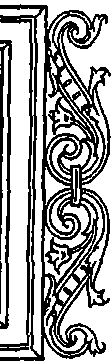
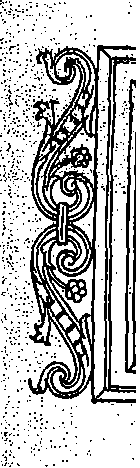
**LEARNING FROM STRANGERS**

THE ART AND METHOD OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES



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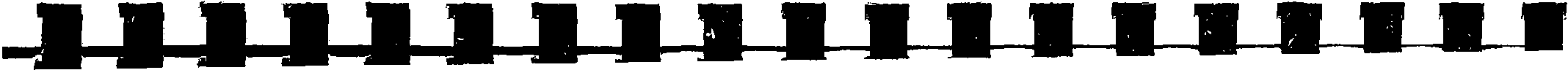
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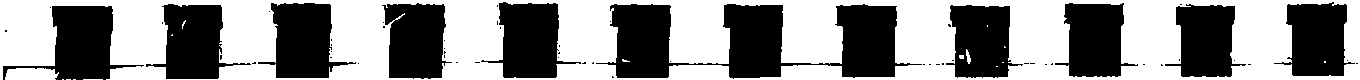
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**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

**WHY WE INTERVIEW**

Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through in­ terviewmg'\ve can leiim about ·we have not been and could not go

pfaces

and about settings iD which we have not lived. If we have the right infor­ mants, we can learn about the quality of neighborhoods or what happens iD families or how organizations set their goals. Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occu­ pations 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 mterviewing, about people's interior expe­ riences. We can learn what people perceived and how they mtet}ll'.eted .their

perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelmgs.tl Wecan 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 wmdow 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 soci­ eties, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of couples and fam­ ilies.

**1**

2 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing rescues events that would. otherwise be lost. The celebra­ tions and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no .r.cor<!. ec.ePt. in their memories. And there are, of course, no observers of the internal even 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 prepackag d as the polling or survey interview in which questions are fixed and answers limited: "Do you consider your­ self 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 in­ terviews 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% Jndependent, ,7% Other or Don't Know. Furthermore, the standard­ ization of question and response pemilts 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 par­ ticular categories or what the relationship is between being in one cate­ gory. 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. Be­ cause 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

Introduction 3

brief answers to open-ended items, we would do well to drop the require­ ment 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 work­ ing 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. Further­ more, 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. Be- · cause each respondent is expected to provide a great deal of information, the qualitative interview stuQx. 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.

Jn 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 exam­ ple, the job satisfaction of workers in different firms. It is also preferable if we hope to use statistical analysis to identify linkages among phenom­ ena, especially where the phenomena are unlikely to be recognized by respondents as linked, An example would the contribution of parental loss in childhood to vulnerability to depression in adult life.

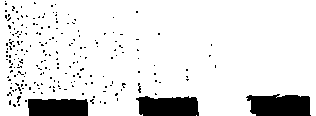
On the other hand, if we depart from the survey approach in the direction of .tailoring our interview to each respondent, we gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides.' We pennit ourselves to be informed as we cannot be by brief answers to survey items. The report 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/And usually we can



produce numerical data from qualitative interview studies that have ex­ plored the same area with different respondents, although we may have to

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4 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS lnlroductlon 5

engage in a time-consuming and cumbersome coding procedure and tol­ erate 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 inthe 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;\_ Itry 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:CAnd 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 itl All the things that I thought I would do, if! weren't in a working situation . . .I'd be writ­ ing, I'd create, I'd start a busin.Ss. I had so many ideas while I wns 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 ensily. When I say **''ideas,'' I mean practical, good ideas and creative ideas. But I have tlo op­** portunity 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 aiiport, and I could fly there. I mean, I could be doing things. I could find alternative ways. But!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. Ifyou 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 shoos-!mean, you know, rent pumps, I mean, the kind tl1at I used to wear-when I came here. And I . . . it wos like I was tom between pride in my appearance and U1e focl 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 lo 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 'ti! two or three in the morning, which I do

* . . *[chuckles]* I could understand that ns a reaction. The focl 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.

INTBRVIEWBR: 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 Inst 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 lo 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 wns 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 wns the end of it. And she's not going to do anything either.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you say that, that she's n<j.l going to do anything?

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

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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.

!NTBRVIEWER: Yeah. Suppose somebody suggested to you, say, volunteer work. What would that mean to you7

RBsPONDBNT: *[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 odd7 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 l)ospice 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,1feel that I've goiten 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?

RBSPONDENT: We were talldng 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

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Introduction 7

**contributions. Because I do care what's happening in this world. It's just**

that I don't know whether I can give anything. INTBRVIBWER: What did your daughter sny7

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 quali­ tative interviewing. It also suggests the contribution qualitative interview­ ing 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 inter­ view 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 ac­ count.

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-

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8 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS lnlroducllon 0

spondent might have given more emphasis to external events, for exam­ **ple, the functioning of the retirement program provided by her company.** Qualitati ve interviews may focus on the internal or the external; what is common to them all is that they ask the respondent to provide an observ­ er'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 pro­ vides 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 responl;[ent believed that she too would fail to achieve the active postretirement life she was planning. The interviewer was also responsi­ ble 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 respondenr') in the small exchanges of ordinary conversation by, for example, match- ( ing 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) !\'/. .the respondent's a:=J count 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 under­ stood but also affirmed that, yes, this is the right sort of material. The interviewer's voice was mostly serious, respectful, interested. The respon­ **dent'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 mostlr the\_ i11teryJ .

**SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN UNDERTAKING A QUAL­ ITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY**

REASONS TO CONDUCT A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

Rese\_ ]]\_ -irns qµJQ\_ .c:lictij[e rs)!!ch method. Here are research aims that could make the qualitative interview study the method of choice:

1. *Developing detaile(l\_ cleKriptions.* 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 inter\_e .teir reports, but we will in any event

want from our infonnants tlie fullest, most detailed description

\_./l?Ossible.

*v2· lntegr(lting multiple perspectives.* We may want to describe an

organization, development, or event that no single person could have observed in it&. t.otality. 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 nec­ essary, standardized questions won't work, because every re­ spondent will have different observations to contribute. Historians, biographers, and journalists deal regularly with prob­ lems of this sort and regularly do qualitative interview studies.

*,)< Describing process.* We may want to know, about some human enterprise, how events occur or what an event produces. Econ­

omists 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 pro­

cesses they use.2 Or we read in the newspapers about "deadbeat

dads" and assume that divorced fathers who withhold child sup­ port must be indifferent to the welfare of their children. But is

this the case? What leads some fathers who'no longer live with

esxaypirnegss.e-d-

a desir.e to .und·ersta--nd--w--h--atever---i-t-·w--·as- - th··e respondent was

their children to fail to contribute to the children's support? Again, qualitative interviews can elicit the processes antecedent

1 0 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

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

***/.Developing h.listic descr.iption:* By \_putting together. process re­** ports from people whose behaviors mterrelatputtmg together the reports of retailers and customers or of institutional psychi­ atrists and institutionalized patients-we can learn about sys­ tems. 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 qualitiitive iriterviewiiig of mem­ bers of a family to understand the nature of their family life, and qualitative interviewing of members of an organization to under­ stand how the organization works, how it moves toward goals or is paralyzed by internal friction. Ingeneral, the dense information obtained in qualitative interviewing permits description of the many sectors of a complex entity and how they go together.

1. *Learning how ev\_e.\_nt .are.mterpreted.* We might want to learn not so much about an event as about how it is interpreted by pwtic­ ipants 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 en­ ables us to learn about perceptions and reactions known only to those to whom they occurred.4
2. *Bridging intersubjectivities.* We might want to produce\_ a report that makes it possible for readers to grasp a situation from the inside, as a pwticipant 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*

Introduction 11

*re7wch.* Qualitative interview studies can provide preparation for quantitative research. Those who do quantitative research require variables to measure, issues about which to frame ques- . lions, 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 arc likely to emerge from a qualitative interview study can inform quanti ta­ tive investigators about what matters in their intended topic.6

Young investigators are sometimes discouraged from undertaking qual­ itative research studies because of the time they require and their pur­ portedly 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 short­ cuts 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 cal) not only .....'· analyze as they go-most people who do qualitative interview studies do/''

is-but also work out their story in their minds. Once their interviewing 1s 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 under­ stand the issues of the research. It is entirely possible for investigators who do quantitative work to end a study knowing more about the statis­ tical 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

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12 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

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. Jn 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 rela­ tively 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 descrip­

tions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way, including the.human consequences of a disastrous flood9 and the experi­

ences 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 .sc­ tured approaches. While it can be valuable for the r-.Jults 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 ?wn words rather than required simply to choose one or another predetenmned alternative.

The hope of those who elect the fixed-question-open-response ap­

proach is that it will systematize the collection f qualilll:tive material and facilitate the quantitative treatment of the matenal. Inthis approach qua!-

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itative infonnation (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 catego­ rized 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 col­ lection turns out to sacrifice as much in quality of information as it gains in systematization. The interviewer is not actually free to encourage a re­ spondent 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.

Furthennore, the very style of question asking weighs against full response. Not only must interviewers ask every question of every respon­ dent 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 fonnat. 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, 'Tm not unhappy with my situation." Al­ most 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. Jn our example of the retiree we probably would not have been told the signif­ icant detail of the respondent's having traded her pumps for sneakers but

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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 differel,\\ approach e!llirely. While studies using this approach may avoid some ot'the vubierabiilties of qualitative interviewing studies, they also lack their strengths.

**THE PHASES OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING RESEARCH**

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Qualitative interview studies generally begin with decisions regarding the sample to interview, move on to data collection, and conclude with anal­ ysis. 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 inter­ viewing, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, and, finally, writ­ ing the report.

**CHAPTER 2**

**RESPONDENTS: CHOOSING THEM AND RECRUITING THEM**

**AIMS AND SUBSTANTIVE FRAME OF THE STUDY**

Any res.: c-?.oje:... <£e .! ak\_e - .eli!,n. .k??. .t!tat was previ­ O!!l.Y.}11:'.-if'i.l.!1:.!i"answer a specific question, sucli as liovipatients ·reiict to a agnosis of a life-threatening illness; or to illuminate an area, as by

showmg 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 ahost 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

*substg.11.ti.ve frame* of the study.

The initial step in a.study\_ is to decde.' provisionally, wl)fil.i lli!M.F..Ul. be ano.w.l!l\U'?J?.IC:.S..l. .IJ..!!1.C!.ud\_ed m its substantive frame. Once these

·are decided, who should be taikeci"wiiii; an:;ra:i:ioiii.wfiaCciln be worked

out. s e investigator learns more about the area of the study, the sdy .s l111Il and rame ma well be modified. One good reason for doing

<pilot rte1e:-vs I to clarify the. al.ffi§ rulQ. frame OF· the. study before mterv1ew111g its\_ pnmary respondents. Even with pilot interviewing, how-

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ever, the boundaries of the study's frame are likely to shift as more is leame2!alth9ugh as tE..s!!!\_ J2!:0CelldUl!. \_shu\_!\_<! shift.Je. .. @<Ls\_a.

\_JThe breadth of a study's substantive frame is often a compromise !

betwe!U!!e i11\_-s!\or's des\_J91 \_1).'.\_of fo\_cll "?d.for nhisive- \ [nessjThe narrower the substantive frame, the easier 11 ts 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 *M oby 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 weJI.

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 expla­ nation or description, each of which would require development of dif­ ferent 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 prob­ lems and strengths..Without giving the matter a lot of thought, I defined the study's frame as the experiences of the executives during their resi­ dency 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, reason­ ably 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 '('l!'it.ed 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.

. upose the aim of our study is to describe an event or development or mstitut10n: 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 experi­ **enced. To enrich or extend our understanding, we mi8"iit also Want to in** elude as respondents people who view our topic from different perspectives

or. who kn?w about different aspects of it. Our aim would be to develop a w1de-rangmg *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 gov­ ernmental 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 aproach would be different if we wanted to study the experiences or behav10rs 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 smgle 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

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panel of knowledgeable infonnants, 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 infonnants Jo tell us about th.e instituion of hi\d visitation and a sample of parents to tell us how 1t works m pracnce.We would then be doing two C!istinct 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 infonnant, although not both at the same time. In a pilot study I did of bum victims a respondent was first an informant on the nature of advocacy organizations for bum 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 J\1Y 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 fonner 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 in­ volved in different ways. To get a sense of the scope of the event we

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might begin ;'ith 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 ihe 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.

1. *An organization.* We might want to study an institution or an or­

. ganization of.coordinated effort: a lying-in hospital, a school, the Navy. Here people m well-defined roles meet to produce planned events. In a

f

./ s!U of this srt we can expect to encounter subgroups, or cliques, and

·• . . polincs. Inter;1ew sblrnkl.be..held ..with.people. in..differentjQ.bLO U:Uf­ fer11t.leY !lships to .the institution,

and from differ-

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et.. 01:111aj\_gr1mp\_s,\_

·· ·A study of an organization requires that the investigator succeed in

. obtaining informants without being perceived as an intrusive foreign pres­ enc. How to survive in the field is discussed in books on field methods, but 11 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 persis­ tece. Of great value is the ability to move through the institution without bemg 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 lose collectivity.* We might want to study a collection of people toch with one another but not as closely linked as those in an orga­

?1zation; for example, a community, a network of associates, or the res­ idents of a neighborhood. With luck it may be possible to find someone

who is central and knowledgeable and who can provide both orientation and spons?rship, 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

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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 knowl­ edgeable insider willing to serve as an informant o informnts. But others who might help include a knowledgeable margmal or disaffected · figure within the s)1stem. Such a person may be more willing to describe the system's failings than would someone central to the system and com­ mitted to it. Still another possibility would be a retiree, a person who h2as

. a careet's experience with the system and now has time to remisce. 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 gov­ ernment or foundation funding for the project may also help.

But it can happen that people you would like to consult prove inac­

cessible to you; your calls are fielded by a lower-level staff member who turns you away. When this has happened to me, my response h":" been to think about getting the experience into my notes and to try agarn. When it keeps on happening, I try to be philosophcal about being frozen\_ out, do something else for a while, and then reconsider my strategy. But, m truth,

the experience is hard on morale. .

Sometimes there is no obvious orienting figure, or there 1s no need for one because the people to be interviewed are immeately appare?t. i:ii.a

study of.a disaster there will be officials and profess10nals hos Job 1 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 st "'.ith pe?ple. who are available to you and easy to interview, .espec1al\_l 1 having inter­ viewed them will make you more informed and leg1t11ruzed when you proceed to interview others, A second principle is to have your early

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intei;iews 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 int:rviwing could go on forever, In a study of the funclloning ?f tod s divorce laws, with judges and lawyers and divor­ cees an their fam1hes all to be interviewed, when do you quit? When do

* you decide you have interviewed enough people? The best answer is that Y?\_u\_ .W. ..Y.'!.ll\_ fi.£0\_l!!!\_te.r,<!i!J! J'! rtums, when the information *ff* you o 1 1s redundant or penpheral, when wliaf you do learn that is newil

?dds too l.mle to what you already know to justify the time and cost of the ;' interviewing.

* + Biographers, whose research by its nature requires a panel of infor­ mants, reully hae the problem of deciding when to stop interviewing.

. Aftr having intrvewed the occupational associates of the biographer's sbject, e subject s close friends, the members of the subject's imme­ diate family'. and the peope who were close to the subject as a child,

. shou!d the biographer continue with the college roommate, the distant

. , cousm, 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.

* + . RE.PRESENTATIONAL SAMPLES
* · Suppose . at 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 apprach is to e:elop a sample that can be argued on grounds of

. . maematical \_Probab1hty to be not too different from the population in

* + which e are nterested. If everyone in a population has the same chance of turning up in the sample, we have a probability sample.

,· . · Ifthe peopew.h make up a probability sample are chosen in such a way

. that each choice 1s mdependent of every other choice, and the sample in­

.. ,. eludes at least 60 respondents, then the sample is likely to be a fairly good

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representation of the population in the sense that every important charac­ teristic 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 pheno­ menon will not appear at all in a simple random sarnpleof 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 num­ bers, and. lihe 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 f -· -ppulation 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 d\_uplication in our sample, we may prefer to select respondents purpo­ sively so that we obtain instances of all the important dissimilar forms present in the larger population. We may further want each of the dis­ similar 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 devel­ opments 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 popu­ lation 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

* ignificant 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 vari-

. ables. If you want to show that adaptation to geographical mi­ gration 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. Ifyou suspect that the experience of ' a newcomer is heavily dependent on the extent to which net­ works are already established in the community into which the

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**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 sh?w that one of the problems experienced by newcomer .couple.s 1s.that the hus­ band is absorbed by the need to prove hunse.lf m his ne':" wok­ place and so becomes emotionally unavailable to 1s wife, include in your sample couples in which the husband is unem­ ployed or self-employed or in which the wife has the more de­

manding career.

If you have a list of possible respondents to work from, you my be able to establish informal quotas that will maximize the heterogeneity of your sample in some respect. You can decide wht sort of conast ou want among your respondents and, as you recruit from the hst, give preference to the potential respondents whom you need to fill o quo­ tas.' To 'know whether potential respondents have characteristics you want, you can include "filter" questions in.the telephone calls you make to arrarige for interviews. Inour study of retirement, for example, we used the filter question "Might you retire within the next ear or so?"

One argument for generalizing to a lger populatl?n from a sample chosen to maximize range depends on bemg able to claun that the sample included the full variety of instances that would encounteed any­ where. If we find uniformities in our sample despite or ha g ade­ quately represented the range of instances, then those umform1t1es must be general. If we find differences among. types of nstance, then those differences should hold in a larger population. We will not be ble to say anything about the proportion of instances of diffrent types m larger population, since the proportion in our sample might be ery 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 usel range of instances, is to accept pretty much whomever we can get. This

is a sample of convenience. . . . Some people who do qualitative research e w1llmg to base th1r reports on informal interviews with friends, famJly, and chance acquam-

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tances. Their examples are introduced with a phrase like "An acquain­ tance 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 ?bout a group difficult to penetrate-gypsies, migrant workers, the very nch-it can be a breakthrough to find *any* member of tl1e 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 pop­ ulation 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 tl1em 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 flt 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 them­ selves, 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. Ina 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 some­

*:* thing illegal, you may be able to find people in jail for the crime-

, ·although they will be, by definition, the ones wh0 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.

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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. Ithelps to be on the staff

or to work with someone on the 9

staff.

These suggestions are not intended to minimize the ingenuity that may be needed to find appropriate respondents. For a pilot study of newcom­ ers to the Boston area I started by asking the gas company for a copy of its most recent list of "tum-ons" and was told that the company guarded the list cloely. It took the intercession of a university vice president to ob­ tain 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 coniacting local newcomer clubs, but before doing so I made connec­ tion with a Welcome Wagon representative. She supplied me with names of newcomer couples in her area until the central office of her na­ tional 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 Con­ venience Samples

A problem with all samples selected orily because they are conveniently obtained is that we may not have good bases for generalization. With a probability sample, generalization is straightforward, based on mathemat­ ical 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 execu­

.·tives 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 situa­ tion 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

. theit 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 gener-

. alized 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.

*·( epth.* 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, re-

* ··ferring to an orator, ''The deeper he dives into his privatest secretest pre­

.. .sentiment-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

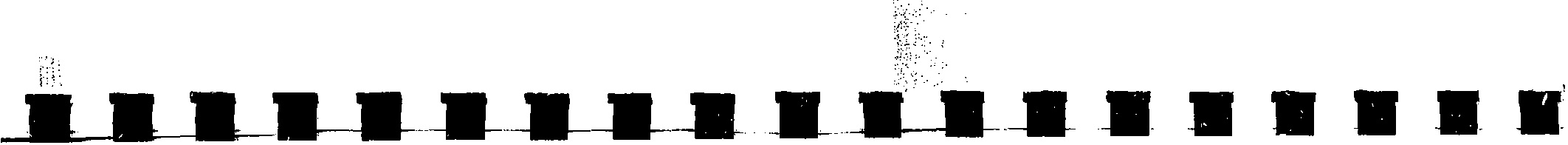
* + - .expression of it. Yet we must be aware that we are working with theory,

.,.. and.we might be wrong.

···.•·. The study of bereavement provides an exami'le. 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,



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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 prc­ tices, the way people display their grief, are easily modified by time and place. We would, therefore, want a representative sample before gener­ alizing 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 argumen •based on the purported depth (and therefore universality) of whatever it fs we are describing is the argument that there is no justification for questioning the exportation of a theory based on our sample. We might acknowl­ edge 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 embez­

zling. 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, Cres­ sey 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 io all embezzlement because it was inherently plausible, it was invariably consistent with his data, and-although he left this im­ plicit-there was no reason his theory should be true only of impris­ oned 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 be­ come. This is especially the case when the results of a quantitative study can anchor a discussion based on qualitative interviewing. For example,

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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 represen­ ta.tive 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 dif-

* + ference between a sample and a larger population on one or on a dozen

.• characteristics does not make a sample representative of the larger pop­

: ulation on characteristics that have not been examined. A snowball sam­

: pie, 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.

:. *C*.,. .*om*. *parison Cases*

.. -.

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•: Inqualitative interview studies, anyone who has anything to teach us is a

,. .desirable interviewee. Often it is useful to interview at least a few people ', ··\\'ho might constitute comparison cases. In a study of men in responsible

•;;.positions, we were several times misled by the filter questions we used to ';: stablish that a potential respondent was actually in a responsible job. As "i)•:result, we . mistakenly selected into our sample men in occupations

·;:.different from those we wanted to learn about. We interviewed the men

»i,Jin)'way and found their contrasting experience to be instructive. And in r':,11,::stil\iy of single parents, we intentionally interviewed people in intact

•.{!harriilges·as a way of understanding better what we were being told by

*1{* singlp parents.

11;,•i>Should you. have a full-scale comparison group? Often, it is all an

;.i',.vestigator can do to collect information from.an adequate sample of

f people in a situation; io·also collect information from an adequate sample

iffof people *not* in the situation can seem an unmanageable burden. It may

11;t;,'

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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 wpuld 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 SO!llething else to do and would accept forgetfulness as an explana­ tion 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, ex­

plicitly 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 lo

* + - 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 oth­

·erwise 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. Ihave occasion-

. · iiliy presented findings from a study I conducted of occupationally sue­

.. cessful men that dealt with, among other things, the division of household labor in their homes. I would report that these men operated from tradi-

* tional understandings, though with flexibility, and that I imagined that other men did as well. Regularly, it seemed, someone in the audience
  + - would ask how Icould 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."

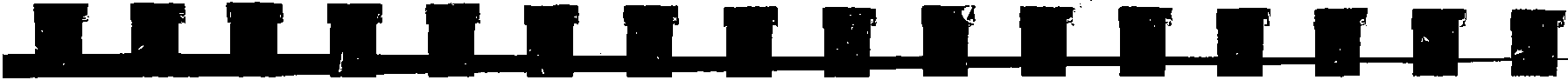
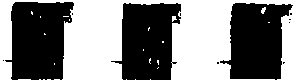
House husbands, men who devote themselves to child care and home maintenance while their wives work, are statistically unusual. In a random

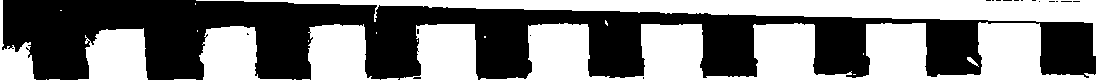
. sample of a hundred families you might find two or three.1 But house

. 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 proba.bly a good

. thing to have interviewed a few house husbands.

I found two house husbands by asking around when attending confer­ ences 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



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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 col­ lect 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 immedfacy, 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 generalizabil­ ity 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 com­ mon 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 pre­ sents 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

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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 strat­ egy of the poor-of the researcher who has little hope of gaining a large and representative sample from which bold generalization may be

**ma**d**e. 1111** H**owever, case researc**h **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 gener­ alization 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 con­ fidentiality of what they say, are willing to talk.

On the other hand, interviewers may need 'the right sponsorship or

!?pie or approach to avoid being turned down by people whose occupa­

. uons have accustomed them to asking the questions, including physicians

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and the police. Indeed, all sorts of things, including geography, can in­ crease 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,** n:iy 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 expe­ riences. 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 "S.():!!!!d-sQ\_ uggestecl lcall.yo.u.\_" The use­ fulness of a vouching figure extends to members of representational sam­ ples. 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 interme­ diary 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 asso­ ciation 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 univer­ sity. 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 affil­ iation. 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 U1e participation of respondents for a community sample of representatives, we have gener· ally 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 respon· dents 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 witl1 your junk mail, but do you

* happen to remember it?"

A checklist of items the investigator might be prepared to tell respon­ dents in a first phone call could include the following: who the investi· gator 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 appoint·

\_ ment, 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 lone­

, · liness, 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.

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On another occasion an English journalist who wanted to interview me called from England for the appointment. Transatlantic calls get my at­ tention, 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 suc­ cessful men, we wanted to interview our respondents three times over the course of a couple of months. That was a Jot 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 tumdowns 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 stilla 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 man­ agerial and administrative work and might contribute to their ameliora' lion. 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 finnly on her own track, which made her a wonderful re­ cruiter, produced difficulties for her as an interviewer. Jn 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 talk­

ing 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 an­ swers 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

1. 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 introduc­

·tion, 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 wOhh teaching. That I know something, but not everything. So they can inform me, and I'll under­ **stand.''**

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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.'' Inordinary 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 Ineeded to know. Now Idid .ask, "How about the most recent interview you did?" And then, maybe because Iwanted permission for my questioning, Iadded, "Could Iask about that? How you decided what you'd ask?"

Instead of answering my question, my colleague held it up for inspec­ tion. "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 gov­ ernment 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."**

Iwondered 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. Ithought Iwould try once more. Inoticed that Igave 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 Ihappened to be working on a book about interview studies and found the issue interesting. Isaid, "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 tlle book tlrnt he thought his respondent could answer.

This incident seems to me to display the determinants of tlle 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 Wld narrow or** something else. Icame 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. Iwas bringing a narrow substantive frame to my inquiry, but Iwanted density within it.

3. *A repertoire of understandings based on previous work, study,*

* + *awareness of the literature, and experience in living.* That Iwas myself someone who did interviewing as part of his work made me a more informed and alert inquirer. For one thing, Iunder­ stood the interview situation well enough to recognize that de­ ciding what to ask about can be a problem.

4. *Pilot research.* This was my first try at investigating how some­ one 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 Idone 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.

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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 mst 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 begin­ ning and an end, like the history of an innovative program in an organi­ zation, 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 mov­ ing 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 forewarn­ ing. 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 con­ fronted, 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. Inconsequence,

·. 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 par­ ticular 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.

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SYNCHRONIC REPORTS

Synchronic reports attempt to achieve coherence without the annature 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 otlier 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

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and to their friendships. Ina similar way a report on an organization might

Some aspects of the entity could be taken as fixed for t11e period of the study. They might include, for example, the roles and relationships of members. The story could describe how these an·angements 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

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diachronic approach makes possible.

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 g\_r pttems that' underlie developme111s in every\_ sector. A report might at­ ternpi-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 n.\_c:;tional req­ uisites that must be met if it is to survive, The members of these entities

;-itls'tie described aS ha g p onal 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 !!C'tio\_Il g\_£1!s: ends it wishes to achieve, as well as the goal\_ of sel\_f-maintenane, 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.

**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 respon­ dents 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 ar­ rangements 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 syn­ chronic 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 reasonwe might want to learn about parental investment is that we believe it can affect how the parents arrange custody and visitation.



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To develop infonnation about parental investment, we must first decide the narrower components of the area about which we can question respon­ dents. We also have to keep in mind that parental investment and its pos­ sible 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 chil­ dren, including fears, worries, hopes, gratifications.
3. The extent to which the parent's planning and activities are or­ ganized 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 chil­

dren.

Each of the topics in the list suggests Jines of inquiry that can be pursued with respondents. By listing these lines of inquiry we can con­ struct a guide for the interviewer when exploring this area with a respon­ dent. 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 any­ one? 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?

1. *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

a\_bout the children. What was the incident, what were the wor­ nes? 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 grat!fied \_by the children. What was the incident, what were the grallfications? Ask for times when R was dismayed or embar­ rassed by the children, when R was angry with them, when R felt burdened by them, when R was proud of them.

1. *The children and R's plans and activities.* To what extent is R's daily routine organized around the children's needs and activi­ ties? Ask about R's most recent workday and most recent week­ end. 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 elephone 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.

1. *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. Separtionfrom chilren.* 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

. .o other areas as well as parental investment, including, at the least the hitory of \_t!;e arents' visitation arrangements, the parents' experince with the v1s1tation arrangements, and the reactions of the children to the

.angements. For each\_ of these other areas we would work out, just as we

.1d here, the narrower issues and topics about which we might ask ques­ tions, nd then work out lines of inquiry for the interview.

It llllght ?e that intrviewing in the area of parental investment would fill all the time se\_t 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 mvestment or schedule more than a ·'single interview with re­

sponde?ts. If we ere devote an entire interview with respondents to cliscussmg parental investment, the preceding list of topics might serve as

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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 funptions 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 fa­ miliar· with the study's aims, guides can be sketchy, listing only topic

headings. Where interviewers cannot niake independent judgments re­ garding how best to direct their inquiry, as when the interviewers are *n?t* part of the investigative team, the interview guide must be developed tn

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. Itwouldn'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?',.

When the guide is more fully detailed, interviewers may have to be cautioned not to shift from qualitative interviewing· to survey-style inter­ viewing 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. Sollie of my worst interviews have been produced by a con­ scientious attempt to cover the topics in a guide. Permitting the respon­ dent to talk about what the respondent wants to talk about, so long as it

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is anywhee 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, t?e. interview guide would be the last page of my shorthand book. Now 1t 1s a page or two on a clipboard. Sometimes, if I know an ea ".'ell or if the interview is entirely exploratory, I do without a wrillen mtemw 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 inthe interview. It is there to provide preparation for the interview before he inerview begins, and it can be a checklist to be used at the edd of an

mterv1ew to ensure that nothing has been missed.

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

1. A DAY AT WORK
   1. Ask R [the respondent] to walk you through a day at work­ the previous day, if possible. When did R get in? What hap­

pened then? When did R leave? What thoughts on leaving? Did R talce work home?

* 1. Devel.op indications of emotional investment, tension, stress, and distress.

1. TASKS AT WORK
   1. 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.

1. HOW R CAME TO THIS WORK
   1. What led .R to his current line of work? (We don't need ·a dtailed work history; a summary i8" good enough.)
   2. Ftnd out how R came to his current job and what his feelings about his current job are.

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1. GRATIFICATIONS AND BURDENS OF WORK
   1. What is R going for in his work? Obtain incidents. in "'.hich R's work was gratifying to him. What wre the grat1ficat1ns? If not noted, ask about challenge, achievements, contnbu­

**tions.**

* 1. What does R have in mind as he does his work? Intances of

"flow"? Ask, if appropriate, "Can you think of a ume when you Jost yourself in your work?"

* 1. Obtain incidents in which R was unhappy at work and when

work produced distress.

* 1. Obtain incidents of stress. How did these incidents develop?

What was their outcome?

1. 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 t? by others. If not volunteered, ask about performance reviews,

salary and bonuses, verbal recognition.

This interview guide generally led to interviews of 2 hours r a bit less. Usually between four to six areas can be covered adequately m a 2-hour interview. If we want to cover more areas-or if one or more of th eas requires extensive discussion-we would probably do best to ant1c1pate

having more than a single interview session.

QUANTITATIVE ITEMS

Often as I noted in chapter I, there is good reason for including quan­ titativ items in qualitative interviews. Quantitative ites can hep anchor a qualitative discussion. Without quantitative information we might hav.e to make imprecise statements like "Many o our resodents fel thetr present circumstances to be undesirable. " With quanUtaUve matenal we **instead can say, ''Asked to rate their present circumstances on a scale** going from the best time in their lives to the worst, ovr 30% of respo dents 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 every­

one-make it easy to segment the population of respondents, for example,

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into those 40 and younger and ci1ose 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 an­ swered yes, the interviewer could then ask what was happening at the

: time. Important information often emerged.

ldon'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

·racts, 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 elab­

1. rate.·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 C,of an· event, on the other hand, must be interviewed on what they know

·'.th.at no one else does. If you are interviewing a panel of infonnants, you

:,Will probably have to draft a new guide, with the particular respondent in ' 111ind, for each interview. And the interviewer should be prepared to drop

)he:'guide. entirely if the interview takes an unexpected direction.

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EARLy INTERVIEWS AS LEARNING EXPERIENCES

:;.Yben·we try to imagine developments in a situation we don't know first­ '·hand(such as what it is like to be a memberof a submarine crew), we must

:·adapt.images from experiences we have had. We construct our initial un­ '.9:ef8tandings from the heroes, villains, and other characters who are

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members of our internal repertory company; the places we have been our­ selves or have read about or have seen on television; and the plot devel­ opments 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. Invirtually 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, inter­ view guides for pilot interviews can be largely misdirected, Areas asked about can tum out to be dull and unproductive while areas not included in the·guide tum 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. How­ ever, 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,

pssessed of m'.sleris. It is as though the area dares the investigator to discover what 1s 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 in intriguing and worth studying, one of the problems of the research enterprise will be to find the research prob­ lem that justifies the research. Findings and problem may emerge to­ gether. 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 fatl1er 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 enor­

.musly. t one extreme is th investigator whose books are compilations of mterv1ew excerpts, who brmgs two tape recorders to an interview each wifu its lapel mike, clips each mike on the respondent's shirt fron;, 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 re­

.·. orer .they an feel constrained by its presence. Most experienced qual- itative mterv1ewers have had a respondent who, upon using a word that is

·.obcene or vulgar, turned to the tape recorder to apologize to the tran­

*i;* ·scnber. And ahnost 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 some­

,: tlling 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

C,jn tlle paragraphs and pages of verbiage. Nor do you really need it all.

. •· Soe first-rate invstigators insist that they Clill' remember enough after

·· .an mterv1ew to wnte an adequate report.7 And one investigator I know

•:'. b,elieves that there is a useful discipline in taking notes. A tape

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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 Itake notes, just because Idon't have to worry about getting down all the respondent's words. (To be sure, Iam 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 Imean?") are dropped in note taking; so are respondents' false

starts and stray thoughts and parenthetic remarks. The vividness of speech disappears.

Content is likely to be lost as well. While Ihave a fairly good short­ hand for a nonstenographer, when Itry to take verbatim notes I regularly omit the utiimportant and much of the parenthetic ("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.

Inow regularly tape-record. 8 Ido 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 tran­ scribing 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 re­ corder. 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 in­ tend 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

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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 ques­

tioned, 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, deter­ rents to candor, If your study requires you to learn things about people d1at could discredit them-let alone get them indicted-forget about us­ ing 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 re­ quired 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

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56 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS Preporalion lot Interviewing 57

notes on what is contained on the tape, never transcribing at all except for quotations to be used in the report. Sliil 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 consqlt 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 qual­ itative interviews can run as long as 8 hours-with breaks, of course. If the interview is easy and sustaining, the respondent interested and coop­ erative, 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.

Ifthere 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 interest­ ing 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 fuilest 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 l become too tired to be fuily in touch with what I am being told and it is possible for me to schedule another interview, l cail 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'il 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 re­ spondents 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 respon­ dent 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 pro·

. cedure respondents are likely to be more willing to report fully. ln 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 respon­ ' dent 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

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

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-live dol­ lars 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.

Ina study with middle-income respondents we acknowledged the con­ tribution re'spondents 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 appreci­ ated.

**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 respon­ dent. She had no special reason; shejust 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 dan­ gerous. 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 .tele-

. . phone. I have conducted many telephone interviews and regularly find that useful infonnation 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 inter­

:views 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.

; Aresearch project that compared telephone and face-to-face interview­

. . . ing found that telephone respondents broke off contact more quickly,

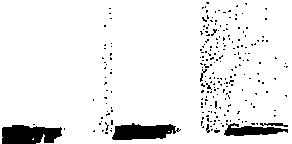
·.• :• .·were both more acquiescent and more evasive, and were more cautious

· 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

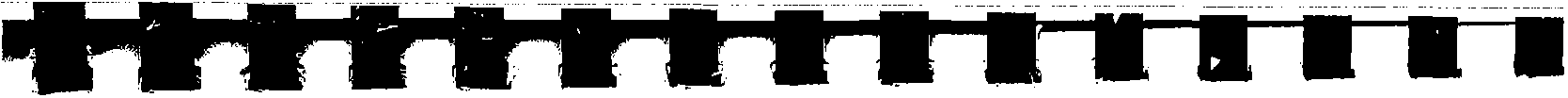
. : ·next best thing. "

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**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 di-

. · reeled to a place to sit.

Your first concern should be to establish a good interviewing partner­

. . ship. The way you act and what you say should communicate that you

. expect to work with the respondent to produce the interview. For exam­

. : pie, 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.

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· 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

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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?" Imight 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 leav­ ing, 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 stari of my interview with one HIV-positive 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 imponant for other people to un­ derstand as well as they can. And so l'm going to ask you to work with me to tell your story. And

**at's it. Thaf's what I'm doing.** R: Tell you what happened, huh? j: Exactly.

R: Sure. That's a good idea. And

**· it's about time.**

I: Yeah. It's amazing, with ail 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. Ihave no problem, So, will it be used in, like, kind of

COMMENTS

*Now I explain what my role will* ***be as interviewer and propose to*** *the 1·espondent 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 com·* ***men/ "And it' s about tinze." I*** *then ask the respondent to read* ***and sign the consent form .***

*This suggests to me that the re­ spondent may feel threatened by*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTBRVIBWBR: 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

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. l* ***want to establish a research***

* **segments, something where it's like**
* people will be able to listen to us?

. Or is it strictly for doctors and psy­

.chologists?

***the form. "! have no problem"***

***may mean that the respondent*** *first felt discmrifort, then rejected* ***it. This, plus the question about*** *who will listen to the tapes,* ***makes me think that reassurance*** *might be called for.*



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 Univer­ sity of Massachusetts, downtown.

*partnership with the respondent.* I:·:Nobody will be listening to the

. tapes except for people on the

.··Jlroject.

.·.. R: It doesn't matter to me.

·· J:.•What we'll do is, we'll tran­

• (scribe it. We'll be reading the tran­

: ..::scripts of your interview and the

'.·..,.

*My guess is that confidentiality*

***might be an issue.***

*The respondent says confidential­*



***ity is not an issue.***

*Just to lie on the safe side, and*

*to forestall the respondent' s later feeling uncomfortable about what*

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TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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In this excerpt I made explicit the terms of the interviewing relation­ ship. After introducing the study and myself, I said, "What I'm doing is

**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 infor­

**mation.**

R: Wei Idon't care. Imean, if you do quote me and you have to use my name, it may be more ef­ fective, by using my name and say-

**ing what it is. But that's neither** ·

**here nor there.**

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

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

I: Okay.

R: Really, it doesn't. It has no ef­ **fect for me, for some reason. De­ nial or something.**

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

**from now,**

R: Yeah, sure.

I: I guess I'd like to start by ask­ ing how you happen to be here. Could you just walk me through how you happened to get tested7

*he' s bought into, I go into detail*

*about how his tapes will be used.*

*Again the respondent says he doesn' t care. Loo/c;ng back, I think he wanted his story told.*

*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.*

***Respondent is holding his***

*ground.*

***''/ accept your position.' '***

*This could be interpreted as say­* ***ing , ''I'm going to be vulnerable to exposure but I don't care, al­*** *though maybe I should."*

***I direct the respondent' s atten­*** *tion to the interview at hand and* ***its continuation.***

*"Okay. I'm ready for the inter­*

***view now.''***

*And so we start. The phrase,* ***''Could you just walk me*** *through* . . ." *suggests the level*

*of detail I would like the respon· dent to provide.*

talldng 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 inter­ viewing relationship Ihope 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 in­

. terviewer and the respondent. The terms of this research partnership are ordinarily implicit, but if Iwere drafting a contract between myself and

. a respondent, Iwould 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 'L WIL9J!lof idle curiosity. On the other hand, the interviewer will be a prtviiegedinquirer in the

·sense that the interviewer may ask for infonnation the respondent would not make generally available, maybe would not tell any­ one else at all.

1. 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 after­ ward, 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 participa­ tion and communications as confidential information.

·.: . There are other ways, besides the research pal!lnership, of defining the interviewing relationship. Sometimes interviewers present themselves as

* the means by which the respondent can tell his story: "Through me you

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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

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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 infonnation, 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 exper­ imented." Interviews in police stations, of course, take on this quality, as do some employment interviews. Journalists sometimes read up on re­ spondents, the better to confound the respondents' efforts to dissemble. In my experience the research partnership definition of the interview­ ing 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**

1. eing a good interviewer requires knowing what kind of infonnation 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

RIJSPONDBNT: It really appalls me that they [in the court] think that

, **I'm some** . . . **some, I'm some sym­**

bol of money. That Is the only rea­ son that I even go to court and the court has any use for me is be­ cause I am a symbol of money.

. Thal 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 Idon't have any money to** feed him when I have him because I pay all the money out. They

**don't care about that.**

INTBRV!BWBR: Could you walk me through the last time you went to

* + court, just what happened?

*This response, a description of* ***the courts as the respondent*** *views them, is generalized. That* ***it is so emotional may obscure the /acl that it su1nmarizes the respondent' s experience rather***

***than presents any specific experi· ence. Note the respondent' s use of "they" when he insists that "they" don' t care about his re· lationship with his son, only*** *about obtaining money from him for his wife. Later, when the re­* ***spondent describes a specific*** *incident, he will talk about spe­ cific people.*

*This is a way of arking 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.***

INTERVIEW? R: The last time I went to court

***The respondent provides a time***

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 infonnation 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 fonner 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.

. ·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.

Tako out my taxes, I make two

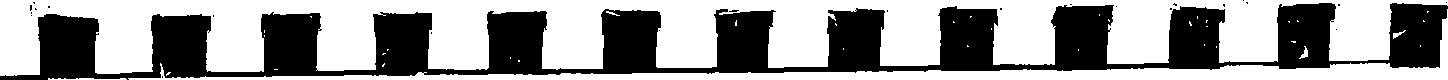
hundred and forty-seven dollars.

*reference for his last time in* ***court and a reason for having gone there but then returns ro***

***his outrage.***

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TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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 thfough 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 peo­** ple 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.

*I bring the respondent back to* ***the court appearance, to what is*** *likely to have been its begin­* ***ning-waiting around.***

*I ask for specifics to keep the*

***respondent in the incident.***

*I' m asking for the concrete de­ tails of the incident. Notice that I ask about what happens in the* ***present tense. This is an error, because it encourages a general· ized 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.***

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. .J 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

·: **Witnt three weeks vacation with my**

·. ·• son; Not all at once. Three weeks. ' ): 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

;:; ·dori,'t see any problem with that.

**:'.'.'.:' Oh, nO. The mediator says, ''Two**

{'.. **WeCks;;, I say, "No, I want three**

**)- ··Weeks.'' I mean, I don't know**

**;\_::::·what. the problem is. What's wrong**

i'\vit)l thfee weeks?

.')i: So what did he say then?

Jt:.R:·**He sayS, ''Well, I'm only giv**

i'.)ng you two weeks and come back

·.•:.:Jn a year and a half and we'll ne­

;;<gotiate again.'' What do you mean,

/'.come back? I'm not coming back

j ;,·::tti·**ibis Court again. Negotiate?**

:::•··What are we negotiating? 'This is

:;;:my• son. It's not a negotiating

**·.'.{g;::**

tt>;:·

*j: W :··,·..,*

*Again, requiring the specific.*

*The respondent is now in the* ***incident . II only remains lo 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. Nore how it develops fur­ ther useful detail.*

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TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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. With­ **out me there wouldn't be a child." Well, I'm like, well . . . nothing.**

Nothing. And I say, "! love my

son and I love seeing my son and I love spending as much time as l

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

mean, nothing should ever be drawn that far. All right, beating your wife-I never did any bent· ing. I never had any resliaining order. Because I'm-you know. But I tell you, if I was that type of person, the wny I felt when I got out of there, I tell you, I could

have knocked her off. 'Cause I was

. pissed.

*co11trol 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.*

want with my son. And l don't like you telling me when I can spend time with him."

I: What0did he say when you said that? ·

**R: 11WeH, that's the way it is."**

I: What were you thinking . . .

R: What am l 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 11these**

**guys"?**

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

***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 experi·*

***ence.***

*A statement of the level of rage* ***the experience induced. Notice the shift into the present tense. Here it is not generalized; in­***

***stead. 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 murder­*

***ous rage. The responden' t self-***

* This excerpt began with a generalized statement of the court experi­

:ence of a noncustodial father. I wanted the respondent to move from this t() as close to an observer's report as he could provide of Ws experiences, internal as well as external. Only that sort of concrete description of just what happened could constitute interpretable data regarding the experi­ ences 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 "!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 respon­

. dents' use of time is important to the study, the interviewer should attempt cto 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

.\_inC!ude: "Could you tell me about a time that displays that at its clear­

<•.est?-".; '-'ls there a specific incident you can think of that would make clear

.: cwhat" you have in mind?"; and "Could you tell me what happened, s!arting from the beginning?"

It can sometimes seem to an interviewer to be an untrustworthy sam­

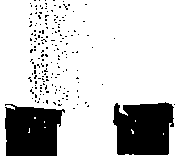
·.-'pling of respondent behavior to ask only about the last time an incident

·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 '::askfor the occurrence that preceded the most recent one as well. Often,

\however, the discussion of the most recent occurrence will produce so

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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 **ma**d**e 1**.**n** th**e past** t**ense:** "I d**i**'d ...," "H**e sru**'d . . . ," **an**d **so on**. **.** H**owever,** 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 gener­ alized 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.'

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 gen­ eralized 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 gen­ eralized accounts are appropriate for a report to someone like the inter­

. viewer, 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 idiosyn­ crasies of the specific event. In addition, the interviewers may uncon­ sciously 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 gen­

:eralized 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 interview­

. ing partnership is faulty.

. QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are no magic questions. Any question is a good question if it dirts the respondent to material needed by the study in a way that makes it ei!sy

. 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

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fill in a gap: "What happened then7" 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 can7" 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, cir might a question be a leading one in that it anticipates a response? Do you ask "What were your feelings then7" or "Were you unhappy about that?" Or might you even offer "You must have been unhappy" 7

Most often, you will not want to affect the respondent's report by offering anticipations in your questions. If you have no reason to antic­ ipate 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. Inthis 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 inyour 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, "Itsounds 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 impor­ tance to the study, "Could you tell me the most recent time that hap­ pened?", you may have to help the respondent develop the incident

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

1. *Extending.* You might want lo know what led to un 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 tl1an the respon­

.dent 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 tl1e density of detail you want: "So you were sitting there, talking with your guest, and this other fellow came over. What happened then7" You could even add "Can you walk me through it7"
  1. *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?"

* 1. *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 re­ garding 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 respon-

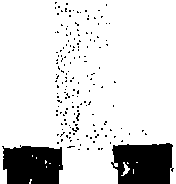
. dent thought, believed, or decided; and emotions, how the re-

'·... , spondent felt and what strivings and impulses the respondent experienced. They can also include the respondent's preconcep­ tions, 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 tole 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-



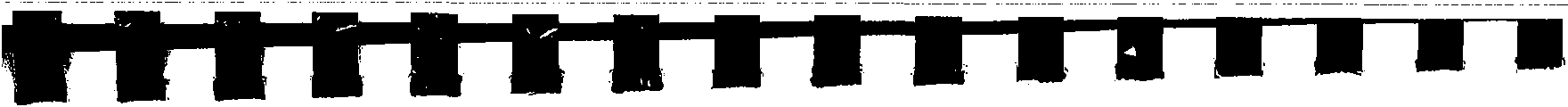
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scribe his or her cognitive reactions by asking, "When that was happening, what thoughts did you have?' ' Then you might obtain **emotional reactions by asking, ''What were your feelings when** he said that?" or "Can you remember how you reacted, emo­

tionally?"

6. *Making indications explicit.* Respondents may indicate by a ges­ ture, 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. How­ ever, often there is a relatively tactful way of entering a difficult area. To learn about men's extramarital experiences, in the study of how occupa­ tionally successful men organized their Jives, 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.

Ingeneral, 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. Inter­ viewers in any study should always understand its goals, so that they can

!mow 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 ask­ ing. And they must thoroughly believe in the study's right to know. Oth­ erwise 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 im­** portant 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 inaccessi­

. bility 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 wjll

·.· 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 inad­

. .<ilertently. 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 *if* different when a respon­

* dent 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

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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 any­ thing 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 yo.urself talking over the respondent, interrupting, or holding the floor while the responent tries to interrupt, something is going wrong in the interview. You mJght want to withdraw some of your attention from the respondent for a mo­ ment or two to figure out why you are competing for the floor. But whethr you figure it out or not, you ought to stop doing it.

It is easy to intrude in an interview. You can interrupt the respon­ dent. You can finish the respondent's sentences. You can offer your associations to what the respondent is saying. You can suggest expla­ nations for observations about which the respondent is perplexed; for example, if the respondent shrugs and says, "I don't know why he s.aid that," you could propose, "Well, maybe he was trying to defend hun­ self." You can insist on completing your question even if the respon­ dent has already started to answer. You can hop from issue o isse 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 mterv1ew. The merv1e"'. is a col­ laboration. Ifit should happen that a respondent is developing an irrelevant

topic at great length, you may have to interrupt to say at there'.•\_another topic you would like to get to. But that should be done m the spmt of the collaboration; it's your responsibility to set topics. You can usual.ly 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 so to pan for retirement?" We then moved to discuss the respondent s planmng for his retirement.

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Talking About Yourself

The interview is about the respondent, not about the interviewer. Jn my view, at least until the interviewing has ended, the interviewer should do only as much self-reporting as is consistent with the interview .sit­ uation. 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 fa­ cilitative technique, but the experience I do have leads me to question it.

. My own experience is that self-disclosure complicates an interview sit­

, uation by shifting the respondent's attention to the interviewer and alter- ing the respondent's relationship with the interviewer.

* + Manitoring the Inf ormation 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 concomi­

.:.·tants of being engaged in a lawsuit. Your concern is what it feels like to

· be either the person sued or the person doing tlie suing. In an exploratory Jnterview you find yourself being told by a plaintiff about his experiences

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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 respon­ dent? 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.**

Ad equacy of the Respond ent'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 associa­ tions. 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 lo flounder. The verbal expres­ sion 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 respon­ dent 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 inter­ viewing 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 associa· lions take. The interviewer will be constantly communicating- by nods of agreement and understanding as well as by questions and comments­ wbat 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.

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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 re­ spondent'.s account were rich and alive, you wouldn't be bored.

Sometimes in an interview Ihave felt sleepy, almost to the point of

being unable to keep my eyes open; the same, Ithink, has happened to other interviewers. This is boredom to an extreme. Almost never, Ibe­ lieve, 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. Ifthe 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

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I use to check out such clues is "Itsounds like , . ." (as in "It sounds like you're saying that you don't feel you've been properly recognized"). Ot11er introductory phrasings for getting beyond superficials are ' 'Some­ times people who are in situations like the one you're describing have feelings like , . ." or "!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 I. Working with a Respondent to Prod uce Use­ ful Material

Here is an example of effective interviewing, from the study of occupa­ tionally successful men. It shows how Ii good interviewer and a cooper­ ative respondent can work together to prod uce 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 COMMENTS

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 be­

come 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

INTERVIBWER: 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 [finn name] was when I was . . .

I've been here five years and it was my first year, and my task, which was really . . . lib . ..im-

***The interviewer asks the re.Spon·*** *dent to find an instance of stress* ***produced by a work assignment .***

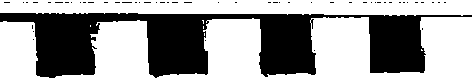
*The respondent describes his first year as having been difficult be­ cause he felt unequipped to deal with an important client. The account* ii'*a bit distanced , with details smudged, but that' s all*

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plicil, 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, Ididn'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 knowl­ **edge at all, and in this medium not** having technical knowledge im­ **pairs your ability to do creative** work. So *1* was in a severe disad­ vantage. And I found that to be very difficult, a very difficult situa­ **tion to go through.**

**And in addition to that, Iwas** . . . 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 l got very . . . I got no support from them at all. Quite the con­ trary. So the-plus I hated the cli­

**ent. It was, uh, the combination of**

all this I felt .was pretty awful.

**I: Was there any incident where it**

*right. The time at work the re­* ***spondent is talking about seems genuinely to have been difficult,*** *and continuing this line of ques­ tioning 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-***

surfaced or crystallized, and now **you can remember that as a time** when you really had the, uh, the height of feelings of whatever dis­ tress 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 dis·

honest subordinates, this guy was just dishonest. And he created . . . he was terribly destructive to the whole organization. He . . . I mean

. . . **again, in a technical environ­**

**ment, he lied about things that Were** . . . **were not happening. And Ithought, HThis is awful!" And**

* there'd be days when I'd know, without a doubt, that this guy can­ not 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 staihere. **Why have you people not done**

***cal incident . He asks for an inci­*** *dent that will display the ele­ ments that made the respondent feel awful.*

*The respondent is flustered. Maybe he' s unwilling to experi· ence the discomfort that would* ***be associated with talking about***

*a critical incident of trouble with co/leagues. He shifts away from* ***the tensions with the vice presi· dent 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 isfurther 'tvidencefor the re­ spondent' s side in the conflict* ***with them.***

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**Intorviowing** 07

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

anything about it7 And I

thought . . . I remember feeling a little resentful that-this is inte=t­ ing, you know-you bring in a

new guy and give him some pretty difficult tasks right off the ball

**You know, you could've cleared**

house for me before I showed up.

COMMENTS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

I mean, I didn't know what was going on-but why should 17 I just got herel *[chuckles]* Uh, and I, you know . . . so his . , . the way he treated me was just annoying, bul **never made me feel-I never** doubted myself,

But you didn't. But that was con­ sistent with the way these two peo­ ple worked.

!: 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 no. He runs a divi­ sion and I run a division. And ac­** tually we're quite good friends.

I: Back then things were not so good between you7

R: *[laughs]* They weren't good at

alll

I: What did it feel like, realizing that you had opposition on a higher leve17

R: Well, I thought . . . this guy's **personality** . . . **he's real slow talk­ ing** . . . **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.**

*Encouraging further develop­*

***ment.***

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

***The interviewer takes the respon­***

*dent back to the beginning,*

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

***Note the mixture of pe,.ception of*** *the vice president and personal feeling slate.*

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, 11I'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 . . . Iwasn't in a**

. **total vacuum. Imean, at least not**

in my group. You see they trans-

*It would be possible for the in­*

***terviewer to now say, 11 You said something a moment ago about the way the vice president***

*treated you. Could you describe*

*that? Maybe describe a particu­* ***lar incident?" However, the in­ terviewer doesn' t interrupt , and the respondent now goes into***

*how he established alliances with his subordinates. Firing the in­* ***competent subordinate seems to*** *have helped him establish him­ self.*

***This is an unasked-for critical incident . The respondent de­*** *scribes how he presented himself to his subordinates in an initial* ***meeting . He asked for their affili­*** *ation and pledged himself to* ***function as team leader, with*** *loyalry returned for loyalry given. The story is useful for under·* ***standing supervisor-subordinate relationships. There seems no need to develop it further.***

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I.

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Intervlowing 00

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

ferred their loyalty over to me right

COMMENTS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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.Ididn't really know any others.

***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 col­* ***league, 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 respon­*** *dent had made, namely, that the* ***respondent was accepted as the*** *leader of the team by his subor­* ***dinates, as. the boss, and not merely as a coworker.***

***The respondent corrects the in­ terviewer' 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 addi­ tion 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 situa­ tion at work at the time. He was*** *in command of.the loyalty of his* ***subordi'nates but otherwise on his own in confrontation with a*** *hostile vice president and col­ league.*

I: Can you remember back when

you had an interaclion, where you got bad vibes?

R: *[chuckles]* Well, I can remem­ ber one . . . uh, trying to come up wilh the most dramatic example.

I...I*was* so mad. Iwas. This is awful. Uh, the client was [X Cor­

poration]. 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 Iworked **with were Alden Brown and Den­** nis Ealing, who's since left. And, uh, Alden and Dennis-I'll believe this to this day-really kind of set me up.

***The interviewer 11ow asks again***

***for a critical incident . Note that*** *the respondent has now estab­ lished that the vice president and his creative colieague were dere­* ***Uct in at least one respect--they*** *didn't fire a dishonest subordi­ nate-and that he had success­ fully won the loyalty of his subordinates. He may be ready* ***now to talk about what happened between him and his antagonists.***

*Note the hesitancies. The respon­ dent is not entirely comfortable* ***reporting this incident.***

***The interviewer assumes that the "two guys" are the vice presi­*** *dent (Alden Brown) and the cre­ ative 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.**

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Intervlowlng 91

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

*extensively. It' s as though the* ***respondent, in describing this incident, has moved to another***

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

*would have been fine. But the phrasing used here is less dis­* ***tancing, 1nore Jn touch,***

They said, "Well, in this meet- ing . . ." 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 uncom­ fortable 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 dam well that it was going to get shot down and be tom apart. And I, not hav­ ing . . . 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 tom to shreds. And I remember sitting back down and saying, "That was **amazing. Boy, this Was awful.''**

I: Did you realize what it was?

***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 iriformation*

*about thoughts and feelings in a more open way: "While this was happening, what was going on in your mind?" That probably*

R:. Oh yeah. I kind of realized it halfway through what I was saying. You know, sometimes your percep­

tions are heightened when you

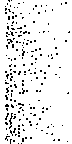
* ' '· have.to speak publicly. *[chuckles]* And Iremember thinking, "This is **not going to work. 11 Well, maybe I** read it in the faces of the people.

**-,;.\_Wha.tever it was.**

. ): .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?

*)·::.'*



i. :..- ·.. .

.' '.' g: Very. Everybody started

<o.,:;qiiirrning, and Iguess Ihave an­

**} :·.; :·otbCr\_· .two minutes to go with this**

**; ;:,:.-;:Jda and it's failing. It's, uh, I sup­**

:};:j **::\_p9sef it's like the comedian with a**

**$; -. :bdjokel It's just-that is what it**

*•}.)·* .\_. "

'

:>>)was like. A bad joke! And, uh,

;2;,f',L Yeah, Icould read every­ j:'.;,,ody's face and Ijust sort of kept

/;\9D talking and I eventually did it

**r1) hanically and I'm sure I conM**

M;,densed it as much as Icould so I

\. could end.

,;

***The respondent is describing*** *both self-monitoring and his monitoring of others. One of the* ***issues included hi this ,ftudy' s***

***sbstantive frame was the way*** *respondents deal with challenge.* ***SelfMmonitoring seems lo 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 hap­* ***pened then? Note how the inter­ viewer 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?''***

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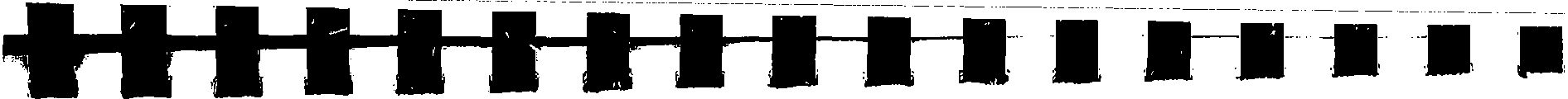
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lnlerviewlng 93



TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Can you remember what it felt **like internally while you were deal­** ing 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?

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 feel·* ***ing along with him and can therefore encourage the respon­ dent to continue. But an argu·*** *ment could also be made for* ***asking a more open question***

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

condescending. And he suid, **"Well, I'm sure once you gain a** little more experience in this field, you 'H realize that that idea wouldn't quite apply to this purtic-

. :ular situation. Although, you know, oil 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?"

R: Oh yeah! And I said, "!would **never ha.Ye 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 awfull 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**

***such as "Did you have any thoughts now about your col­ leagues?''***

*This is the right level of con­ creteness and the right density of* ***detail . The interviewer may well*** *be nodding to signal understand­* ***ing and assurance that this is*** *important material.*

. . I: Yeah. Why had they done it?

.R: Ah, well, I thought there was

':'a ...From their standpoint it prob·

* + ably·was more or less, uh, very

:.shortsighted, but, uh, it ensured

**.· that as far as this one client was**

**·concerned, which was the com-**

:pany's most important client, I'd

·never have any credibility with

: them. And that's truel I haven't.

): What happened after that? I

:, mean, could you sort of • . . ?

***On the surface this question asks*** *for information about the motiva­* ***tions 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 tlwught 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 respon­*** *dent to fxtend the story. The de­* ***scription of the s.tressor***

***situation is adequate: so is the***

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Interviewing 05

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

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 ex­*** *actly right. Let the respondent*

*tell the story, and get him to fill*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

**me up.''. Iwouldn't give them the** pleasure of it. Just sat by myself. And, uh, when we got to the air­ port,! 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

R: Well, for the rest of the meet­ ing 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 ex­ tremes. It's really unfair.

I: Now you've got-you were go­ ing 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**

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*in the blank areas later, if neces­ sary.*

*This is a description of trying to* ***achieve mastery of self in a situ­ ation of what must have seemed*** *catastrophic failure. Note how many leads there are, in this one* ***brief passage, to an understand­*** *ing 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 elabortion 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.***

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: 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 ques-

. **tions. Show them that I was inter­** ested even though I wasn't completely knowledgeable. You

·know, that was the end of that.

I: What happened the evening you

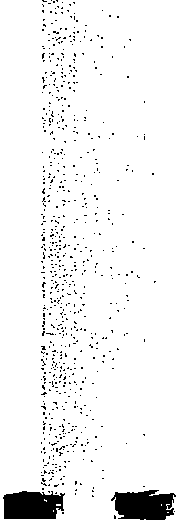
. got home? After . . . after you got

· ·. . off the plane?

r::

>R: *[pause]* I didn't share it with

. /,:my wife.



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

***The interviewer asks for further*** *extension of the story. Instead of asking about a nonspecific time*

*( "after you got back" ), the in­* ***terviewer 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 some­*** *thing 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 inter­ viewer done this, the respondent*** *very likely would have talked* ***about problems in his marriage.***

***Instead of detouring in that direc­ tion, the fnterviewer properly con­*** *tinues the story of the job trou­* ***ble. La.ter in the interview the in-***

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Interviewing 07

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

I: Can you remember how you felt?

R: Mad. Angry. I was angry. Yeah. Iwas feeling-I was also glad to be out of [client company's town], it was such an awful place. Hated it! *[chuckles]* Imean, the whole environment. Something

like that to happen in that kind of

**environment. It was just sort**

of . . . so distasteful. But, Idon't know, Iwas 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 work7

*R:* Because I wanted to do some­ thing about it, you know. *{pause]* And I . . . I can't remember specifi­ cally what I did. I can just remem­ ber how I felt. And I felt like, I'm

*tet'Viewer 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 re· member thinking about telling your wife?"*

*The interviewer asks the respon­ dent 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 inci­* ***dent , but can' t remember what*** *he did. He goes on to describe what seems to have been an ef-*

certainly more honest than you arc. My intentions are better. And uh,

* [the firm] was right to hire me be­ **cause you couldn't run an organi** zation where other people would report to you. So they won't. Prom

.. now on they'll just report to me. And, you know . . .

1. **: Did you have some sense of**

damage done? •

. R: To me personally?

·r: To your . . .

R: To my reputation?

*Jon to reassure himself that de­* ***spite his disastrous presentation*** *to the client , the company had* ***been right to bring him in and should continue to value hin1.***

***The interviewer wants to know to what extent the respondent***

***felt his standing in the orgaiiiza­***

*tlon 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 respon· dent thought the incident would affect his standing at work by asking something like "Did* ***what happened in your presen­*** *tation affect your situation at* ***work?' '***

*The respondent is floundering a bit. He is not sure what the in­* ***terviewer has in mind. Damage*** *to the firm? Damage to him per· sonally? 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 re­* ***spondent' s situation at work.***

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

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TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: To your reputation in the finn.

COMMENTS TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

*Now the interviewer says that*

COMMENTS

**R: As far as** Iwas **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 Em-

mett . ..I never talked to Emmett about it, but I think he understood.

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

***yes, he wants to know whether the respondent had been aware*** *of damage to his reputation in the firm.*

***Despite the interviewer' s prob­ lem in directing the respondent , the interviewing partnership is sound, and the respondent con­ tinues to work with the inter­*** *viewer 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 man­ aged to maintain himself in the company despite the failure of* ***his presentation to the com­***

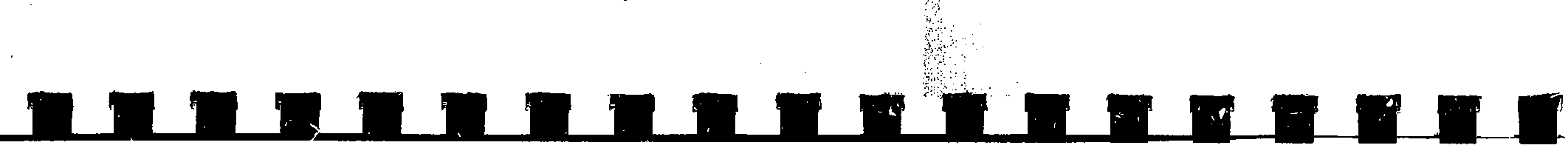
*pany's most important client. At that point the respondent said he had gone to Emmett Franklin*

*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 respon­*** *dent' s mentor and helped him obtain accounts of his own. But here the respondent discouraged* ***questioning about Emmett Frank·***

*/in by saying he had never talked* ***with him about the incident and*** *by neglecting to mention that he nevertheless had gone to himfor help.*

***The interviewer is asking about***

*the aftermath of the Incident.*



.· long that incident stayed with you

•' ' emotionally?

* + . R: Oh, as far as Alden Brown's concerned, it wilt 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

I: :How about the other man?

,...,\_:·

···· *:* R: .DeMis Ealing? He went to

' work with the client company.

*/ [chuckle]* He's its director of mar­

.; ·keting. 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*

*'r* Particularly early in a first interview, the interviewer may have to search the areas in which the respondent can provide useful material. The ',';interview guide will tell the interviewer the areas in which the study needs

::for

·::ciiiformation, but the respondent may have little to offer in some of the '\areas, a great deal in others. Or the respondent may feel uncomfortable

\;bout 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

:.Jirst faterview, 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 fonner

·' IV drug users to the results of testing for HIV. The interview took place in the mv clinic of a hospital in which the respondent was an outpatient.

.Th• 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 infonnation he wanted. The interviewer began by asking about ' this.

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100 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing 101

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

**INTERVIEWER: You were just say­ ing you wanted infonnation. Can** you say what kind of information you wanted?

RESPONDENT: Well, essentially **knowing what to expect. To me** that seems to be the greatest prob­ lem 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. Bu 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 mo­** bility? 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 peo­ ple 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 be­ **came very ill. And so I'm wonder­** ing, "ls this the kind of thing

**that's in store for me? Am I going**

***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, per­ haps, whether worry about what might happen is always in the respondent' s mind. But the refer­ ence to "seeing other people having died from it" sounds like a marker.*

***The interviewer picks up the***

*marker.*

***But the respontint 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***

**to·end up in a hospital somewhere,** [having] to be cared for, or what­ ever?" There are a lot of aspects to this thing, in my case particu­ larly. I'm thirty-nine years old. I

* ' don't have any kids.

:. . :1: 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 talk­**

ing to her. Ifeel somewhat obli-

··. ' gated to make sure that nothing

.**.go'es 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**

::: **woman right now.**

*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 re­*** *spondent's worry about himself.* ***In any event, by the time the re­*** *spondent stops talking, the re­* ***spondent 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 hav-.* ***ing 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 de·*** *ve/op. The respondent seems to* ***be alluding to actual events.***

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

*The re•pondent refuses the inter­* ***viewer's tmplied suggestion that the respondent is summarizing***

102 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing 103

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: When *was* the last time this hap· pened?

R: Shit. I mean, at least three, four **months now since lhad a relation with any \\'.Oman. I mean, I'm in a** st.age where I'm just looking.

That's all I *can* do, is look. Be· cause, what am I going to do?

They say, well, okay, use condoms. But even condoms are not a hun­ dred 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 Idon't have any sexual rela­** tions with women. Now that . . . phew . . . is a real change, a real upsetting thing. You know, there's still a relationship based on friend· **ship 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 estab­*** *lishing relations with women now.*

*Nevertheless-mistakenly-the* ***interviewer tries again for a par­ ticular event. The vividness of***

***the image of ''nothing goes on but conversation'' may have*** *made the interviewer believe that the respondent did have a par(ic·* ***u/ar 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. Whatfol·* ***lows is a vivid description of the*** *respondent's sense of having to turn away any chance for a sex· ual relationship.*

***Partly to strengthen the inter­ viewing partnership, partly to*** *attend to the feeling tone of the* ***respondent' s report, the inter­*** *viewer establishes that yes, he does understand that the respon· dent is talking about how his*

*HIV statu.s 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 Iwill 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 diffi·

* · ·. cult to deal with.



•· R:!·have a lot of friends, a lot of

,,1 acquaintances, a lot of people I'm

•.• meeting·who don't know me that

* + well•.and I know they're wonder­

**:.::1ng, like, uWhat's it with him?**

<WJiy is he not with anybody?"

:'>Wlrich brings up a whole thing

* + .. about people wanting to know

**'.'. ::·hRt1s up with you .** . . .**It puts a**

;,.,strain on family relationships. All **(·'.'.ri'lY brothers and sisters, they've got f:'.r.wi\_veS, girlfriends or boyfriends, or**

..

;:;•.whatever. And just the whole con­

**;\_;;.:.ept \_of . . . anytime you see me,**



,;.'.:..:· .

*.::{ ·:..*

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COMMENTS

*The response "Yeah. Yeah. A* ***great deal, a great deal" ac­*** *knowledges that the interviewer has understood his feelings. Now* ***the respondent goes on to elabo­ rate what It means lo 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 say·* ***ing that the situation is so ap­*** *palling that it cannot be grasped.* ***Here the profanity seems lo ex­ press movement from a more*** *public self to a self closer to* ***emotion. The respondent uses intensifying words to convey the*** *depth of his despair.*

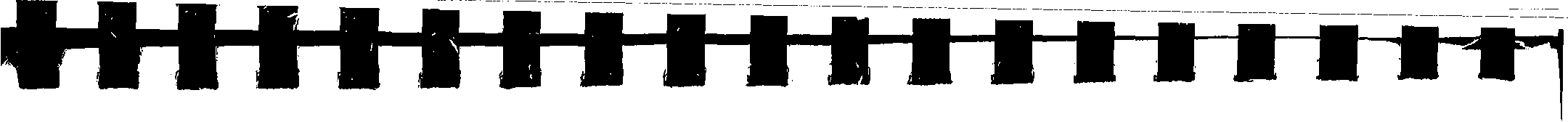
*The interviewer is asking the* ***respondent to continue the theme*** *of "it's difficult."*

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

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104 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

interviewing 103

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I'm always by myself. There's **never a woman involved. l'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

COMMENTS TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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 some­ body, that I could pass this on to somebody else.

around like that." Dealing with that whole aspect of it, knowing **that people are wondering and that** some people are not saying any­ thing out of respect. They're not being nosy, they're not asking it ou.trig,ht.

**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 be­ fore the tests. And then it wasn't an issue. It never did come up be­ **cause it wasn't an issue. Since the**

**test I have not been involved sexu­** ally 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 infect­** ing somebody else. Cutting some­

body else's life short. Why would I

***The interviewer is here trying for a concrete incident that would display the respondent' s ''know­*** *ing 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 HN 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 HN positive. But.* ***now "It's just on my mind so heavy."***

I: It sounds like it's made you feel

sort of a pariah, like.

R: Yeah. Yeah. I: Is that it?

***Here the interviewer could have***

*picked up the ethical issue or the* ***self-restraint the respondent is*** *describing, but that would prob­ ably have led the respondent to repeat what he' s already said* ***about not wanting to put some­ one else at risk. Instead the in­ tervi'ewer 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 rela­ tionships. The interviewer is, in*** *effect, checking a hypothesis, while at the same time suggest·*

***ing 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 intef'viewer is giving the re­***

*spondent a further opportunity to*

106 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Jntorvlowlng 107

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 **cose. 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 al­ ways be backing out of things, al­ **ways on your guard to never let a situaJion 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 rela­

**tionship.**

COMMENTS

*reject the guess if it doesn' t*

***strike him as exa.ctly right.***

***The respondent corroborates that*** *he is talking about feeling like a pariah. He now explicitly links thisfeeling to his earlier state­ men.t about not being able to touch, but only to look. Note that now, instead of skillering 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 inter­*** *viewer have together located what the respondent can best contribute to the study at this* ***point in the respondent' s inter­ view: a statement of how isolat­***

*ing it is to be HN 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 respon­ dent 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 As­ sumption

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 pennit 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.

The interviewer made a couple of mistakes in the course of this ex­ cerpt. He failed to recognize that the respondent had disclaimed any

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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 rec­ ognition of this underlying issue was not only valuable for the study in its own right, but also strengthened the interviewing partnership.

lNTERVIBWBR: In relationships

with any of these people or anyone else you would interact with regu­ **larly at work, would there be any­** thing about the relationships

**that** ...**were there any times when** the relationships themselves were **bad or were a source of distress for** you personally or . . .

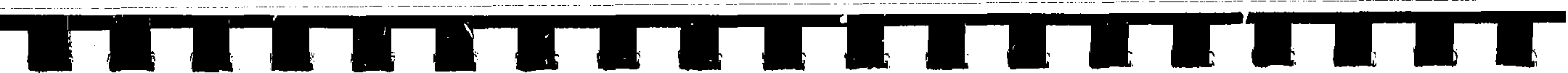
*The question doesn't adequately*

***direct the respondent to a spe­ cific relationship-a boss or sub­ ordinate or peer. And the final phrasing, "times when the rela­ tionships themselves were bad or were a so'urce of distress,'' has a vagueness that makes response*** *difficult. ln itsfavor, the question* ***does ger the respondent into the area of relationships at work. Jn***

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108 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing 100

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

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.

***addition, it asks for concrete in­***

***stances.***

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

***The interviewer doesn' t recog· nize that the respondent has re­*** *jected 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 rec­ ognize that the respondent wants***

*to close out this line of que$tioning. The respondent is saying, firmly,*

*that there is nothing to report.*

***The interviewer keeps going on the issue of ba,f relationships. The interviewer seems to have been determined to complete the earlier' question," even though its*** *premise has already been re­ jected by the respondent.*

***The respondent offers a compro­*** *mise: 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 respon· dent develop the material, per·*** *haps by asking. "Could you tell* ***me about one of tlwse times?"***

* 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 con­ **vince them and convince the whole**

. group by consensus that this is

. what we ought to be doing, then

. they ·au 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

·inuch, people as a group under-

: stand· as a group what they were

••·trying to accomplish, and you

:.• could shift responsibilities around

· , to match the skills, and so on.

***The intervi'ewer doesn' t recog­ nize that there is a story being***

*alluded lo here. Instead , she lakes* ***the respondent' s comment as a statement about managerial style.***

*And now we have a bit of man­ agement philosophy of little obvi­* ***ous use to the study. It is quite*** *distant from the topic of relation­ ships at work. The interviewer*

*has fostered this by her reflection*

***in the previous comment.***

***Now the interviewer returns to*** *ihe bad relationship line the re­ spondent has flatly rejected. This* ***approaches badgering . In actual­ ity, 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?''***

110 LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing 111

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

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

COMMENTS

***The interviewer' s question sug· gests an absence of interest in*** *what the respondent just said.*

*My guess is that the interviewer* ***is continuing to search for stressful or distressing experi·***

*Interview IV. Refusing Respondent Lead s*

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.

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 . . . per­ haps we can go into that a little bit.

***ences and has hit on the idea of*** *asking about specific relation­ ships. But to introduce this now abruptly shifts the interview* ***away from where the respondent*** *is.*

*The respondent isflustered-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.***

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

. lNTBRVIEWBR: I was wondering if,

. . you know, what sort of an audi-

.· ence. 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**

1. colleagues or . . . you know . . .

**·...·. .R.ESPONDBNT! 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

;'<bands, so I certainly have to im-

, Press him properly and give him

* ''··the level of confidence in'me, you

;" know. That's only for my benefit.

:About my peers within . . .

COMMENTS

*It' s all right to ask questions* ***awkwardly as long as your con· cern is communicated and you*** *don't inadvertently introduce an* ***element that requires special attention. Here the interviewer*** *does inadvertently supply a pos·* ***sible niotivation for competent*** *performance ( "doing it to im­* ***press ''), a motivation niany re· spondents would want to*** *disclaim.*

***The respondent reacts to the*** 1***•doing it to impress'' part of the question. He doesn' t flatl y reject*** *the idea that he works to im­* ***press, 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***

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 inter­ viewer also refused to accept the respondent's indications of material he could develop comfortably, I find it remarkable that the. respondent con­ tinued to be cooperative, despite the interviewer's competing with him for ·· the floor, disregarding his comments, and abruptly shifting topics.

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". :1: Which would be . . .

.'.::: ..- .

*:;:.*

}::,:;\_ -

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***when the interviewer interrupts***

*him.*

***The interviewer wants to know exactly who is meant. This is not necessarf, and because it inter· rupts the respondent, is question­*** *able.*

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**:112**

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Interviewing 113

LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: . . . within the company . . , I: Within the company.

R: . . . and, uh, the peers outside

the company?

COMMENTS

***The interviewer' s insistence that***

*the respondent identify his peers*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

***viewer assuming that the respon­*** *dent has agreed that he wants to* ***impress competitive associates?*** *Actually, he has11' t agreed to this at all,*

- - -

••

I: Yeah. Like who would be your

**peers?**

**R: Well, former associates** . . .

**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 num­ bers, it's very small in the sense of** knowledge of companies and peo­ ple and, uh . . .

I: How is that information trans­ mitted to each other? How do they . . .

*before saying whether he works*

*to impress them appears to have flustered the respondent.*

***The interviewer establishes con­ trol over the intenliew by requir­ ing that the respondent provide this unessential information be­*** *fore going on with his story.*

*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 con­ cerned with whether the inter­*** *viewer will understand.*

*Has the interviewer forgotten that the issue was whether the respondent worked with this au­* ***dience in mind? Or (s the inter-***

R: Usually very casually. Where we, uh, chance meetings or chance **conversations. Let me say also in** terms of people, of people Iwant **to please, Iwant to please the peo­ ple who I'm doing the project**

for . . .

I: The clients?

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 . . . Ilike to

* + ·. **leave a good trail.**
* : I: Yeah . . .

R: Both, again, for my own ac-

. complishment and also for the

.··good of the company. But we were

: :having lunch today in a west sub­ urb. 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**

*The respondent, God bless him, is still trying to answer the ques­* ***tion about working to impress other people . Now he remembers his clients, whom he does want***

***to please,***

***The interviewer seems to have*** *lost the thread of the interview and is puzzled by the respondent bringing up his clients.*

*The respondent is virtually inter­ viewing 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.***

**114** LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

Interviewing 115

TRANSCRJPT 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 en­** counters, this is how things get spread around.

COMMENTS TRANSCRJPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

*ter for the respondent. Instead of pursuing this, the Interviewer* ***asks a leading question about*** *what will now happen to the in­ formation about the respondent gained by his former coworker.* ***Sometimes leading questions are***

*useful because they demonstrate*

I: So what did you talk about?

**R: W:.ell, just what his company** was. doing and what I'm doing and who these people are who were

*Okay, I guess. But more useful might be what went through the respondenf s mind. when the fel­ low he once worked with came up to his table lo meet him, his client, and his boss.*

***This is superficial, as well as*** *general. A former colleague* ***comes over to say hello and***

* R: Yeah. Now he'll go back and



·**·say, you know, that he saw me**

* + yesterday and who I was with.

***that the interviewer is in touch*** *or because they suggest a useful* ***direction /or development . Here*** *the leading question only nar­* ***rows the possible response.***

having lunch together.

I: Was it kind of the idea of im­ **pressing them with your associa­ tion 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?**

*maybe check out how the respon­ dent is doing. This would very likely elicit appraisals of relative* ***success. It would be natural now*** *to ask what had been the respon­ dent' 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 sup­* ***position.***

***This pretty much repeats the pre­*** *vious statement about what was talked about. The respondent is* ***indicating that there'snothing*** *more of note here.*

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

··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 respon­

:; ·aent's, even though the respondent may accept that phrase ("Yeah, it gets '1spread around").

*'{* the same observation holds for this interviewer's insistence, despite the

::respondent's objections, en 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

'ij'questioned by the respondent. The following example of bad interviewing

;)is from an interview conducted by a student in a class on interviewing.

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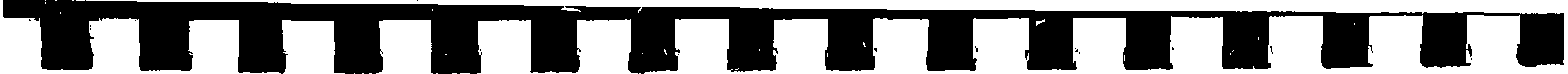
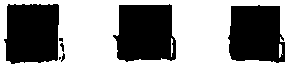
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Interviewing 117

The student interviewer was concerned with identity fonnation 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

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT COMMENTS

***back to where lhe 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.*

had recently been convicted of theft. The 17-year-old has just said that organized crime figures had long been heroes of his.

I: Why were they your role mod­

. els?

***The student is determined to con·*** *firm his hypothesis; he neglects* ***the markers,***

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS **R: Because they were into orga­**

nized. crime. They had a lot of

***The word ''power'' strikes me as another marker. I would guess***

INTERVIEWER: Did looking up IO

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.

*The student makes a couple of*

***errors here: a minor one ( asking*** *two different questions at once) and a more important one ( ask­ ing the respondent for conclu­* ***sions rather than observations ).***

***The problem is that the stu- dent 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 *con..*** *firm 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 trou­ ble ." 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*



**power.**

: . J: How do you mean?

***that ii is an expression of some· thing 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 auractive, but maybe the respondent can*** *describe the imagery associated with power. In general, it' s diffi­ cult to get respondents to explore*

***cognitive and emotlonal com*** *plexes. 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 respon­*

***dent is already in a Scene (if this*** *respondent had said, ''The guy I was working for showed me he* ***Uked me"), here lt' s too unfo· cused. The respondent can' I***

***know whether the interviewer is*** *asking for a definition ("What* ***do you lirean by power?'' ) or for*** *an elaboration of the idea of*

***power. A better question might***

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Interviewing 119

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 con­ ceives of the crime bosses as*** *having not only a Godlike power of life and death but also a royal power of comman1!- 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 respon­ dent' 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 inter· viewing partnership might be in* ***order.***

***This question, at this point, makes me think the interviewer*** *was oul of sync with the respon­ dent. The respondent has just* ***tried to answer "How do you***

*mean?" by specifying the display of power he had in mind. Now*

***the intervi'ewer 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 inter­*** *viewer' s pose of naive/<!. 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 partner­***

*·ship.*

*The level of the respondent' s* ***asperity seen1s niild to nte . Nev­ ertheless, the respondent is ques· tioning 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 mo­ ment , to provide anything more* ***than a sketchy, if vivid , indica­*** *tion 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 partner­

.:.ship. The partnership may have been fragile to begin with-and certainly

:the student was courageous to undertake a tape-recorded interview with a J?year-old who had recently been convicted of theft-but closer atten­ tion to the respondent's thought and imagery and more concern for main­

··taining the interviewing partnership would almost surely have produced a

* 1. etter 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.

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###### CHAPTER 5

**ISSUES IN INTERVIEWING**

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. **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

:c ·•.people who are lllV positive, said about being interviewed. Both respon­

*i..* ::dentS were male and lilV positive; neither respondent had gone beyond

Jc.. high school.

i\. :.:INTl!RVIBWER: What was it like to be interviewed?

;;:'.. .

*'·i..'* • :• RllsPONDENT: 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 mean7

k('•· · :R: Well, see, there's nobody that I can talk to in my life. There's nobody

=;'-', ;

c\.:";·..-. · **whatsoever. I just don't have nobody to talk to like that. I mean, even**

*;'(*

*'1-'-.:*

*·...H ·..·.··.*

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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 some­ times. It's probably what I needed for a long, Jong 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 inter­ rupted 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 inter­ pretations, 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 ex­ perience 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 some­ one'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 inter­ view 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 conver­ sations with friends and intimates, nor is it likely that an attempt to do so would be uninterrupted.

Although my situation is far Jess 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 opportu­ nity 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 pro·

* vide helpful support as a respondent explores matters that had been con­ fusing, 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 some­ what more comfortable with matters the respondent had previously felt trouble\! 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 respon­ dent 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 de- fenses 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 possi­**

: ble, 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



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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 relation­ ship 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 respon­ dent 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 tllpes 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 pos­ sible 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 *responsibili ty* for providing a sup­**

portive presence, a role the interviewer may not have expected. But, as Saint-Exupery'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 re­ tirement 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, ''rs this something you would feel all right talking about?"'

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 tum 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

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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 respon­ dents 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 neutraliza­ tion 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. Itrequires 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 conse­ quence, 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 tl1e 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, sud­ denly began crying because she was reminded by the interview of how disappointing her life had been. But neither the interview nor the inter­ viewer was responsible for the respondent's sadness and tears. Nor should

* 1. he interviewer's relationship to the respondei have been changed by their

·display. It should have continued to be a partnership based on mutual re­

: spect, concerned with producing information useful to research.

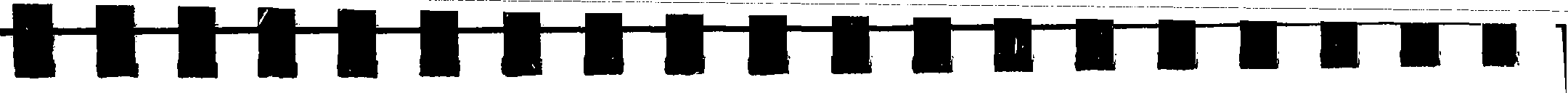
Often, when a respondent is flooded by emotion, the interviewer's respect for the respondent is best expressed by just sitting quietly. When



. 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 hmd 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



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Issues in Interviewing

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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 re­ porting." 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, some­ times 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 dis­ plays pain.

Once, while interviewing a respondent, a lawyer who had retired from a distinguished career, I was asking about his currentactivities when he said, in passing, that he was deling with some unexpected personal problems. This was, of course, a marker, and 1picked 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 decom­

·pensating. I suppose an instance of this might be a respondent telephoning us, the day af ter the first of an intended series of interviews on bereave­ ment, 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 respon· dents. 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 c.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,

i' .·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 U 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 iri 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 evalua­

I

. lion 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 I:

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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 inter· view. 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 inter· viewed." 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'i"think he was hurt either.

Janet Malcolm suggests that interviewing is inherently duplicitous. She generalizes from a particular instance in which a writer ingratiated him· self 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 argu­ ment 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 exctly what it pur· ports to be-a research partnership. Beyond this, I think interviewers should ensure that respondents are not hurt because cif their cooperation. Unlike physicians, interviewers have no responsibility to benefit the peo· pie 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 man· date 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 confidenti­ ality. 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 ofrespondents. 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 psy­

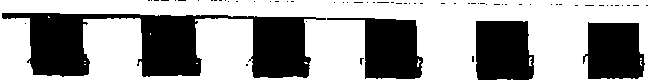
:: chiatrist, a state agency for the protection of children? Suppose the re­

.·· 'spondent confesses behavior that is criminal? Should the respondent be

1. eported 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



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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 inter­ viewing. 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 acquain-

tance probably was already infected. I was appalled and indicated con­ cern 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 contractig 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 princi·

pies. We have, usually explicitly, bound ourselves to respect the confi· dentiality 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 Jaw, 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 con­ fidentiality 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 confiden­ tially. 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? ls 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 inactin?

Problems of this sort are, fortunately, rare, but when they anse 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

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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 un­ bidden, 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 re­ spondents leave the research interview more comfortable with them­

selves? 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. What­ ever 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 be­ havior, advice on the patient's choices in life, and explorations of the patient's thoughts and feelings about the therapeutic relationship. In re­ search 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 in­ terviewer is without license to produce change in the respondent's func­ tioning and has no right to give interpretations or advice. It would not be **proper for a research interviewer to suggest connections between the**

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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 thera­ peutic interviewing is different. Therapists are likely to encourage pa­ tients 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 responsi­

.. bilities. And while therapists remain for some time important figures in

·. the lives of patients, interviewers are ordinarily recognized by respon­

·. dents 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. Itis 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

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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 cpuple 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 inter­ viewer'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 coun­ seling 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.

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One way to phrase this issue is to ask lo 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 de­ tailed report of witnessed events that is the more usual concern of quali­ tative 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 back­ ground, 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. 1-lis 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 respon­

. dent 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 re­ search 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

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my understanding of his hustle. For a similar reason I was told in detail about the Junctioning 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 lO 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 under­ standing 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.' 0

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 consider­ ateness, 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 med­ icine, 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

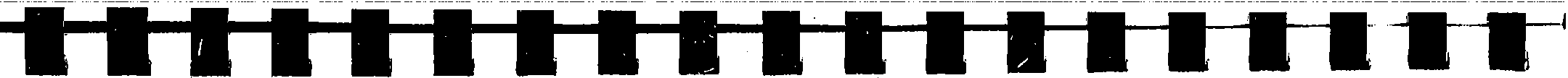
interview I found myself, without consciously intending to, repeatedly making reference to my own achievements. I mentioned, for example, that I had once taught at the respondent's university; I also noted that I was the principal investigator of the study and that I had done successful work in the past. 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 compet­ itive 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 your­ self? Might not the interview provide material for gossip,. maybe intro­ duced by the comment, "I once interviewed him . . ."? And even if the information goes nowhere else, *you* have it and you are a potential col­ league 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 inter­ viewing 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



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**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 eth­ nicity 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 con­ fidants 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 cir­ cumstance 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 im­

. pression 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.



* .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 some­ one widely experienced, although not necessarily in the area of the in­ terview. 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 respon­

. dents 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 cooper­ ating with it. The result is a sequence like the following, from an inter­ view in the study of occupationally successful men:

**.lNTERVIBWBR: What's it been like for you, raising your children?**

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

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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 misun­ derstood 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 inake 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 hap­ pened, the respondent is likely to avoid providing detail and to frustrate your efforts to elicit detail. My policy in such situations is to keep plug­ ging 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 omething like

•'We really need stories that will show us what was happemng-the more concrete and detailed, the better" or "I wonder if there's a specific

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cident you could describe, because then we can see what happens.'" But

if th espodent doesn't have detailed stories to tell and doesn't want to admit 1t, tlus urging won't work either.

A repondent who ':"ants to avoid an issue in an area of the research may be as d?'ficu\_lt. I was m th early phase of an interview with a physician

•?out!us retirement when 1t became evident that he had been asked to re­ sign his hospital appointment. TI1ere was some hint in what he was saying

that he ha? become ueliable, maybe that he had botched a procedure. A colleague *s* vulnerability to a malpractice suit was alluded to and then

ropped. As I pressed for detail about the reasons for the respondent's re· trrement, I could see his edginess increase. Although I then moved to an are where I thought he would be more comfortable, he wanted to be told agam wha the study was about and where I was from and who would know wht 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 ade­ quately explred an that I wanted to thank him. His interview provided usable matenal, but It wasn't a good interview.

*People Whose Feelings Are Ra w*

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 ansered by a relative acting as a caretaker, we would be sent awy, sometimes fiercely: what right did we have, they wanted to know, to mtrude 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 wiows d widowers were grateful for someone to talk to. Although

the?" eelmgs were. raw and their pain immediately at hand, the great maJonty found talking to be helpful.

. When grief is new and pain intense, people need both to let their distress be known and o gain relief from the distress by pushing lt away. So peopl Want somi;t1mes to be able to talk, sometimes not to have to mterviewer- a a strger who is understanding, indeed profes­

·*1:"*

sonal, conce'?e? \_yet d1spass10nate; and able to listen without offering

e\_1ther report-hnutmg sympathy or a palliative formula-is exactly the nght person to 1:11k to. sualy people organize themselves so they are

rady to talk durmg the mterv1ew. They then tald! other times for distrac. tlon from awareness of their loss.



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If I Weren't in This Situation, You Wouldn't Want to Inter­ view 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 JO-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 in­ trview. 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 respon­ dent 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 in­ terview 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 J 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 respon­ dent.

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 rtired. He lived by himself, sep(lfated 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

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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 de­ fensiveness too, an unwillingness to take his objections seriously. Any­ way, 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 inter­ viewing 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, arid 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 respon­ dent nor you is relaxed. The respondent may indicate discomfort or re­ sistance 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 enga,ged 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 respon­ dent 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 iittle 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 .S 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

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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 inter­ viewer d.id 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 ungiving respondents that I haven't tried, but have been told by other investigators is effective, is to say, "It is impor­ tant 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 par­

. ticular match of interviewer and respondent is wrong. Or it may be that

* .the respondent will always refuse to provide usable infonnation, 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· in­ formation 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

. ;TRUfH, TIIE WHOLE TRUfH, AND NOTIIING BUT TIIE TRUfH?

'' 'How much of what a respondent tells you can you believe? And how I

much is left out?

*{'* A while ago I was a respondent being interviewed by a skillful ad

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,/,:sympathetic interviewer about the history of a research training program

;-:·t had helped organize. I wanted the interviewer's project to succeed and

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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 t11e 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 im­ portant proposal had gotten written, although almost certainly I had done mosl 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 aprogram that did not ye(exist. But it was surprising to me that I could provide detailed in­

formation 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 o.f uncertainty. They are likely also to display, as I did, unwilling· ness 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 main· tain a counterfactual reality when being pressed to provide detailed de­ scriptions 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

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precise truth. If respondents want to keep from us events or behaviors or n sector of their lives, there is every reason to believe that they can succeed. While it would be difficult for respondents to produce the cir· cumstantial detail and corroborating incident necessary to make an in· vented 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 embez­ zled. It seems to me unlikely that we had in our sample only·men who were aware of others' dishonesty and none who were dishonest them­ selves.

Nor can we be sure we will be told tlie 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. Respon· dents 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 cor­ rective information. One respondent, an HIV·positive IV drug user, in a first interview described breaking a syringe against the wall when impor·

* + tuned 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. Itreally happened-or maybe came close to happening. But

* + it wasn't until the later interview that he presented the more mixed pie· ture.

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 respon­ dent might be more thoughtful and analytic..,

Information is context dependent-that is, shaped in part by the inter· view situation-when it is free of anchors in observations of events.

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Generalizations from experiences also tend to be context dependent be­ cause 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. Ifwe 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 inval­ idity. After all, people can act in inconsistent ways or maintain inconsist­ ent 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,"

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." 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,"' 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 unq uestionable merits of this view, a conspiracy of forces regularly impedes early analysis. During the interviewing phase the in­ vestigator must deal with all the demands of obtaining the data: recruiting the respondents, conducting the interviews, getting them transcribed, de­ ciding 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 I ,

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but there will be uninterrupted weeks or months available for their anal­ ,,

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ysis. Undoubtedly the investigator will develop insights, speculations, and ' small-scale theories beginning with the first pilovinterview or before. But I it is likely to be only after interviewing has ended that the investigator can

give full attention to analysis and writing.

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