it.

RESPONDENT: Right.

I: I'm a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, downtown.

COMMENTS

The setting is a small office in a testing station. The respondent has been told by his counselor that a study is being done and he has said he would participate. I want to establish a research partnership with the respondent.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

And what I'm doing is talking to people who are in your situation, because you know what is going on and nobody else does, but it is important for other people to understand as well as they can. And so I'm going to ask you to work with me to tell your story. And that's it. That's what I'm doing.

R: Tell you what happened, huh?

I: Exactly.

R: Sure. That's a good idea. And it's about time.

I: Yeah. It's amazing, with all the AIDS research, this hasn't been done. Anyway, here is a consent form for you to read. It describes the study, and if it's okay with you, you sign one copy and let me have it, and keep the other.

R: Oh, yeah. I have no problem. So, will it be used in, like, kind of segments, something where it's like people will be able to listen to us? Or is it strictly for doctors and psychologists?

I: Nobody will be listening to the tapes except for people on the project.

R: It doesn't matter to me.

I: What we'll do is, we'll transcribe it. We'll be reading the transcripts of your interview and the

COMMENTS

Now I explain what my role will be as interviewer and propose to the respondent that his role will be to provide information about "what is going on" in his life, to tell his story.

The respondent indicates that, yes, this makes sense to him.

Here I try to get in tune with the respondent by extending his comment "And it's about time." I then ask the respondent to read and sign the consent form.

This suggests to me that the respondent may feel threatened by the form. "I have no problem" may mean that the respondent first felt discomfort, then rejected it. This, plus the question about who will listen to the tapes, makes me think that reassurance might be called for.

My guess is that confidentiality might be an issue.

The respondent says confidentiality is not an issue.

Just to be on the safe side, and to forestall the respondent's later feeling uncomfortable about what

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

transcripts of interviews with other people we interview and we'll compare them and summarize them and say this is what goes on. We might quote people, but if we do we will drop out identifying information.

he's bought into, I go into detail about how his tapes will be used.

R: Well, I don't care. I mean, if you do quote me and you have to use my name, it may be more effective, by using my name and saying what it is. But that's neither here nor there.

Again the respondent says he doesn't care. Looking back, I think he wanted his story told.

I: It's just our practice that we don't do it.

Maybe I should have gone on to the interview at this point instead of staying with this, but I felt more had to be said about the ground rules.

R: Yeah. I just figured that one or the other, it doesn't bother me.

Respondent is holding his ground.

I: Okay.

"I accept your position."

R: Really, it doesn't. It has no effect for me, for some reason. Denial or something.

This could be interpreted as saying, "I'm going to be vulnerable to exposure but I don't care, although maybe I should."

I: Also, if it is possible, it would be good if we could talk again, maybe next week or two weeks from now.

I direct the respondent's attention to the interview at hand and its continuation.

R: Yeah, sure.

"Okay. I'm ready for the interview now."

I: I guess I'd like to start by asking how you happen to be here. Could you just walk me through how you happened to get tested?

And so we start. The phrase, "Could you just walk me through . . ." suggests the level of detail I would like the respondent to provide.

In this excerpt I made explicit the terms of the interviewing relationship. After introducing the study and myself, I said, "What I'm doing is talking to people who are in your situation, because you know what is going on and nobody else does. . . . So I'm going to ask you to work with me to tell your story." Often, I don't describe in such detail the interviewing relationship I hope to establish, because it seems to me already pretty much understood. In this case the respondent must have struck me as uncertain of what would be expected of him.

THE INTERVIEWING RELATIONSHIP

The interviewing relationship is a research partnership between the interviewer and the respondent. The terms of this research partnership are ordinarily implicit, but if I were drafting a contract between myself and a respondent, I would include the following clauses:

1. The interviewer and the respondent will work together to produce information useful to the research project.
2. The interviewer will define the areas for exploration and will monitor the quality of the material. The respondent will provide observations, external and internal, accepting the interviewer's guidance regarding topics and the kind of report that is needed.
3. The interviewer will not ask questions out of idle curiosity. On the other hand, the interviewer will be a privileged inquirer in the sense that the interviewer may ask for information the respondent would not make generally available, maybe would not tell anyone else at all.
4. The interviewer will respect the respondent's integrity. This means that the interviewer will not question the respondent's appraisals, choices, motives, right to observations, or personal worth.
5. The interviewer will ensure, both during the interview and afterward, that the respondent will not be damaged or disadvantaged because of the respondent's participation in the interview. In particular, the interviewer will treat the respondent's participation and communications as confidential information.

There are other ways, besides the research partnership, of defining the interviewing relationship. Sometimes interviewers present themselves as the means by which the respondent can tell his story: "Through me you

can make your story known." This might be the approach of someone doing life history studies or of a reporter in an interview with the famous or the notorious.

It is also possible for the interviewer to take the role of the respectful student, awaiting instruction. One woman, an excellent interviewer, said she tried to make the government officials she interviewed feel that she was ready to admire their knowledge and authority and was, indeed, already awed to be in the presence of someone so important. She believed that disguising how much she knew and how perceptive and skeptical she was disarmed her respondents.

Some interviewers are willing to act as the respondents' antagonists. If they suspect the respondent is holding back information, they are ready to confront the respondent: "You say you haven't ever used drugs. But you hung out with drug users. There must have been a time when you experimented." Interviews in police stations, of course, take on this quality, as do some employment interviews. Journalists sometimes read up on respondents, the better to confound the respondents' efforts to dissemble.

In my experience the research partnership definition of the interviewing relationship works best. It is the most easily sustainable, both for the interviewer and the respondent. And it is consistent with the reasons for having research interviews.

SOME INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES

Being a good interviewer requires knowing what kind of information the study needs and being able to help the respondent provide it. Here are some guidelines.

WHAT IS IT YOU WANT TO OBTAIN IN THE INTERVIEW?

In the great majority of research interviews you will want the respondent to provide concrete descriptions of something he or she has witnessed. This includes both scenes and events external to the respondent and the respondent's own thoughts and feelings. A task in almost every interview is to communicate to respondents that this is what is needed. Here is an interview excerpt that suggests the kind of information that is wanted and how it can be obtained. It is from an interview with a divorced father who was involved in a dispute with his former wife over his times of visitation. I conducted the interview as part of a study of the usefulness of a program for helping parents deal with visitation problems.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

RESPONDENT: It really appalls me that they [in the court] think that I'm some . . . some, I'm some symbol of money. That is the only reason that I even go to court and the court has any use for me is because I am a symbol of money. That is the only reason. They don't . . . they could care less if I saw my son. Okay? It's a different story if the mother wasn't seeing him. But they could care less if I didn't see him. They could care less if I didn't have a roof over my head. They could care less that I wouldn't be able to take my son because I don't have any money to feed him when I have him because I pay all the money out. They don't care about that.

INTERVIEWER: Could you walk me through the last time you went to court, just what happened?

R: The last time I went to court was just before I went to see the counselor. Basically, I went down to go over custody and payments. Now think about it. I got to pay rent. I live in an apartment. I got to pay rent. I got to put food on the table, you know. I got to make payments on the car. I make three hundred dollars a week, gross. Take out my taxes, I make two hundred and forty-seven dollars.

COMMENTS

This response, a description of the courts as the respondent views them, is generalized. That it is so emotional may obscure the fact that it summarizes the respondent's experience rather than presents any specific experience. Note the respondent's use of "they" when he insists that "they" don't care about his relationship with his son, only about obtaining money from him for his wife. Later, when the respondent describes a specific incident, he will talk about specific people.

This is a way of asking for the concrete incident that led to the generalized emotional statement. The phrase "walk me through" is intended to communicate the level of concreteness wanted. "The last time" is intended to specify a particular incident.

The respondent provides a time reference for his last time in court and a reason for having gone there but then returns to his outrage.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

They want seventy dollars. Who pays for my rent?

I: Okay. When you came to court, were you waiting around before you . . .

R: Oh yeah, wait around for hours, hours.

I: Where were you waiting?

R: You wait downstairs in a lobby, waiting to be called. And then you go through this shenanigans.

I: What happens while you're waiting to be called?

R: You sit. You sit. You sit. You don't even get called. I had the lawyer go stand in line. You don't even see a judge. You see some person who shuffles a million people around a day. And then you sit down with a mediator. He's my mediator. He's not my mediator. He's telling me what I'm supposed to do like he's a judge. He's telling me, "This is what you have to do."

I: Was your wife with you when you were seeing the mediator?

R: Oh yeah.

COMMENTS

I bring the respondent back to the court appearance, to what is likely to have been its beginning—waiting around.

I ask for specifics to keep the respondent in the incident.

I'm asking for the concrete details of the incident. Notice that I ask about what happens in the present tense. This is an error, because it encourages a generalized response. (I say more about this later in this chapter.)

The response is generalized, quite possibly because of the present-tense question.

I now supply a specific detail to bring the respondent back to the incident.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: So it's the three of you—you, your wife . . .

R: Me, the lawyer—I might just as well have left the lawyer at home. I mean, I might as well have left him at home. I mean, I mean, the lawyer couldn't do anything.

I: So what happened?

R: What happened is, you know, it's like this. I want three weeks. I want three weeks vacation with my son. Not all at once. Three weeks.

I: So did you say that or . . .

R: I mean, what's this guy? What's wrong with three weeks? What's the problem with three weeks? One week, three times a year. Spring, winter, and summer. You know, what's the big deal? I don't see any problem with that. Oh, no. The mediator says, "Two weeks." I say, "No, I want three weeks." I mean, I don't know what the problem is. What's wrong with three weeks?

I: So what did he say then?

R: He says, "Well, I'm only giving you two weeks and come back in a year and a half and we'll negotiate again." What do you mean, come back? I'm not coming back to this court again. Negotiate? What are we negotiating? This is my son. It's not a negotiating thing.

COMMENTS

Again, requiring the specific.

The respondent is now in the incident. It only remains to ask about it.

Which I now do.

I can't tell if the respondent asked for this or if it was only in his mind.

For clarification.

Apparently, the respondent asked and was refused. And then the respondent argued.

I ask the respondent to continue reporting on the level of what actually happened.

The respondent is now providing a description of the incident, both what was happening in the event and what was happening internally. This is the level of concreteness needed for the study. Note how it develops further useful detail.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Did your lawyer say anything?

R: My lawyer. My lawyer's like . . . he says, "Well, why can't we have the three weeks?" But, you know, it is the mother. I'm like, "Well, I'm the father. Without me there wouldn't be a child." Well, I'm like, well . . . nothing. Nothing. And I say, "I love my son and I love seeing my son and I love spending as much time as I want with my son. And I don't like you telling me when I can spend time with him."

I: What did he say when you said that?

R: "Well, that's the way it is."

I: What were you thinking . . .

R: What am I thinking? I want to kill the guy. I want to kill her. You know, 'cause she's sitting there smiling and smirking. I mean, I tell you, I tell you, I'm a very rational person. But when I left that day, I tell you, and I watched the news, right? And I see these guys and I'm sitting there going, "There's something going on behind the scene. You're not seeing the whole picture."

I: What do you mean by "these guys"?

R: These people that are on TV and they're killing their wives. I

COMMENTS

This is an instructive account of the frustrations of the noncustodial father and the feelings of helpless rage that develop. Note the respondent's anger at being told when he can see his son by someone who doesn't know him or his son.

Again phrasing the question on the level of the concrete event.

The respondent says that he was essentially just turned away by the mediator, not attended to.

Asking for the internal experience.

A statement of the level of rage the experience induced. Notice the shift into the present tense. Here it is not generalized; instead, it describes a past incident as though it were occurring now.

The respondent is alluding to thoughts. I ask him to develop them further.

This is a description of murderous rage. The respondent self-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

mean, nothing should ever be drawn that far. All right, beating your wife—I never did any beating. I never had any restraining order. Because I'm—you know. But I tell you, if I was that type of person, the way I felt when I got out of there, I tell you, I could have knocked her off. 'Cause I was pissed.

COMMENTS

control is good enough so that he will not harm the mediator or his ex-wife. But this is the feeling that underlay the diatribe with which this excerpt began.

This excerpt began with a generalized statement of the court experience of a noncustodial father. I wanted the respondent to move from this to as close to an observer's report as he could provide of his experiences, internal as well as external. Only that sort of concrete description of just what happened could constitute interpretable data regarding the experiences of noncustodial fathers in court.

Generalized descriptions can be good enough if they are about an issue of peripheral importance to the study. A respondent's statement that "I go to work about nine in the morning" would be acceptable if the study isn't especially concerned about the respondents' use of time. But if respondents' use of time is important to the study, the interviewer should attempt to obtain a concrete description of what happened the morning of the day preceding the interview.

We obtain descriptions of specific incidents by asking respondents to particularize. In the foregoing excerpt I asked, "Could you walk me through the last time you went to court, just what happened?" Other questions that might also have served to elicit a concrete description include: "Could you tell me about a time that displays that at its clearest?"; "Is there a specific incident you can think of that would make clear what you have in mind?"; and "Could you tell me what happened, starting from the beginning?"

It can sometimes seem to an interviewer to be an untrustworthy sampling of respondent behavior to ask only about the last time an incident occurred. To check this, it might be useful for the interviewer to ask if that occurrence was very different from previous occurrences and, if it was, to ask for the occurrence that preceded the most recent one as well. Often, however, the discussion of the most recent occurrence will produce so

much instructive particularity that it will be of secondary importance whether it is a typical event or not.

TENSE AND SPECIFICITY IN THE INTERVIEW

It is useful to bear in mind that reports of actual events are ordinarily made in the past tense: "I did . . .," "He said . . .," and so on. However, respondents may also make reports of actual events in the present tense to give their accounts a sense of immediacy and drama, as though the events were happening now. The respondent just quoted did that when he said, "My lawyer's like, he says, 'Well, why can't we have the three weeks?'"

A more frequent use of the present tense might be called "the generalized present." This is the tense respondents most frequently employ for a generalized description. It summarizes developments that occurred in the past and continue through the present. This is the tense used by the respondent in the excerpt just presented when he said, "You sit. You sit. You sit. You don't even get called." Notice that the respondent used the generalized present in response to a question by the interviewer that was itself in the generalized present: "What happens while you're waiting to be called?" This question assumed the generalized present and so pulled a response in the generalized present. A better question would have been, "What *happened* while you were waiting to be called?"

The generalized present is often requested in studies using a fixed-question-open-response format. Such a study might ask, for example, "What are the issues about which you and your wife tend to disagree?" As was exemplified in the excerpt, when a question is phrased in the generalized present, the response is likely to be in the generalized present.

There is a second generalizing tense, which I call "the generalized past." A respondent can signal this by use of the auxiliary "would," as in "I would sit there for hours." The respondent could also signal this tense by using "used to" or an equivalent: "I used to spend a whole day sitting there." Here too the respondent is summarizing, not describing a specific incident.¹

Respondents often prefer to provide generalized accounts rather than concrete instances. One reason for this is that they can feel that they are being more responsible reporters if they remain general, since they are describing an entire class of events rather than a single idiosyncratic

event. The generalized material, they may think, is more inclusive and so constitutes better information. Actually, when respondents provide generalized accounts, their description expresses a kind of theory of what is most typical or most nearly essential in the class of the event. By doing this, respondents preempt the investigator's task of analysis; it is they who have decided what is important.²

In addition, a generalized account permits respondents to minimize elements about which they feel diffident. Respondents may feel that generalized accounts are appropriate for a report to someone like the interviewer, whom they don't know that well. Generalized accounts are more nearly public information, with none of the potentially embarrassing or revealing details of private life.

Interviewers, in qualitative interview studies, like their respondents, may imagine that the generalized present or generalized past will provide an overview that saves interview time and is less subject to the idiosyncrasies of the specific event. In addition, the interviewers may unconsciously prefer to phrase a question in the generalized present or past because it seems less prying, less intrusive, than a question that asks for a specific past event. The question, "What's it like when you and your wife quarrel?" can feel easier to ask than "Can you tell me about your most recent quarrel? Could you walk me through it?" Asking about a specific past event can make interviewers uncomfortable because it seems as though they are putting respondents on the spot.

But just because questions phrased in the generalized present or generalized past appear less intrusive, the interviewer should be wary of them. The point of qualitative interviewing is to obtain from respondents a field report on their external and internal experiences. This does require the respondent to provide a density of detail that would not be provided in ordinary conversation. If asking for detailed, concrete information in an interview constitutes an unacceptable invasion of privacy, the interviewing partnership is faulty.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are no magic questions. Any question is a good question if it directs the respondent to material needed by the study in a way that makes it easy for the respondent to provide the material. Sometimes the best question is one that in a very few words directs the respondent to give more detail or

fill in a gap: "What happened then?" Sometimes it is one that takes the time to tell the respondent just what is now needed: "Could you give me a concrete instance of that, a time that actually happened, with as much detail as you can?" Any question that helps the respondent produce the material you need is a good question.

On Phrasing the Question

Should every question be phrased in an open way, or might a question be a leading one in that it anticipates a response? Do you ask "What were your feelings then?" or "Were you unhappy about that?" Or might you even offer "You must have been unhappy"?

Most often, you will not want to affect the respondent's report by offering anticipations in your questions. If you have no reason to anticipate a particular response, you would ask, "What were your feelings when that was happening?" But sometimes you can help a respondent provide a full report by demonstrating your understanding, and one way to do this is to name the respondent's state. In this situation the right thing to say might be "You must have been unhappy about that." Or if you don't want to supply the characterization, "unhappy"—after all, if you do, the characterization of the feeling isn't the respondent's own—you might try "It sounds as though you had a pretty strong reaction." You don't have to be compulsively nondirective, but you should make sure that the words and images you may eventually quote in your report are the respondent's, not yours.

There may be a few points in an interview where you want to check on a surmise you have come to. One way to do this is to say, "It sounds like you are still pretty upset about that." But if the respondent agrees with this, you might do well to check whether the agreement comes because of politeness or because you have been right. I have sometimes asked "Is that exactly right?" just to make sure.

Helping Respondents Develop Information

Most important in an interview is obtaining concrete information in the area of inquiry. Once a respondent has alluded to an actual incident, perhaps in response to your asking, with respect to something of importance to the study, "Could you tell me the most recent time that happened?", you may have to help the respondent develop the incident

adequately. Here are forms of development you might want to obtain and some ways you might ask for them.

1. *Extending.* You might want to know what led to an incident. Questions that ask for this include "How did that start?" "What led to that?" Or you might want to know the consequences of an incident: "Could you go on with that? What happened next?"
2. *Filling in detail.* You might want more detail than the respondent has provided. A useful question often is "Could you walk me through it?" An interviewer who worked with me used to add "We need you to be as detailed as possible," and that seemed to work for her. Another approach to obtaining increased detail is to go to the beginning of the respondent's story for which you want detail and ask what followed, exemplifying in your question the density of detail you want: "So you were sitting there, talking with your guest, and this other fellow came over. What happened then?" You could even add "Can you walk me through it?"
3. *Identifying actors.* You might want to learn the social context of an incident, the other people who were there. You could ask "Was anyone else there when that was happening?" "Who else was there and what did they do?"
4. *Others the respondent consulted.* Especially in a study whose concerns include how respondents dealt with problems, you may want to ask whom the respondent talked with about an incident and what the respondent said: "Did you talk to anyone about what was going on?" This may also produce information about the respondent's view of the incident at the time.
5. *Inner events.* You will generally want to obtain information regarding some of the inner events that accompanied the outer events the respondent reports. Inner events include perceptions, what the respondent heard or saw; cognitions, what the respondent thought, believed, or decided; and emotions, how the respondent felt and what strivings and impulses the respondent experienced. They can also include the respondent's preconceptions, values, goals, hopes, and fears. You will usually want at least the cognitive and emotional events. Imagine a respondent reporting, "My boss called me in and told me he wanted me to fire one of the people working for me." After the respondent developed what happened, you could ask the respondent to de-

scribe his or her cognitive reactions by asking, "When that was happening, what thoughts did you have?" Then you might obtain emotional reactions by asking, "What were your feelings when he said that?" or "Can you remember how you reacted, emotionally?"

6. *Making indications explicit.* Respondents may indicate by a gesture, a grimace, or an expressive shrug feelings they haven't put into words. You won't have the gesture, grimace, or shrug in your transcript when you are analyzing your data, nor can you quote it as supporting material for your report. The problem is to communicate to the respondent that you sort of understand what he or she is indicating but that you want to be sure. To convey the message that the respondent's feelings are worth developing in words, you might try suggesting, perhaps by a nod, that you understand, and then ask for elaboration by the question, "You had some pretty definite feelings?" or "What were the feelings you had?"

Handling Difficult Questions

Some questions are hard to ask. People in survey research sometimes say that income is the most private of matters, more difficult to ask about than sexual behavior. Perhaps, but sexual behavior is difficult enough. However, often there is a relatively tactful way of entering a difficult area. To learn about men's extramarital experiences, in the study of how occupationally successful men organized their lives, we sometimes began by asking respondents about their experience of loneliness and then moved to questions about friendships with women other than their wives. Still, despite our efforts to be as tactful as possible, a few men responded by saying that they didn't want to get into that area. That told us something—although not very much.

In general, if there are difficult issues to be developed, it is important to establish a reliable research relationship before entering the area. It is also important for interviewers to know why the information is needed. Interviewers in any study should always understand its goals, so that they can know which of a respondent's leads to develop; but if they are to ask about sensitive issues, it is especially important that they know why they are asking. And they must thoroughly believe in the study's right to know. Otherwise they will communicate their absence of confidence in the questions.

Markers

I define a marker as a passing reference made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state. One respondent whom I interviewed in the study of retirement reported, "We went to our place on the Cape a couple of weeks after my mother died, and my husband spent all his time working on the house. He always has one more thing he has to do." The point of this response was to communicate how occupied the respondent's husband was, despite his retirement. The reference to the death of the respondent's mother—not previously mentioned by her—was a marker. The respondent was indicating that this was something significant for her, by which she dated events; that she understood that it might not be important for the study; and that if I wanted to pick it up, well, there it was.

After the respondent had finished developing the material about her husband's full schedule, I said, "You mentioned earlier that your mother had died. What happened?" The respondent then described how devoted she had been to her mother. That devotion explained why her inaccessibility to her husband had been an issue in his retirement. Now, with her mother dead, there were indications that things might be different. This was material important to the study.

Because markers occur in the course of talking about something else, you may have to remember them and then return to them when you can, saying, "A few minutes ago you mentioned . . ." But it is a good idea to pick up a marker as soon as you conveniently can if the material it hints at could in any way be relevant for your study. Letting the marker go will demonstrate to the respondent that the area is not of importance for you. It can also demonstrate that you are only interested in answers to your questions, not in the respondent's full experience.

Sometimes interviewers feel it is tactful not to pick up markers. This may, on occasion, be true, especially if the marker was dropped inadvertently. But most often respondents are in enough control of their report that if they don't want you to know about the area, they won't drop markers.

Respondents sometimes offer markers by indicating that much has happened that they aren't talking about. They might say, for example, "Well, there was a lot going on at that time." It is then reasonable to respond, "Could you tell me about that?" It is different when a respondent clearly states that an area is off-limits to the interview by saying something like, "There was a lot going on at that time, but I don't want

to talk about that." Now you can't possibly ask, "Could you tell me about that?" Still, if the topic appears relevant to the study and you have a good interviewing relationship, you might ask, "Can you tell me anything about what sort of thing that was?"

MANAGING THE INTERVIEW

Intrusions

The first rule of interviewing is that if the respondent has something to say, the respondent must be able to say it. If you find yourself talking over the respondent, interrupting, or holding the floor while the respondent tries to interrupt, something is going wrong in the interview. You might want to withdraw some of your attention from the respondent for a moment or two to figure out why you are competing for the floor. But whether you figure it out or not, you ought to stop doing it.

It is easy to intrude in an interview. You can interrupt the respondent. You can finish the respondent's sentences. You can offer your associations to what the respondent is saying. You can suggest explanations for observations about which the respondent is perplexed; for example, if the respondent shrugs and says, "I don't know why he said that," you could propose, "Well, maybe he was trying to defend himself." You can insist on completing your question even if the respondent has already started to answer. You can hop from issue to issue following your own train of thought rather than the respondent's. With any and all of these, don't do it.

Never, never fight for control of the interview. The interview is a collaboration. If it should happen that a respondent is developing an irrelevant topic at great length, you may have to interrupt to say that there's another topic you would like to get to. But that should be done in the spirit of the collaboration; it's your responsibility to set topics. You can usually manage the redirection without discouraging the respondent from talking freely. In the retirement study a respondent who was nearing retirement wanted to talk about the details of his business and how hectic things were. His discussion was interesting but not useful for the study, so at a pause I asked, "With all this going on, is it possible for you also to plan for retirement?" We then moved to discuss the respondent's planning for his retirement.

Talking About Yourself

The interview is about the respondent, not about the interviewer. In my view, at least until the interviewing has ended, the interviewer should do only as much self-reporting as is consistent with the interview situation. It is usually enough for the interviewer to give business card information—location and profession—along with the study's aims and sponsorship.

If a respondent asks about some aspect of the study, the question should be answered fully—although not so fully that the respondent's attention wanders. If a respondent asks a question of the interviewer such as whether the interviewer had a difficult time finding the respondent's home, the question should be answered in a way that will satisfy the respondent's concern, but briefly. If a respondent asks a specific personal question, such as whether the interviewer had an experience similar to the one the respondent is describing, the interviewer should answer honestly rather than seem mysterious. But again the response should be brief; it's the respondent's experience that's important.

Some interviewers believe that self-disclosure fosters disclosure by respondents. I don't have much experience with self-disclosure as a facilitative technique, but the experience I do have leads me to question it. My own experience is that self-disclosure complicates an interview situation by shifting the respondent's attention to the interviewer and altering the respondent's relationship with the interviewer.

Monitoring the Information the Respondent Is Providing

You must carry into the interview a general idea of what you want to learn about. The interview guide is one statement of this. Your ability to judge what else might contribute to the study's report should make it possible to recognize when material not anticipated in the guide could be useful for the study. Even as you are listening closely, you should be assessing whether the material might be useful for the study's report. The guiding question is "Does this material help illuminate experience in the area of the study?"

Suppose your study is on the psychological and emotional concomitants of being engaged in a lawsuit. Your concern is what it feels like to be either the person sued or the person doing the suing. In an exploratory interview you find yourself being told by a plaintiff about his experiences

as a father when his son got into a dispute over ownership of baseball cards. Is this relevant material? Should you ask for its development in the interview? Or should you be thinking about how to redirect the respondent? If I could imagine any use for the material, I would want the respondent to develop it. It might occur to me that the stance of being a father protecting his child, or teaching the child to deal with conflict, carries over into the respondent's present adversarial action. For me, that possibility would be enough to justify encouraging the respondent to develop the material.

It can be hard to know what is relevant, especially in early interviews, before the frame of the study is firmly established. My policy is: If in doubt, see what's there.

Adequacy of the Respondent's Account

Suppose what you are being told is in exactly the right area. How do you know whether you are being told enough, whether you are being given enough development and enough detail? One test is visualizability. Can you call up the scene and imagine who is there in the setting being described and how the participants relate to each other? If you were to stage the scene in a theater, would you know what people to put there? Would you know who is saying what? Would you be able to move the plot forward? Actually, you'll never get enough information to do all of this, but you ought to be able to identify the major figures present on the scene, know the important things that were said, and maybe understand how the scene came to be or what happened next. If an event is of critical importance for your study, you should try to get as much information about what happened as your respondent can supply, up to the point where the respondent becomes restive.

Managing Transitions

The best questions fit in so well with what respondents are saying that they seem almost to be continuations of the respondents' own associations. They encourage respondents to say more about what is already in their minds. Transitions to new topics require respondents to stop and think, to relocate themselves; they may be necessary, but they tend to be unsettling.

Suppose that after a respondent has told an anecdote about his children, the interviewer nods and then asks, "How about at work, what is a typical day like?" The respondent will require time to reorient himself. He must redirect his mind from his relationship with his kids to his work situation. For a few moments, the respondent is apt to flounder. The verbal expression of this might be, "Well, ah, well, ah, the way it goes, I guess . . ." The interviewer has flustered the respondent.

I used to tell interviewers who worked for me that they could fluster respondents three times in an interview. Anything more and the respondent would wait for the next question, answer it briefly, and then wait for the next question. This is how respondents act in survey interviews. It isn't at all what is wanted in qualitative interviews.

Actually, how many times a respondent can be flustered and yet remain ready to give a full report depends largely on the quality of the interviewing partnership. A fully cooperative respondent can be flustered more than the three times I would tell interviewers was their limit. But where there is initial resistance—for example, where a respondent isn't sure he or she wants to be interviewed—even a single flustering can lead to responses that are stiff and sparse.

It is good practice to try to follow the respondent's associations so long as they remain within the interview's frame. The interviewer will still have a great deal of influence on the direction the respondent's associations take. The interviewer will be constantly communicating—by nods of agreement and understanding as well as by questions and comments—what is of value to the study and what is not. Even if few directive questions are asked, the interview will be an interactive product. Usually, without introducing new topics more than three or four times in the interview, the interviewer will find that the issues that have to be covered have been dealt with.

There are, however, a few ways of phrasing transitions that can prepare respondents for redirection. When it is evident to the interviewer that a particular line of inquiry has been adequately developed, the interviewer might say, perhaps nodding affirmatively, "Okay. Now there is another issue I wanted to ask you about. It is . . ." The respondent may still be flustered but will have warning that a question requiring reorientation is about to be made.

How Well Is the Interviewing Partnership Going?

Be alert to indications by the respondent of discomfort, antagonism, or boredom. If there is any suggestion of any of these, your immediate aim should be to restore an effective partnership. A way of doing this is to listen sympathetically to whatever the respondent wants to offer so long as it is within the study's frame. Often the respondent will have talked easily and comfortably in an area dealt with earlier in the interview, such as challenges at work and how they were overcome. Returning to that area may improve matters.

Use your own feelings in the interview as a guide to what is going on. If you are being bored by the respondent, something is wrong in the interview. The respondent may be avoiding emotional material or may be defensively providing only superficial elements. Chances are, if the respondent's account were rich and alive, you wouldn't be bored.

Sometimes in an interview I have felt sleepy, almost to the point of being unable to keep my eyes open; the same, I think, has happened to other interviewers. This is boredom to an extreme. Almost never, I believe, is it an indication of fatigue or sleep deprivation. Rather, it suggests that the interview has become lifeless and that the interviewer has bought into an unspoken agreement with the respondent just to get the interview over and done with.

If you find boredom with the interview setting in, find a topic with life in it. If the respondent becomes engaged, you will too. There is little value in mechanically plodding on, obtaining still more material that challenges your ability to remain awake. Keep in mind that you are at least as interested in the topics of the interview as a reader of the ultimate report will be. If you are bored by the material, you can be sure its readers will also be bored. The contrary is also the case: if you are fully engaged by the material and drawn in by it so that you feel your understanding is being enlarged by it, then others will be also.

One approach to finding engaging material, should an interview become boring, is to ask yourself what may be concerning the respondent that the respondent isn't expressing. If you attend closely, you may pick up clues to emotions underlying the respondent's account. Respondents may show their emotions in the phrases they use or in the stories they tell or in their posture or voice tone. Should you get a clue about which you feel fairly confident, you might try to check it out—tactfully. A phrasing

I use to check out such clues is "It sounds like . . ." (as in "It sounds like you're saying that you don't feel you've been properly recognized"). Other introductory phrasings for getting beyond superficials are "Sometimes people who are in situations like the one you're describing have feelings like . . ." or "I wonder if you might have been thinking . . ."

But if you're not comfortable making potentially facilitative comments of this sort, don't do it. And if you should run into an interview that becomes draggy, do as well as you can with standard techniques and keep in mind that not every interview can be stellar.

EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEWING

EXAMPLES OF GOOD INTERVIEWING

Interview 1. Working with a Respondent to Produce Useful Material

Here is an example of effective interviewing, from the study of occupationally successful men. It shows how a good interviewer and a cooperative respondent can work together to produce material useful for a study.

The respondent had completed a brief first interview the week before. One aim of this second interview was to learn about stressful incidents at work—how they happened and how they were managed. The interview took place in the respondent's office.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of what has been the thing that has been most troubling of all the things that you've had to do while you've been here?

RESPONDENT: [pause] Well, I think the most difficult task I've had at [firm name] was when I was . . . I've been here five years and it was my first year, and my task, which was really . . . ah . . . im-

COMMENTS

The interviewer asks the respondent to find an instance of stress produced by a work assignment.

The respondent describes his first year as having been difficult because he felt unequipped to deal with an important client. The account is a bit distanced, with details smudged, but that's all

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

plicit, because I had to learn what we did . . . I was hired as someone who will manage people who did know—and they did. A fairly large group. And the greatest source of revenue this company had at the time was this one client. And I don't know—I mean, I didn't have a vague idea [*chuckles*]*—*but it turned out that I understand . . . well . . . what . . . ah, what we did from a conceptual standpoint. But I had absolutely no technical knowledge at all, and in this medium not having technical knowledge impairs your ability to do creative work. So I was in a severe disadvantage. And I found that to be very difficult, a very difficult situation to go through.

And in addition to that, I was . . . I was brought in because the whole client relationship with this one client was a mess. And, uh, it was run by a person who at the time was a vice president of marketing for the company and someone else who was very creative but resented the fact that I was brought in to try and get this thing organized and sort of be the people person and get morale back up and, you know, all this other stuff.

So I got very . . . I got no support from them at all. Quite the contrary. So the—plus I hated the client. It was, uh, the combination of all this I felt was pretty awful.

I: Was there any incident where it

COMMENTS

right. The time at work the respondent is talking about seems genuinely to have been difficult, and continuing this line of questioning seems likely to produce useful material.

Here's something that may be interesting; the respondent was brought in to remedy problems with the client.

Conflict with the incumbents and dislike for the client. If this isn't a setting for stress, what is?

The interviewer asks for a criti-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

surfaced or crystallized, and now you can remember that as a time when you really had the, uh, the height of feelings of whatever distress there was?

R: Well, I . . . I can . . . [*pause*] I don't know, there were so many instances. I mean, I inherited this team. I found out . . . I had been here three days, and I found out that one of these guys that worked for me, an account supervisor, was just dishonest! You talk about dishonest subordinates, this guy was just dishonest. And he created . . . he was terribly destructive to the whole organization. He . . . I mean . . . again, in a technical environment, he lied about things that were . . . were not happening. And I thought, "This is awful!" And there'd be days when I'd know, without a doubt, that this guy cannot stay. So I fired him.

I: What was it like . . . uh, you know, going through that decision, that "I've got to get rid of him"?

R: [*pause*] Uhm . . . he . . . he was so blatant it was really not a . . . it wasn't a difficult decision, and it wasn't a, uh, an agonizing one in any sense. [*Spring in swivel chair squeaks.*] This guy was so blatant. And the thing that amazed me was that he'd been allowed to stay here. Why have you people not done

COMMENTS

cal incident. He asks for an incident that will display the elements that made the respondent feel awful.

The respondent is flustered. Maybe he's unwilling to experience the discomfort that would be associated with talking about a critical incident of trouble with colleagues. He shifts away from the tensions with the vice president and his creative colleague to describe something else, a problem with a subordinate.

The interviewer accepts the story, although it is out of the area initially identified, and asks for the internal experience that accompanied the decision.

Ah, here's the connection to the preceding material: the vice president (the fellow who had been in charge) and his sidekick (the creative colleague) should have fired the subordinate. This is further evidence for the respondent's side in the conflict with them.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

anything about it? And I thought . . . I remember feeling a little resentful that—this is interesting, you know—you bring in a new guy and give him some pretty difficult tasks right off the bat! You know, you could've cleared house for me before I showed up. But you didn't. But that was consistent with the way these two people worked.

I: Yeah.

R: It was a certain amount of—it's interesting because one of them, the guy who was vice president of marketing, he and I are equals in this company now. He runs a division and I run a division. And actually we're quite good friends.

I: Back then things were not so good between you?

R: [laughs] They weren't good at all!

I: What did it feel like, realizing that you had opposition on a higher level?

R: Well, I thought . . . this guy's personality . . . he's real slow talking . . . his values and mine were so different. And he was so clearly hostile—subtle in his own way—but to me clearly hostile. Uhm . . . that [pause] I never . . . well, I never . . . I guess . . . You know, I'm trying . . . trying to describe how I felt. I guess I never doubted my own self.

COMMENTS

Encouraging further development.

The respondent is skipping to the end of the story. A lot must have happened between the respondent's first showing up (and firing a subordinate who needed firing) and this outcome.

The interviewer takes the respondent back to the beginning.

Picking up R's comment and asking for the feeling state that might underlie it.

Note the mixture of perception of the vice president and personal feeling state.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I mean, I didn't know what was going on—but why should I? I just got here! [chuckles] Uh, and I, you know . . . so his . . . the way he treated me was just annoying, but never made me feel—I never doubted myself.

And, uh, I made friends quickly here, and the team of people who worked for me rallied around me real quick because I fired this guy who was such a destructive force. Early on, uh, I got this whole team into, uh, one of the conference rooms, and, uh—I don't know whether I really planned this, I just sort of did it—but I sat them down and I said, you know, "I'm so-and-so and this is . . ." I was kind of introducing myself to them. [chuckles] No one had introduced me. And I said, "I'm so-and-so and this is my background and this is what we're supposed to do and, frankly, I will not pretend that I know the techniques." I said, "I really don't. And, uh, because I don't, uhm, I'm going to ask you to really help. And, uh, if you help, I'll learn and there are things that I do know, and I'll be able to, uh, I'll be able to do something for you as a team."

And, uh, then I subsequently, you know, pretty soon got rid of this other guy, so they believed that. And they supported me. You know, so it wasn't . . . I wasn't in a total vacuum. I mean, at least not in my group. You see they trans-

COMMENTS

It would be possible for the interviewer to now say, "You said something a moment ago about the way the vice president treated you. Could you describe that? Maybe describe a particular incident?" However, the interviewer doesn't interrupt, and the respondent now goes into how he established alliances with his subordinates. Firing the incompetent subordinate seems to have helped him establish himself.

This is an unasked-for critical incident. The respondent describes how he presented himself to his subordinates in an initial meeting. He asked for their affiliation and pledged himself to function as team leader, with loyalty returned for loyalty given. The story is useful for understanding supervisor-subordinate relationships. There seems no need to develop it further.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

ferred their loyalty over to me right away. So that was good.

It was easier to deal with Alden Brown.*

I: Was he the vice president?

R: Yeah.

I: So you could rely on the people that you were working with?

R: I could rely on the people who worked for me.

I: Anybody else that you . . . sort of thought to yourself, "Well, I've got that person as a friend"?

R: Uh, no. No, not really. [pause] But just the people who worked for me. I didn't really know any others.

COMMENTS

When respondents name people, it can be assumed that their thoughts are moving closer to memories of actual incidents.

The interviewer checks that his assumption that this is the vice president, not the creative colleague, is correct.

Asking for confirmation, but also communicating the message "Yes, I understand, I'm with you." But the phrase "working with" misses a point the respondent had made, namely, that the respondent was accepted as the leader of the team by his subordinates, as the boss, and not merely as a coworker.

The respondent corrects the interviewer's phrasing.

Since we're talking now about allies, we may as well develop that element. We ought to know if others were involved in addition to those identified so far, and it may be difficult to return to this scene later.

This completes the picture of the respondent's interpersonal situation at work at the time. He was in command of the loyalty of his subordinates but otherwise on his own in confrontation with a hostile vice president and colleague.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Can you remember back when you had an interaction, where you got bad vibes?

R: [chuckles] Well, I can remember one . . . uh, trying to come up with the most dramatic example. I . . . I was so mad. I was. This is awful. Uh, the client was [X Corporation]. Yeah. And we used to have to go down to have monthly meetings in [small town], which is in the middle of nowhere. And, uh, we went down there for a meeting. And it was always a very hostile environment. They didn't like us, we didn't like them. And here were two different groups, creative groups, working together, but we really used to compete with each other.

And the two guys that I worked with were Alden Brown and Dennis Ealing, who's since left. And, uh, Alden and Dennis—I'll believe this to this day—really kind of set me up.

COMMENTS

The interviewer now asks again for a critical incident. Note that the respondent has now established that the vice president and his creative colleague were derelict in at least one respect—they didn't fire a dishonest subordinate—and that he had successfully won the loyalty of his subordinates. He may be ready now to talk about what happened between him and his antagonists.

Note the hesitations. The respondent is not entirely comfortable reporting this incident.

The interviewer assumes that the "two guys" are the vice president (Alden Brown) and the creative colleague (Dennis Ealing). The interviewer is confident enough of the identities to feel no need to check. But it's odd that the "two guys" should be referred to now as though they hadn't already been talked about

* This name, like all names of respondents and the people to whom they refer, is an invention.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

They said, "Well, in this meeting . . ." You know, maybe thirty, forty people and I'd been here a short time and this is in [small town], so I felt displaced in the sense that there's no . . . I was with them and staying in some crummy hotel, you know. So it's really sort of—and I'm feeling very uncomfortable with the clients and the whole bit. And, uh, they kind of set me up by saying, you know, "In this meeting you should really propose this," knowing darn well that it was going to get shot down and be torn apart. And I, not having . . . not having the technical knowledge or . . . or experience really to be able to distinguish whether or not this was a good idea. So it was . . . I said it at the meeting, haltingly—because I didn't have confidence to really do it from conviction. And it got torn to shreds. And I remember sitting back down and saying, "That was amazing. Boy, this was awful."

I: Did you realize what it was?

COMMENTS

extensively. It's as though the respondent, in describing this incident, has moved to another area of his mind.

The respondent is recapturing how isolated, disoriented, and vulnerable he was.

The interviewer is asking the respondent what was going on in his mind. The interviewer could also have asked for information about thoughts and feelings in a more open way: "While this was happening, what was going on in your mind?" That probably

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: Oh yeah. I kind of realized it halfway through what I was saying. You know, sometimes your perceptions are heightened when you have to speak publicly. [chuckles] And I remember thinking, "This is not going to work." Well, maybe I read it in the faces of the people. Whatever it was.

I: Could you sort of develop it from there? What happened? You're sort of talking, you look at the faces of these people in front of you. And they're starting to get uncomfortable?

R: Very. Everybody started squirming, and I guess I have another two minutes to go with this idea and it's failing. It's, uh, I suppose it's like the comedian with a bad joke! It's just—that is what it was like. A bad joke! And, uh, I . . . Yeah, I could read everybody's face and I just sort of kept on talking and I eventually did it mechanically and I'm sure I condensed it as much as I could so I could end.

COMMENTS

would have been fine. But the phrasing used here is less distancing, more in touch.

The respondent is describing both self-monitoring and his monitoring of others. One of the issues included in this study's substantive frame was the way respondents deal with challenge. Self-monitoring seems to be part of that process.

The interviewer has decided the previous response was good enough as a description of what had happened to produce the respondent's sense of failure. Now the interviewer asks for extension of the story: What happened then? Note how the interviewer tries to establish the level of concreteness he wants by bringing concreteness into the question: "You look at the faces . . . and they're starting to get uncomfortable?"

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Can you remember what it felt like internally while you were dealing with that?

R: Oh, I felt like a fool. I felt mad. I felt—I really resented being set up. I mean, I thought, “What a cheap shot! What a son of a bitch.” I mean, that’s rotten.

I: Then you knew it was set up?

R: Oh yeah! And I said, “I would never have done that to you, you bastards.” You know. But I also realized you’ve got to be pretty desperate to do this crap.

I: Yeah.

R: You know, . . . and, uh . . . so I sat down. And when I sat down, at first I just felt sort of, you know, just dread, just feeling, “What did I just do? This is awful! I feel like such a fool.” And everybody’s sort of, you know . . . and they very politely said, “Well, I’m sure your idea may have some merit.” And this other company guy, he was sort of sarcastic and . . . and so

COMMENTS

The respondent has come to the end of his description of the event. Now the interviewer asks for his internal state while it was happening.

This sort of leading question can reassure the respondent that the interviewer is thinking and feeling along with him and can therefore encourage the respondent to continue. But an argument could also be made for asking a more open question such as “Did you have any thoughts now about your colleagues?”

This is the right level of concreteness and the right density of detail. The interviewer may well be nodding to signal understanding and assurance that this is important material.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

condescending. And he said, “Well, I’m sure once you gain a little more experience in this field, you’ll realize that that idea wouldn’t quite apply to this particular situation. Although, you know, on its own merits it might . . . might’ve been all right.” But it was a real put-down. A real put-down. Yeah. And I knew, you know . . . I instantly recognized, “Well, my credibility with these people . . . gee, why did you set me up? Why did you do this?”

I: Yeah.

R: It was rotten. “Why did you ever do this?”

I: Yeah. Why had they done it?

R: Ah, well, I thought there was a . . . From their standpoint it probably was more or less, uh, very shortsighted, but, uh, it ensured that as far as this one client was concerned, which was the company’s most important client, I’d never have any credibility with them. And that’s true! I haven’t.

I: What happened after that? I mean, could you sort of . . . ?

COMMENTS

On the surface this question asks for information about the motivations the respondent attributed to the pair who had set him up. It also is a way of getting at the kind of threat the respondent felt himself exposed to.

The respondent thought that his colleagues had wanted to queer his reputation with the firm’s most important client, and in fact they had succeeded in this. He might reasonably have feared that his job was in danger. This suggests a high level of threat.

The interviewer asks the respondent to extend the story. The description of the stressor situation is adequate; so is the

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: Well, for the rest of the meeting I just sat there, you know. I just . . . I don't know . . . tuned out. I mean, I paid no attention to that. I just sort of sat there and said, "Well, why did they do this?" And I realized, you don't do this unless you're scared of me. You wouldn't have to go to these extremes. It's really unfair.

I: Now you've got—you were going to have dinner with them that evening and . . . ?

R: No, we had to fly back on this tiny little plane.

I: What happened?

R: I just sat by myself. I didn't talk to them. I didn't want to go to them and say, you know, "You set

COMMENTS

characterization of the level of threat. Now the interviewer wants to know what this level of threat did to the respondent and how he dealt with it. The open phrasing here ("What happened after that?") seems to me exactly right. Let the respondent tell the story, and get him to fill in the blank areas later, if necessary.

This is a description of trying to achieve mastery of self in a situation of what must have seemed catastrophic failure. Note how many leads there are, in this one brief passage, to an understanding of responses to threat. First there is the respondent's focus on the threat, then his attempt to work out the aims of his enemies, then his disparagement of his enemies together with an effort to reassure himself of his own potency, and finally his protest of the wrong done him.

The interviewer decides not to seek further elaboration of this scene and instead goes on to the next scene. Again, note the level of concreteness in the question.

The interviewer encourages the respondent to continue the story.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

me up." I wouldn't give them the pleasure of it. Just sat by myself. And, uh, when we got to the airport, I just walked . . . walked away.

And, uh, we came to work the next day, and I decided, well, I'm not going to—because I was trying to be their friend! You know, I was trying to get the . . . get on the good side. I was trying to, uh, please them, trying to get along with them. Go and ask them questions. Show them that I was interested even though I wasn't completely knowledgeable. You know, that was the end of that.

I: What happened the evening you got home? After . . . after you got off the plane?

R: [pause] I didn't share it with my wife.

COMMENTS

The respondent has not before described having attempted to ingratiate himself with the vice president and the creative colleague.

The interviewer asks for further extension of the story. Instead of asking about a nonspecific time ("after you got back"), the interviewer refers to a concrete event ("after you got off the plane").

Mentioning that he didn't share the incident with his wife is a marker. Why else mention something that didn't happen? The interviewer must decide whether to pick it up. It could have been picked up with the question "How come?" Had the interviewer done this, the respondent very likely would have talked about problems in his marriage. Instead of detouring in that direction, the interviewer properly continues the story of the job trouble. Later in the interview the in-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Can you remember how you felt?

R: Mad. Angry. I was angry. Yeah. I was feeling—I was also glad to be out of [client company's town], it was such an awful place. Hated it! [chuckles] I mean, the whole environment. Something like that to happen in that kind of environment. It was just sort of . . . so distasteful. But, I don't know, I was just angry. Like I couldn't wait to get to work the next day. I probably didn't sleep very well.

I: Why couldn't you wait to get to work?

R: Because I wanted to do something about it, you know. [pause] And I . . . I can't remember specifically what I did. I can just remember how I felt. And I felt like, I'm

COMMENTS

terviewer could return to the marker by saying: "Earlier you said that when you returned from that client visit, you didn't tell your wife about it. Do you remember thinking about telling your wife?"

The interviewer asks the respondent to describe his internal state on return. Here, as is often the case, it is valuable to learn not only what happened, but what the respondent thought and felt about what happened.

Maybe it would have been good here to ask the respondent about what kept him awake: "What was going through your mind?" The interviewer may have moved too quickly to the return to work.

The respondent says he wanted to do something about the incident, but can't remember what he did. He goes on to describe what seems to have been an ef-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

certainly more honest than you are. My intentions are better. And uh, [the firm] was right to hire me because you couldn't run an organization where other people would report to you. So they won't. From now on they'll just report to me. And, you know . . .

I: Did you have some sense of damage done? .

R: To me personally?

I: To your . . .

R: To my reputation?

COMMENTS

fort to reassure himself that despite his disastrous presentation to the client, the company had been right to bring him in and should continue to value him.

The interviewer wants to know to what extent the respondent felt his standing in the organization had been damaged. But the respondent hadn't yet said anything about believing damage had been done to his standing. The interviewer should first have learned how the respondent thought the incident would affect his standing at work by asking something like "Did what happened in your presentation affect your situation at work?"

The respondent is floundering a bit. He is not sure what the interviewer has in mind. Damage to the firm? Damage to him personally? What sort of damage?

The interviewer, recognizing that the question was too vague, starts to specify that he wanted to ask about damage to the respondent's situation at work.

But the respondent is continuing with his review of what might have been damaged. So the interviewer gives the respondent the floor.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: To your reputation in the firm.

R: As far as I was concerned, that was such a clear setup that any . . . anybody should've recognized it. I'm sure everybody did. Emmett Franklin, the man I now work for—and he is one of the founders—yeah, I think Emmett . . . I never talked to Emmett about it, but I think he understood.

I: Looking back now, uh, how long . . . could you say how

COMMENTS

Now the interviewer says that yes, he wants to know whether the respondent had been aware of damage to his reputation in the firm.

Despite the interviewer's problem in directing the respondent, the interviewing partnership is sound, and the respondent continues to work with the interviewer to produce useful information.

The respondent's reference here to Emmett Franklin was a marker, although the interviewer did not recognize it. Later in the interview, the interviewer asked the respondent how he had managed to maintain himself in the company despite the failure of his presentation to the company's most important client. At that point the respondent said he had gone to Emmett Franklin and told him that he needed him as a mentor or he would never last. Franklin, who apparently thought well of the respondent, did agree to act as the respondent's mentor and helped him obtain accounts of his own. But here the respondent discouraged questioning about Emmett Franklin by saying he had never talked with him about the incident and by neglecting to mention that he nevertheless had gone to him for help.

The interviewer is asking about the aftermath of the incident.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

long that incident stayed with you emotionally?

R: Oh, as far as Alden Brown's concerned, it will always stay with me. I mean, he and I do get along very well now. We're good friends, but I'd never work with him!

I: How about the other man?

R: Dennis Ealing? He went to work with the client company. [chuckle] He's its director of marketing. He was an odd duck. Very brilliant guy. Absolutely brilliant. And I don't like him.

Interview II. Negotiating What the Respondent Will Report On

Particularly early in a first interview, the interviewer may have to search for the areas in which the respondent can provide useful material. The interview guide will tell the interviewer the areas in which the study needs information, but the respondent may have little to offer in some of the areas, a great deal in others. Or the respondent may feel uncomfortable about reporting material in some areas, and their exploration might be postponed until the interviewing partnership is better established. The following excerpt displays the process of searching, in the beginning of a first interview, for the areas to discuss.

The respondent was an IV drug user who had learned a few months before the interview that he was HIV positive. The interview was one of several conducted in a pilot study of reactions among present and former IV drug users to the results of testing for HIV. The interview took place in the HIV clinic of a hospital in which the respondent was an outpatient. The respondent had mentioned, in a brief discussion with the interviewer that preceded the interview, that the medical staff at the hospital were not giving him information he wanted. The interviewer began by asking about this.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: You were just saying you wanted information. Can you say what kind of information you wanted?

RESPONDENT: Well, essentially knowing what to expect. To me that seems to be the greatest problem right now about this whole thing, being HIV positive, about having this. To know what comes next. You know, everybody talks about AIDS. Okay, AIDS is going to kill you. There's no cure for it. But how? And when? I mean, can I expect to get up every morning? Am I suddenly going to be struck down one morning, I can't get up anymore? Am I going to lose my sight? Am I going to lose my mobility? What's going to happen? How is it going to happen? Is it going to be painful, is it not going to be painful, what? Even having the experience of seeing other people having died from it, it still doesn't tell me a lot about what to expect.

I: You've seen other people die from AIDS?

R: Yeah. I've had a lot of friends who've died from it, and I know that most of them became very debilitated at the last stages and went to the hospital. They began to lose a lot of weight, and they became very ill. And so I'm wondering, "Is this the kind of thing that's in store for me? Am I going

COMMENTS

The interviewer begins where the respondent is.

This is vivid, but it's hard to know where to go with it. The response suggests both dread of what may happen and discomfort because so much is uncertain. It might be worth learning, perhaps, whether worry about what might happen is always in the respondent's mind. But the reference to "seeing other people having died from it" sounds like a marker.

The interviewer picks up the marker.

But the respondent doesn't now describe a particular incident. This is generalized: "a lot of friends." The respondent might intentionally be avoiding being specific because he doesn't want to talk about a particular person or might rather have something else on his mind. The interviewer

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

to end up in a hospital somewhere, [having] to be cared for, or whatever?" There are a lot of aspects to this thing, in my case particularly. I'm thirty-nine years old. I don't have any kids.

I: You don't have any kids?

R: No. I don't have any children. And at present I'm not really going steady with anybody, not living with a woman or anything like that. It's difficult to maintain the single lifestyle now. I mean, I'm out having a drink or something and I run into a woman, start talking to her. I feel somewhat obligated to make sure that nothing goes on but conversation. It kind of puts a real strain on me.

I: Are you thinking of a special time, a particular time?

R: This is any time right now. I can't afford to have a relation with a woman right now.

COMMENTS

might possibly ask for specifics by saying, "Of the friends who've died, could you tell me about the one who died most recently?" But that question would not connect with the respondent's worry about himself. In any event, by the time the respondent stops talking, the respondent has moved to not having kids. This is both another marker and apparently another aspect of the respondent's worry about his own situation.

The interviewer picks up the marker and asks the respondent to develop the thought of not having kids in any way that feels right to him.

The respondent extends not having kids to not going with a woman—with whom, presumably, he could have kids. Then he moves to his feeling that when he meets a woman he cannot allow a relationship with her to develop. The respondent seems to be alluding to actual events.

Again the interviewer picks up what seems to be a marker.

The respondent refuses the interviewer's implied suggestion that the respondent is summarizing

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: When was the last time this happened?

R: Shit. I mean, at least three, four months now since I had a relation with any woman. I mean, I'm in a stage where I'm just looking. That's all I can do, is look. Because, what am I going to do? They say, well, okay, use condoms. But even condoms are not a hundred percent safe. There's too many possibilities of an accident happening. And so what I've done is more or less I've just gone to where I don't have any sexual relations with women. Now that . . . phew . . . is a real change, a real upsetting thing. You know, there's still a relationship based on friendship and conversation. But, I don't know, it's just not enough for me.

I: It means you're alone.

COMMENTS

actual events. He says that there are no such events; he isn't establishing relations with women now.

Nevertheless—mistakenly—the interviewer tries again for a particular event. The vividness of the image of "nothing goes on but conversation" may have made the interviewer believe that the respondent did have a particular incident in mind, despite his disclaimer.

The profanity here may express exasperation at having to say again that there isn't any woman, or it may be a way of introducing further detail of a repugnant situation. What follows is a vivid description of the respondent's sense of having to turn away any chance for a sexual relationship.

Partly to strengthen the interviewing partnership, partly to attend to the feeling tone of the respondent's report, the interviewer establishes that yes, he does understand that the respondent is talking about how his HIV status has forced him to isolate himself.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: Yeah. Yeah. A great deal, a great deal. And it's adjusting to it, accepting the fact that I will never have kids. That entire aspect of my life is through. I'm thirty-nine. And how am I dealing with that?

I: What do you think about that?

R: It's fucked up. It's real messed up. It's real messed up. . . . It seems like it's difficult, very difficult to deal with.

I: How's that?

R: I have a lot of friends, a lot of acquaintances, a lot of people I'm meeting who don't know me that well, and I know they're wondering, like, "What's it with him? Why is he not with anybody?" Which brings up a whole thing about people wanting to know what's up with you. . . . It puts a strain on family relationships. All my brothers and sisters, they've got wives, girlfriends or boyfriends, or whatever. And just the whole concept of . . . anytime you see me,

COMMENTS

The response "Yeah. Yeah. A great deal, a great deal" acknowledges that the interviewer has understood his feelings. Now the respondent goes on to elaborate what it means to be alone. He indicates that not having kids is an expression of being alone.

The interviewer asks for further thoughts about dealing with not having kids. The question is a bit awkward, but gets the idea across.

The respondent seems to be saying that the situation is so appalling that it cannot be grasped. Here the profanity seems to express movement from a more public self to a self closer to emotion. The respondent uses intensifying words to convey the depth of his despair.

The interviewer is asking the respondent to continue the theme of "it's difficult."

The respondent fears that he is suspect because he is alone. He must deal not only with being alone, but also with the suspicion that his being alone creates in others.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I'm always by myself. There's never a woman involved. I've got nieces and nephews that are getting to the age where I know that they're beginning to look and say, "Well, gee, Uncle Al never has a girlfriend. He's never around any woman. He never brings anybody around like that." Dealing with that whole aspect of it, knowing that people are wondering and that some people are not saying anything out of respect. They're not being nosy, they're not asking it outright.

I: When's the last time something like that happened? Like you were with somebody and this thing came up?

R: Well, probably have to be before the tests. And then it wasn't an issue. It never did come up because it wasn't an issue. Since the test I have not been involved sexually with anybody. Okay? And that's simply because I just have chosen not to. It's just on my mind so heavy. To think about that. It would be easy to do that. I could get away with it real easy. I mean, I could fool somebody right quick. But what would that involve? That involves taking a chance on infecting somebody else. Cutting somebody else's life short. Why would I

COMMENTS

The interviewer is here trying for a concrete incident that would display the respondent's "knowing that people are wondering." But the interviewer's phrasing asks for such an incident in too open a fashion.

The respondent misinterprets the interviewer's question as asking about his being HIV positive in connection with a possible sexual relationship. He says he hasn't been with anyone since before the tests, and then he didn't know he was HIV positive. But now "It's just on my mind so heavy."

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

do that? Or why even want to do that? I don't have the heart to do anything like that. Just don't have the heart to do that. I really don't feel like I could do that to somebody, that I could pass this on to somebody else.

I: It sounds like it's made you feel sort of a pariah, like.

R: Yeah. Yeah.

I: Is that it?

COMMENTS

Here the interviewer could have picked up the ethical issue or the self-restraint the respondent is describing, but that would probably have led the respondent to repeat what he's already said about not wanting to put someone else at risk. Instead the interviewer makes explicit what may be the theme underlying much of what the respondent has been saying; no kids; being seen as suspect by friends and family; having no access to sexual relationships. The interviewer is, in effect, checking a hypothesis, while at the same time suggesting an issue for development. And the interviewer is also again establishing that he understands what the respondent is saying. Note that the interviewer offers his guess at the underlying theme in a tentative, "sounds like . . ." statement that the respondent can reject.

The guess seems to have been right.

The interviewer is giving the respondent a further opportunity to

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: Yeah, it definitely made me feel like a pariah. The old-style lepers, I guess. Way on the outside now. Always looking, but you never touch. Never let anybody get that close. It's tough, man. It's very tough to be that lonely. To not have the affection, the closeness. Just not be there anymore. To always be backing out of things, always on your guard to never let a situation get that developed. Or somebody may want to be with you—you can't let that happen. Can't let it happen to you. You just can't let them get that close. At the same time, doing it in such a way as not to just come right out and say, "Hey, I got AIDS." Like to get the message across that you just don't want that kind of relationship.

The interviewer made a couple of mistakes in the course of this excerpt. He failed to recognize that the respondent had disclaimed any potentially romantic relationship and went ahead to ask for an instance; and he phrased an appropriate question in so open a fashion that the respondent entirely misinterpreted it. Nevertheless, the interviewer paid close and unfaltering attention not just to what the respondent was saying, but also to what might underlie what he was saying. Fairly quickly the interviewer found an important underlying issue that had been expressed in much of what the respondent had said and that had to be recognized if the respondent's situation was to be understood. The interviewer's recognition of this underlying issue was not only valuable for the study in its own right, but also strengthened the interviewing partnership.

COMMENTS

reject the guess if it doesn't strike him as exactly right.

The respondent corroborates that he is talking about feeling like a pariah. He now explicitly links this feeling to his earlier statement about not being able to touch, but only to look. Note that now, instead of skittering from issue to issue, the respondent speaks coherently and with vivid emotion. He is now talking about matters of great importance to him.

The respondent and the interviewer have together located what the respondent can best contribute to the study at this point in the respondent's interview: a statement of how isolating it is to be HIV positive and how lonely it is to be so afflicted.

EXAMPLES OF POOR INTERVIEWING

A bad interview can often be identified just from the look of a page of transcript: the ratio of words said by the respondent to words said by the interviewer will be nearly one to one. However, a preponderance of respondent material doesn't guarantee a good interview. An interviewer can produce a bad interview not only by talking as much as the respondent but also by permitting the respondent to develop at length material of no value to the study.

Bad interviews are more frequently of the sparse-response type than the runaway respondent type. Leading to the sparse responses, often, is what seems to be questioning by the interviewer that is unrelated to the respondent's train of thought; instead, the interviewer's questions are directed solely by the interview guide, or they express the interviewer's own train of thought.

Interview III. An Interviewer with an Unshakeable Assumption

In this first example of bad interviewing, the interviewer seems to be trying to control what she is being told. She has a preconceived notion of what the respondent ought to tell her, a notion she doesn't permit the respondent to influence.

The general topic was relationships at work, and the interviewer was searching for instances of stressful relationships. The respondent had been talking about other members of his work group.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: In relationships with any of these people or anyone else you would interact with regularly at work, would there be anything about the relationships that . . . were there any times when the relationships themselves were bad or were a source of distress for you personally or . . .

COMMENTS

The question doesn't adequately direct the respondent to a specific relationship—a boss or subordinate or peer. And the final phrasing, "times when the relationships themselves were bad or were a source of distress," has a vagueness that makes response difficult. In its favor, the question does get the respondent into the area of relationships at work. In

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

RESPONDENT: Well, I find that, for the most part, the kinds of . . . I never had any bad relationships myself with anybody in the group.

I: But within the framework of the people you were speaking with . . .

R: Within the framework of the people with whom I worked, I did not have any relationships which grated on me, no.

I: Or which caused . . .

R: Some of them had relationships which were grating . . . which grated on each other, which I was pretty much aware of and probably could deal with more effectively than anybody else, because I never wound up with a situation in which in order to resolve this I had to make an enemy out of any one of them.

COMMENTS

addition, it asks for concrete instances.

The respondent starts on something, then changes course to reject the notion that he had had bad relationships.

The interviewer doesn't recognize that the respondent has rejected the idea of having had bad relationships with anyone in his group. Now the interviewer begins to argue ("But . . ."). My guess is that the phrase "bad relationships" suggests being unable to get on with others and the respondent wants to deny being that sort of person.

The interviewer should now recognize that the respondent wants to close out this line of questioning. The respondent is saying, firmly, that there is nothing to report.

The interviewer keeps going on the issue of bad relationships. The interviewer seems to have been determined to complete the earlier question, even though its premise has already been rejected by the respondent.

The respondent offers a compromise: he acknowledges that other people had trouble with each other, a situation he was able to help with. The interviewer should accept this and let the respondent develop the material, perhaps by asking, "Could you tell me about one of those times?"

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Uh-huh. That was just your own style.

R: Yeah, that's more a matter of leading them rather than telling them what to do. If you can convince them and convince the whole group by consensus that this is what we ought to be doing, then they all go out, back to the trenches, and do it.

I: Basically, you never got into a stress or distressful situation, then, with any of your people that you're related to or felt closer to?

R: No. The other thing I would say is that I typically manage the group by calling the whole group in and asking them to explain what they are doing. Just going through . . . each guy says what's going on in his area, and then, sort of by consensus, it all helps steer the consensus as to what we do next, fellas. But that way, pretty much, people as a group understand as a group what they were trying to accomplish, and you could shift responsibilities around to match the skills, and so on.

COMMENTS

The interviewer doesn't recognize that there is a story being alluded to here. Instead, she takes the respondent's comment as a statement about managerial style.

And now we have a bit of management philosophy of little obvious use to the study. It is quite distant from the topic of relationships at work. The interviewer has fostered this by her reflection in the previous comment.

Now the interviewer returns to the bad relationship line the respondent has flatly rejected. This approaches badgering. In actuality, the respondent may have been in stressful or distressing situations with one or more of his people—most managers at some point are—but this isn't the way to get a description of those occasions.

The respondent is now speaking in the generalized present. At this point it would make sense to accept where the respondent is and ask him to become concrete: "Could you tell me about the last meeting? Walk me through it?"

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: What about your "boss"? I mean, do you have some kind of relationship?

R: My present boss?

I: Well . . .

R: . . . or my past boss?

I: Your . . . maybe we can talk about both.

R: Well, my past bosses were two people for whom I had a great deal of respect.

I: Yes, you did mention . . . perhaps we can go into that a little bit.

In this interview excerpt the interviewer was determined to get an interesting story of troubles with a coworker and refused to accept the respondent's unwillingness or inability to come up with one. The interviewer also refused to accept the respondent's indications of material he could develop comfortably. I find it remarkable that the respondent continued to be cooperative, despite the interviewer's competing with him for the floor, disregarding his comments, and abruptly shifting topics.

COMMENTS

The interviewer's question suggests an absence of interest in what the respondent just said. My guess is that the interviewer is continuing to search for stressful or distressing experiences and has hit on the idea of asking about specific relationships. But to introduce this now abruptly shifts the interview away from where the respondent is.

The respondent is flustered—as well he might be. He tries now to reorient himself. He asks a question partly to gain time until he can get a grip on the new interview topic.

And, in stumbling fashion, the interview goes on.

Interview IV. Refusing Respondent Leads

Here is another excerpt from an interview in which the interviewer did not listen well. In this excerpt the respondent tried to contribute usefully to the study, but the interviewer failed to elicit from the respondent the meanings of a critical incident. The interview topic was the way that recognition and informal evaluation affected the respondent.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: I was wondering if, you know, what sort of an audience you have for your work? Is there some sort of group that you're doing it to impress as . . . or who you might look for out there somewhere else . . . or maybe your colleagues or . . . you know . . .

RESPONDENT: Well, obviously, uh, first I wanted to satisfy my boss, in the sense that he's—you know, I serve at his pleasure, so to speak. My annual evaluation is in his hands, so I certainly have to impress him properly and give him the level of confidence in me, you know. That's only for my benefit. About my peers within . . .

I: Which would be . . .

COMMENTS

It's all right to ask questions awkwardly as long as your concern is communicated and you don't inadvertently introduce an element that requires special attention. Here the interviewer does inadvertently supply a possible motivation for competent performance ("doing it to impress"), a motivation many respondents would want to disclaim.

The respondent reacts to the "doing it to impress" part of the question. He doesn't flatly reject the idea that he works to impress, but he does correct the implication that he might work only to impress. Of course he works to satisfy his boss, and in that sense to impress him, but that's his job. The respondent is starting to consider whether he works to impress his peers when the interviewer interrupts him.

The interviewer wants to know exactly who is meant. This is not necessary, and because it interrupts the respondent, is questionable.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
R: ... within the company ...	
I: Within the company.	
R: ... and, uh, the peers outside the company?	<i>The interviewer's insistence that the respondent identify his peers before saying whether he works to impress them appears to have flustered the respondent.</i>
I: Yeah. Like who would be your peers?	<i>The interviewer establishes control over the interview by requiring that the respondent provide this unessential information before going on with his story.</i>
R: Well, former associates ...	<i>The respondent would have a right to be annoyed around here. He doesn't seem to be. He might be getting a bit cautious in his response, though; a bit concerned with whether the interviewer will understand.</i>
I: Oh, former associates ...	
R: Or competitive associates. You know, people from other companies.	
I: Uh-huh. You all know each other in ...	
R: It's ... we may probably know of each other, probably more than we know each other, because we are—although it's a fairly large community in the sense of numbers, it's very small in the sense of knowledge of companies and people and, uh ...	
I: How is that information transmitted to each other? How do they ...	<i>Has the interviewer forgotten that the issue was whether the respondent worked with this audience in mind? Or is the inter-</i>

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
	<i>viewer assuming that the respondent has agreed that he wants to impress competitive associates? Actually, he hasn't agreed to this at all.</i>
R: Usually very casually. Where we, uh, chance meetings or chance conversations. Let me say also in terms of people, of people I want to please, I want to please the people who I'm doing the project for ...	<i>The respondent, God bless him, is still trying to answer the question about working to impress other people. Now he remembers his clients, whom he does want to please.</i>
I: The clients?	<i>The interviewer seems to have lost the thread of the interview and is puzzled by the respondent bringing up his clients.</i>
R: The clients. In the sense that it tells me that I've done a good job for them, and it tells me that my company has done a good job. And when there's an opportunity in the future, we certainly want to be considered—or even more than considered, even handed the project. Well, these are ... I like to leave a good trail.	
I: Yeah ...	
R: Both, again, for my own accomplishment and also for the good of the company. But we were having lunch today in a west suburb. I was there this morning. We had lunch—the client, my boss, and myself. And out from another table comes somebody I knew from a company I worked for three years ago, who I haven't seen in	<i>The respondent is virtually interviewing himself. He holds to a theme and looks for concrete instances. Without any help from the interviewer he here presents an incident that illustrates how people outside the company learn how you are doing.</i>

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

almost—what?—three years. And through the whole chitchat . . . I introduced him and introduced the people to him and, you know, these chance meetings, chance encounters, this is how things get spread around.

I: So what did you talk about?

R: Well, just what his company was doing and what I'm doing and who these people are who were having lunch together.

I: Was it kind of the idea of impressing them with your association with the client, or was it really friendly?

R: No. Just sort of a friendly informational-type thing. Like that.

I: And it kind of gets spread around?

COMMENTS

Okay, I guess. But more useful might be what went through the respondent's mind when the fellow he once worked with came up to his table to meet him, his client, and his boss.

This is superficial, as well as general. A former colleague comes over to say hello and maybe check out how the respondent is doing. This would very likely elicit appraisals of relative success. It would be natural now to ask what had been the respondent's thoughts as the former colleague came up.

This question is at least a stab at obtaining the respondent's thoughts and feelings during the incident, but it overstructures by asking if the respondent was aiming to impress—and is a bit demeaning by making that supposition.

This pretty much repeats the previous statement about what was talked about. The respondent is indicating that there's nothing more of note here.

The interviewer drops the inquiry into the meaning of the encoun-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

ter for the respondent. Instead of pursuing this, the interviewer asks a leading question about what will now happen to the information about the respondent gained by his former coworker. Sometimes leading questions are useful because they demonstrate that the interviewer is in touch or because they suggest a useful direction for development. Here the leading question only narrows the possible response.

R: Yeah. Now he'll go back and say, you know, that he saw me yesterday and who I was with.

One of the several problems in this excerpt is the extent to which the interviewer provided wordings for the respondent. When an interviewer introduces a phrase in a question (here the phrase is "and it kind of gets spread around"), then the phrase is the interviewer's and not the respondent's, even though the respondent may accept that phrase ("Yeah, it gets spread around").

The same observation holds for this interviewer's insistence, despite the respondent's objections, on pursuing the theme of working to impress. Does this respondent really work to impress others? I would say no, not in the sense the interviewer intends. He wants recognition for his competence, but that's different from being competent in order to gain recognition. However, the interviewer kept returning to this theme, and at a couple of points elicited very qualified agreement. But it would be wrong to accept this qualified agreement as validating the interviewer's assumption.

Interview V. Losing the Research Partnership

Despite the serious interviewing flaws in the two previous excerpts, the interviewer in each was able to maintain an interviewing partnership. When things really go badly, the research partnership is likely to be questioned by the respondent. The following example of bad interviewing is from an interview conducted by a student in a class on interviewing.

The student interviewer was concerned with identity formation among delinquents, an interesting issue for which qualitative interviewing would seem to be the appropriate data-gathering approach. The student hoped to demonstrate that criminal behavior stemmed from the development of a criminal identity and that one process leading to the development of a criminal identity was taking as a role model a figure from organized crime. The excerpt is from the student's interview with a 17-year-old who had recently been convicted of theft. The 17-year-old has just said that organized crime figures had long been heroes of his.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: Did looking up to them change your behavior? Would you have gotten into crime without them?

RESPONDENT: Yes, I tried to be an enforcer for them. I started thieving and eventually I got into trouble.

COMMENTS

The student makes a couple of errors here: a minor one (asking two different questions at once) and a more important one (asking the respondent for conclusions rather than observations).

The problem is that the student wants a quick confirmation of his hypothesis. He would like the respondent to say, "Yes, looking up to them made me a thief." The student interviewer would have done better to elicit his respondent's thoughts and memories and to let them confirm or disconfirm his hypothesis.

This statement in itself doesn't contribute much, but what a wonderful collection of markers it is: "tried to be an enforcer" (note the "tried"); "started thieving"; and "got into trouble." Given the research aim, I would pick up on "tried to be an enforcer" and ask "Could you tell me about trying to be an enforcer?" with the expectation of then asking "Could you go

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Why were they your role models?

R: Because they were into organized crime. They had a lot of power.

I: How do you mean?

COMMENTS

back to where the idea came from?" and "How did things develop from there?" I'd also make a mental note of the other markers and be ready to return to them when there was opportunity.

The student is determined to confirm his hypothesis; he neglects the markers.

The word "power" strikes me as another marker. I would guess that it is an expression of something of cognitive and emotional importance to the respondent. It might be valuable to follow it up.

It's going to be tough to get to the reason power is attractive, but maybe the respondent can describe the imagery associated with power. In general, it's difficult to get respondents to explore cognitive and emotional complexes. Asked for elaboration, respondents are apt to state the complex in new words rather than provide its imagistic and emotional bases. Although the question "How do you mean?" can be a good one if a respondent is already in a scene (if this respondent had said, "The guy I was working for showed me he liked me"), here it's too unfocused. The respondent can't know whether the interviewer is asking for a definition ("What do you mean by power?") or for an elaboration of the idea of power. A better question might

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: They had the power to choose whether a person could live or die. They had the power to snap their fingers and people would do what they say.

I: Like how? What do you have in mind?

R: Come on, man. You know as much as I do. They don't like somebody, they get one of their people in, they say go hit him in the head. Pretty soon he's not around anymore. That's all there is to it. They had that kind of power.

COMMENTS

have been "How did they show their power?"

The respondent does provide some development of his idea of the crime bosses' power. He conceives of the crime bosses as having not only a Godlike power of life and death but also a royal power of command. It would be important to move to concrete material now. One possibility would be to ask the respondent when he first became aware of the crime bosses' power or first saw it displayed. The respondent's stories would then show what images were indexed by his words. But also the interviewer should note that the response is a bit testy. Attention to the interviewing partnership might be in order.

This question, at this point, makes me think the interviewer was out of sync with the respondent. The respondent has just tried to answer "How do you mean?" by specifying the display of power he had in mind. Now the interviewer is again asking a kind of "How do you mean?" question.

This is a rejection of "What do you have in mind?" Manifestly, the respondent rejects the interviewer's pose of naïveté. But there is also in the respondent's asperity an objection to a sense of artificiality in the interview, to

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

the absence of genuine partnership.

The level of the respondent's asperity seems mild to me. Nevertheless, the respondent is questioning the assumptions of the interviewing partnership: "Come on, man. You know as much as I do." The respondent goes on to provide an answer, but he has put the interviewer on notice that he is aware that the interviewer is playing a role and that he is made uncomfortable by it. And he refuses, at least for the moment, to provide anything more than a sketchy, if vivid, indication of what he has in mind.

There's nothing irreparable here as yet. But note how the student interviewer's failure to pick up markers, insistence on a particular line of thought, and, finally, unfocused response to the respondent's reference to crime-boss power led the respondent to challenge the research partnership. The partnership may have been fragile to begin with—and certainly the student was courageous to undertake a tape-recorded interview with a 17-year-old who had recently been convicted of theft—but closer attention to the respondent's thought and imagery and more concern for maintaining the interviewing partnership would almost surely have produced a better interview.

What is essential in interviewing is to maintain a working research partnership. You can get away with phrasing questions awkwardly and with a variety of other errors that will make you wince when you listen to the tape later. What you can't get away with is failure to work with the respondent as a partner in the production of useful material.

CHAPTER 5

ISSUES IN INTERVIEWING

THE EFFECTS OF INTERVIEWING ON RESPONDENT AND INTERVIEWER

Qualitative interviews regularly bring the ordinarily private into view. What are the effects on the respondent and on the interviewer of the respondent's sharing with the interviewer aspects of the respondent's private life?

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A RESPONDENT?

Here is what two respondents, each a participant in the pilot study of people who are HIV positive, said about being interviewed. Both respondents were male and HIV positive; neither respondent had gone beyond high school.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like to be interviewed?

RESPONDENT: It was good to talk to somebody, finally. That's one thing I haven't done, is talk to many people about it. I'm getting something out of it.

I: How do you mean?

R: Well, see, there's nobody that I can talk to in my life. There's nobody whatsoever. I just don't have nobody to talk to like that. I mean, even

though our conversations—it's like you're like listening. I mean, you ask questions, but you're more listening. And that's all sometimes I need. See, there's nobody else that listens. I mean, you're not saying one thing or another, you're just listening. And that's to me, that's what I need sometimes. It's probably what I needed for a long, long time. Or I wouldn't be able to come in here so easily and just tell you about everything.

One interpretation of this statement is that being interviewed interrupted the respondent's oppressive isolation. It provided him with the opportunity to talk about urgent concerns to someone who listened closely and sympathetically. That the listener did nothing more—made no interpretations, offered no advice—did not matter. It was the talking and being listened to that counted.

To talk to someone who listens, and listens closely, can be valuable because one's experience, through the process of being voiced and shared, is validated. Furthermore, it is useful to be able to formulate one's experience and so to make sense of it.

The second respondent offered only a brief response to the question about what it had been like to be a respondent. But in that brief response he made evident the cathartic value of talking:

I: What has it been like, talking?

R: I haven't had no problem with it. Some days I got something on my mind maybe, and . . . well, it drains some of the pressure out of me.

I have several times been a respondent in a qualitative interview. When the interview went well, I found afterward that in the areas covered in the interview I made more sense to myself. It's not that I had been puzzled by myself before, but I hadn't given systematic attention to the issues I discussed in the interview. Furthermore, I was pleased to have had someone's uninterrupted attention for a while. I liked having a sympathetic listener. I found it confirming to have what I said treated as legitimate and valuable. I liked feeling that my accounts were useful. When the interview ended I was reminded of how rarely in my life I can talk about my experiences in something other than a condensed, allusive, or generalized fashion. Spinning out a detailed, coherent story just isn't done in conversations with friends and intimates, nor is it likely that an attempt to do so would be uninterrupted.

Although my situation is far less pressured, far less distressing, than the situation of someone who is HIV positive, the value of being interviewed

seemed the same for me as for the two HIV-positive men. I believe the value of being interviewed is much the same for most respondents.

In large measure, interviewing provides respondents with an opportunity to talk about matters of emotional importance while remaining at an emotional middle distance: close enough to the emotions to experience them but distant enough to maintain self-control.¹ The alliance with the interviewer, which is an aspect of the research partnership, can provide helpful support as a respondent explores matters that had been confusing, distressing, or painful. The respondent's task—to describe in a coherent fashion what happened—requires the respondent to maintain control over the memories and feelings even as he or she experiences them anew. The result is likely to be that the respondent becomes somewhat more comfortable with matters the respondent had previously felt troubled by.²

The risks to respondents in qualitative interviewing are not usually significant. One risk is a consequence of the time-limited nature of the interviewing relationship. When there is a series of interviews and the respondent is socially isolated (as a single parent might be), the respondent may feel let down when the interviewing ends. But terminating a series of interviews probably doesn't leave the lonely respondent worse off than before the interviewing began, and precautions can be taken against the respondent's experiencing too severe a sense of loss. The respondent can be told in advance how many meetings are planned, and the last meeting can include a summing up to help the respondent achieve closure on the experience. And it may be possible to send the respondent a copy of a project publication.

Institutional review boards set up for the protection of human subjects sometimes worry about an interviewer shaking up a respondent's defenses and weakening his or her integration. They imagine a respondent reacting like Captain Queeg during his cross-examination, becoming all nervous tic and jittery incoherence. I suppose this is theoretically possible, but I have never known it to happen. It seems to me unlikely to happen if only because virtually all respondents will have successfully defended their character organization against severe onslaughts—such as those launched by an angry spouse—and will have little trouble dealing with the much lesser threat an interview may pose.

It is possible that interviewing may cause someone to reflect on his or her life and, in consequence, make changes. A respondent in a study of

single parents, after interviews in which she described her rather barren life, decided she had become entirely too reliant on her mother. Soon thereafter, despite her mother's opposition, she embarked on a relationship with a married man. She and her mother became estranged. For a couple of months the relationship with the man was sustaining, but then the man returned to his wife and the woman became depressed. The woman thought being interviewed had contributed to her shift in life organization, but she said that she thought she would have rebelled against her mother sooner or later anyway.

On a very few occasions in my experience a respondent indicated that he or she regretted having talked too freely in the interview. Once, in an interview marked by close rapport, a woman employed in the design world talked freely about the sexual lives of her associates. She later called my office to ask that the sections of the tape containing those comments be erased. I erased the sections. In another instance a respondent withdrew from a study and demanded that his tapes be sent to him because his wife was outraged by his candor about their marriage. I sent the tapes and did not use his material in the study. In each of these cases the interview obviously had created transient discomfort.

My associates and I have found that respondents may be concerned that they will be identifiable in our publications. One man, head of a family business, was worried that we would describe him so precisely that he would lose anonymity. We reassured him that we wouldn't, and we didn't; in our report, for one thing, we omitted that his was a family business. Another man gave us an account of his marriage that contained potentially embarrassing material. He asked that if we quoted from his interview we not give any clues to his identity. We did quote from his interview, but gave no information at all about his age or occupation.

In most studies I've done, a few respondents have been dealing with a current upset, such as a recent marital separation or a recent diagnosis of serious illness, and the interviewing uncovers their distress. It isn't possible at that point to remain the unobtrusive research interviewer. Rather, you have to acknowledge the respondent's distress and, for a time, simply sit and listen and permit the person to feel whatever he or she feels. Such occasions impose on an interviewer a responsibility for providing a supportive presence, a role the interviewer may not have expected. But, as Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince pointed out, such are the risks of entering someone else's life.

Does an interviewer have the right to ask a respondent about poten-

tially painful material? If that is what the study is about, then the answer is "of course." The respondent should have agreed in advance to the topic of the interview, and the interviewer always is responsible for being considerate in questioning and listening. If the study has another focus but the respondent has provided a marker—"Let's see, I accepted early retirement a couple of months after my divorce"—the interviewer is being invited to ask about the matter—"Your divorce?"—and probably should. If the matter is relevant to the study but the interviewer is uncertain whether the respondent wants to discuss it, the interviewer could first ask, "Is this something you would feel all right talking about?"³

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO SIT AND LISTEN?

There isn't any one reaction I have to listening to respondents. Sometimes I leave an interview exhilarated; at other times an interview is only an interview, an afternoon's task. To be sure, even in the latter case I am likely to feel privileged to have been admitted into someone else's private experience.

Occasionally, an interview is engaging enough for me not only to feel in tune with the other person's rhythm of speaking and thought but to see the world through the other person's eyes. At such times I feel myself to be split, with one part functioning professionally, asking questions and monitoring responses, while another part is identified with the respondent. Identification can become so strong that I feel my contact with my own core self has been loosened. I remain aware, of course, that I am with the respondent as an interviewer, but the world in which I live is replaced, temporarily, by the respondent's.

After the ending of any interview that has been engaging, I am likely to be a bit disoriented, the way someone might be on emerging from a movie. On the drive back to the office I may take a wrong turn and go in a direction I hadn't intended. But instead of being impatient and frustrated I am likely to feel as though I need the extra time to return from the respondent's world to my own.

At some point in every study in which I have done interviewing, I have found a respondent's account so evocative of developments in my own life or of my own concerns that I am flooded with thoughts or feelings. I then try as best I can to allow my thoughts and feelings to enter my awareness, while continuing to attend to the respondent, as a way of better understanding him or her. Later I try to summon the thoughts and feelings

so that I can better assimilate them, or at least become accustomed to them.

My aim is to enable myself to emotionally understand someone's account without allowing my attention to be captured by my own feelings and thoughts. When we interview on an issue that is painful for respondents and when their accounts are likely to elicit sympathetic pain in us, it is almost necessary that we achieve this kind of neutralization. In a study of bereavement, for example, the interviewer should try to get to the point where he or she can hear about—and witness—the pain that follows a husband's death, or a wife's, or a child's, and understand it and respond to it while neither becoming a distanced spectator nor being flooded by personal experiences, associations, and feelings. This sort of neutralization is not callousness; rather, it is a state in which the interviewer can understand emotionally while still attending to the respondent and the interview.

Interviewing is, for me, usually tiring. I find that it takes energy to maintain an unswerving attention. It requires energy to get into sync with the respondent's way of thinking while remaining alert to what isn't being said. It requires energy for me to monitor my own reactions, to judge whether the material is vivid enough, to keep in mind the issues about which I hope to learn, to maintain a sense of how I am doing with time, and to remember to check the tape recorder's view meter to be sure the recorder is working. I can't do too many interviews in a day. Three strikes me as a lot; two would be better.

Some interviews leave me feeling washed out. Some leave me feeling perplexed, wondering if I managed them properly. I may be uncertain about the way the interview developed or feel bad about walking away from someone whose life is difficult. Whenever any of this happens, I want to talk to someone; when I have a partner on the project, I try to talk with that person about what happened. If there's no one to talk to, I can manage, but it's better to have someone to talk to.

I am always gratified if an interview has gone well. The interview will then have been a good experience in itself, and in addition I know that I have usable material on the tape. Sometimes, after an interview has gone well, I find myself believing that I am good at what I do and, in consequence, am pleased with myself. By the same token, after a bad interview I feel awful.

I have had my share of bad interviews. I think especially of interviews where I have been clumsy, a respondent has been ungiving, and my

clumsiness and the respondent's obduracy each exacerbated the other. In an interview that is going badly I fumble for questions, try to remind myself of the interview's objectives, phrase badly the questions I come up with, and begin to feel acutely uncomfortable. I leave such an interview frustrated and self-doubting, sure that the interview produced little of value. I am likely to wonder whether I have not stumbled into the wrong line of work.

But even with the occasional failure, there is much I gain from the experience of interviewing. I can find myself so absorbed by the issues of the interview that I suspend awareness of myself. I am in that state that Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow": I am totally in the interview, aware of it and nothing more.⁴ Or an interview can suddenly become so rich in material the study needs that it is as if I have struck the mother lode. (It is at such moments that I feel compelled to check that the tape recorder is working.) In a sizable proportion of the interviews I've done I have felt that I was being given personal instruction in some sector of living, for example, how to be a parent or how to function despite adversity. At such times I have felt doubly privileged: privileged to be permitted into the respondent's life and privileged again for the opportunity to learn.

INTERVIEWER RESPONSIBILITIES

While interviews are extremely unlikely to introduce pain or trouble in respondents' lives, they may well elicit in respondents an awareness of pain they had pushed out of their consciousness. A woman who worked for me as an interviewer was disturbed when her respondent, also a woman, suddenly began crying because she was reminded by the interview of how disappointing her life had been. But neither the interview nor the interviewer was responsible for the respondent's sadness and tears. Nor should the interviewer's relationship to the respondent have been changed by their display. It should have continued to be a partnership based on mutual respect, concerned with producing information useful to research.

Often, when a respondent is flooded by emotion, the interviewer's respect for the respondent is best expressed by just sitting quietly. When the respondent gives evidence of being back in touch, the interviewer might ask, "Is it all right to go on?" or might say something that indicates understanding, such as "It must have been hard going for you, these past weeks" or "It sounds like anniversaries are hard." The interviewer should offer such comments as a professional who is working with the

respondent. It would be wrong for the interviewer to step out of role and say, as might a solicitous friend, "You just have to think of the future." Not only is this statement out of keeping with the interviewer's role, but it also suggests a reluctance to listen. And with a truly serious hurt or loss, an attempt at good advice can be felt as a minimization of how dreadful was the respondent's experience.

It would also be wrong for the interviewer to try to comfort by saying "I know how hard it can be" or, worse, "I'm sure it will be better in time." The interviewer has been granted no right to attempt to modify the respondent's feelings. Nor should the interviewer become evaluative, not even approvingly evaluative, as by saying "It's brave of you to keep going" or "I admire your ability to keep going." The interviewer is a work partner, not a therapist, not a friend, not an appraising audience.

It is appropriate for the interviewer to indicate, by his or her manner, "Yes, I understand the seriousness and painfulness of what you are reporting." The interviewer might be able to say, with sympathy, "That's too bad." Beyond this the interviewer does best to convey a middle distance in response to the respondent's feelings, in touch with them and responsive to them, but not overwhelmed by them.

There is no reason for an interviewer to feel guilty about intruding on a respondent's grief or sorrow. It's not the talking that hurts. Yes, sometimes people who are grieving want to distract their minds so that they can gain respite from their distress. But if they are aware of the interview's topic, they are likely to be prepared to talk about the loss. Still, the interviewer should bear in mind that sensitivity, tact, and respect for the respondent, always important, are essential with a respondent who displays pain.

Once, while interviewing a respondent, a lawyer who had retired from a distinguished career, I was asking about his current activities when he said, in passing, that he was dealing with some unexpected personal problems. This was, of course, a marker, and I picked it up. He then said that 5 or 6 weeks earlier his wife had left him. Then he stopped and sighed. After a moment's silence I asked how it had happened. The man then talked about his wife's long-unexpressed anger at having been his taken-for-granted spouse and how his traveling to collect an honor had been for her, unbeknownst to him, a last straw. The information was valuable for the study. It demonstrated how isolating was the double loss of work and spouse, even for a widely respected man. Talking about the loss was also, I think, helpful to the respondent.

Of course, we should not be so single-minded in pursuit of data that we encourage respondents to decompensate, to shift their defenses so that they become less capable of effective functioning. Indeed, we ought to call a halt to interviewing if it ever appears that a respondent is decompensating. I suppose an instance of this might be a respondent telephoning us, the day after the first of an intended series of interviews on bereavement, to say that as a result of the interview he had been unable to sleep and intended to stay home from work. But I have never known this to happen, and I have interviewed people who were pretty fragile.

In a study of case management I interviewed formerly hospitalized mental patients. My respondents were men and women who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, paranoid, or brain damaged. With only a few exceptions, each had sufficient clarity to tell me how case managers had helped or had failed to help. None suffered anything more than transitory discomfort as a result of participating in the interview.

This is not to say that the interviewing never unsettled these respondents. A man in his mid-thirties, living in supervised housing, had until a few months earlier lived with his family. But when I introduced the topic of how it had happened that he had moved from his family into supervised housing, the man produced a sound like an air-raid siren, piercingly loud and unvarying in pitch, followed by a staccato burst of words whose sequence made no sense whatsoever. Then he began to sigh deep, rasping sighs. Then, again, the air-raid siren, followed by the words, followed by the sighs. The episode lasted a couple of minutes in all. Then the man was quiet. Then, in a normal voice, he returned to the interview as though nothing had happened. We talked a bit more about his current housing, and I again asked about the family events that had preceded his move into supervised housing. There was a moment's silence, and then the man went into the sequence of siren noise, word salad, and sighing. At that point I decided to ask no more direct questions about events in his family.

In another interview in that study a woman insisted, whenever the interview made her uncomfortable, that she had given birth to a child from her forehead. I'm sure her delusion had symbolic meanings, but I decided that learning what they were would not contribute to an evaluation of case management. Instead, when the woman began describing her baby's emergence from her forehead, I would try, gently, to return her to her experience with her case manager.

As these two respondents demonstrated, even formerly hospitalized mental patients who are still severely troubled have effective ways of

guarding their integrity. I feel confident that being interviewed did no harm to either of these two respondents. Nor did it harm a paranoid respondent who refused to believe I was really an interviewer, several other respondents whose region of clarity was limited, nor the quite extraordinary respondent who seemed as sane as anyone but had become adapted to life as a mental patient.

I have also interviewed troubled adolescents and, again, feel confident that the interviews were not harmful to them. Most welcomed the interview. I do remember one boy who was thoroughly distrusting, but he dealt with whatever threat he believed the interview posed by limiting his responses to the most laconic. I finally said something like "You seem to be sort of uncomfortable, like you're not sure you like being interviewed." At this he brightened and said I was right. I congratulated myself on getting through to him and said, "What is it that doesn't feel comfortable? Like, is it just talking about things, or something else?" The young man hesitated, then his face set, and he said, "I don't know," and that was the end of it. He wasn't benefited by being interviewed, but I don't think he was hurt either.

Janet Malcolm suggests that interviewing is inherently duplicitous. She generalizes from a particular instance in which a writer ingratiated himself with a subject in order to obtain material that he later used to discredit the subject. (To be sure, the subject had already been discredited by a conviction for murder.) Malcolm characterizes all journalists—her argument can be extended to anyone who interviews—as confidence men, skilled at establishing relationships of apparent warmth and trust so they can obtain information that they will later use for their own purposes. The result, she says, is that respondents feel, at the very least, misled.⁵

This can be true, but I think it need not be and should not be. The relationship established with respondents should be exactly what it purports to be—a research partnership. Beyond this, I think interviewers should ensure that respondents are not hurt because of their cooperation. Unlike physicians, interviewers have no responsibility to benefit the people they talk with, but, like physicians, they do have a responsibility to do no harm.

Respondents are very unlikely to be harmed simply by participating in a research interview. Indeed, as I have noted, the chances of their being benefited by the interview are much greater than the chances of their being harmed. But they can be hurt by confrontation with a view of

themselves that they feel to be injurious or by making available to others potentially discrediting information.

It is an expression of the interviewer's responsibility, quite apart from its importance as technique, to be nonjudgmental, even when that goes against the interviewer's grain. Furthermore, the interviewer has no mandate to help respondents understand themselves. This means, among other things, that the interviewer should refrain from making connections for respondents that the respondents have not made for themselves and from suggesting motivations for the respondents' behavior that the respondents have not themselves considered.

The interviewer must, of course, respect the commitment to confidentiality. Nothing a respondent says to the interviewer should be leaked to others in the respondent's world, nor should the respondent's interview materials be available to anyone outside the study. Nothing reported from the study, in print or in a lecture, should permit identification of respondents.

We have, I think, one further responsibility to our respondents. In any study we have an obligation to our sponsors (government or foundation or university or our own bank account), to our field, and to ourselves to produce the most useful report possible. We have the same obligation to our respondents. We have engaged them in a partnership in which they are expected to do their best to provide the study with observations. It is our responsibility to make their lessons known.

CONFIDENTIALITY DILEMMAS

We guarantee respondents confidentiality. Indeed, we put the guarantee into our consent forms. Furthermore, one element of the implicit research partnership we establish with a respondent is a commitment that the respondent will not be damaged because of his or her participation in the interview. Are there any circumstances in which an interviewer could nevertheless be justified in passing on interview information to whoever might be the appropriate authorities—the police, the respondent's psychiatrist, a state agency for the protection of children? Suppose the respondent confesses behavior that is criminal? Should the respondent be reported to the police? What if the respondent is homicidal? Or suicidal? What if the respondent is harming others? What if the respondent is harming children?

I have never interviewed anyone who gave me reason to believe he or

she planned a homicide or suicide or was involved in child abuse. If I had, I believe I would have made an effort to contact appropriate authorities. I have interviewed people engaged in criminal behavior, including several who were engaged in illegal drug use, a few who were involved in occasional theft from retail stores, and one man who a year before our interview had committed armed robberies. (The man was a drug user who had been desperate for money.) I did not report any of these respondents to the police and would have resisted efforts to make their interview reports available as evidence against them. I hope I am not vulnerable to charges as an accessory after the fact, but I think in those cases I could responsibly honor my pledge of confidentiality.

More difficult was the problem posed by a woman respondent who was HIV positive. She said that all her life, from the time she was a child, she had been treated brutally by men. Contracting HIV from a boyfriend was only the most recent instance. Now she wanted to get even with the whole male sex. She visited barrooms every evening to pick up men with whom she could have intercourse, in the hope that she would infect them. The woman's sister had already reported her to a public health agency, mostly because she wanted the woman stopped before she was hurt by some man she had tried to infect. The public health agency did nothing.

In our final interview I learned the woman was no longer seeking revenge through sex. She had met a man who had become her steady boyfriend and who remained with her even after he was told—by that same sister—that she was HIV positive. (His first reaction was to yell at the woman and, I think, push her around.) If in our final interview the woman had reported continuing her campaign to spread HIV among men, I would have told her to stop. I can't believe that would have done much good, but I would have told her anyway. I also would have discussed her report with the head of the clinic where she was being treated, with the thought of devising some way to interrupt her behavior.

Until the woman herself resolved the issue, the problem of what to do with information that a respondent was trying to spread HIV infection to others was the most difficult dilemma I have faced in a lifetime of interviewing. But there were two other respondents in that pilot study who also raised issues of intervention. One was an HIV-positive woman, an IV drug user and an alcoholic, who blithely reported that she had passed along her hypodermic needle to an acquaintance. The respondent had known what she was doing; she had told the recipient to "wash it out good." In the interview she offered the rationalization that the acquaint-

tance probably was already infected. I was appalled and indicated concern, but I did not tell her she should never again pass on a needle she had used. Nor did I take this information to the clinic where she was being treated. The second instance was a woman whose husband was HIV positive who was deliberately exposing herself to the risk of contracting the disease. Again I was appalled, and again indicated concern, but did not say she should stop.

These dilemmas develop at the intersection of two governing principles. We have, usually explicitly, bound ourselves to respect the confidentiality of what we are told. We have also, usually implicitly, bound ourselves to respect the integrity of our respondents, including their right to their decisions and behaviors. These commitments are on the side of inaction. On the other side are our responsibilities as citizens to prevent harm by our respondents both to themselves and to others. Generally, we respect our pledges to respondents, but there can be circumstances under which we would not. An interviewer who was convinced by a respondent that the respondent intended to kill someone, and had the gun with which to do it, would be required, under law, to do whatever might be necessary to stop the intended crime, including placing a call to the police.

It might seem that dilemmas associated with confidentiality could be avoided by noting in the consent form the conditions under which confidentiality will be breached. A statement might be made in the consent form that a serious threat to adult life or to the well-being of children would justify suspension of the investigator's commitment to confidentiality. In fact, some research review boards require such statements.

Noting in the consent form that confidentiality may not be absolute can help, but it will not fully resolve the problem. If an interview produces evidence of a threat to the well-being of the respondent or others, the investigator would still be required to assess the threat's credibility. If the investigator believes the threat to be genuine and yet unlikely to be implemented, should action to forestall it nevertheless be taken, to be on the safe side? Issues of judgment remain, no matter what's in the consent form: Just how credible is the threat? Is useful action to forestall it possible? What would be the cost to the respondent and to the study of any action undertaken? What are the possible costs of inaction?

Problems of this sort are, fortunately, rare, but when they arise they are likely to have no easy solution. Nor does there seem to be any general method for their resolution. Rather, as would be true in other situations where the behavior required by one governing moral principle is contrary

to the behavior required by another governing moral principle, decision can only be arrived at on a case-by-case basis.

RESEARCH INTERVIEWING AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

The techniques of qualitative interviewing may seem uncomfortably close to constituting psychotherapy unsought by the respondent. An interviewer with whom I once worked told me that she had become conscience stricken when one of her respondents said, "I'm talking to you like I would to my therapist." My colleague worried that, unknowing and unbidden, she had blundered into the realm of therapy.

There are obvious resemblances between the research interview and therapeutic interviewing. The research interviewer resembles a therapist by encouraging the respondent to develop thoughts and memories, by eliciting the respondent's underlying emotions, and by listening closely to the respondent's utterances. How different, then, is the respondent from a patient when the respondent provides what would otherwise be private observations, thoughts, and feelings? And how different from therapeutic results are the results of participation in a research interview when respondents leave the research interview more comfortable with themselves? Is qualitative interviewing really therapeutic interviewing motivated by research needs?

There are several ways in which qualitative interviewing is different from therapeutic interviewing. First, the aims and practices of research interviewing and of therapeutic interviewing are different. In therapeutic interviewing the functioning of the patient is the object of concern. Whatever the therapist does is, or should be, motivated by the aim of helping the patient. Patients understand that their talking is a means to their improvement. In order to help, therapists may do much more than simply listen closely: they may also provide interpretations of the patient's behavior, advice on the patient's choices in life, and explorations of the patient's thoughts and feelings about the therapeutic relationship. In research interviewing, on the other hand, the interviewer's questioning is motivated by the aim of eliciting information useful to a study. The respondent is a partner in developing the research information. The interviewer is without license to produce change in the respondent's functioning and has no right to give interpretations or advice. It would not be proper for a research interviewer to suggest connections between the

respondent's verbalizations when the respondent has not already made them. It was improper, for example, for a student interviewer to follow a young woman's report of liking young men who were active in sports with the question "Is your father active in sports?"

Second, the material elicited during research interviewing and therapeutic interviewing is different. Therapists are likely to encourage patients not only to talk about their internal states but also to find sources in earlier life for current images and feelings. And a therapist is likely to want the patient to explore these matters until the patient has dealt with them adequately. The research interviewer is much more likely to want to hear about scenes, situations, and events the respondent has witnessed. The interviewer in a qualitative research study will want respondents to talk about their internal states only if this would be useful for the study. Once the interviewer has obtained the information needed by the study, the area of a respondent's internal state would not be revisited.

Third, the interview relationship is different for the researcher and the therapist. Therapists are responsible to patients for helping them improve in functioning. Because the patient looks to the therapist for help, the therapist will almost surely become an authoritative figure in the patient's life and thoughts. In contrast, the research interviewer is a partner in information development. The interviewing relationship is defined as one of equals, although interviewer and respondent have different responsibilities. And while therapists remain for some time important figures in the lives of patients, interviewers are ordinarily recognized by respondents as transient figures in their lives.

Finally, the patient pays the therapist for the therapist's help. The interviewer is paid not by the respondent but by the study. Indeed, the respondent may also be compensated by the study; at the very least, the respondent is likely to be thanked by the interviewer for the interview.

IF A RESPONDENT HAS NEED OF CLINICAL SERVICES

What if someone you talk with is so troubled that you feel psychiatric help is desirable? If respondents themselves indicate an interest in clinical services, there is not much of a problem. It is a good idea to have available a list of services, including therapists and social agencies, to be given to people who ask for referrals. But absent such a list, you can always tell respondents that you will check with colleagues and get back to them.

It is when a respondent doesn't indicate an interest in clinical services

but you think they are needed anyway that you may have a problem. Although it is not your place to make diagnoses or judgments regarding who might be benefited by therapy or counseling or other services, if your respondent, on the way to sitting down with you for the interview, were to trip on the rug and be injured, you would of course call for emergency treatment. Similarly, if the respondent gives the kind of evidence of need that any fellow citizen would respond to, you should respond as a fellow citizen. For example, after an interview with a new widower who is baffled by his inability to manage his household, you could mention that homemaker services may be available.

But people who do a great deal of research interviewing can go through their careers without meeting more than a handful of situations in which they think it right to make an unrequested referral or offer unsolicited advice. More often they run into situations where the right thing to do isn't evident. I once interviewed a couple whose marriage was clearly troubled. They both described loud quarrels, frightening to the children and disturbing to themselves. The husband, after he and I completed our interview, asked me what I thought about his family. I said I thought all families, including his, had strengths and vulnerabilities. I waited for him to say more about what he had in mind, but he didn't. So I left.

It is not all that unusual for respondents to want to know the interviewer's reactions to them or to their situation just to be reassured that they are doing well enough. If I can offer that kind of reassurance without being false or patronizing, I will do so. If I can't, I will retreat into generalities, as I did here. Perhaps in this case nothing more was being asked for. But as I remember the ending of that interview, I suspect that the man did want something more. Maybe he wanted a referral for counseling or at least a judgment on whether he and his wife should have counseling. Maybe I should have found a way to ask if that was what he had in mind. I still wonder what I should have done.

MATCHING INTERVIEWERS TO RESPONDENTS

A few years ago it was fashionable among reviewers of proposals for the funding of qualitative interview studies to want interviewers matched to intended respondents, at least in race and possibly in sex and social background as well. There were two reasons given for the desirability of such compatibility: acceptance of the interviewer by the respondent and a greater likelihood that the interviewer would be able to understand.

One way to phrase this issue is to ask to what extent it is necessary for the interviewer to be an insider in the respondent's world in order to be effective as an interviewer. Studies of survey interviewing have shown that respondents do use observable characteristics of the interviewer, including the interviewer's skin color, dress, demeanor, age, and sex, to guess where they might find common ground. Their judgment in this respect then affects the opinions and attitudes they voice. But we can't be sure whether interviewer characteristics would also affect the sort of detailed report of witnessed events that is the more usual concern of qualitative interviewing. My guess is that even if a respondent had a tendency to slant a description of an event in order to win the interviewer's approval, the interviewer could reduce that tendency by obtaining full detail.

In any case, it is difficult to anticipate what interviewer attributes will prove important to a respondent and how the respondent will react to them. Nell Painter, a black academic woman of clearly middle-class background, found when establishing an interviewing relationship with Hosea Hudson, a radical black man of rural Southern working-class background, that the attribute that mattered to the respondent was her politics:

When he asked about my politics I feared that would mean the end of our work together, for although I admired his long years of dedication to radical change in the face of opposition, I had to admit that I was only a Democrat. To my surprise, Hudson was greatly relieved. His worry was not that I might be a liberal, but that I might belong to one of the groups he calls "left-splinter," such as the Socialists Workers Party.⁶

There are so many different interviewer attributes to which a respondent can react that the interviewer will surely be an insider in some ways, an outsider in others. When I interviewed men who were IV drug users, I was an outsider to the drug culture but an insider to the world of men. When I interviewed a woman who was an IV drug user living in a shelter and also the mother of two children, I was an outsider to the world of women, drug users, and women's shelters, but an insider to the concerns of parents.

I have generally found it better to be an insider to the milieu in which the respondent lives, because it is easier then for me to establish a research partnership with the respondent. But some of my most instructive interviews have been good just because I was an outsider who needed instruction in the respondent's milieu. I was once instructed in the art of car stripping by a respondent who found me, as he put it, a little lame in

my understanding of his hustle. For a similar reason I was told in detail about the functioning of a "shooting gallery" and the reasons for the willingness of addicts to use house needles—something an insider might not have asked about. Also, respondents sometimes talk more openly to outsiders not only because the outsiders seem to appreciate tutelage but also because outsiders don't share the values that would make them condemn those aspects of the respondents' behavior that an insider would recognize as failing insider norms.

It may well be possible to be so much of an outsider that respondents decide they cannot talk to you because you could never understand or cannot be trusted or do not know how to ask. Charles Briggs writes that different settings require that interviewing be done in different ways, and the proper way to ask questions must be mastered if there is to be an interview at all. But my experience, limited to be sure, is that learning how to be instructed is among the first things one learns in a new setting.⁷ And investigators, though they may begin as thoroughgoing outsiders, are likely in time to learn from their study how to manage to interview.⁸

Robert Merton concludes after careful consideration that both insiders and outsiders can make unique and valuable contributions to an understanding of situations.⁹ My own view is that a reasonably proficient qualitative interviewer can establish an effective research partnership with a very wide range of respondents.¹⁰

What I give in the following paragraphs is an account of my own experiences, as I am aware of them, in relation to four bases frequently considered for deciding insider or outsider status in research interviewing.

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

I have found that when my niche on the socioeconomic ladder was higher than that of my respondent's, because I was a college professor and the respondent was a blue-collar worker or on welfare, it was usually easy to establish a good research partnership. All it took was ordinary consideration, together with full and respectful attention within the interview. When I was inferior in social standing to someone in a different field, as when my respondent was someone highly successful in business or medicine, our being in different fields seemed to reduce the relevance of our relative ranking.

I have found it most difficult to interview highly successful people in academic or professional fields not too different from mine. In one such

interview I found myself, without consciously intending to, repeatedly making reference to my own achievements. I mentioned, for example, that I had once taught at the respondent's university; I also noted that I was the principal investigator of the study and that I had done successful work in the past. It is not unusual for men to assert their own merits in early interchanges with someone whom they respect, but it was no way for me to go about establishing an interviewing partnership; the competitive element was too obtrusive. This particular interview went badly. I suspect that similar issues, on my side and on the side of respondents, have troubled other interviews I've had with people in or near my own field.

I think it may be undesirable to be an occupational insider because issues of competition are difficult to suspend. Furthermore, confidentiality is a problem. Can you really be trusted to keep the information to yourself? Might not the interview provide material for gossip, maybe introduced by the comment, "I once interviewed him . . ."? And even if the information goes nowhere else, *you* have it and you are a potential colleague or competitor. Just as you probably should avoid interviewing people in your own family—talking with them frankly is a different matter—you probably should avoid interviewing people who are or may become colleagues. An exception to this would be if your study requires such interviews; even then I would be cautious.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

It seems like common sense that it would be better for the interviewer to be of the same race and, if possible, of the same ethnic background as the respondent. My own experience has been that here common sense is mostly wrong. Racial and ethnic differences, insofar as the respondent can infer these, may perhaps play a role in a respondent's initial reaction to the interviewer, but my experience has been that once an interview takes hold, these differences have little effect on the quality of the interviewing partnership. They become like a difference in height: there, but unimportant.

I speak as someone who is white who has interviewed people who are in other racial groups and as someone who is Jewish who has interviewed people of other religious and ethnic groups. Only on rare occasions has my religion or ethnicity seemed even relevant. Once, when I was starting out, a respondent who did not recognize me as Jewish described his own sharp negotiating as justified because his victim was Jewish. I remained

an attentive interviewer. More recently, a respondent who was a retired minister quizzed me about my religion with an eye toward recruiting me to his faith. This happened after the interview had ended and seemed manageable enough. That's about it, as instances where religion or ethnicity seemed to matter.

SEX

Most often, it seems to me, men can interview women with the same success they would have in interviewing men, and women can interview men with the same success they would have in interviewing women. There is some belief in the field that women do better as interviewers with both men and women. Certainly, women are more often chosen as confidants by men as well as by other women. But among the very good interviewers with whom I have worked there have been both men and women, and good interviewers remain good interviewers irrespective of the sex of the respondent. Also, it has seemed to me, the great majority of respondents can form a good research partnership with an interviewer of either sex.

However, difficulties do sometimes appear in cross-sex interviewing that express themselves as respondent or interviewer discomfort. When interviewing women of about my age, I am often aware—and suspect that the woman is also aware—that while our relationship will under no circumstance become a sexual one, still it can be imagined that it could. This awareness, no matter how peripheral to attention, can make the research partnership more cautious. But even if it should have the effect of making the partnership more engaging, this would be no less a problem: an interviewer who feels drawn to a respondent can feel encouraged to be more present and more interactive than is entirely desirable. Similarly, a respondent can be encouraged by a relationship with an interviewer that has begun to seem intriguing to be more concerned with interaction with the interviewer than with memories and observations. But in reality any hope that might develop in an interview for a continued relationship can only lead to disappointment and confusion. If an interviewer becomes aware of a developing personal interest within an interview, an interest of the sort that is usually preliminary to a continuing relationship, it is the interviewer's responsibility to cool it. Nothing good comes from using such an interest to enliven an interview.

It is possible for women who are interviewers to be challenged by male respondents who want to test the women's sexual accessibility. My impression from women who have worked with me is that such challenges occur infrequently, but, as I noted in chapter 3, I do not think interviewers should take any risk whatsoever of assault. It seems to me only sensible for an interviewer to trust, and act on, even vague intuitions. A feeling of discomfort is reason enough to avoid an interview situation or, if one is in it, to end it.

AGE

When I began interviewing I was a young man often interviewing men and women much older than I. Now most respondents are younger than I am. Age does make a difference in the nature of the relationship that is established. When I was the younger I often took the role of someone less experienced than the respondent. Now I more often take the role of someone widely experienced, although not necessarily in the area of the interview. But in either case my stance has been that of someone who can be talked to, and, young and old, I have tried to listen attentively. The content of the interviews seems to me to be no different.

INTERVIEWING DIFFICULTIES

PROBLEM RESPONDENTS

Most respondents are cooperative and easy to work with. Some respondents present one or another sort of challenge.

The Unresponsive Respondent

The respondent who is unresponsive may not be convinced that candor is without risk. Or the respondent may just feel that there is no potential profit in participating in the interview and therefore no point in cooperating with it. The result is a sequence like the following, from an interview in the study of occupationally successful men:

INTERVIEWER: What's it been like for you, raising your children?

RESPONDENT: Well, I suppose you don't have to worry about running out of aggravations.

I: Could you tell me about the most recent time when you might have felt an aggravation?

R: That's just a manner of speaking. Really, things are just fine.

Maybe the interviewer should have shown more appreciation of the humor in the respondent's initial response. Maybe the interviewer's follow-up question was too abrupt. Maybe the interviewer would have been more successful with "What are the kinds of things you have in mind that might supply you with aggravations?" But there's no reason to believe the respondent would not have deflected any query. A respondent who doesn't want to respond isn't going to become cooperative because of a question's wording.

The Respondent Determined to Present a Particular Picture

A man I interviewed in the study of retirement was anxious to have me believe that he had been an outstanding success as a businessman. This may have been the case, although he was so determined to have me believe it that I was led to wonder. When I asked for incidents that would display the highs of his business career, he became evasive. Every effort I made to elicit the daily experience of running a business was misunderstood or sidestepped. A pump-priming comment I made—"It sounds like you were carrying a lot of responsibility"—elicited only annoyance. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get specifics. I gave the interview about an hour and at the end of that time felt that I had learned little. I couldn't see how a second interview would make things better and didn't try to schedule one.

I don't know if this respondent wanted to convince me of something that was counterfactual, but he acted as though he did. When a respondent wants you to believe something that is different from what actually happened, the respondent is likely to avoid providing detail and to frustrate your efforts to elicit detail. My policy in such situations is to keep plugging away for concreteness until I'm convinced further effort is pointless. If problems seem to exist primarily in one area, I will search for a study-relevant area in which the respondent is willing to be candid. If the respondent insists on remaining general, I may try saying something like "We really need stories that will show us what was happening—the more concrete and detailed, the better" or "I wonder if there's a specific

incident you could describe, because then we can see what happens." But if the respondent doesn't have detailed stories to tell and doesn't want to admit it, this urging won't work either.

A respondent who wants to avoid an issue in an area of the research may be as difficult. I was in the early phase of an interview with a physician about his retirement when it became evident that he had been asked to resign his hospital appointment. There was some hint in what he was saying that he had become unreliable, maybe that he had botched a procedure. A colleague's vulnerability to a malpractice suit was alluded to and then dropped. As I pressed for detail about the reasons for the respondent's retirement, I could see his edginess increase. Although I then moved to an area where I thought he would be more comfortable, he wanted to be told again what the study was about and where I was from and who would know what he said. For the rest of the interview he was tense. He didn't relax until I said that I thought the questions I had brought with me had been adequately explored and that I wanted to thank him. His interview provided usable material, but it wasn't a good interview.

People Whose Feelings Are Raw

In a study of bereavement we called widows and widowers within weeks of the death of their husbands and wives to arrange for an interview. If our call was answered by a relative acting as a caretaker, we would be sent away, sometimes fiercely: what right did we have, they wanted to know, to intrude at such a time? But when it was the widow or widower who answered our call, we often were welcomed. For the most part, the new widows and widowers were grateful for someone to talk to. Although their feelings were raw and their pain immediately at hand, the great majority found talking to be helpful.

When grief is new and pain intense, people need both to let their distress be known and to gain relief from the distress by pushing it away. So people want sometimes to be able to talk, sometimes not to have to talk. An interviewer—as a stranger who is understanding, indeed professional; concerned yet dispassionate; and able to listen without offering either report-limiting sympathy or a palliative formula—is exactly the right person to talk to. Usually people organize themselves so they are ready to talk during the interview. They then take other times for distraction from awareness of their loss.

If I Weren't in This Situation, You Wouldn't Want to Interview Me

Sometimes the interview is a reminder to the respondent that he or she is in a category of people who have been hurt or who are, for some other regrettable reason, special. I once interviewed a widow whose husband had been an important political figure. She felt that if her husband were still alive not only would I not be seeing her in the course of a study of bereavement but she would perhaps not even be accessible to me for an interview of any kind. And also she felt that if we were having this interview while her husband was still alive, my manner would have been deferential rather than sympathetic. The respondent was able to describe these feelings; by doing so she was instructive about the social effects of bereavement.

THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

Having others present in an interview's setting always affects what can be asked and what will be reported. Often, the best way to deal with the situation is to include everyone present in the interview. At least then their contributions to what is said will be more nearly evident.

For example, I began an interview of a retired physician with his wife silently in the background. The physician was maintaining that he felt happily occupied despite a much-reduced work schedule. He clearly was not only reporting to me but also arguing with his wife, although I had no idea what the argument was about. When I asked the physician's wife what she thought about what her husband was saying, she said that he didn't have a reduced work schedule at all, that he was still working 10-hour days, only now he wasn't getting nearly the income he had gotten when he worked those long hours in his practice. He had given up his medical building office, to be sure, but he continued to treat patients from an office in the home. She said her husband could easily cut back his hours if he wanted to but he was determined to fill his time with work.

The joint interview provided information about the tensions that could be introduced into the marriage of retired men should the men define their retirement as bringing their work lives home. Had I been able to interview the respondent without his wife in the background, I might or might not have obtained a useful interview. But given that the respondent's wife was there, it was better to include her.

INTERVIEWING FAILURES

Sometimes respondents decide that they are being oppressed by the interview. And sometimes this is true. Being asked repeatedly for concrete instances can be experienced as badgering. Not being understood by an interviewer can be experienced as a kind of nonacceptance, and it is easy to become irritated or angry in response.

Respondents who begin being uncomfortable may ostentatiously check their watch, ask how many more questions you have, or just stop talking. In one instance in our study of occupationally successful men, a respondent fell asleep during an interview. I am grateful that I was not the interviewer, although I hope I would not have let the interview get to this pass. Going to sleep was the respondent's final move in a contest between him and the interviewer over who would control the interview.

Sooner or later every interviewer encounters a bad interview, an interview in which no matter what the interviewer does, the respondent does not provide usable material. Interviews that go badly have occurred less and less often as I have become more experienced. Nevertheless, I would guess that one interview in fifteen or twenty is a failure. When I have had an interview failure, my first reaction has been that it was my fault. Often enough, I have found much to criticize in my approach. But usually a bad interview, like a good one, is jointly produced by interviewer and respondent.

In one interview that went badly, the respondent appeared skeptical about the interview to begin with. He wanted to talk about his situation, partly to get a grip on it, but he didn't want to lose control of the discussion. I don't think he started off determined to reject the interview, although that is what he came to.

The respondent had had a distinguished career and now was retired. He lived by himself, separated from his wife. He sometimes visited his former firm when the firm had open meetings, although he then sat silently through the meetings. He had no financial problems. He presented his current life as ideal, without stress, with all the time in the world for hobbies and reading. It struck me as bleak.

The interview began with the respondent answering questions briefly, although thoughtfully. But when I tried to get him to elaborate on a response, he replied that he had already answered the question. When I said it was important for us to have a sense of the events of his retirement, he responded by wondering what I could possibly make of his words. He

said that people are each unique, living unique lives, and that you can't generalize from what any one person tells you. I didn't want to get into defending the study, but not defending it may have been a kind of defensiveness too, an unwillingness to take his objections seriously. Anyway, I asked more questions. The respondent began allowing his attention to wander. I don't think he looked at his watch, but he shuffled in his chair in a way that suggested he was bored. Then, in case I had missed the body language, he told me he was bored. Then he said that he thought the kind of work I was doing was useless and that he didn't see any reason to participate further. I thanked him for his time and left.

I decided later that I should have attempted to strengthen the interviewing partnership by focusing on the respondent's former work. But when I listened to the tape of the interview, I found that I had tried doing that. The respondent had brightened briefly but then had gone silent again. That was the worst interview I have had in the last fifty or so I have done, and maybe the worst interview I've ever had.

What to Do When an Interview Is Going Badly

It isn't hard to tell when an interview is going badly. Neither the respondent nor you is relaxed. The respondent may indicate discomfort or resistance or antagonism by lapses in attention or sparse responses or outright challenges. Even without this, you are likely to be uncomfortable. You can't get engaged by the interview. You find it hard to listen closely to the respondent. You aren't in touch with the respondent's account, limited as it is. Your questions are awkward. You fail to ask the respondent to extend a description or give detail for an incident, although usually you would do this almost automatically. You flounder. The interview takes on a survey research quality: you ask a question, and then the respondent gives a brief response and waits for the next question. You are painfully aware of how little the interview is producing and yet feel unable to rescue it.

What can you do? If it is the first few minutes of the interview, you might simply continue in the hope that you and the respondent will become more at ease. But if the interview has been going as long as 5 minutes, and the respondent indicates discomfort, you ought to try to strengthen the research partnership. You might check that the respondent understands and accepts the study's assumptions. A pause in questioning to discuss the study's aims can make it easier for the respondent to ask for

further information. You might search for an area of easy rapport; the area of the respondent's work will often do. You should make every effort to follow the respondent's lead in deciding what to talk about, so long as it is within hailing distance of the study's substantive frame (as the interviewer did in the second interview in chapter 4). More than anything else, you should attend closely to both text and subtext of the respondent's statements.

A way of dealing with unresponsive respondents that I haven't tried, but have been told by other investigators is effective, is to say, "It is important for us that the people we talk with give us complete accounts of their observations or experiences in the area of the study. Is this something you feel you can do?" If this can be said so that it isn't confrontational, it might make it easier to obtain useful materials.

My own practice, if an interview is going badly and nothing seems to be working and yet I do not want to give up entirely, is to end the interview before the respondent begins to think about ending it, and set another appointment. To justify returning, I name some topics still to be discussed. Back at the office I talk to a colleague about the problems in the interview or at least think about how to approach the next interview.

With some respondents, nothing can be done. It may be that the particular match of interviewer and respondent is wrong. Or it may be that the respondent will always refuse to provide usable information, or is unable to. Some people play their lives close to their chests and will never show their hand, no matter the circumstance. Chalk it up to experience. Everyone has some bad interviews. It is not essential for a study that every interview be illuminating. If this respondent does not provide information about some phenomenon, then another will. It's a shame to lose the opportunity to learn from a respondent, and a bad interview is a loss for the study. But the loss is virtually never fatal.

ISSUES OF VALIDITY: DO RESPONDENTS TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH?

How much of what a respondent tells you can you believe? And how much is left out?

A while ago I was a respondent being interviewed by a skillful and sympathetic interviewer about the history of a research training program I had helped organize. I wanted the interviewer's project to succeed and

wanted to provide her with whatever information I had. And yet as I described the early days of the program, I observed myself slide over incidents that had been important at the time, because describing them would have made evident the frictions that had developed among the program's staff. Here I was, determined to be a good respondent and to describe exactly how it had all happened, and I was being less than candid. My justification to myself was that I didn't want to compromise other people's privacy nor to rehash old quarrels. Nor was I entirely happy with my own part in the conflicts of those long ago days. I dropped one or two markers to indicate that the program had had its problems, and had the interviewer asked me to say more about them, I would have. She didn't, and so I let them be. But what an incomplete report I provided!

I was also struck by the gaps in my memory. These, for all I know, may have been more significant. I could not remember how a critically important proposal had gotten written, although almost certainly I had done most of the writing. I vividly remembered going to Washington to seek further funding after the program had completed its first years, and my unsatisfactory encounter there with a representative of a granting agency. Perhaps defending a program that had become emotionally important to me was a more memorable event than writing a proposal for a program that did not yet exist. But it was surprising to me that I could provide detailed information about the one event and no information about the other.

Cooperative respondents asked about a past no longer much thought about will probably display, as I did, oases of vivid memories within a desert of uncertainty. They are likely also to display, as I did, unwillingness to make all their memories accessible. On the other hand, they may, again as I did, provide markers to the elided material that an attentive interviewer can recognize.

There was one thing I did not do in my responses to that interview: I did not invent events that had not occurred. Indeed, I felt no temptation to invent anything—not a role for myself I hadn't played nor a success for the program it hadn't had. I think this too is likely to be the case for most respondents in most studies: what is reported may be spotty, but little will be invented. The lying respondent happens less often than people who don't do interviewing may imagine. For one thing, it's difficult to maintain a counterfactual reality when being pressed to provide detailed descriptions of events. And why should anyone want to do it?

But while we as interviewers can anticipate that we will be told the truth, we cannot assume that we will be told the whole truth nor the

precise truth. If respondents want to keep from us events or behaviors or a sector of their lives, there is every reason to believe that they can succeed. While it would be difficult for respondents to produce the circumstantial detail and corroborating incident necessary to make an invented reality seem plausible, it is very easy for them not to report something—and to give no indication that there is something not being reported.

There are some kinds of events that we are unlikely to hear about unless we have established an interviewing relationship in which there is extraordinary trust. People will not endanger themselves to contribute to social research. In our interviewing of occupationally successful men we were told of no incidents in which our respondents embezzled from their employers, although we heard of incidents in which others had embezzled. It seems to me unlikely that we had in our sample only men who were aware of others' dishonesty and none who were dishonest themselves.

Nor can we be sure we will be told the precise truth. The vagaries of respondent memory make for reports in which some observations are crystal clear while others are obscured or distorted or blocked. Respondents also may shade their responses to present a positive picture of themselves. This seems to me most likely in a first interview; in later interviews a respondent, more confident of acceptance, may provide corrective information. One respondent, an HIV-positive IV drug user, in a first interview described breaking a syringe against the wall when importuned by a friend to share it; in a subsequent interview he described another occasion when he agreed to share his needle. He wasn't lying in his first story. It really happened—or maybe came close to happening. But it wasn't until the later interview that he presented the more mixed picture.

Shading responses to present a positive picture of the self is especially likely when respondents are asked about opinions, attitudes, appraisals, evaluations, values, or beliefs. These can express an identity appropriate to the situation of the interview as much as something more stable. Asked by a friend to comment on the future of an institution the respondent is involved in—for example, a company or university—the respondent might express his mood of the moment; with an interviewer, the respondent might be more thoughtful and analytic.

Information is context dependent—that is, shaped in part by the interview situation—when it is free of anchors in observations of events.

Generalizations from experiences also tend to be context dependent because they depend on weightings of what may be discordant observations. A question like "Is your relationship with your sister good or not so good?" can have many true responses, including those indicating that the two get on well enough, that the two have a barely submerged rivalry, and that the two stopped talking for a year after the sister disputed a will. If we are seen as a friendly stranger, we may be told that the relationship is amicable, which is true. If we are seen as a sympathetic listener, interested in the respondent's disappointments, we may hear that the sister is not to be fully trusted, also a true response.

While questions about concrete incidents—such as "What happened when you and your sister were last together?"—may be answered from more than one perspective, they are less likely to be modifiable by the interviewing context. Thus, we will obtain more reliable information and information easier to interpret if we ask about concrete incidents than we will if we ask about general states or about opinions.

Despite all the ways in which interview material can be problematic, richly detailed accounts of vividly remembered events are likely to be trustworthy. Nor does apparent inconsistency always demonstrate invalidity. After all, people can act in inconsistent ways or maintain inconsistent feelings. Business partners, for example, can be both grateful and resentful. A respondent who in a second interview describes an attitude toward a partner contradictory to an attitude described in a first interview may in both interviews have been telling the truth.¹¹

Sometimes we can check on the validity of a respondent's account by interviewing other respondents. Occasionally, there are records we can look to for corroboration.¹² But for the most part we must rely on the quality of our interviewing for the validity of our material. Ultimately, our best guarantee of the validity of interview material is careful, concrete level, interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Most investigators let analysis slide until the advent of an "analysis phase." Anselm Strauss, in *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, his manual on analysis in the style of "grounded theory,"¹ and Miles and Huberman, in their more eclectic *Qualitative Data Analysis*, consider this bad practice. They urge that analysis begin as soon as there is data collection. Miles and Huberman observe that the more investigators have developed understandings during data collection, the surer they can be of the adequacy of the data collection and the less daunting will be the task of fully analyzing the data.²

Despite the unquestionable merits of this view, a conspiracy of forces regularly impedes early analysis. During the interviewing phase the investigator must deal with all the demands of obtaining the data: recruiting the respondents, conducting the interviews, getting them transcribed, deciding whether the right information is being collected, and returning to conduct more interviews. Nor can the investigator escape awareness that when the interviewing is finally over, not only will all the data be at hand but there will be uninterrupted weeks or months available for their analysis. Undoubtedly the investigator will develop insights, speculations, and small-scale theories beginning with the first pilot interview or before. But it is likely to be only after interviewing has ended that the investigator can give full attention to analysis and writing.