

# 6

## Producing Data II

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### Qualitative Interviewing

*Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.*

—Barthes (1957/1972, p. 109)

### Introduction

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It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we live in an interview society, in which “the interview serves as a social technique for the public construction of the self” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 12). Part of growing up in this society is learning to be an interview subject ourselves. Who among us hasn’t been interviewed for a job or submitted to questioning by the likes of a pollster, a marketer, an insurance adjuster, a therapist, or a health care provider? We also consume interviews for pleasure and information. How often during the course of a year are we amused, fascinated, offended, or bored by the talk show (or reality show) confessionals that fill our culture of celebrity (Kvale, 2006, p. 493)? How often do we read or view the daily news, oblivious to the fact that a great deal of it is based on the conventions of interviewing “sources”—conventions that go back more than 150 years in American journalism (Schudson, 1994).

Living full time in this interview society, we can be forgiven for thinking that there really isn’t much to interviewing. Watching media professionals

and others doing it, we may reckon that it is just a matter of using the right combination of questions to unlock another person's information or viewpoints. However, this popular notion fails to capture the core meaning of interviewing when it is done for scholarly purposes. That meaning is encoded in the term itself. An interview, writes Brenner (1985), "quite literally . . . develop[s] a *view* of something between (*inter*) people" (p. 148, italics in original). In other words, a research interview unfolds as a social process. It is organized, Denzin (1978) once wrote, "so as to give one person (the interviewer) greater control over the other (the respondent). It is talk that is (typically) furnished for someone else's benefit" (p. 113). At the same time, the interviewer often yields back some of this control in order to encourage a full articulation of the respondent's beliefs, interests, and experiences. Ideally, what emerges is a richly expressive *inter-view* that neither person could have produced alone.

This research method is remarkably adaptable to varied circumstances and settings. Interviews can be done in a research lab, during a walk along a beach, at a corner table in a restaurant, or in a teenager's bedroom—anywhere two people can talk in relative privacy. The scope of topics is limitless. Interviews may dwell on the most personal matters or revolve around the most public, politically charged issues. Interviews vary enormously in their (in)formality. They are usually well-marked social events, preceded by a great deal of preparation, but an interview can also happen on the spur of the moment. They can be conducted briskly in a few minutes or at a leisurely pace for several hours. Although interviews are usually conducted face-to-face, such technologies as the telephone and the Internet enable researchers and participants to come together even when they are miles apart.

The method also draws upon varied interpersonal and technical skills. If interviews are the "digging tool" of social science, the skilled interviewer should ask questions in an effective, nonthreatening way. If some interviews are meant to reveal secrets and hidden realities, the interviewer should be a trusted confidant. If interviews are partly conversation, the interviewer should be an engaging, maybe even charming, conversationalist. If interviews are learning situations, the interviewer should be a willing student. If interviews are cross-cultural encounters, the interviewer should be a fluent speaker of local languages and a sensitive traveler across cultural borders. The researcher may not always perform these roles brilliantly. As with any skill set we try to master, good outcomes are never guaranteed and mistakes will happen. But mistakes are usually forgiven when they happen *despite* one's preparation—not in the absence of it.

Qualitative interviewers often try to emulate the form and feel of a talk between friends. When it goes well, an interview does provide some of the

same enjoyment—and the same sense of *connection*—as an intimate conversation. For all of these similarities, however, the qualitative interview is a different kind of conversation. It is a “conversation with a purpose” (Bingham & Moore, 1959). The researcher defines the reasons and goals for the meeting to occur and then finds the people who are best suited for realizing these goals. The process of interviewing also strikes a different tone. It takes time—and the commitment of two or more people working together—for an interview to reach its full potential. It requires that the interviewer listen patiently to what the subject is trying to say, always on the lookout for subtle, fleeting meanings as they emerge. And sometimes it requires one to step back (or aside)—to dwell on a topic, to explore the ramifications of a remark, to mentally revise the ideas guiding the interview—before taking the next step forward. This reflexive approach is described eloquently by the late Marianne Paget (1983):

What distinguishes in-depth interviewing is that the answers given continually inform the evolving conversation. Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns at talk. It collects in stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations. . . . The specific person interviewing, the “I” that I am, personally contributes to the creation of the interview’s content because I follow my own perplexities as they arise in our discourse. (p. 78)

Paget’s words resonate with your authors, who recall the dynamic and often tortuous—but ultimately gratifying—routes they have traveled in the company of their subjects. The ability of the qualitative interview to go deeply and broadly into subjective realities has earned it a place as one of the preeminent methods in communication studies. Indeed, some sort of interviewing is used in nearly all qualitative research projects. This fact alone underscores the importance of studying its forms, practices, and limitations.

Interviews are as much art as science. Much of what we present in this chapter is the systematic, “scientific” side of interviewing. But hopefully the world that lies beyond this chapter—your interviewing experiences—will invoke your own artful ways of asking, listening, and telling.

## Purposes of the Qualitative Interview

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At the most basic level, an interview has a *referential* purpose (Briggs, 1986). We expect that the interview discourse will refer to people, settings, events, and behaviors outside the context of the interview. Furthermore, we expect it to be “a *sound* source of witness information about what happens in particular settings” (Hammersley & Gomm, 2008, p. 89; emphasis added). In other

words, interview talk should bear a relevant, truthful, and reliable relationship to empirical facts. Think for a moment about the alternative scenario. If the most we could say about interviews is that they shed light on the situation of being interviewed, then most of them would be of dubious—if not worthless—research value.

However, this referential purpose, in and of itself, is insufficient. For one thing, people are *not* always a sound source of witness information. People often forget aspects of what they see and hear; they exaggerate, repress, and make mistakes about their experiences; and they lie about still others. Even when these issues of human fallibility and hubris are accounted for, there is an even bigger problem with the referential view of language: people do not narrate their lived experience from a neutral position. Rather, everything that people say in an interview—all of the “stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations,” as Paget characterized this discourse—issue from a perspective that is uniquely their own. Because whether they realize it or not, they are the authors of the stories they tell. And like any author, they are inherently biased in favor of their own values and interests (if not actually in love with the sound of their own voices). People are also quite obviously cultural animals. As such, they come equipped with cultural codes that shape the structure and content of what they choose to say on particular occasions.

Thus, the ways by which people articulate their knowledge—especially the ways in which “how” and “when” and “to whom” something is said influences “what” is said—are of great importance. It behooves us as interviewers to gather a whole matrix of information about the people we recruit and use this information to design the best possible interviews. Keeping this premise firmly in mind—that interview talk is the rhetoric of socially situated speakers—we can discuss the major purposes of qualitative interviewing:

- Understanding the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations
- Eliciting the language forms used by social actors
- Gathering information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means
- Inquiring about the past
- Verifying, validating, or commenting on information obtained from other sources
- Achieving efficiency in data collection

Interviews are particularly well suited to *understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews*. Researchers usually select persons if their experience is central to the research problem in some way. They may

be recruited for their expertise in a skill or discipline or because their role in a scene or in critical events created a unique fund of knowledge. Interview subjects who occupy a certain status or social category—e.g., homeless men, middle-class adolescents, female captains of industry—may be chosen because of their life conditions, the challenges they face, or the power they have (or lack). The researcher often expects the nature of a person's experience to result in words that can only be uttered by someone who has "been there" (or "is there"). Interviews are also ports of entry into a person's worldviews or ideologies.

Knowledge, experience, and/or worldview are elicited in one of three forms of interview talk: stories, accounts, and explanations. In contrast to propositional modes of cognition, which favor abstractness and generality, *stories* give shape to human experience in terms of actors, intentions, contexts, and actions (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Storytelling is arguably the one symbolic practice that is universal. The content of stories and the specific ways they are narrated vary from one culture to the next, but all people have the innate ability (and impulse) to narrativize. For this reason, communication scholar Walter Fisher (1987) famously dubbed our species *homo narrans*. The qualitative interview is a storytelling zone par excellence. It is an opportunity for people to tell their stories as they see fit and, in so doing, to achieve some coherence in shaping their own understandings. Even young children find it natural to talk about a familiar activity—such as birthday party rituals (Otnes & McGrath, 1994)—in terms of a story structure. Later in this chapter, we will see how "narrative interviews" are used for analyzing a range of communicative phenomena.

Interviews enable people to give *accounts*, which Scott and Lyman (1968) define as excuses or justifications of social conduct. As an example, Hunt and Manning (1991) interviewed police officers during an 18-month field study about the social contexts in which they would lie. Instances of police lying to colleagues and in court were found to serve a variety of ends: saving face, retaliating against disrespectful suspects, compensating for an ineffective justice system, avoiding unnecessary paperwork, and protecting fellow officers. The authors concluded that "learning to lie is a key to [police] membership" (p. 54).

In addition, qualitative interviews can be vehicles for exploring people's *explanations*. We might be curious about how a group of people created a philosophy or cultural logic; how they apply this framework to situations, issues, or dilemmas; how they interpret texts according to the philosophy they espouse; and so forth. For example, Ahlqvist (2001) explored the "programming philosophies" of commercial radio programmers by having them talk about their priorities and rationales. From these interviews, Ahlqvist categorized statements into four knowledge frameworks: a "musicologist"

philosophy, a “surrogate consumer” philosophy, a “professional programmer” philosophy, and a “conduit” philosophy.

Qualitative researchers also use interviews to *elicit the language forms used by social actors*. Becoming acculturated in any realm of social life usually involves learning languages, vocabularies, and idioms, which we use to manipulate objects, establish competency, develop group values, and mark in-group membership. Neumann and Simpson’s (1997) study of music bootlegging uncovered a vocabulary—including such terms as “encyclopedia,” “archivist,” “library”—that self-described “tapeheads” used to name objects in their arena of cultural activity. The authors concluded that these terms indicate “the pieties toward literacy evident in the perspectives many bootleggers adopt toward their practices” (p. 331).

Interviews enable researchers to *gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means*. Interviewing, as Kleinman and colleagues (1994) note, is “a good way to learn about physically unbounded social realities . . . [and] identities and meanings that cut across, lie outside, or transcend settings” (p. 43). Interviews in this vein encourage the interviewee to be “the observer’s observer” (Zelditch, 1962).

Similarly, researchers use interviews to *inquire about the past*. The critical events in the life of a person or community are not always available in oral histories, official records, or other artifacts. And because official histories, if they exist at all, often reflect the interests of power holders, interviews can gather a wide range of voices and memories and thus inscribe a more nuanced understanding of the past.

Interviews are often used to *verify, validate, or comment on information obtained from other sources*. In many instances, interviews can help pry loose the meanings from fieldnotes, surveys, or other interviews. Even if an event is documented in some fashion, we still might need to consult with a native member to find out what really happened—for example, how the internal politics of the group membership affected what was said at a meeting. “Member validations” with key persons near the end of a study can also be useful for *testing hypotheses developed in the field*; this kind of interview is discussed in Chapter 8.

Finally, interviews may be able to *achieve efficiency in data collection*. A project involving a number of in-depth interviews usually consumes fewer “contact hours” than an ethnography of the same group. However, this efficiency metric applies only to the amount of time spent in the field. The transcription and analysis of interview data take as much (if not more) effort as the write-up and analysis of fieldnotes. In choosing between methods, the major consideration should always be which one is best able to address a research problem.

## Types of Interviews in Communication Research

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Most qualitative interviews are relatively informal, semistructured events. Interviewers engage in some planning for a session—particularly by preparing a list of questions—and they follow the plan to some extent; but they also respond flexibly to any unforeseen contingencies that arise during the interview. Apart from these common characteristics, several distinctive types of qualitative interviewing have been developed in the social sciences. The types we discuss in this section are among the most commonly used in the communication discipline. They differ along several dimensions: the depth and range of topics; the contexts in which they occur; the kind of discourse produced by each; the length and number of interview sessions for each participant; and the relational quality of the interview. We begin with a type of interview that does not operate in a self-contained fashion: the ethnographic interview.

### Ethnographic Interviews

The ethnographic interview—also known as the *informal conversational interview* (Patton, 1990), a *situational conversation* (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973), or the *go-along* (Kusenbach, 2003)—is the most informal, spontaneous form of interviewing. It typically occurs in a cultural scene, while the investigator is busy hanging out with the people being studied. A casual exchange of remarks, or a lull in the action, signals that the moment is right to ask a “research” question. As such, an ethnographic interview occurs in the midst of some other social action, often while the sights and sounds that triggered the question are still fresh in the minds of the researcher and the participants.

In her ethnography of Mexican American teenage girls living in San Antonio, Mayer (2003) took fieldnotes on their “media talk.” Instances of media talk consisted of “discussions that explicitly addressed telenovelas as well as on casual conversations during which an implicit reference to a telenovela might be embedded in a larger topic such as school or family. These passing references often provided the most interesting leads, guiding the researcher’s questions with subjects in the field” (p. 484). Here is an example from Mayer’s fieldnotes of an ethnographic interviewing situation:

I was driving Ana and Sara (two of the three cousins described above) for the video project. Sara asked me if people had altars in front of their homes on the North side of the city. I answered no, but then thought for a while which word I should use to describe North Side residents, who are generally middle-class

Mexican Americans. Without turning around I asked the girls whether they called themselves Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican American . . . “Chicano?” Sara asked and then giggled. They had never heard of the term. Rather, Ana and Sara said they preferred the phrase, “Mexican American,” though they said they accept and are not offended when people call them “Hispanic” or “Mexican.” Ana explained to me, “Hispanic is like official and Mexico is where I’m from. I only don’t like *mojado* (wetback) because that’s an ugly way of saying we don’t belong. Sara added, “We’re all American. We’re just from Mexico.” (p. 489)

This was not an instance of “media talk,” but it did help Mayer understand the teens’ media usage by clarifying their sense of ethnic identity. The easy informality of ethnographic interviews belies the skill involved in “finding” and exploiting these moments. Ethnographers should stay alert to the social cues that tell them an opportune time has opened up for asking questions. The aftermath of ethnographic interviewing also calls for equal measures of prudence and resourcefulness. As Bernard (2002) advises, “You have to remember a lot, you have to duck into private corners a lot (so you can jot things down), and you have to use a lot of deception (to keep people from knowing that you’re really at work, studying them). Informal interviewing can get pretty tiring” (p. 204).

## Informant Interviews

During the course of a study, the researcher may meet people whose knowledge is quite valuable for achieving research objectives. These people are called *informants* because they inform the researcher about the scene—the scene’s history, customs, and rituals; the local “lingo”; the identities and actions of the key players; and so forth. Many qualitative studies—especially, but not exclusively, ethnographies—depend heavily on the information gained from informant interviews.

The people who make good informants often display one or more of the following characteristics:

They are veterans of the scene, often by having “risen through the ranks” and can serve as reliable sources of the institutional memory.

They have inhabited many different roles and can speak knowledgeably about the social parts of the scene and how they work together.

They are widely respected by the membership and are plugged into one or more key social networks.

They are competent users of the local language and possess other forms of cultural capital.



In short, the best informants are savvy social actors. Gatekeepers or sponsors sometimes fill this role, acting as guides to the world the researcher is about to enter. One of the most celebrated figures in the ethnographic literature is Doc, a key informant in William Foote Whyte's classic ethnography, *Street Corner Society* (1943). In their first encounter, Doc agreed to help guide Whyte around the working-class Boston neighborhood called "Cornerville":

Any nights you want to see anything, I'll take you around. I can take you to the joints—the gambling joints. I can take you around to the street corners. Just remember that you're my friend. That's all they need to know. I know these places and if I tell them you're my friend, nobody will bother you. You just tell me what you want to see, and we'll arrange it. . . . When you want some information, I'll ask for it, and you listen. When you want to find out their philosophy of life, I'll start an argument and get it for you. (p. 72)

Occasionally, people of a marginal status—including those who are independent operators of some kind—can be useful informants. They may be more attuned to, and willing to discuss, the political machinations of their colleagues or the episodes of incompetence, cowardice, avarice, and vanity that others choose to ignore or "forget." On the other hand, the researcher should be wary of becoming too closely identified with an alienated or discredited social actor and should certainly not believe everything he or she says.

A researcher who is likable, trustworthy, and eager to learn will usually find willing informants. For example, while studying the ways in which young people use fake identification to gain access to a nightclub, Scheibel (1992) "befriended the club's doorm[e]n and was subsequently allowed to stand next to them as they interacted with the customers. Near the end of some evenings, doormen would show me fake Ids they had confiscated from customers earlier in the evening and explain why the Ids were 'bad'" (p. 161). Additional interviews with students, customers, and past employees helped the author understand the contexts and consequences of fake ID use. These informants offered various viewpoints on the nightclub scene by virtue of the roles they occupied.

With respect to the issue of accuracy, cognitive studies indicate that informants generally recall stable, long-term patterns quite well but may also produce "false recalls" of details of particular events (Bernard, Killworth, Kronenfeld, & Sailer, 1984; Freeman, Romney, & Freeman, 1987). However, in a study of Irish Republican Army (IRA) activists, White (2007) found that interviews conducted with the same people more than 10 years apart yielded very consistent reports of "high profile events" (e.g., how they

joined the IRA). Thus, the degree of accuracy may depend on how salient certain events are to the informant.

## Respondent Interviews

As its name implies, the aim of respondent interviews is to elicit open-ended responses. More than six decades ago, Paul Lazarsfeld (1944) described the general goals of this type of interview: (1) to clarify the meanings of common concepts and opinions, (2) to distinguish the decisive elements of an expressed opinion, (3) to determine what influenced a person to form an opinion or to act in a certain way, (4) to classify complex attitude patterns, and (5) to understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act. Today, qualitative researchers who identify their subjects as “respondents” often adopt at least one of these five objectives.

In contrast to informants, who provide observations and opinions about the world around them, respondents speak only for, and about, themselves. The accuracy of what they say—in relation to the “facts” of a case—is normally of little concern. Rather, respondent interviews are conducted to find out how people express their views, how they construe their actions, how they conceptualize their life world, and so forth. In short, we want them to disclose their subjective standpoints. For example, Bruder and Uçok (2000) studied art museum visitors’ talk about paintings, focusing on the “communicative character of the viewer’s encounter with works of art” (p. 338). Patrons were approached at a public gallery where they could choose the paintings they wanted to discuss. The interviews lasted 5 to 30 minutes (the average was approximately 10 minutes), and no background data were solicited (in order to preserve the sense of having a casual conversation). Except for one question asked of all the respondents—“What do you think?”—the researchers asked only questions “designed to probe for clarity and greater interpretive depth” (pp. 340–341). Underlying this study—and other studies employing the respondent interview—is the assumption drawn from phenomenology that people relate to their life world through both individual intentions and “typifications” (or shared constructs) of experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

In the traditional model, the respondent interview is like a lens focused on the psychological self. Interview talk is treated as a stable and valid representation of the individual’s perspective. Recently, however, researchers have employed a different model of the respondent interview that serves the interests of feminist theory, poststructuralism, and/or cultural studies. In such studies, interview talk is treated as a local manifestation of the discursive formations that circulate broadly in society—for example, gender,

racial, sexual, and political discourses. Interviewees are conceived as speaking subjects who utilize these discourses to perform their identities as well as to make sense of their own positions in the social structure. Often, the subject's speech is judged to be symptomatic of multiple, contradictory, or rapidly mutating discourses, which is considered an indicator of contending ideologies in the society at large.

As an example of this model of respondent interviewing, Clark, Demont-Heinrich, and Webber (2004) studied the "discursive structure" of the digital divide as articulated by both users and nonusers of computers. The authors defined "discourse" as "the ways in which narratives are patterned in both public and private conversations in reference to existing systems of power as they operate through cultural categories such as race, gender or socioeconomic position" (p. 532). This way of defining discourse enabled the authors to develop linkages between what the respondents had to say about computers and the digital divide and existing themes in the public sphere about the uses and possibilities of information technology (e.g., individualism, technological determinism).

Respondent interviews are typically used as a stand-alone procedure rather than combined with other methods in a field study. Although the questions asked can vary from one person to the next, many respondent-interview studies follow a standard order so that responses can be compared across the sample. Even if the questions are not standardized, other aspects of the protocol may be well-defined and formalized.

## Narrative Interviews

The idea of a narrative interview presents something of a "category problem." After all, other types of interviewing also yield stories, tales, anecdotes, jokes, and other kinds of narrative. So, why do we need a separate type called the narrative interview? The answer, quite simply, is that narrative interviews have a dual nature as both an empirical method and an ontological paradigm. In other words, the narrative interview is not only a method for "capturing" stories; it also assumes that people understand who they are partly through their everyday performances of narrative. The act of storytelling thus holds as much interest as the story content in a narrative interview.

There is another major difference between the narrative interview and other types. Narrative inquiry is concerned with the study of entire stories, whereas other types of inquiry, such as informant and respondent interviewing, often extract certain kinds of material—for example, opinions, themes, references to people and places—from stories for analytic purposes.

Some of the distinctive properties of narrative, especially as they bear on interviewing, have been usefully explained by Chase (2008):

Narrative researchers treat narrative—whether oral or written—as a distinct form of discourse. Narrative is retrospective meaning making—the shaping or ordering of past experience. . . . Unlike a chronology, which also reports events over time, a narrative communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place. Thus, in addition to describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. (pp. 64–65)

Chase also notes that “the narrator’s story is flexible, variable, and shaped in part by interactions with the audience” (p. 65). This latter point is especially important for communication scholars. Through its patterns of representation (dramatic forms, plots, scenes, characters, etc.), storytelling enables people to make their experiences intelligible to each other. Narrative thus encodes human desire—as well as human angst and anxiety—at the deepest levels of social life. To be a member of any community means to share such tales. This is undoubtedly what Jerome Bruner (1987) meant when he wrote that “life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of a ‘life,’ for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he [or she] thinks the other is hearing” (p. 21).

Narrative interviews are the earliest known form of in-depth interviewing. From early twentieth-century anthropological accounts of Native American lives, and from the Chicago School sociologists of the 1920s, came the life history method (Langness & Frank, 1981). A life history documents all of the key contours of a person’s life, acting as a prism—or metaphor—for understanding cultural or historical themes. Recently, the life history has taken new forms, including forms that focus attention on disjuncture as a motif for “identity work,” create autobiographical accounts from compelling personal issues and crises, and mix genres (Chambon, 1995; Heyl, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2008).

Two streams of narrative interviewing have emerged in communication: the *personal* narrative and the *organizational* narrative. Arising out of oral culture traditions, the personal narrative eschews monologue in favor of conversational interaction (Langellier, 1989). The personal narrative “[creates] a dynamic interplay between self and others” (Corey, 1996, p. 57). The stories are often told in relation to cultural discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other politicized identities. Feminist scholarship has had an enormous impact in this regard through its explorations of gendered speech and its theorizing about the dialogical qualities of interviewing (Graham, 1984; Reinharz, 1992). Recent work in personal narrative studies includes

stories as strategic resources (Corey, 1996), stories for making sense of mortality and spirituality (Wittenberg-Lyles, 2006), and stories as autobiographical exploration (Leonard & Ellen, 2008; Ronai, 1995).

Organizational narratives do not differ in significant ways from the personal narrative. The key variance is that the stories told by organizational members make up a web of collective reality. Moreover, the organizations themselves are sources of stories that become embedded in—or problematic in relation to—the actions of the membership. Boje (1991) defines the storytelling organization as “a collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sense making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (p. 106). In this view, an organization exists largely in, by, and as a result of stories told at multiple levels and through multiple symbolic forms. It is also through the use of narrative that organizations reach out to their external clients and constituencies in the ongoing effort to shape a favorable climate for their operations. Among other topics, recent studies have focused on stories as the discourse of conflict (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996), stories as health interventions (Petraglia, 2007), and stories as the commodified fables of company founders (Boje, 1995).

The method of narrative interviewing often depends on a close, long-term relationship with participants. If they do not already know each other, the researcher and the subject may spend some time together in order to become familiar with each other’s background and to develop an ethos of equality (see the section “The Practices of Interviewing” later in this chapter). Narrative interviews are also among the least structured of all interviews. The goal is to find the most comfortable grounds for people to tell their stories. This means that the interviewer is most concerned about facilitating, not controlling or managing, the flow of talk.

## Focus Group Interviews

As we have seen so far, qualitative interviews are typically a dyadic encounter between an interviewer and a human subject. However, some research problems call for interviewing several people at once. Among a host of group interview methods (e.g., Delphi groups, brainstorming groups, informal group interviews in the field), the *focus group* is unquestionably the most popular (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Versions of focus group interviewing have been used in the social sciences for decades (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Morrison, 1998), and pollsters and commercial marketers rely on focus groups as a tool for probing people’s political beliefs, their responses to

media messages, and their associations with brands and retail settings (Calder, 1977). Focus groups are also used in mixed-methods designs, either as an exploratory technique for developing hypotheses and questionnaire items during the early stage of survey design or as part of a triangulation strategy complementing individual interviews, participant observation, or quantitative measures (Barbour, 2008, pp. 44–47). More importantly for our purposes, the focus group interview has come into its own as a stand-alone method. It is a useful social laboratory for studying the diversity of opinion on a topic, the collaborative process of meaning construction, and the cultural performance of communication (Hollander, 2004).

Focus groups have been defined as “small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic” (Hollander, 2004, p. 606). Many people’s viewpoints about a topic can be gathered quickly, and indeed this is often a rationale for using this method. We see this rationale in play whenever focus group participants’ responses are analyzed individually, absent the dialogic context. This usage is problematic because a group conversation is not equivalent to an aggregate of voices.

The most compelling reason for using the focus group method is to exploit the “group effect” (Carey, 1994). The method takes advantage of the fact that, in both ordinary conversations and guided discussions, people draw upon a shared fund of experiences. What occurs in this context is a kind of “chaining” or “cascading” effect in which each person’s turn of the conversation links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions that came before it. As Morgan (1988) explains, “the explicit use of the group interaction [produces] data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 12). This dynamic seldom, if ever, arises in a one-on-one interview.

The group effects vary widely, but they are generally of two broad kinds. Some researchers strive for *complementary interactions*. In this mode, the group members attain consensus on the topics under discussion and go on to add their own observations and subtle shades of meaning. What is also valuable about these complementary interactions is that they often reveal vernacular forms of expression from the participants’ own world—slang, jokes, anecdotes, songs, acting-out episodes, and so on. The easy informality of a well-run focus group helps to bring these forms of speech and action out into the open (Kitzinger, 1994). Not surprisingly, focus groups can be high-spirited occasions—even at times noisy and rambunctious. However, some groups are appropriately quiet and serious. With the help of a skilled moderator, a sense of supportive intimacy can flourish such that people feel they can speak openly about sensitive topics.

Focus groups also enable people to compare, contrast, and critique each other's perspectives on a topic. In this mode of *argumentative interactions*, the moderator's deliberate introduction of certain topics—along with the careful sorting of participants into groups—can result in cleavages of opinion, or clashing worldviews, that produce insights into “how people theorize their own point of view . . . in relation to other perspectives and how they put their own ideas to ‘work’” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 113). In short, the objective is to employ the focus group as a setting for analyzing divergent or contending viewpoints. It takes a skilled moderator to help people talk freely about their differences. The trick is to empower people to speak more candidly than they normally might in “mixed company,” without raising emotional temperatures or pitting one against another and without the participants taking offense at others' viewpoints or retreating into a defensive crouch. Still not everyone will play this game as intended. Some participants manage to “say” a lot in focus group sessions by saying very little. Hollander (2004), for example, has explored instances in focus groups of “problematic silence” (in which participants withhold their viewpoints) and “problematic speech” (in which participants make statements that do not represent their underlying beliefs or experiences).

The protocol for focus group interviews has by now become well established. The best size for a group is 6 to 12 persons. A group with fewer than 6 persons can lead to a less diverse range (and more rapid exhaustion) of useful comments; a group with more than 12 participants runs the risk that not as many topics can be covered and not everyone will be heard from. The normal length is 30 minutes to two hours, depending on the size of the group and the complexity of the topic. The interview typically takes place in a “neutral” location like a conference room, but it is not unknown for focus groups to be held in the home of a group member or the researcher. Audio recordings benefit from the use of multiple microphones, often recorded on separate tracks to aid the transcription of often chaotic conversations. Some researchers videotape the proceedings—with the camera(s) set up in the interview setting or behind a one-way mirror in an adjacent room—in order to capture facial expressions, gestures, and other nonverbal behaviors.

The free-wheeling character of focus groups is both its virtue and its potential difficulty. Researchers accustomed to the calm, orderly pace of individual interviews may be in for a shock. As Warr (2005) observes, “the structure of a group discussion tends to encourage more partial modes of ‘account making’. . . . [S]uch data are usually more ‘unruly’ than one-on-one interviews because participants can interrupt and argue with each other or introduce conversational tangents” (p. 203). In other words, this bounty of talk comes at a price of fragmentary thoughts, one-off comments, non sequiturs, and the like.

The interviewer—or *moderator*—plays a critical role in the success of focus group interviews. After introductions around the table, the moderator usually starts with one or two questions intended to “break the ice.” The moderator may then present one or more stimuli (e.g., a photo, a song, a video, a fill-in-the-blank question) to orient the group to the topic and provide a push-off to the discussion. Thereafter, the moderator lightly guides the discussion with a list of questions and probes. Moderating the focus group is a challenging job. There are fine lines to walk between encouraging each person to speak and promoting a positive group feeling; between promoting a robust, uninhibited discussion and gently tamping down a domineering group member; between ensuring that all key questions are asked and not inserting oneself too forcefully in the discussion.

A good example of focus group principles put into practice is a study by Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) on the audience reception of racial stereotypes. The authors wanted to explore how interpretations of racially defined characteristics are affected by the comedic devices of Hollywood filmmaking. The film chosen to exemplify the comedy genre was *Rush Hour 2*, featuring a Black American police detective (played by Chris Tucker), a Hong Kong chief inspector (Jackie Chan), an assortment of Asian characters portrayed as villains, and several White characters in small but significant “overseeing” positions. In order to “[create] an atmosphere where participants would feel comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics, such as racism” (p. 165), as well as to analyze racial group viewpoints in comparative fashion, 40 Black, Asian, and White American university students were recruited and placed into racially homogeneous groups. Altogether, eight focus groups were organized, with each group consisting of three to eight participants. The focus groups first watched *Rush Hour 2* in its entirety. Then the moderator led a 30- to 60-minute discussion of their opinions of the characters and the stereotypes featured in the movie, their feelings about the portrayals, and racial stereotyping in general. The moderators kept the discussions on track with a list of questions. At the same time, the “semi-structured discussions were relaxed and informal so that much of the information shared emerged from a natural flow of conversation” (p. 166).

Among the major decisions for designing focus groups are the composition of groups and the use of interview questions. Groups of strangers are usually better for exploring issues of a public nature. In addition, a focus group of people unfamiliar with each other is often more attentive to the moderator’s questions (rather than going off on tangents). The use of a pre-existing group has the obvious advantage of a shared history, which makes it easier to start discussions and keep them going. It also allows the researcher to study the influence of group dynamics on the development of



views (Barbour, 2008). On the other hand, a preexisting group is often marked by a deeply ingrained style of interpersonal communication—which sometimes gets in the way of uncovering new or diverse views.

The degree of hetero- or homogeneity in focus groups is also an important factor. A mixed group (e.g., men and women; Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) has the potential for creating interactions of an argumentative type. On the other hand, the members of a mixed group—not wishing to offend each other—may be a bit more cautious in how they express themselves. A homogeneous group is usually more willing to speak openly, as the Park et al. (2006) study suggested. On the other hand, moderators need to be on the watch for “group think” tendencies arising in a homogeneous group.

In terms of interview questions, Morgan (1996) notes that the use of more questions usually means greater structure in the discussion (or less freely flowing discussion). The impact of the *types* of questions asked is less clear. Discourse analysis studies of focus group interaction suggest that the moderator’s agenda often wins out over the participants’ own concerns in determining the direction of a discussion (Agar & MacDonald, 1995; Saferstein, 1995). This effect may not be noticed in the midst of a fast-moving focus group session. Therefore, moderators should occasionally do an “after-action” study of their role in focus groups and try to correct any habits that tend to inhibit or misdirect group members’ talk.

## The Practices of Interviewing

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Most qualitative interviews are a site of tension between two demands. On the one hand, the conceptual issues that drive the project impose, as Rapley (2001) puts it, “an extra-local need to collect data on a topic” (p. 310). Researchers often view this as a need for obtaining the right kind of data that will help address the project’s research questions. The other, competing, demand arises from the interview itself. Here, the researcher must respond rapidly and with sensitivity to “a here-and-now interactional event in which these data are collected in and through talk-in-interaction” (p. 310). This is not just a demand for having a satisfying encounter, although that, too, is important; rather, it is an obligation to listen attentively and allow the conversation to lead to new discoveries. In trying to cope with one demand (e.g., the “extra-local need” of the project’s goals), interviewers often find themselves pulling away from—or even being at odds with—the very thing that produces a great interview (the “here-and-now interactional event”). Somehow interviewers must find a way to reconcile these demands or at

least find a way to put the tension that inevitably arises to work for the good of the research.

This goal is more likely to be achieved if the interview can be framed as a project in which the researcher and the participant are mutually invested. But how is this sense of mutual investment created? We suggest that interviewers should try to foster a frame of *serious play*, in which the usual norms of social interaction are suspended (Bateson, 1972). To quote Benney and Hughes (1970) from their classic essay on the sociological interview:

By offering a program of discussion, and an assurance that information offered will not be challenged or resisted, self-expression is facilitated to an unusual degree [that is] inherently satisfying. In this sense, then, the interview is an understanding between the two parties that, in return for allowing the interviewer to direct their communication, the informant is assured that he [or she] will not meet with denial, contradiction, competition, or other harassment. As with all contractual relations, the fiction or convention of equality must govern the situation. (pp. 194–195)

This way of framing the interaction—as a “fiction or convention of equality”—will be taken seriously only if the participants can truly say what they want without challenge. It is the researcher’s job to help the interviewee “enlarge on the definition of the situation . . . by reading the interview also as an interesting and satisfying encounter, as a chance to express his [or her] dislikes, disappointments, and ideas” (Brenner, 1978, p. 130). Yielding some control over the interview is key to this process. Although the researcher establishes a broad agenda for the interview, participants can still exercise agency in the following ways: by reframing a question, by answering a question with a question, by being purposely terse (or verbose), by being silent, by setting limits on what they are willing to say, and—in the ultimate act of free will—by quitting the interview (Kauffman, 1992; Knapik, 2006). Most people do not deploy all of these tactics, or even most of them; but just the realization that they can do so is an important step in creating a spirit of serious play. And the more they “buy in” to the idea of open, nonjudgmental dialogue, the more they will kindle an interest in “getting it right”—producing the information, stories, and accounts that aid the researcher’s quest. In the following pages, we discuss some ways of jointly creating this frame.

## The Interview Context

Issues of timing and location can be consequential for conducting good interviews. The best time for an interview varies across people and

situations, but generally, one should try to find a *protected time* when the participant isn't otherwise preoccupied or feeling edgy about the next thing on his or her calendar. Best results are usually obtained when participants are relaxed—neither highly energized nor fatigued. Of course, researchers are seldom in a position to predict their subjects' moods or scheduling issues. If someone does arrive for an appointment in a harried state of mind, or mired in a funk, it is often a good idea to let them “off the hook” and suggest that the interview be rescheduled.

Decisions about where to conduct interviews take similar considerations in account. Generally, this means finding a *protected place* in which the needs of comfort and confidentiality can be met. Ideally, it should be a place insulated from interruptions or the presence of others who might listen in. Many locations on a college campus, such as a faculty member's office or a conference room, satisfy these conditions although they may not be convenient for the participant in terms of travel and parking. (Conference rooms can also be “sterile” settings, which some find off-putting.) Ironically, many public settings—a picnic table in a park, a booth in a coffee shop—afford as much privacy as one's own home.

One problem with public settings is that they are susceptible to background noise—which can produce anxious moments for the researcher. For example, in August of 2008, Tom was in Chicago for an interview with the director of advance for the Obama presidential campaign. They met during the lunch hour at an open-air patio overlooking Michigan Avenue, with dozens of people sitting, eating, and talking at nearby tables. It was not the ideal venue from Tom's viewpoint, but for this participant—who was already squeezed for time, and nervously checked his BlackBerry throughout the interview—it was the location closest to headquarters. Tom had no choice but to proceed. He pressed the record button, moved the recorder close to his companion, and hoped for the best. Fortunately, both voices came through strong and clear when the interview was played back later.

As this anecdote implies, researchers often defer to the participants' preference. Most people choose to be interviewed on their own turf, such as in a home or office. They are likely to be at ease in these places, playing the role of host to the researcher (which can be quite helpful for engendering a “serious play” frame). These settings have the added benefit of admitting researchers into the interviewee's own habitat, where they can observe artifacts and revealing mannerisms or meet people who are mentioned in the interview stories and accounts. One graduate student that Bryan knows, for example, interviewed off-duty prison guards at local coffee shops. She quickly noticed that they never sat with their backs to the door and that they remained hypervigilant about potential encounters with ex-inmates or the

friends and family members of current inmates. This helped her to better understand the guards' off-duty relationships with inmates. In general, the interviewer should be attuned to the social meanings that are implicated in doing research in certain locations, be they public or private (Herzog, 2005).

To some degree, the effects of location can be reduced by interviewing on the phone. Once upon a time, dialing a phone number assured one of reaching another person at a physical location known to both of them (a "home phone" or "office phone"); thus securely connected by a land line, a researcher and an interviewee could talk from within their respective zones of privacy. Today, with the ubiquity of mobile phones, the shifting social and physical settings in which calls are negotiated must now be considered a complicating factor of such interviews. The knowledge that a person is multitasking while ostensibly participating in an in-depth interview is enough to give pause to any qualitative researcher. Tom is familiar with this feeling of mild disquiet, having once engaged in an "intensive" phone interview with one of the actors in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, who took Tom's call while watering the grass at his vacation home in Maine. Still, a phone interview does retain the advantage of bringing distant parties together at times of mutual convenience.

Logistically, a phone interview requires the use of a recorder with special circuitry for inputting the audio frequencies of a phone call. Most U.S. states do not require callers by law to inform the other party that a conversation is being recorded. Of course, this is not an option in academic research. Like any other research encounter, the interviewer should guide the participant through the human subject protections portion of the protocol and record his or her consent before proceeding further. In this regard, it is important to note that in-depth phone interviews are seldom "cold calls." The researcher ordinarily makes an initial contact by letter or e-mail (or in person, for that matter) and outlines the purposes of the study. If the person responds positively, one can follow-up in a subsequent call or e-mail and negotiate the terms of the phone interview.

Telephone interviews are frequently criticized for being impersonal and a poor substitute for the sensuous interaction of face-to-face meetings. Visual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and body posture are indeed missing from phone interviews, thus eliminating potentially valuable information "given off" by the respondent. There is also some validity to concerns about the level of candor and trust that can arise between people who have only "met" on the phone. (Not unlike the online context, engaging in deception with a stranger on the phone is often perceived as carrying few, if any, negative consequences.) However, the experience of some phone-based studies tells a different story. At least one study has found that interviews conducted

by telephone and face-to-face modes yield highly comparable findings (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Moreover, as Tom found in his *Last Temptation* study (the incident of the vacationing actor notwithstanding), a phone interview can be as intimate and engrossing, and ultimately just as good at getting full responses, as an in-person interview. Phone interviews may even conjure up a “strangers passing in the night” phenomenon, in which participants feel freer to disclose personal information because they don’t expect to meet the researcher again. The absence of visual cues can also serve a useful purpose by reducing respondents’ reactions to the cultural signs and body presentation of the interviewer or to the equipment used to record the interview. (See Bird, 1995, and Sunderland, 1999, for excellent discussions of in-depth telephone interviews.) A face-to-face interview is usually preferred if all options are equally available, but the telephone should not be dismissed out of hand as inferior. For some purposes, a phone interview may do just as well, if not better.

The Internet affords a range of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools and discursive arenas that many qualitative researchers have adopted in their interview practices. As we just discussed with respect to phones, any technological intermediary will constrain some aspects of a “normal” interview, leave others more or less unaltered, and liberate still other potentialities. In this light, some researchers argue that the synchronous forms of CMC (e.g., Internet Relay Chat, or “chat rooms”)—and perhaps the near-synchronous forms as well (e.g., texting)—are best suited for nonstandardized (e.g., ethnographic) interviewing (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 76). The immediacy of this real-time interaction allows participants to ask and answer questions efficiently, and it contributes to a climate of intimacy in which understandings can be carefully developed and explored. On the other hand, the global reach of the Internet means that chat room denizens may be interviewed “from” vastly different time zones. A researcher’s midafternoon task may be an interviewee’s cure for insomnia. Such circumstances, combined with differences in participants’ concentration, speed of response, and endurance (Lyman & Wakeford, 1999, p. 365), mean that some will adapt better to the demands of a synchronous CMC interview than others. For their part, interviewers must use limited information in moment-to-moment decisions about the significance (and implications) of message form and content. They must be ready to probe, remind, coax, and—if necessary—cajole their interlocutors, not only to move the dialogue in a fruitful direction, but also to clear up ambiguities and reestablish contact if and when their connection is terminated.

Due to its staggered, time-delayed form of messaging, asynchronous CMC (e.g., e-mail) is not capable of achieving the same level of engagement

as synchronous CMC. The most obvious issue facing the e-mail interviewer is deciding how much of the interview guide to send in a single turn. In text-based formats, sending an entire list of questions could effectively transform the interview into a survey. The alternative—parceling out a question or two at a time—presents the challenge of managing small bits of sequentially received data. Additionally, it increases the chance that bored or distracted interviewees will invest their time and attention elsewhere before completing the interview. However, recent comparisons of e-mail interviews with more traditional forms of interviewing (e.g., face-to-face, telephone) reveal that people often enjoy the ability to create thoughtful answers and use the flexible reply time to gain more control of the dialogue (James & Busher, 2006; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Further, as James and Busher (2006) note, “The continuous and visible record of the email interviews in every exchange enabled participants to revisit issues that had slipped temporarily out of view through the course of their interviews . . . , because they could return to earlier aspects of the interview at their convenience and remind themselves of their earlier interpretations of their lives” (p. 416). The upshot of these findings is that the ability to contemplate a series of texts (messages, replies, replies to replies, etc.) before submitting an answer can result in a more fully reflexive interview.

Whether they are generated in synchronous or asynchronous modes, CMC interviews are already a written text, which eases the time and cost invested in transcription. Participants can also add certain kinds of punctuation, text formatting, abbreviations, shorthand phrasing, and symbols (e.g., “emoticons”) to express their moods, attitudes, and nuances of meaning. Additionally, as McCoyd and Kerson (2006) note, “respondents can ‘clean up’ their own messages so that the researcher does not modify the respondent comments by deciding which verbal tics and stuttering to remove, but obtains responses needing only a cleaning of spelling errors” (p. 397). Respondents can attach videos, photos, or documents to their response, and with the availability of high-speed broadband and “webcams,” live video chat is an option for doing interviews.

Before leaving this topic, we must note the special ethical issues of interviewing people in the porous setting of the Internet—and some precautions that help to ensure these issues do not turn into problems (see McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 394). In many organizations, including academic ones, an employee’s e-mail is legally subject to being monitored by administrators. With this in mind, it is not a good idea to let any messages from our interview subjects sit in the in-box for very long. New e-mails should be stripped of identifying information (with a code number replacing the respondent’s name and e-mail address) and placed in a computerized file system; soon

afterward, the e-mails can be deleted (and then deleted again from the deleted folder). Some researchers go to the extent of storing all of their project data on an offline computer, so as to eliminate the possibility of data being “hacked” or corrupted by viruses and malware. Subjects should also be told that their e-mails and other data will not be forwarded to, or shared with, a third party. In general, people will feel more secure about being interviewed online if our confidentiality measures are sound, justified, and transparent.

## Recording Interviews

Some researchers are capable of recalling conversations in great detail. Author Truman Capote, for example, is reputed to have written up his interviews for *In Cold Blood* almost verbatim from memory. Most of us, however, are not *memoires savants*. The speech from interviews must usually be recorded in tangible form, and the choices are twofold: note taking or audio recording. The chief virtues of note taking are that it can be done anywhere and doesn't depend on devices that are prone to mechanical failure. In addition, note taking is a deterrent to mind wandering and distractions; it forces the researcher to concentrate on the real-time task of listening to what the interviewee is saying.

However, note taking has its limitations. We might be able to capture the highlights of an interview—a summary of dialogue, maybe a few exact phrases—but a large amount of it is always lost. If the researcher does opt for note taking, the advice given in Chapter 5 about quickly converting scratch notes into fieldnotes applies here, too.

Audio recording, on the other hand, is capable of capturing and preserving all of the interview discourse with little effort by the researcher. Rather than slavishly writing down what is being said, the interviewer can sit back (or lean forward) and engage more fully in the conversation. The result of this process—a cassette or a data file—can be summoned at the touch of a button or a click of a mouse. We can peruse the content of the talk as well as its paralinguistic aspects—accents, dialects, laughter, sighs, pauses, stresses on words, and so on. After the tape has been transcribed, the researcher is in possession of a text that, for all intents and purposes, is verbatim. Later, this text can be imported into data analysis software, or individual sections can be “cut and pasted” into a scheme of categorization.

In recent years, digital audio recorders have eclipsed tape recorders in convenience, cost, and storage capacity. It is now a simple procedure to save audio files on a PC (and back them up on CDs, a thumb drive, or other media), making the stacks of cassettes that once accumulated during a project a thing of the past.

Unquestionably, audio recorders are powerful, multifaceted tools in the service of the interviewer's craft. Yet even a small recorder is a conspicuous object, and it can affect the casual atmosphere that one is seeking. To be sure, some interviewees have no qualms about being recorded—like the political advance person who asserted to Tom, with full knowledge that he might be quoted by name in a publication, that President George W. Bush is “a war criminal.” Other interviewees exhibit a different comfort level; we can tell by their glances and guarded manner that they have carefully noted the presence of the recorder. The effects of this self-consciousness can be subtle but pervasive. As Whyte (1982) points out, “informants are likely to talk more ‘for the record’ with the machine than without, even when they have been told that the interviewer is going to write up the interview later” (p. 118). Thus a certain formality may creep into their speech. They may “self-censor” their remarks (with the researcher unsure about what has been left out or modified). If they are willing to say something controversial, they might ask to have the recorder turned off. These on-the-spot negotiations interrupt the flow of the talk, to say nothing of constraining the quality of the data.

These problems can be averted to some degree by observing a few simple rules. First, all technical preparations—choosing a microphone, checking audio levels, making sure batteries are charged, etc.—should be done *before* arriving at the site. (See Maloney and Paolisso, 2001, for a discussion of using microphones with different pick-up patterns for specific interviewing circumstances.) Packing spare batteries and tapes, or even a back-up recorder, is also a good precaution to take. Interviewees often take their cue about the importance of the recorder from the attitude of the researcher; if the researcher discusses it in a matter-of-fact tone they are also likely to think it's not a big deal. During the interview, the researcher should avoid referring to the recorder or visually fixating on it. Any overt worrying about the equipment can raise the subject's own anxiety level; stopping to deal with an equipment issue may have worse consequences. When the interview is over, you might consider offering to send a copy of the transcript to the participant, as a gesture of goodwill. Some researchers invite subjects to review the transcript for inaccuracies or misstatements—and then return the corrected transcript.

To sum up, if only a set of facts is required from an interview, or if your subject is overly sensitive about being recorded, then note taking may be the best bet. But an audio recorder is the medium of first choice if accuracy and completeness are required.

## Developing Rapport

Because the parties usually meet each other initially as strangers, researchers must do whatever they can to put the participant at ease. They should try to



anticipate the images and questions the participant may bring to the meeting: “What does this person want to know about me? What will this ‘communication student/professor’ think of how I talk, where I live, what my interests are? Will I be allowed to say what I truly feel and believe? Of what value is this research anyway? Who benefits from it?” These are all reasonable questions. Perhaps few of them will be verbalized in our presence. Nevertheless, you should try to put yourself in their place and get ready to respond to the sorts of issues that concern the participants about the study, the interview, and the kind of professional—and person—you are.

In this initial stage of interaction, we try to achieve *rapport* with our participants. Rapport means that while we may not always agree with each other’s viewpoint, our viewpoints are worthy of respect. Rapport also means that we implicitly agree about the communicative rules of the interview, such as the turn taking of question and answer, the right to finish a thought without interruption, and the freedom to use any form of expression (except expressions that devalue the dignity or experience of the other).

Importantly, rapport is a quality of a communication event, not of a relationship. As Spradley (1979) notes, “Just as respect can develop between two people who do not particularly like one another, rapport can exist in the absence of fondness and affection” (p. 78). Rapport should also not be confused with “neutrality” on the part of the researcher—even if it were possible to be neutral. Patton (1990) puts the distinction this way:

Rapport is a stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. Neutrality is a stance vis-à-vis the content of what that person says. Rapport means that I respect the people being interviewed, so that what they say is important because of who is saying it. . . . Yet, I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me. (p. 317)

Because the researcher has limited time to complete the interview, a high priority is placed on establishing rapport quickly. Arguably, this encourages a view of rapport as serving only the researcher’s needs (Jorgenson, 1992). Clearly, no one party can “possess” rapport. By its very nature, rapport is a social accomplishment. Still, the researcher is the one who should make the first moves to lay the groundwork for a mutually gratifying conversation.

Rapport also grows out of the researcher’s clarity of purpose. Participants should be given clear, honest reasons for why they have been recruited, what the project’s goals are, and how the interview will be conducted. Certain elements of this rhetoric are nearly “boilerplate” for qualitative interviews. Participants are told, in some fashion, “I want to know how you (or others

in your group) think about these topics.” They are told that there is “no right or wrong response” and moreover, that it is important to “express your views in your own words.” Participants may be urged to “take as much time as you need,” and to “bring up questions or issues that are relevant, but maybe I simply didn’t know enough to ask.” However, you should also let them know that “I have a set of questions that I want to cover in the time we have today.”

Focus group interviews usually follow a special protocol for introducing the study and creating the grounds for rapport. Table 6.1 displays one such “script.” The moderator starts by emphasizing that all of the group’s conversation must be held in confidence—some variation on the saying, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Of special interest in this script are the use of humor and the imaginative way in which the moderator explains the concept of opinion equality. It is important to go around the room for introductions, not only to break the ice but also so that voices can be matched with names for later transcription.

Table 6.1 Focus Group Script

### I. MODERATOR INTRODUCTION

*[Note: A conversational approach sets a tone that relaxes people, making it more comfortable for them to share their intimate thoughts. This part of the script can be easily remembered and delivered naturally by moderators.]*

Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am working with \_\_\_\_\_. You were all invited here today because it is important that we hear from young adults like you. However, don’t worry that anyone outside of our group will know exactly what you said. No names will be used when your comments are used in our research project. Also, we ask you to respect the privacy of the other group members by not discussing anything that anyone else says. So we all agree that our conversation will be confidential? *[Be sure to make brief eye contact with each person at this point.]*

Let’s imagine that you go outside this building and ask someone, “What is the temperature right now at this spot?” There is a right answer that you can check with a thermometer. However, what we are discussing tonight is how you or your friends feel about things, and there could be as many different opinions as there are people in this room. Guess what? Every one of those opinions is right! Remember, we aren’t here to convince anyone of something in particular or to change anyone’s mind. We are here to discuss things and hear what each and every one of you has to say.

Sometimes, you will find that many people in the room have your opinion, and other times, you will be the only one with that opinion. But it is important for us

Table 6.1 (Continued)

to learn about all the opinions, because even if you are the only one in this room who holds that opinion, there may be hundreds or thousands of other people in our community who feel just as you do. Most importantly, every opinion counts, so please feel free to share your thoughts.

You will note the carefully hidden tape recorder. *[This is a joke!]* I will be recording our conversation because we want to be able to remember everything you share and to really listen to you now instead of spending time scribbling notes. The tape recorder does have one problem. It is hard to hear voices when more than one person is speaking. So I'm asking you to please speak one at a time.

If you need to leave the discussion for some reason, please feel free to step outside, but I ask you to hurry back to join us. So, sit back and relax. I know you will find the next 90 minutes very interesting and enjoyable.

## II. PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS

First, please turn your name cards so I can see everyone's name. Thanks. I'd like to begin by finding out about your favorite TV show.

*[Note: This is a discussion-training exercise. You call on people by their first name and ask one follow-up question about whatever they say. The follow-up question can be anything that makes it clear you have been listening and that encourages the participant to add something more. That will help get the participants used to your probing for more information. A good approach is to call on people in a seemingly random order, rather than moving around the table, because the randomness better approximates how the focus group discussions happen. Moving around the table sets a different tone and could lead to people patterning their comments after their neighbor who has just spoken.]*

Source: Courtesy of Suzanne Allard.

One way to engage the participant's interest and pave the way for future meaningful discourse is to start with *interviewer self-disclosures*. By saying something about who you are—including, perhaps, your own reasons for doing the study—you can help along the equal-footing nature of the interview. If you use brief personal stories or anecdotes judiciously during the rest of the interview, a sense of reciprocity and goodwill often unfolds.

Alternately, you might ask for *participant self-disclosures*—for example, asking them about their hometowns, families, jobs, or other aspects of their lives. One purpose of doing this is to help the participants feel comfortable talking about themselves. For your part, these moments are neither frivolous nor a throwaway tactic: the participants' speech patterns, storytelling

performance, and willingness to share confidences can be noted silently for making adjustments to your interview strategy. It may go without saying (but we will say it anyway) that participant self-disclosures should key in on a positive experience or at least an innocuous one. Asking about an interviewee's job just after the person has been laid off, for example, is not a good start. Obviously, the goal of building rapport together suffers if your questioning brings negative emotions to the surface.

The researcher's demeanor and personal appearance also matter in how a subject evaluates you and the interview event. As in the ethnographer's stance discussed in Chapter 5, you should generally present a positive, nonjudgmental, eager-to-learn face. At the same time, be ready to adjust yourself to the tone of the topic and occasion. For example, researchers interviewing men who have had prostate cancer surgery would be wise to steer a middle course between bubbly cheerfulness and funereal solemnity. One can be far more buoyant interviewing kids about their favorite TV shows. And whatever people's notions of the academic's dress code may be, you should dress in a way that reflects a sensible reading of the scene. Business attire has its place for some interviews but so, too, does casual wear.

Finally, it is worth noting that achieving rapport can be a considerable challenge at times. In some studies, stark differences between the researcher and the participants—defined in terms of social status, cultural capital, or communicative style—exist from the start of fieldwork. For example, anthropologist James Waldram (2007) tells of how he conducted a study of sexual offenders in prison—a category of people who are commonly judged “among society's greatest contemporary pariahs” (p. 964). The inmates had no reference for what an anthropologist does, nor did they initially grasp why he wanted to spend hours listening to their stories. Waldram earned their trust by establishing his independence from the prison's staff and by handing much of the control of the interviewing process over to the men. As he put it, “Having no power over them, and no reason to cause them harm, I was well positioned to bear witness to their lives” (p. 966). He also managed to convince the men that their stories had value to others.

Rapport is sometimes disrupted by the interviewees' behavior and in ways that are not easily repaired. For example, when women interview men, especially on topics of gender relations or sexual conduct, some men will try to control the “conversational dance” by asserting their superiority and dominance, denigrating women, asking highly personal questions of the female interviewer, and engaging in acts that could be considered sexual harassment (Arendell, 1997; Green, Barbour, Barnard, & Kitzinger, 1993). Incidents such as these not only threaten rapport, they can attack the researcher's self-confidence and sense of safety. If you knowingly go into a problematic interview situation,

be prepared to use conversational tactics for deflating tensions or even terminating the interview if the subject becomes unpleasant or dangerous (see Arendell, 1997; Green et al., 1993).

Researchers must also make delicate, on-the-spot decisions about how to respond to their subjects' comments. Glaser (1996) tells of being with a White campaign official who told a racist joke. The situation, he wrote, "*required* a response. Silence, interpreted in other situations as approval, was disapproval in this one" (p. 536). Glaser instantly replied, "That's terrible," as if to say that the joke itself was a poor one. His ambiguous response satisfied a moral imperative and avoided a confrontation that might have endangered their rapport. Nonetheless, the author admitted, "It was not the most honest moment in my life" (p. 536). This example reminds us again that rapport can exist even while we disapprove of the other person's ethics, values, or conduct. But achieving it may require us to temper our urge to speak out as we normally would.

## Listening

Listening is a crucial—maybe *the* most crucial—way to build rapport after an interview has started. At its most basic level, listening means "paying attention." Because words alone can come across as insincere, the act of paying attention to a speaker can be the purest sign of showing respect, of wanting to hear more. A good listener is likely to elicit more talk and maybe even better stories and information. Conversely, not paying attention—looking down, staring off to the side, fidgeting with a pencil—is one of the best ways to frustrate somebody and discourage him or her from talking.

While paying attention tends to be a passive style of listening, one engages in *active listening* in order to hear the significance of what the subject is saying. It is probably the hardest and most important "work" you do in an interview. As the conversation unfolds, you monitor your own understandings in relation to the possible meanings of what the person is saying. Silently, you are asking: "What am I learning now? What else should I be learning? How does this story relate to what I heard earlier? What can I do to help this person express him- or herself more clearly and completely?" In active listening, according to Cottle (1973), one is actually keeping "a watch on oneself, a self-consciousness" (p. 351).

Your train of thought during active listening might suggest questions that are urgent enough to warrant breaking into the subject's talk—especially if it is a question that brings a pressing issue to the surface or that helps to bring an issue to a satisfying resolution. The mere fact that *this question* is posed *at this point* tells the interviewee that you really are listening, rather

than just being a caretaker for the audio recorder. These moments can propel the discussion into exciting new areas and promote a closer bond between the two of you.

However, you must be careful about when, and how, to break in with a question. You don't want to break in too abruptly. Asking too many questions might suggest that you aren't listening closely—or not being patient enough with the interviewee. And asking a question that was answered earlier is proof positive that you haven't been listening at all.

Active listening also consists of the head tilts, nods, smiles, looks of concern, and the “Yes,” “Uh huh,” and “I see” that sustain talk. These expressions should not be treated as mere “tactics” to be deployed mechanically in the interview. Most of us recognize a sign of authentic interest from another person when we see it. And we usually return it in kind. Rapport thus leads to active listening, and active listening promotes rapport. Listening is the vital connective tissue of all good interviews.

## Question Design and Use

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Questions are the best-known tools of the interviewer's craft. If your subjects are unclear about the goals of a study at the start, the questions will soon enough tell them what the investigator is really after. Questions are potent tools for starting a dialogue moving along a certain track or for switching tracks later. They can help open up a shy person or persuade a chatty one to speak more economically. Good questions can even help a person think about a familiar topic in new ways. On the other hand, poorly worded questions can confuse people, stall their thinking, or convince them of the mediocre quality of the study.

Interview questions do not always appear in journal articles, but they are objects of concern at nearly every stage of a study. This section considers some key aspects of the design and use of interview questions.

### Interview Schedules and Interview Guides

Two types of interview instruments—interview schedules and interview guides—are used by qualitative researchers to prepare for interviews. The *interview schedule* is the more formal one. It is used when a project requires uniformity in the wording and sequencing of questions. The overarching goal is to ensure that everyone in the sample hears the same questions in the same way (although there may be different sets of questions asked of different respondents depending on how certain “qualifying” questions are answered).

Interview schedules are employed in studies that call for a more structured approach to interviews, such as respondent and focus group studies. A set pattern of questioning makes it possible to characterize the subjective understandings of an entire sample of people along certain dimensions. Interview schedules are also helpful when multiple interviewers are working on a project, in order to increase the reliability and credibility of qualitative data.

*Interview guides* offer a more informal, flexible approach. An interview guide consists of a list of topics and questions that can be asked in different ways for different participants. There may be a preferred order for asking the questions, but the guide itself does not dictate that order. Rather, the researcher is free to drop some questions from the list, or add optional questions, or improvise still others. Especially when it comes to informants, whose experience and expertise may vary widely, the interviewer can reshuffle the topics and questions to find the best fit for an individual. Table 6.2 displays a portion of Tom's interview guide for interviewing political advance professionals.

**Table 6.2 Interview Guide**

1. How did you first get involved in doing political advance work, and what major advance assignments have you had since then? (Probe: Which campaigns?)
2. What attributes, qualities, and skill sets make for a good advance person? What are the biggest challenges in the "learning curve" — including from your experience?
3. What kind of person is less likely to be good at—or be happy doing—advance work?
4. What do you do between election cycles?
5. Why is the community of advance people so tight-knit? What are the attractions for those who keep returning to it?
6. Several people I've talked to have described advance as both an art and a science. What do you think?
7. I understand that events have a "theme" or a purpose. How is that theme developed?
8. How do advance people coordinate their efforts with the communication office? How is the event theme communicated to the advance team?
9. Tell me about [event]? How was the theme visualized? What staging elements were considered?
10. What goes into a great picture of an event? And give an example of one.

11. What constitutes a poorly conceived picture? (Note: Different from poorly executed.) And give an example of what one looks like.
12. What event(s) that you have helped advance are you most proud of? (Probe: In terms of challenges successfully met or positive impact.)
13. On the other hand, what event(s) that you have helped advance turned out to be problematic?
14. How do the qualities of the principal play a role in deciding the type of event, the venue, and the symbolism for an event? (Probe: What kind of candidate does well in a “town hall” event?)
15. Typically, how much is the principal involved in the planning of campaign events?
16. Which of the candidates or elected officials you’ve worked for had the deepest knowledge—and appreciation—of advance work?
17. What are the main threats to carrying out a successful event?
18. Can you tell me about an incident in which the event production and advance efforts became a story in itself? (Probe: May 1, 2003, aircraft carrier appearance by President George W. Bush)
19. How do you interact with the news media covering an event?
20. What goes into the management of—the “care and feeding of”—the press?
21. Do you generally stage an event in the way preferred by news producers? Can you think of any times when the media did not like the way an event was set up?
22. After an event, do you review the print, TV, or Internet coverage that was generated?
23. Do you keep copies of pictures, videos, etc. of events you’ve produced? Do you critique yourself?

Nor does an interview guide necessarily dictate *how* the questions will be asked. Researchers may adjust the wording of a question to the verbal style or competency of the participant—for example, using short, simple phrases for young children. The context and social dynamics of an interview may also call for rephrasing questions or customizing them in various ways to get the desired results. Sometimes different versions of an interview guide can be developed from the start of a project. At other times, the interviewer must quickly decide how to use an interview guide for the person who has just sat down.

The difference between the two instruments can be stated this way: “The interview schedule . . . emphasizes the means of obtaining information, [whereas] the interview guide emphasizes the *goals* of the interview in terms



of the topics to be explored and the criteria of a relevant and adequate response” (Gorden, 1969, pp. 264–265). In other words, an interview guide allows multiple means to achieve a study’s goals, whereas an interview schedule stresses standardization of both the instrument and the protocol for administering it.

Whether you use a guide or a schedule, you should try to sequence the interview questions in a way that promotes a sense of logical progression and flow to the discussion. Hermanowicz (2002), for example, advocates a three-stage strategy for interview questions: “The first questions are often introductory, easy to answer, and nonthreatening. . . . If one uses difficult or threatening questions . . . they should be placed in the middle of the interview. The interviewer will have gotten the respondent used to talking and can gradually begin to ask more difficult questions. . . . An interview should always end on a positive note. The interviewer should ‘cool down’ the respondent” (p. 488).

Hermanowicz also states that an interview lasting 60 to 90 minutes will consume a list of 20 to 30 questions, although this rule—like any other rule of thumb—will work for some and not for others. Generally, the number of questions is scaled to the estimated length and complexity of the interview. The interviewer’s style—such as whether your instinct is to interview in a more “free-form,” by-the-seat-of-your-pants fashion or to go about it in a more methodical way—also affects the number of questions you write in advance.

## Nondirective Questions

The last thing that we as interview researchers want is for our subjects to tell us what they think we want to hear. Instead, we want them to speak the truth—the truth as they know it. Thus, nondirective questions—a type of question that allows the subject freedom to define the scope and terms of his or her answer—tend to work well at the start of an interview and at many points during the rest of the interview. A common nondirective question is the *tour question*—or *grand tour question*, as it is also called. This question is often used to prompt subjects to tell us how something in their scene or life experience—an activity, an event, a friendship, their career—has transpired. We often ask how things are generally done, but it is also useful to ask for a tour of how a specific something happened. This question is usually—but not always—situated in a time frame. Alternately, we might want to vicariously tour a physical or geographic terrain.

During this tour, the participant “educates” the researcher by pointing out the key features—the routines, rituals, procedures, artifacts, cycles of activity, socialization paths, and so forth. It may be embellished with telling incidents,

histories, and thumbnail profiles of people. A tour question often results in a long answer. Indeed, one or more interview sessions may be required to finish the tour.

It should certainly be within the ability and experience of the participant to serve as tour guide. If it is a tour of a person's own life, this issue is moot. But if the subject is discussing a place, process, or event, we should be cautious about ascribing ultimate authority to the account. The narrative may refer to concrete (and verifiable) signposts along the way, even in richly persuasive detail, but the main reason we're going on this tour is to understand how our subject describes it. As a practical matter, though, by asking many people the same tour question, we may end up hearing basically the same story, which bolsters the claim of a commonality of interpretation.

*Minitour questions* are also used for going deeper into parts of a larger tour. Another variation is the *memorable-tour question*. Here, the participant is asked about a "standout" experience—for example, the first time someone did something, a turning point in one's life or career, or the time a life lesson was learned. Sometimes a tour question incorporates multiple parts, as illustrated in Table 6.3. Tom started off his interview with SK by asking how he got started in advance (a *memorable tour*) and then the trajectory of his work afterward (a *grand tour*). The excerpt shown in the table is just the start of what turned into a 30-minute response. And even that lengthy response just skimmed the surface of his professional life history, which grew more detailed in this interview and the next one.

Table 6.3 Tour Questions and a Probe

TL: Can you give me kind of a sketch as to how you got involved in advance work and how you moved into different positions over the years?

SK: I started out working with advance teams during the 1984 campaign. I'd been taking a semester off from the University of Iowa to travel in the Soviet Union and China for a month each. I got back and it was about late October '83 and Mondale's office in Iowa City where I lived had just opened. I wasn't in the university for the rest of the semester, and I'd been hugely disillusioned with what America was becoming with Ronald Reagan as president. The America I believed in was a more generous America and a bigger America in a lot of ways. It was an America that was moving forward on taking care of its poorest people and moving to greater civil rights, and Ronald Reagan was taking us backwards from there. I wanted to get involved in the '84 campaign. I started doing fieldwork and really just volunteering and doing a lot of small

(Continued)

Table 6.3 (Continued)

jobs. I was dealing with mailings, running phone banks, but when the advance teams would come in, they tended to suck up a lot of the resources from the campaign office, and as a young operative I was enamored with advance. I'd end up working with advance teams when we'd have a visit from Mondale, and then later when we got into the general, I was eventually paid by the coordinated campaign. When Mondale or Ferraro would come through, I'd tend to get assigned to be the point person for the coordinated campaign to work with their advance team. I got a taste of that, and at the end of that campaign, Ferraro came through town and afterwards I was invited up into her plane and she thanked me personally. At that point, I thought that was just as good as a gift. In '88 I didn't do very much on the campaign. I wasn't enamored in any way with Dukakis.

TL: Can I ask one question here? You said that you were enamored with advance back in the '84 election cycle. What was it about advance that you were most taken with?

SK: It's the very short-term nature of the project that tends to be—advance teams in a campaign will be on the ground four or five days. You build something from nothing that is a very tangible, real product. It's exciting. It's the rock-and-roll side of politics. It's the show business side. It also became clear that you were touching voters both with what you saw on TV at the end of the day and the people that came to events. . . .

If a story is told too quickly or vaguely, the researcher can use *probes* to generate more detail. Bernard (2002, pp. 210–216) has catalogued many of these tactics. There is the *tell-me-more probe* (“Tell me how *that* happened”), the *echo probe* (softly repeating a phrase just spoken by the participant), the *silent probe* (waiting silently for a few beats until the respondent realizes that more explanation is desired), the *phased-assertion* or *baiting probe* (“I’ll bet you were surprised when she said *that*”), and the *uh-huh probe* (self-explanatory). Sometimes, all it takes is one word—such as “How?” or “Why?” Using the participant’s own words or stating a logical implication of what he or she just said—a technique called *vernacular elicitation* (Dick, 2006)—is another way of eliciting a longer, fuller response to a one-dimensional response. Of course, one can write some prompts in advance and put them into the interview schedule or guide (see Table 6.3). Stylianou (2008) has shown how probe questions can be used in much the same manner as the experimental control of independent variables, to explore people’s attitudes and motives with greater precision.

In addition, most people read the researcher’s facial expressions during the course of an interview for signs of how their responses are being received. Experienced interviewers know that the looks that pass back and forth

between them constitute an intimate “conversation” of its own, apart from—but inextricably related to—the overtly verbal conversation. As John Shotter has noted about this phenomenon, “As soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in the same way too), a little ethical and political world is created between us” (as cited in Knapik, 2006, p. 4). As this “little world” deepens, both partners become more adept at monitoring each other’s cues. An arched eyebrow, accompanied by a smile and a nod, can signal something along the lines of, “Yes, I know—I’ve been in a similar situation.” Slightly raised eyebrows can “tell” the interviewee that what he or she just said is interesting or surprising—a sign of approval, as well as an implied prompt for more of the same. A furrowed brow may convey puzzlement about the most recent remark, prompting an alert interviewee to clarify his or her meanings. The key to using probes effectively is to deploy them gently, sparingly, and in a timely fashion. Too many probes, whether verbal or nonverbal, can be disruptive to the conversation.

In Table 6.3, Tom’s second question is a probe of the “tell-me-more” sort, asked during a pause in SK’s response. Tom wanted him to expand on why he became so “enamored” of advance work when he got his first “taste” of it. It was important to ask this before he got too far beyond that point. The question could have been asked later, but then it would no longer be a probe—and, being out of context, it might be less effective.

Grand tours are often temporally grounded, but a more focused way to explore this dimension is the *time-line question* approach (Shields & Dervin, 1993). Here, the participant discusses events on a line moving from some point in the past to a point closer to the present. (For example: “From the first time you worked on an event until the first time you were fully responsible for producing an event, what were the most important skills that you learned?”) This kind of questioning is well suited for studying the participant’s biographical self or the history of a social collective.

*Example questions* and *experience questions* (Spradley, 1980, p. 80) are also nondirective methods for going deeper into the participant’s world. Example questions, of course, ask for an example of something, or a case in point. One of the better responses to Question 10 of the interview guide came from a former media director for the White House. This person’s response, shown in abbreviated form in Table 6.4, recounts a prototypical presidential event, including his motives and the actions he took to ensure a “good picture.” One must be selective about asking for examples, since nearly any general statement could be potentially fair game. It is also not unusual for interviewees to spend more time on an example than the point it illustrates—another reason to choose example questions carefully.

Table 6.4 Response to an Experience Question

JK: The president's in Belfast, Northern Ireland, talking about peace, and he's giving an important speech at a podium. Before the speech happens, I have a five-year-old Catholic boy and a five-year-old Protestant girl take turns introducing the president. I know that the president is going to hug and kiss them as soon as the introduction is over, and I'm going to make sure the lenses are right there to take that picture so that whatever the president says, however long he goes into an exegesis about the history of the Northern Ireland peace conflict, on the front page of the *Belfast Herald*, *London Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post* is going to be the president embracing this Catholic boy and this Protestant girl, and all smiles and love.

If we ask interviewees for an example, they often tell us about a case that is representative of the general statement or principle. In addition, an example question often elicits a case that derives from folklore or secondhand sources. Alternately, one can ask the participant to describe an incident from firsthand experience. In responding to an experience question, people often tell a story in a highly personal, first-person voice. They are also more likely to be self-reflective about their role in the story and the consequences of their actions. It is often helpful to frame this question in a particular way—for example, asking about a very vivid experience, or the most influential one, or the most difficult one—so that the subject can better focus his or her thoughts and deliver a well-formed narrative.

The ways in which participants articulate their own motives are central to many communication studies. Issues of motive may be resolved as the interviewee talks—volunteering to justify or explain his or her actions or the actions of other persons mentioned in a story. However, if it does not come up spontaneously, the interviewer may want to ask a *why question* (“What were you trying to accomplish?” “Why do you think she said that?”), especially if it is important to have this account. Questions about motive could be construed by the subject as implying blame or second-guessing, so they should be asked with care.

In the question tactic known as *posing the ideal* (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973), the interviewer poses a hypothetical state of affairs—“which pushes an observed process or role to its logical and desired extreme” (p. 81)—and asks the participants what they think of it. Alternately, they may be asked to imagine this ideal themselves. The tactic is intended to reveal deeply held beliefs or ideological positions. It is a somewhat more structured approach than other nondirective questions, but it still gives people room to define their own ideas.

Finally, *native-language questions* (Spradley, 1980, pp. 89–90) ask interviewees to discuss the forms of language they use in everyday life. Qualitative interviewers generally want to know the indigenous linguistic terms, their meanings, who uses them, and in what contexts they are used. For example, political advance professionals share a parlance that few others know about. In the interviews with SK, Tom asked him to explicate what is known as an “OTR” event (acronym for “off the record”). OTRs, he replied, are “basically events that nobody knows [about]. We know they’re going to happen, we plan it, we walk through it, we’ll have one advance person there incognito and maybe a Secret Service agent there incognito, and then the candidate will just come rolling in.”

### Directive Questions

In contrast to questions that help people talk in an unconstrained manner, directive questions encourage people to think along certain lines or within certain parameters. For example, *structural questions* (Spradley, 1980) are used to discover “how informants [organize] their knowledge” (p. 60). In Table 6.5, Tom asks SK to describe the different kinds (or categories) of protesters he has encountered. Here, SK is cued to Tom’s interest, but the specific scheme for categorizing protesters is left for him to decide. He could have described them in other ways—for example, in terms of demographic or personality types—but SK chose to describe the different methods of protesting. By asking the same structural question of many people, Tom ultimately hopes to better understand the standpoints of people whose job it is to contain (or minimize, control, shape) protest.

A *compare-contrast question* prompts the participant to think comparatively (or contrastively) about a topic. The question can be framed as a dichotomy (e.g., best-worst, smartest-dumbest), as a continuum (e.g., from effective to ineffective), or in terms of different contexts. For example, Tom asked this compare-contrast question of several advance people: “What are the differences between doing advance for a campaign event and for a non-campaign political event, such as an inaugural or a G-20 summit?” Such questions do not pretend to be “real,” objective measurements of the phenomenon being contrasted/compared; rather, they tap into people’s own understandings of what’s real.

Floating an *emergent idea* is another directive technique that can open a vista into the participant’s world. In Table 6.6, we see Tom floating the notion that certain events have a stagey, yet authentic-seeming quality about them. It’s not much of a question, really. Tom just says, in effect, “This is what I think—now, what do you think?” Such questions present subjects

Table 6.5 Structural Question

TL: Are there different kinds of protesters? Different categories of people that do this?

SK: Oh yeah. There are a number of different types of protest. Everything from an anti-Bush sign that comes into the crowd, to a single heckler, to an organized effort to drown out or shout down the candidate, to an organized effort to distract the cameras. You know, there's a big difference between having one sign in the middle of a crowd that says—and you know, maybe even well placed if they know what they're doing, right in with one of the shots. That's a fairly passive thing, compared to having someone go up one of the sound towers and unfurl a banner which all of the cameras are going to turn to and pay attention to. . . . Then there's others that want to just disrupt the event. One situation I may have mentioned to you or not is the debate arrival rally in '92 in St. Louis when a whole bunch of guys came in with duck calls when Hillary was going to speak. [Bill] Clinton had a real hoarse voice and he was standing on the stage. We had Henry Winkler introduce Hillary Clinton, and as soon as she started speaking, these people started wailing on their duck calls. They were right in front of the press riser to have maximum disruption, and it was a very well-organized effort. So you talk about different types of protesters, in '96 there was a deal in Jacklyn Square in Oakland where simultaneously on both sides of the event, Greenpeace people went up and unfurled a banner and were throwing stacks and stacks of leaflets out into the crowd and you know, sort of raised hell and rallied. We got the police who were just sitting there watching them, got them to pull them down and mitigate it that way. So it's different levels of organization. . . . Counterfeiting tickets too. That can be a thing one person does on their Apple or something they do for 50 of their friends.

with an idea—it could be an idea from an external source or a product of the researcher's own thinking; the idea thereby gives people something to agree or disagree with and an opportunity to clarify or elaborate their own viewpoints. Even if participants confirm that they think or feel the same way as the view being presented, they often opine on the aspects they find most important. In this excerpt, we see SK using Tom's brief reference to "a speech delivered in front of a big crowd" (an inadvertent compare-contrast component of the broader question) to develop distinctions about the front-porch-type campaign event. By using the emergent-idea approach, it is possible to learn much about what is right or wrong—right or wrong from one person's perspective—with an idea or analytic claim.

Another way to get people talking about their beliefs and assumptions is to ask a *devil's-advocate question*—in which the interviewer poses a question that is skeptical of their identity or knowledge claims, or offers up a view that is unpopular, untrue, or counterintuitive. For example, Tom has

Table 6.6 Emergent Idea Question

TL: Getting back to what a good picture looks like, let me suggest an example from the Kerry campaign. I'd like to know what your professional opinion of it is. Do you remember that front-porch part of the campaign, during the summer, when both Kerry and Edwards visited people's houses in Ohio and sat on their front porches? It seemed to be kind of a classic set piece, a classic contrived-but-still-authentic-looking situation, which is different from having a speech delivered in front of a big crowd. I wonder what you think that kind of picture is, how effective it is?

SK: I think if you can sell that he's going to see real people in real towns at their houses, it is effective. Frankly, it's different for different candidates. Bill Clinton was a real person from a real house with a real porch. Most people at the time of the election thought he didn't have any kids and thought he was rich. People don't know the candidates that well, their personal stories. Most people after the [1992] election were surprised to find out that he came from this incredibly poor background, because people just don't focus in that much. So it's a good way to tell the [candidate's] story. Doing a front porch is a good way to show you are with real people. It's not like the events you're seeing now with Bush where everybody's handpicked. You invite the people from the neighborhood and do it on someone's front porch and there you are. I think it's a good way to say that's where you are. I think treating the sense of momentum, excitement, and inevitability is the point of doing the huge rallies. I think the things where you're more one-on-one with people, that's more to say who you are, that we're listening to people just like you. At Clinton's town hall meetings in '92, he was doing the Oprah thing for the first time that any politician's really done it at that level. I'm here, I'm with you, I'm listening to you, I feel your pain, I hear your needs. And that's what [front porch] events are about. It's just modifications of town hall meetings of sorts.

asked some advance people, "What would you say to the notion that advance people are just glorified 'event coordinators'—or 'PR flacks'?" Unsurprisingly, all of them took issue with that characterization. However, they also took the question seriously. They knew that the notion exists "out there," and so they took pains to explain how and why it isn't true. There is obviously a hint of confrontation in the devil's-advocate question. But if rapport has been established, an interviewee might briefly flinch at the question but probably not react angrily or defensively. Along similar lines, Kvale (2006) presents an intriguing case for taking a more challenging, conflictive, or confrontational approach in qualitative interviews.

Finally, qualitative researchers have increasingly turned to verbal and visual techniques for augmenting their directive questions. *Photo-elicitation*



*methods* (Harper, 2002) employ visual materials, typically photographs, to trigger a subject's commentary about aspects of a scene. Two lines of questioning are useful in photo-elicitation interviews: (1) descriptive questions about what objects (or people) are shown in the picture, what they are called, what their purposes are, etc. and (2) questions that use the picture as a point of departure to ask about processes, activities, and motives that are not literally represented in the images (Caldarola, 1985). Photo-elicitation techniques can be an effective and enjoyable way of working with interviewees. For example, Daws (2009) interviewed her female subjects at length about the communicative significance of their wedding websites while sitting together in front of a laptop computer. The respondents "talked through" their decisions for choosing interactive features, graphics, photographs, text, and so forth without having to rely on their memory of the sites.

*Vignettes* are also used as either a self-contained technique or in conjunction with other interviewing methods (Barter & Arnold, 2000; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Vignettes are "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch, 1987, p. 105). If respondents accept a vignette as a good representation of their social reality, it can be an effective way of opening up a discussion of cultural norms, value systems, and communicative action.

## Finishing Up

Questions of a sensitive nature are often left for the final stage of the interview. Not only is it wise to develop trust before broaching a controversial or intimate topic, the interviewer may also want to take the time to gauge the subject's knowledge or frame of mind before deciding to ask such a question. This "rule" may not be invoked if both parties are aware from the start that they will be venturing into this territory. On the other hand, Hermanowicz (2002) argues that sensitive or tough questions ought to be asked in the middle of an interview, as part of the natural rhythm of the qualitative interview. The communicative compatibility of the parties—such as often happens when women interview women (Finch, 1984)—can also justify an earlier introduction of sensitive topics.

Near the end of the interview, some time should be set aside for *loose-ends questions*. These questions concern topics that weren't covered earlier so as not to disrupt the flow of the talk or issues arising spontaneously in the researcher's mind and "bookmarked" for later exploration. Interviewers usually preface the loose-ends questions by saying, "Now, I'd like to ask about something you said earlier," or "I didn't get a chance to ask you this before, but I was surprised when you said that. . . ." Researchers should also

invite the participant to ask questions or raise their own issues: “Is there anything we’ve missed that would be important for me to know?” This is a chance for the subject to clarify (or elaborate upon) a thought, suggest a new idea, or “set the record straight” before the interviewer leaves. If it looks as though this discussion is going to take a lot of time, arrangements can be made to finish up in another interview or by phone or e-mail.

Ideally, these tactics produce a complete and successful interview. Still, however, we note the conventional wisdom among qualitative researchers that the endings of interviews can be surprising and revealing. More than one researcher has discovered that subjects do not necessarily acknowledge the “official” termination of an interview. In a few cases, this is due to researchers’ ambiguous closings or to subjects’ insensitivity at reading social cues. In most cases, however, this happens because subjects are excited by the interaction and wish to continue, or they desire to “turn the tables” on the researcher and assert their own agenda (Warren et al., 2003).

Therefore, even as researchers pack up their recording gear and engage in leave-taking rituals, they should remain attentive to subjects’ parting comments and stories, no matter how innocuous or conventional such comments may initially seem. Viewed in retrospect, these contributions may confirm researchers’ impressions of how the interview went or reveal something that was transpiring (or still unfolding). In this way, qualitative researchers—along with therapists—apply a famous piece of baseball wisdom to the work of interviewing: “It ain’t over ’til it’s over.”

## Transcribing Interviews

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The next step is the transcription of interviews from audio recordings. This marks an important point of transition in the life of a project. For once an interview has been transcribed, most of us never return to the audio recording. At this stage, the transcript *becomes* the interview. For this very reason, some postmodern researchers are highly skeptical of the fixity, closure, and decontextualization that transcription seems to impose (Denzin, 1997; Fusco, 2008). It is indeed difficult to deny the feelings of alienation that can occur when we transit from the social performance of interviewing to the “embalmed transcribed speech” of transcripts (Denzin, 1997, p. 41).

It is also here—the point that transcribing begins—that fieldwork begins to give way to the production and processing of data. As we discuss later in this section, we make numerous decisions about how to systematize the visual “look” of the interview for subsequent coding and analysis and ultimately for the readers of our research. As much as possible, these decisions ought to be

conscious, codified, and justified. Importantly as well, transcribing “[implies] decisions about significance, which in turn imply interpretation from some point of view” (Bird, 2005, p. 228). In other words, the act of transcribing enables us to take a more detached perspective on the dialogue in which we once participated. It gives us the first of many opportunities to peruse and reflect upon what was said. In so doing, we begin the process of pulling threads of meaning out of the accumulating stories and accounts.

There are several technical means of transcribing interviews. The old-fashioned way is to simply manipulate the controls of a tape recorder. To transcribe every brief pass of the tape, one must press several buttons (play, stop, rewind) in succession, over and over again—a tedious procedure that tries the patience of anyone who does it for very long.

A major improvement in ease of use is tape transcription machines. The key feature of these machines is a foot pedal for moving audio tape back and forth, thus freeing one’s hands to type at a keyboard. Machine-aided transcribing significantly reduces the time and tedium of doing this job. However, it still takes a large commitment of time. Depending on the operator’s skill level and the quality of the recording, a 60-minute interview can take anywhere from two to five hours to transcribe.

Digital machines are the latest innovation for interview researchers. Foot pedals are still employed, but the software includes such handy features as time stamping, bookmarking, and the queuing of multiple files for transcription.

Even with transcription equipment, the task requires full concentration to do it right. An easy-to-understand utterance of moderate length—this sentence, for example—can take two passes to transcribe fully and accurately. Many other utterances are not only longer and more complicated, they are also sometimes unclear. The person might have spoken too quickly or too softly, coughed loudly, or leaned back in his or her chair for a few moments, outside of the microphone’s pick-up range. Two or more speakers might talk at once (very common in focus groups), resulting in “cross-talk” cacophony. Some researchers have a rule of thumb for how many times they replay a segment; for Bryan and Tom, five times is usually the limit. Another tactic is to study the semantic and syntactic contexts of the inaudible segment and try to guess the word or phrase that fits. Regrettably, we sometimes have to give up on the effort (noted on the transcript as “inaudible text segment”).

One logistical decision faced by researchers is whether to transcribe the interviews themselves or have a professional do it. One clear advantage of doing it yourself is that the participants are already known to you, making it easier to recognize speech patterns, references to people and places, and so forth. Transcribing also allows you to listen to the dialogue in a more studied way. You can revisit powerful or revealing moments, ponder meanings

that may have gone unnoticed in real time, as well as gain insight into possible improvements in your interviewing skills.

On the other hand, researchers can save a great deal of time and frustration by outsourcing this work. If the number of interviews is substantial, there may be no other practical option but to engage a professional's services. (In addition to inquiring about rates, one would be well advised to ask about the transcriber's experience and references.) Most professional transcribers produce high-quality work, but the transcripts should still be read and corrected by the researcher, especially for names, special terms, and so forth. When researchers have their work transcribed by others, they are at least partly alienated from the transcription. They encounter it as an unfamiliar product of another's labor, rather than as a familiar record of their own interpretive activities. Our point here is not Marxist but pragmatic: a gain in efficiency is balanced by the loss of intimate understanding that can only be created by hearing—and typing—voices.

While professional transcriber costs can be substantial, there are ways to manage these costs against the requirements of the project. For example, a professional might be hired only for the audio that must be transcribed in full. Otherwise, the researcher may elect to transcribe a few selected passages or write summaries of the topics discussed on the tape.

Research projects involving more than a few interviews should set out a clear, logical protocol for transcribers to follow. An interview is just too valuable to risk the jeopardy of inaccurate, inconsistent, or imprecise transcripts. Paraphrasing the work of Mergenthaler and Stinson (1992), McLellan, MacQueen, and Neideg (2003) identified seven principles that should guide the development of transcription rules (p. 65):

1. *Preserve the morphologic naturalness of transcription.* Keep word forms, the form of commentaries, and the use of punctuation as close as possible to speech presentation and consistent with what is typically acceptable in written text.

2. *Preserve the naturalness of the transcript structure.* Keep text clearly structured by speech markers (i.e., like printed versions of plays or movie scripts).

3. *The transcript should be an exact reproduction.* Generate a verbatim account. Do not prematurely reduce text.

4. *The transcription rules should be universal.* Make transcripts suitable for both human/researcher and computer use.

5. *The transcription rules should be complete.* Transcribers should require only these rules to prepare transcripts. Everyday language competence rather than specific knowledge (e.g., linguistic theories) should be required.

6. *The transcription rules should be independent.* Transcription standards should be independent of transcribers as well as understandable and applicable by researchers or third parties.

7. *The transcription rules should be intellectually elegant.* Keep rules limited in number, simple, and easy to learn.

The preparation of a *rule book* can help avoid transcribing problems, an especially important goal if two or more people are involved. No detail is too basic to be ignored. Even the slightest change in punctuation can result in dramatic changes in meaning. For example, the words—"I hate it, you know. I do"—acquire a completely different meaning when they are punctuated this way: "I hate it. You know I do" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 185). Transcripts should be prepared in a uniform manner regarding source labeling (speaker identification), header information, text layout, font size, tape (or file) number, and so forth.

Above all, the level of transcription detail should be adequate for the analysis that will be performed. Conversation analysts notwithstanding, most qualitative researchers in communication have no need for exacting precision in depicting the structural features of interview speech. Their foremost concern is just getting the actual spoken words right. However, most of us do employ a limited set of notations for conveying contextual information about the interview. Here are the notations used by Boje (1991, p. 112):

- // Overlapping talk from the first to the last slash
- . . . A pause of one second or less within an utterance
- (2.0) A pause of more than one second within an utterance or between turns, the number indicates the length of the pause
- \*\*\* A deletion
- [ ] An explanatory insertion
- Italics* A word or part of a word emphasized by a speaker

Researchers must also decide what level of editing is appropriate for a transcript, and this issue is subject to more debate among qualitative researchers (see DeVault, 1990). Most researchers engage in at least some editing due to the fact that everyday speech, when it is transcribed verbatim

in print, can be wickedly hard to read. But “verbatim” is an ambiguous construct. For example, *verbatim* can mean transcribing *everything*, including all of the messy details of informal conversation: the broken starts of sentences; the overlapping talk and stumbling over words; the sighs, exclamations, and laughter; and so on. Or *verbatim* can mean “cleaning up” much of this linguistic clutter so that only the content of what the subjects said comes through clearly.

The impact of these decisions goes beyond just the readability of the text. Editing someone’s speech for grammatical correctness—or alternately, leaving it as is—can actively shape a reader’s impressions. For example, if the respondent says, “I’m gonna get me some sleep,” typing it that way preserves the original language. On the other hand, we could type it as, “I’m going to get some sleep.” By doing so, we may try to avoid the inference that this person is uneducated or ill-bred (or some other unflattering characterization). But the second version also arguably conceals aspects of the respondent’s speech style or culture. Similarly, if we polish the patois of middle-class American teenagers—removing the instances of “like,” “you know,” or modifying their slang—are we not also changing the meanings of their expressive culture? The kindest interpretation of this sort of editing is that we are trying to make the content of their speech more accessible. Less charitably—and more truthfully—we are performing unlicensed surgery on the participants’ identity.

Capturing distinctive speech styles is a vital objective of most qualitative research. It is also an ethically and politically uncertain art. The lines between transcribing that is intended to “clean up” ungrammatical or extraneous speech, transcribing that levels the power differences, and transcribing that preserves a person’s integrity are not always bright ones in practice. The general guideline we offer here is to try to balance a concern for the dignity and interests of the interviewee with the informational value of the speech being transcribed.

## Conclusion

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Interviewing is a special experience. It is not special because it is rare; interviews, in fact, happen all the time. Interviews are special because people can say what they truly think and feel, usually for the benefit of someone whom they barely know. It is an occasion set apart from the webs of status, rank, and obligation that normally enmesh us all. It is a time and place for dialogue to flourish. This dialogue is an achievement of two (or more) people engaging in the “serious play” of sharing their inner considerations. The role of the

interviewer may not be as far from that of the participant observer as the separation of chapters in this book might suggest. Through a “participant self,” the interviewer can be in something of an authentic relationship with another person. The interviewer learns to hear new language forms, some of which is language that is intrinsic to the interview situation and some of which is language drifting in from remembrances of other lived experiences. The researcher also uses the goals of the project to inform decisions about what to ask and how to respond and when to listen; through this “observational self,” the researcher can be in more of a theoretic relationship with the spoken discourse.

## Exercises

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1. Conduct an interview with one of the participants in your study. Then, write a *reflective analysis* in which you address these questions:

- What kind of interview was it (ethnographic, informant, respondent, narrative, focus group)—and why did you choose this approach?
- How did the following factors affect the interview—the time, setting, and method of recording apparatus; your rapport with the interviewee; the way you introduced yourself; and the goals of your study?
- What aspects of the dialogue or the entire interview event were particularly interesting?
- What do you wish you had done differently?

2. It can be illuminating to read the transcript (or listen to the tape) of an interview and critique one’s performance as an interviewer. Questions that might be useful in carrying out this critique—with the goal of improving your interviews in the future—include the following:

- How would you characterize your style? Active or passive? Affirming or skeptical? Open or guarded? And so on.
- Did you encourage the participant to expand on his or her ideas, stories, and accounts?
- Were there points when a follow-up question should have been asked but wasn’t?
- Did you allow the interviewee a chance to finish what she or he was saying?
- How did you respond to any interest the participant showed in you?