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IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

◆ John M. Johnson

The contributors to this volume describe many different types of interviewing. Each type has its distinct style, methods, advantages, and limitations. Each uses and builds on our commonsense knowledge about talking to others. Each type of interviewing uses our common cultural wisdom about people, places, manner, and contexts. Each is no better than the person using it. This chapter examines in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviews tend to be of relatively long duration. They commonly involve one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between an interviewer and an informant, and seek to build the kind of intimacy that is common for mutual self-disclosure. They tend to involve a greater expression of the interviewer's self than do some other types of interviews, as well as a personal commitment

on the part of participants that spans several or many interview segments. In-depth interviewing offers great advantages, but it also entails some risks and dangers as well as some distinct ethical considerations.

In this chapter, I first describe in-depth interviewing as a social form and explain how this form is commonly used along with other methods of collecting data. I then discuss the goals and purposes of in-depth interviewing, emphasizing the importance of clarifying the research question in order to maximize the utility of this method, and describe some methods for locating informants. This is followed by an examination of the life cycle of an in-depth interviewing project. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some common ethical issues associated with in-depth interviewing.

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◆ *In-Depth Interviewing as a Social Form*

In-depth interviewing involves a certain style of social and interpersonal interaction. As a social form, it differs from the kinds of interactions one usually finds in sales pitches, public lectures, job interviews, counseling sessions, sexual pickups, board meetings, monologues, or marital conflicts. To be effective and useful, in-depth interviews develop and build on intimacy; in this respect, they resemble the forms of talking one finds among close friends. They resemble friendship, and they may even lead to long-term friendship. But in-depth interviews are also very different from the kind of talking one finds between friends, mainly because the interviewer seeks to use the information obtained in the interaction for some other purpose.

A researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks “deep” information and knowledge—usually deeper information and knowledge than is sought in surveys, informal interviewing, or focus groups, for example. This information usually concerns very personal matters, such as an individual’s self, lived experience, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or perspective. When two close or “best” friends talk, there is no pragmatic purpose that transcends the friendship itself. That kind of talk is an end in itself. But when an in-depth interviewer talks to an informant, the goal is to collect data. Some specific ethical issues arise because of this difference.

In-depth interviews rarely constitute the sole source of data in research. More commonly, they are used in conjunction with data gathered through such avenues as lived experience of the interviewer as a member or participant in what is being studied, naturalistic or direct observation, informal interviewing, documentary records, and team field research. In many cases, researchers use in-depth interview-

ing as a way to check out theories they have formulated through naturalistic observation, to verify independently (or triangulate) knowledge they have gained through participation as members of particular cultural settings, or to explore multiple meanings of or perspectives on some actions, events, or settings. This was true in the famous case of anthropologist Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* ([1928] 1960). Mead supplemented her field experience, direct or naturalistic observations, and other interviews with in-depth interviews with informants (see Atkinson and Coffee, Chapter 38, this volume).

Years later, in his reexamination of Mead’s research in *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (1983), however, Derek Freeman raised serious questions about these interviews. Freeman argues that Mead was misled by her female adolescent informants, even though she had lived in the Samoan villages for many months, because of the Samoan suspicion of outsiders and other contextual features of their recent contacts with Westerners. When Freeman later interviewed some of the same women who had been Mead’s adolescent informants, they told him that they had told Mead what they thought she wanted to hear.

Another well-known case is represented by the studies of the Mexican village of Tepotzlan done over several decades by two different researchers, Robert Redfield (1930, 1941, 1960) and Oscar Lewis (1951). Redfield and Lewis made different inferences from their observations and interviews and drew diverse conclusions from their lengthy experiences of living in this small, remote village. Each justified and legitimated what he reported by referring to his heroic fieldwork and interviews. The two men’s findings were different, however, in large part because of certain basic assumptions each made about the nature of “conflict” and “shared meanings” (or consensus) in everyday life, assumptions that predated their research observations and experiences.

Another heated debate arose recently concerning what is arguably the most famous sociological ethnography of all time, William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1943, 1955, 1981, 1993), the classic study of an Italian American community in north Boston. Whyte also utilized in-depth interviewing in his study to supplement and complement other forms of data collection. Years later, W. A. Marianne Boelen (1992) returned to north Boston and reinterviewed virtually all of the people Whyte had interviewed; she then contested the truth of what he had reported (see Whyte 1992; Vidich 1992; Denzin 1992).

All of the studies noted above involved multiple research methodologies in addition to in-depth interviews. They illustrate that each research project involves the observer or interviewer as an active sense maker and interpreter of what is seen or heard in the research context. Each inevitably depends on the researcher’s own standpoint and place in the community, as well as his or her own self-understandings, reflections, sincerity, authenticity, honesty, and integrity.

Whether in-depth interviewing should be used in research depends on the nature of the research question. Achieving clarity in the formulation and articulation of the research question commonly enhances the clarity of the methodological goals and objectives. If one is interested in an area of study in which the information sought is relatively limited, such as the marketing choices of individuals, then there is every reason to think that the use of focus groups or fixed-choice questionnaires might be appropriate. If one is interested in understanding forms of urban sociation, then direct observation would seem to be a reasonable approach to gathering data. But if one is interested in questions of greater depth, where the knowledge sought is often taken for granted and not readily articulated by most members, where the research question involves highly conflicted emotions, where different individuals or groups

involved in the same line of activity have complicated, multiple perspectives on some phenomenon, then in-depth interviewing is likely the best approach, despite its known imperfections. In-depth interviewing is often a very appropriate method to use in qualitative research (see Warren, Chapter 4, this volume), life story research (see Atkinson, Chapter 6, this volume), the gathering of personal narratives (see Riessman, Chapter 33, this volume) and oral histories (see Cándida Smith, Chapter 34, this volume), and the use of grounded theory methodology to analyze the accounts of members of some social setting (see Charmaz, Chapter 32, this volume). The important point is this: The nature of the research question determines whether or not the use of in-depth interviewing is advisable.

◆ *The Goals and Purposes of In-Depth Interviewing*

Many talented researchers have analyzed in-depth interviewing as a method or technique of collecting data (see Atkinson 1998; Cicourel 1964; Denzin 1989a, 1989b; Douglas 1985; Fontana and Frey 1994; Geertz 1988; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1984, 1995; Merton, Fiske, and Kendall 1956; Rubin and Rubin 1995; Spradley 1979; Wax 1971). Many authors have taken up the issue of “how to do” qualitative or in-depth interviewing, and most additionally affirm the importance of the researcher’s goals and purposes, the researcher’s moral commitment to seek out what is true, and the researcher’s ethical imperative to examine his or her own personal ideas, occupational ideologies, assumptions, common sense, and emotions as crucial resources for what he or she “sees” or “hears” in a particular research interview or project.

Many reflective parents have had to learn this important lesson from their chil-

dren, often painfully: Children don't learn what their parents tell them, but what they are prepared and ready to hear. The same holds for in-depth interviewers: They don't necessarily "hear" what their informants tell them, but only what their own intellectual and ethical development has prepared them to hear. The Mead/Freeman, Lewis/Redfield, and Whyte/Boelen conflicts emphatically underscore this point. In each of the complicated community settings these researchers studied, it is not the case that there is just "one truth" that the observer or interviewer either does or does not "see" or "hear." Rather, each researcher implicitly draws upon his or her commonsense cultural knowledge—or "stock of knowledge," as Alfred Schutz (1967) terms it—and creates or constructs a truth or interpretation that will work for all practical (intellectual) purposes.

As the name implies, in-depth interviewing seeks "deep" information and understanding. The word *deep* has several meanings in this context. First, deep understandings are held by the real-life members of or participants in some everyday activity, event, or place. The interviewer seeks to achieve the same deep level of knowledge and understanding as the members or participants. If the interviewer is not a current or former member or participant in what is being investigated, he or she might use in-depth interviewing as a way to learn the meanings of participants' actions. In the words of the famous ethnographer and student of daily life Erving Goffman (1989), the goal here is one of "subjecting yourself . . . and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, their work situation, or their ethnic situation" (p. 125).

In this respect, the informant would be a kind of teacher and the interviewer a student, one interested in learning the ropes or gaining member knowledge from a veteran informant. If the interviewer happens to be

a current or former member or participant in this activity, he or she may use in-depth interviews to explore or check his or her understandings, to see if they are shared by other members or participants. Former or returning members can fruitfully use in-depth interviews to check, stimulate, or inspire their own self-reflections and to see if their understandings are the same as those shared by others who are also members or participants.

Second, deep understandings go beyond commonsense explanations for and other understandings of some cultural form, activity, event, place, or artifact. In-depth interviewing is an irremediably commonsensical (or intersubjective) enterprise. It begins with commonsense perceptions, explanations, and understandings of some lived cultural experience (which include scientific explanations) and aims to explore the contextual boundaries of that experience or perception, to uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to more reflective understandings about the nature of that experience. For example, in one of my own current research projects I am using in-depth interviewing to explore the complicated phenomenon of "stalking"; I am seeking to learn how those who stalk others actually see or interpret their actions, as well as to explore the nature of the (often conflicted) emotions that lie underneath these actions.

Third, deep understandings can reveal how our commonsense assumptions, practices, and ways of talking partly constitute our interests and how we understand them. In his self-revealing book *Creative Interviewing*, for example, Jack Douglas (1985) tells how his own deeply hidden and conflicted emotions about his mother's prostitution influenced what he was able to "hear" in the in-depth interviews he conducted on the nature of love and intimacy (Douglas 1985, 1988).

Fourth, deep understandings allow us to grasp and articulate the multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some ac-

tivity, event, place, or cultural object. To illustrate with an example from my own current research with Beth McLin: We are currently seeking to understand the multiple perspectives on the death penalty. At a commonsense level, one might think this would include studying the views of those who advocate the death penalty and those who oppose it. Although this is a useful distinction for some limited purpose, it fails to grasp the variety among the many groups involved in this issue: death penalty abolitionists and protesters, executioners, death row prisoners' wives and other family members, victims' family members, prison guards, legislators, clerics, pro-death penalty demonstrators, wardens, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and death row prisoners. Knowing whether an individual is "for" or "against" the death penalty tells us little about the complicated, multifaceted perspectives on and meanings of capital executions. Jaber Gubrium (1975, 1988; Buckholdt and Gubrium 1985) is a long-time qualitative researcher who has successfully combined observations with in-depth interviewing in several settings in order to gain explicit understanding of the multiple interpretations of and perspectives on the activities and settings he investigated.

To gain clarity on the goals for conducting in-depth interviews, the researcher must achieve clarity on the research questions. An important issue is the researcher's relationship to member knowledge and lived experience. Is the researcher completely ignorant of and inexperienced in the issues to be addressed in the interviews? If so, the interviews will take on the nature of instruction, with the more experienced members teaching the novice interviewer. Such interviews are commonly very uneven in quality, with the early ones usually telling more about the novice's ignorance than about the phenomenon being studied. John Lofland and Lyn Lofland (1995) have observed that virtually all of such interviews will prove to be entirely worthless as empirical data. They may play an important role

in the education and learning curve of the neophyte interviewer, but it usually takes a long time for a novice to begin to "hear" what a veteran is saying about the important matters of lived experience. This aspect of interviewing is of such importance that the authors of a recent book elevate it to the very subtitle of their work: *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

In prior decades, social researchers who possessed experiential knowledge of some activity or scene that they were studying commonly elected to hide that fact to elude professional disrepute or even some more severe stigma. The many legendary examples (including quantitative researchers as well) provide fodder for the informal gossip one finds at professional meetings. These tales are commonly transmitted orally, and one begins to achieve "inside" or "member" status as a social science professional by learning these sad and joyous tales of heroism, cowardice, and perseverance in the face of adversity. In these earlier times, the professional ideal was that of "detachment" and "objectivity," which was taken to mean that actual lived experience or actual membership status could "taint" the research or its findings. John Irwin's perception that he had to conceal his nine-year prison sentence as an important experiential resource in the research that went into the writing of *The Felon* (1970) is a good example from this era. H. Laud Humphreys's concealment of his gay identity in his award-winning *Tearoom Trade* (1970) is another.

Lived experience and member status are no longer stigmatized among social scientists, and some even extol their relative merits (Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Denzin 1997; see also in this volume Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker, Chapter 14; Ellis and Berger, Chapter 41). Today there are many researchers who use their investigations and interviews to explore phenomena about which they have prior or current member-based knowledge. Jeffrey Riemer (1977), who terms this "opportunistic re-

search,” provides many examples of individuals who have conducted such research (see also Higgins and Johnson 1988). Lofland and Lofland (1995) advocate the advantages of “starting where you are,” by which they mean potential researchers should seriously consider studying those social phenomena to which they have ready or advantaged access. Some of my own first research experiences and in-depth interviews fit this pattern. Making use of my knowledge and membership as a former U.S. Navy officer, I conducted in-depth interviews to explore others’ perceptions and knowledge of routine bureaucratic record-keeping activities and “gundecking” (fudging) of official reports (Johnson 1972, 1980a, 1980b). Later, active participation in the battered women’s shelter movement as a founder and worker in a shelter provided me with a foundation from which to conduct in-depth interviews with battered women about their experiences with domestic violence (Adhikari, Reinhard, and Johnson 1993; Ferraro and Johnson 1983; Johnson 1981, 1985, 1992; Johnson and Ferraro 1984; Johnson, Luna, and Stein forthcoming). And even today, my years of activist participation as a death penalty abolitionist serve to inform my work as I conduct in-depth interviews with respondents who hold multiple perspectives on these actions.

When charting a research project that includes in-depth interviewing, is it better to be an experienced veteran or a relatively ignorant novice? Each status has its strengths and advantages, and each its pitfalls and dangers. Novices are less inclined to possess hardened assumptions about what they are studying, but they often have more difficulty seeing the nuances or layered meanings of participating members. When undertaking a research project through in-depth interviews, they are likely to have a longer learning curve. Veterans with actual lived experience may already possess member knowledge, but they may also take that knowledge for granted. Additionally, their current or former status as

members may constitute a barrier when they interview others. It is important that researchers recognize these nuances in advance, so that they can undertake the planning of in-depth interviewing in a manner that will help them to assess these influences on the accounts and reflections collected during the interviewing process. Whether the researcher is a neophyte or a returning veteran, in-depth interviewing involves an interactive process in which both interviewer and informant draw upon and use their commonsense knowledge to create some intelligible sense of the questions posed and the ensuing discussions about them.

◆ *Locating Informants*

Planning and preparation are essential for successful in-depth interviews, but few researchers do everything they think they should before beginning them. Hardly anyone reads everything he or she feels should be read or achieves the kind of clarity he or she really wants on the protocol of questions. In their recent work on interviewing, Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin (1995:42) liken the planning for an interviewing session to planning for a vacation—that is, making plans sufficient to meet practical and emotional expectations while at the same time providing for the possibility of “hanging loose,” or altering the course of the interview to go where the informant wants to lead. At some point, the researcher must make a leap of faith and just dive into the process.

The research process is a learning process. Interviewers make mistakes; they make gaffs and alienate informants. They learn that their race, age, gender, social class, appearance, and even achieved statuses make one kind of difference with some informants and another kind of difference with other informants (see in this volume Schwalbe and Wolkomir, Chapter 10; Reinharz and Chase, Chapter 11;

Dunbar et al., Chapter 14). The point is that researchers can learn from all this—learn what makes a difference for their specific projects, learn their strengths and how to play to them, and how to cover or compensate for their weaknesses.

Individuals have performed the basic forms of asking questions and answering questions countless times before they ever come to their first formal, in-depth interviews. The role of informant is part of the cultural stock of commonsense knowledge for the vast majority of children and adults. As friends, we talk in an informal manner and engage in cooperative, mutual self-disclosure. Those who elect to conduct research in a more formal fashion draw upon and build upon these cultural forms and commonsense practices. When a researcher begins an in-depth interview, he or she behaves in a friendly and interested manner so as to help build trust and good rapport.

An in-depth interviewer begins slowly, with small talk (chitchat), explains the purposes of the research, and commonly begins with simple planned questions (often referred to as icebreakers) that are intended to “get the ball rolling” but not to move so quickly into the issues of the key interview questions as to jeopardize intimate self-disclosure (or trust). Good rapport is signaled by emotions that feel harmonious and cooperative, and trust can commonly be discerned through eye contact, facial expression, and bodily idiom.

In-depth interviewing differs from other forms because it involves a greater involvement of the interviewer’s self. To progressively and incrementally build a mutual sense of cooperative self-disclosure and trust, the interviewer must offer some form of strict or complementary reciprocity. Strict reciprocity is possible only if the interviewer is a former or current member of the group under study, and would take the form of the interviewer’s sharing with the informant his or her own views, feelings, or reflections on the topics being discussed.

It is more common for an interviewer to bring some form of complementary reci-

procity to the informant—not a strict exchange of perceptions, feelings, or reflections, but rather some form of help, assistance, or other form of information. When I interviewed the women who came to the battered women’s shelter that I helped establish in the late 1970s, for example, I could hardly offer them strict reciprocity for their views on battering, given that I was not a battered woman. Rather, I could share with them what many other women had told me they felt and said about their similar circumstances; after a while, I could even offer well-grounded advice on what they might do next (Ferraro and Johnson 1983; Johnson and Ferraro 1984). I did the same in two subsequent interview studies on the effectiveness of domestic violence protection orders (Adhikari et al. 1993; Johnson et al. forthcoming). In my current interviews with male stalkers, I cannot offer my informants the solace of strict reciprocity, given that I have never stalked anyone myself. I can, however, share the wisdom I have culled from working in the field of domestic violence for 30 years, including almost two decades of work and counseling with violent men.

In order to conduct in-depth interviewing, then, researchers must undertake considerable self-reflection to get to know themselves; they must also make a self-conscious effort to observe themselves in interaction with others. The development and cultivation of trust with informants is slow, incremental, and emotional, in most cases, and the relationship can change quickly (Johnson 1975). The ideal goal is that the informant become a collaborative partner with the researcher in the intellectual adventure at hand.

Gender is inevitably important in interviewing, but it is difficult to generalize about the precise nature of its importance. The nature of the research question is commonly the main issue. Some research questions may elicit responses or perspectives for which gender has great relevance, whereas others may not. Feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) assert that

many researchers interpret women's responses according to male standards (hierarchy, individualization, rationality) while neglecting women's relatively greater uses of relational categories and perspectives. Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990) notes that prevailing institutional priorities and agendas often devalue women's lived experiences in the world, and that the very formulation of the questions that animate a research project often implicitly contain hidden gender evaluations or perspectives. She proposes that researchers place the issue of women's daily lived experiences at the center of the research process itself. All researchers would be wise to develop a special sensitivity to the explicit or deeply obscured meanings of gender in any particular research topic.

The process of locating informants is simplified if members of the group of interest are usually or regularly located at the same place or scene; it is more complicated if potential informants do not regularly congregate at one locale. All those persons who are members of some scene or community, or who participate in some activity, are not equally valuable as informants. Informants differ greatly in their intelligence, knowledge, and ability to reflect. Informants also differ in their motivations to assist in or cooperate with an in-depth interview or series of interviews. Informants differ widely in their responses to specific individuals, whether because of racial, class, gender, age, or other characteristics, or perhaps just because of timing. It is realistic for the researcher to anticipate that this will happen. Because those who do in-depth interviews for research purposes have no interest in "counting" them or "adding them up," this reality of noncomparable interviews poses no problem.

Many research projects have been "made" by the researcher's finding that rare, reflective inside informant who seems to know just about everything that seems to be important and has thought about it and reflected on it for some considerable period of time before he or she ever meets an eth-

nographer or does an in-depth interview. Legendary examples include "Doc" (Dean Pecci), William Foote Whyte's key informant in his research for *Street Corner Society* (1943, 1955, 1981, 1993); "Tally," Elliot Liebow's key informant for *Tally's Corner* (1967); and "Vincent Swaggi," Carl Klockars's key informant for *The Professional Fence* (1974). The kinds or types of individuals who are likely to become key informants like this can be found in many settings. They are often marginal to the setting or scene being studied and are often seen by others in the setting as "lay intellectuals," thinkers, eggheads, or know-it-alls. Sometimes they are the politically ambitious individuals in the setting, those who have strenuously studied the setting and its personnel for the purposes of occupational or material gain or advancement. Sometimes they are the "outsiders" of the setting, stigmatized for some quality that is depreciated or deprecated.

Ethnographers and interviewers should always develop an awareness of such individuals and be ready to cultivate their trust and friendship for the purposes of gaining member knowledge. Marginal membership status in the setting or activity seems to provide many with an invitation to reflection and usually a certain sense of intellectual detachment from the "official line" among the membership. Finding such individuals and making them collaborators in the research process can yield wonderful results. Researchers should take care, however, to check out the observations and reflections of such individuals by getting independent verification through other interviews, if and when possible. Researchers who fail to do such checking can jeopardize the integrity of their research findings and possibly their own reputations.

Some informants are better than others. Not all members of a setting or community are equally valuable for purposes of in-depth interviews. Not all of those who participate in some activity have a sufficient motive or interest to be interviewed about it. The best informants are those who have

been thoroughly enculturated in the setting or community, have recent membership participation, have some provisional interest in assisting the interviewer, and have adequate time and resources to take part in the interviews. The best informants are those who can describe a scene or setting or activity, those who can provide "thick description," as Clifford Geertz (1973, 1988) terms it, but not necessarily those who analyze or theorize. In some settings or situations, such individuals may "click" with the interviewer or they may not—this is inevitable. The issue of "sampling," or how researchers decided which informants to include and which to exclude, is one that is rarely addressed in research reports and publications. It is important for researchers to provide accounts or explanations of how this selection was done in specific projects, so that readers may assess the researchers' findings (Altheide and Johnson 1994: 494-95).

◆ Conducting In-Depth Interviews

The act of conducting the first in-depth interviews on a new study is often tinged with anxiety but also great anticipation and excitement. The first interviews usually yield great leaps forward in learning. The learning curve is steep at this point. It is best for the interviewer to begin with an actual protocol of questions: usually two or three introductory icebreakers to get the ball rolling; several transition questions, which may again explain the purposes of the interviewing project or elicit permission from the respondent to use a tape recorder; and then perhaps five to eight main or key questions that address the heart or essence of the research question(s). An in-depth interview commonly concludes with the interviewer summarizing some of the main points he or she has understood or giving the informant some information about what others have said about the issues dis-

cussed. Although interviewers might anticipate following such a nice, neat, rational plan before they begin interviewing, they inevitably find that the path, tone, and trajectory of actual interviews rarely follow this sequence.

As an interview progresses, it often takes unexpected turns or digressions that follow the informant's interests or knowledge. Such digressions or diversions are likely to be very productive, so the interviewer should be prepared to depart from his or her prepared plan and "go with the flow"—that is, consider following for a while where the informant wants to lead. It is essential that the interviewer be assertive enough to return the interview to its anticipated course when necessary, but not so rigid as to preclude his or her learning unexpected information. Go with the flow, be playful, and be open to an experimental attitude—these are all good pieces of advice for a novice in-depth interviewer in the early stages of a project.

USING THE TAPE RECORDER TO LEARN INTERVIEWING SKILLS

We now know with some certainty that a human being's individual memory does not remember what the person sees or hears, but rather organizes it into some intelligible coherence based on the individual's past experience. Thus it is essential that interviewers tape-record in-depth interviews to obtain verbatim records of those interviews. Handwritten field notes are important for any research project, and there exists considerable wisdom about how to make such notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990), but field notes are far inferior to tape recording for in-depth interviews.

One of the main goals of qualitative research has always been to capture the words and perceptions of informants, or, as Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) puts it, "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation

to life, to realize his visions of his world” (p. 25). So obtaining a verbatim record is the ideal if the subsequent analysis is to be valid and meaningful. Whether or not the researcher tape-records an interview, it is imperative that he or she take process notes regarding the interview itself, to gain an understanding of the interview as a social occasion and how the questions and answers mutually constitute the sense of what is said. The questions asked guide and influence the answers given, and so it is important for the interviewer to grasp why the informant proffers one segment of talk as an answer rather than another.

Researchers can develop and cultivate the skills needed for in-depth interviewing with practice. Although in-depth interviewing is perhaps the form of interviewing closest to the kind of talking done between friends, the individual who conducts an in-depth interview exercises greater control over the flow and tone of the conversation than does the respondent. The beginning of the interview is different from the beginning of a conversation between friends in that the interviewer commonly explains the purposes of the research and, these days, perhaps gets the informant’s signature on an informed consent statement. The turn taking is also different from that in a conversation between friends, with the interviewer deferring to the informant.

The asking and answering of questions is asymmetrical, with the interviewer having previously prepared a protocol of questions and the will to keep the informant on track, attending to the business at hand. The interviewer is more passive in the role of listener, and, if the interviewer is successful, the informant is more active as a speaker. During interviews, the rules for pausing are usually different from those in talks between friends, as are the rules for physical proximity. The interviewer’s aim is to develop progressively with the informant the kind of mutual and cooperative self-disclosure that is associated with the building of intimacy and trust, but it takes great skill to accomplish this when one is

working with asymmetrical communication norms very dissimilar to those one usually associates with building intimacy and trust, as in actual friendship. The interviewer’s goal is to solicit the informant as a collaborative partner in the sense making and interpretations that flow from the interviewing process.

USING INTERVIEWS TO EXPLORE VERSUS USING INTERVIEWS TO VERIFY

In the early stages of a research project, the in-depth interviewer may feel relatively ignorant about what he or she is studying. After several interviews, however, the interviewer begins to build a stock of knowledge about the research questions, and in most cases feeds some of this information back to the informants in subsequent interviews, after those same questions have been covered. This information exchange becomes part of the complementary reciprocity so necessary to the continued building of intimacy, and it also begins the process of verification in the research process. Data collection and verification become inextricably intertwined in most in-depth interviewing projects. As the research develops, the interviewer should keep and review his or her own jottings and notes (see Emerson et al. 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995) and should review prior interviews when possible, or when transcripts become available, and should begin progressively to focus the nature of the questioning and probing in later interviews. The later interviews of an in-depth interviewing project are usually more focused on specific probes and verification of what has been learned in earlier interviews.

In more traditional or standardized interviewing, interviewers are commonly told to stick to the questions on the research protocol, to ask the questions precisely as they are given, to probe for clarifications only in ways that will not influence the respondents’ answers, and to record only what the respondents say (see, for ex-

ample, Singleton and Straits, Chapter 3, this volume). Further, traditional interviewers are trained to be impersonal; that is, they are trained to avoid offering any kind of personal information or revelations about any of their own values, beliefs, or opinions that might influence respondents in any way (see, for example, Fowler and Mangione 1990). This is not a realistic ideal for in-depth interviewing, because the nature of the research question itself usually entails a deeper process of mutual self-disclosure and trust building.

Skilled in-depth interviewers may often deviate from the research protocol, to go where the informant seems to want to go or perhaps to follow what appear to be more interesting leads. The interviewer should record these moves in his or her process notes, so that he or she can see later how one set of interviewing actions influenced and thereby constituted what the informant said. The interviewer can use subsequent interviews with the same informant or other interviews with additional informants to check the interpretive validity of this strategy.

◆ *The Life Cycle of In-Depth Interviewing*

Excitement runs high when an interviewer is in the springtime of a research project. Genuine students are usually enthusiastic about gaining new knowledge from informants and learning what they have to teach. Eventually, however, the excitement begins to wane. The doldrums of the summer monsoons appear. The animating enthusiasm begins to lessen, and researchers find themselves using all sorts of excuses, rationalizations, and self-deceptions to alter their involvement with the research interviews. In some cases, boredom appears. This happens because the learning curve has peaked, and it is less satisfying to do all of the pragmatic work required to set up interviews when one learns progressively less

from them. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967:120-45) refer to this as the “saturation point” of a research project. It is commonly in this context that the researcher begins to ask, How many interviews are needed? How many interviews are enough?

Interestingly, the academic literature on interviewing includes various answers to the question of how many interviews are needed. James Spradley (1979:51), an anthropologist usually interested in using interviews to understand cultural forms and members’ perspectives, has noted, for example, that for him, one in-depth interview commonly involves six or seven one-hour sessions, and a given research project might include between 25 and 30 of these. Grant McCracken (1988:37), a researcher with a business background who uses in-depth interviews (which he terms “long interviews”) to gain knowledge about marketing and business questions, says eight such interviews are usually enough. The progenitors of grounded theory methodology in qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss (1967), do not recommend a specific number of interviews or observations, but say that the researcher should continue until a state of *theoretical* saturation is achieved; the identification of this point, however, is left ambiguous in their writings on this issue. Many others have shared their opinions on this question, but as the researchers cited above illustrate, there is no specific, set answer.

The number of interviews needed to explore a given research question depends on the nature of that question and the kind or type of knowledge the interviewer seeks. To those students who have asked me how many interviews they need, I have often responded, “Enough.” By this I mean that enough interviews must be conducted so that the interviewer feels he or she has learned all there is to be learned from the interviews and has checked out those understandings by reinterviewing the most trusted and most knowledgeable informants.

It has been a common ideal in in-depth interviewing for the interviewer to check out his or her understandings with one or more key informants since this practice was first articulated and reported by William Foote Whyte (1943:279-358); this is usually called the "member's test of validity." In research that uses interviewing as a basic form of data collection, whether the researcher is a neophyte or a returning member, early interviews will embody much more "grand tour" questioning (Lofland and Lofland 1984:78-86; Spradley 1979: 86-92) than will later interviews, which tend to be more focused on checking out and verifying research observations, analyses, and presumptive findings.

In a very important sense, all research is "team research" in that it occurs in social, interactional, and community contexts. Even in the case of the heroic "lone ranger," the individual who is for the most part working on his or her own out in the field, there is usually a social support system of family members and friends and a small coterie of professional colleagues who provide intellectual and social support for the project. Researchers usually acknowledge such ties in the introductions, prefaces, or notes of the reports they publish on their studies. In other cases, interviewers may work in teams on projects with other researchers and share the interviewing duties. The interpersonal dynamics among research team members can be a source of problems, from the beginning negotiations concerning the "research bargain" (the division of labor and reward) to the eventual analysis and report. Members of an interviewing team may feel violated or "ripped off" just as informants may feel violated or "ripped off" if their confidentiality is breached or if promises are not kept (Adler, Adler, and Rochford 1986; Douglas 1976). In one of the extensive team research projects on which I worked, proprietary rights to the interviewing records were specified in a divorce agreement.

In addition to the social relationships implicated in and by a particular research

project, research reports claim membership in some kind of interpretive community. They do this through the idiom, language, and issues that they embody. Qualitative research is a diverse and multifaceted field. The editors of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000a), identify "seven moments" of qualitative research; in their recent work, Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1997) identify four major "idioms" of qualitative method. However one classifies qualitative research communities, each implicates its own standards of acceptable and reportable truth. Researchers would be wise to make their connections to particular research communities explicit and to incorporate these into their research processes and reporting, so that competent readers may assess how standards were created and embodied in actual research situations.

◆ *Ethical Issues Raised by In-Depth Interviewing*

In-depth interviewing commonly elicits highly personal information about specific individuals, perhaps even about the interviewer. This information may include participants' personal feelings and reflections as well as their perceptions of others. It may include details about deviant or illegal activities that, if made known, would have deleterious consequences for lives and reputations. It may include expressions of private knowledge about some setting or occupation that goes against that setting or occupation's public front or public presentation. Collecting this kind of information raises some specific ethical issues.

HOW DEEP?

One ethical issue concerns how far an interviewer should go in probing informants' answers. As noted previously, in-depth in-

terviewers should be prepared to follow where informants might lead, because this often leads to fruitful territory for those informants who wish to use the interviewing situation as an occasion for self-reflection and their own increased understanding. It is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, however, for a researcher to anticipate fully the consequences of such probing. In the case of one in-depth interview conducted by Rubin and Rubin (1995:98), an informant's suicide followed a revealing interview by a matter of weeks; the timing of this informant's death led the researchers to wonder if there was any connection between their interview and the suicide.

PROTECTING SUBJECTS

Professional social science organizations have traditionally addressed potentially difficult issues in their published codes of ethics (see Neuman 1994). One traditional ethical principle has been that the researcher must do whatever is necessary "to protect research subjects." There are several different ways in which such a principle can be interpreted, however, and so there exists some ambiguity about what is required of the researcher. One interpretation of this ethical principle is that the researcher should do what is necessary *to protect the specific individuals who have assisted him or her in the research, as individuals*. This means that a researcher or interviewer would feel obligated to take whatever steps are necessary to protect the individuals who have cooperated in the research from any misuses of the information they have shared.

In one well-known case, a researcher coded all his interview records and kept them in a safe deposit box in a bank located in a state different from the one where the research was conducted (Humphreys 1970). In another famous case, a researcher went to jail rather than yield research and interview materials to court officials (Brajuha and Hallowell 1986; Hallowell

1985). In that case, Mario Brajuha was a graduate student who was studying a restaurant that was "torched" (burned down), and when police investigators suspected mob arson, they went to the courts in an effort to obtain Brajuha's research records. Knowing about such potential complexities in advance should stimulate researchers to give prior consideration to their ethical commitments and the lengths to which they will go in order to protect research informants. In another case, a sociology graduate student spent five months in jail in order to protect his subjects in a sociological field project on ecoterrorism; his incarceration produced further reflections on this ethical dilemma (Scarce 1994, 1995, 1999).

PROTECTING COMMUNITIES

Another issue concerning the protection of research informants is whether researchers should feel any obligation to avoid causing harm to the reputation, social standing, or social prestige of their informants' professions, occupations, communities, or groups *as collectives*. Predicting future consequences of this kind is highly problematic, so it is exceedingly difficult to assess the risk of such harm with any certainty.

Another issue concerning the protection of informants is whether a research report will play some role in "deprivatizing" their lived experience (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). The risk of this is also very difficult to assess, and so it is reasonable to anticipate that different individuals will reach different ethical judgments, even individuals within the same support community or research team. This seems like one reasonable reading of what occurred when Carolyn Ellis (1986), an ethnographer, published an award-winning book about two fishing villages near the Chesapeake Bay. Ellis studied the villages over a period of 19 years, but when she returned in the early 1990s she discovered that her published accounts had offended some of the community members, leading her to express some

reservations about the standards she had used in the research publication (Ellis 1995). It seems clear that Ellis did not use the criteria for privacy that existed in the communities she studied, but instead used a much broader standard familiar to most of the cosmopolitans who live and work in and around universities today. The problematic nature of such ethical judgments does not reduce the need for interviewers to face and address them as best they can.

TELLING THE TRUTH

The most important ethical imperative is to tell the truth. This issue has become especially important during the current period, which Denzin and Lincoln (2000b:3) call "the postmodern moment." This moment is defined by two crises: the crisis of representation and the crisis of legitimation (for qualitative research). One response to these crises is the advocacy of "standpoint epistemologies" (Denzin 1997:53-89), where the research interviewer not only *self-consciously empathizes* with the informants as individuals, but *self-consciously sympathizes* with the political or community goals of those informants *as a category or collective*.

John Lofland (1995), a strong advocate of analytic ethnography, heartily disagrees with this position, saying that it amounts to a promotion of "fettered research." Most of the complex settings or situations that the vast majority of social scientists are likely to study are highly variegated, pluralistic, and filled with multiple perspectives and interpretations, so the adoption of a standpoint epistemology does not address certain important ethical questions (Altheide and Johnson 1994).

In a situation with multiple perspectives or interpretations, whose standards or criteria of truth are to prevail in the final report? This is the critical ethical question for in-depth interviewing. In several recent

publications, Denzin discusses a short story written by Raymond Carver (1989) about a writer who returns to his home town to find out that everyone there is angry with him because of what he has written about them. Denzin (1997:285-87) interprets the import of this story to be that "a writer is always selling someone out," meaning that, in virtually all complex settings in today's world, all interpretations and voices are subject to conflict and dispute. To resolve this problematic dilemma, Denzin suggests "upping the ante" on the guilt and other professional consequences for not telling a defensible truth in one's writings.

Robert Emerson and Melvin Pollner (1992) advocate another way to address this issue: Take the final ethnographic report back to the informants and other members of the setting that was studied, not so much to verify the findings independently (as in Whyte's "member's test of validity") as to gain their impressions and feedback on what has been written about them. The goal is not necessarily to seek a consensus, but to open a dialogue on what is written in the final report. E. Burke Rochford (1992) is one researcher who has actually followed this path. His experiences indicate that this practice may be very problematic, however; it can lead to conflict among members who later dispute what even they will accept as a true interpretation, because of subsequent considerations about the consequences of publication.

Carl Klockars (1977) offers the opinion that "the true test of ethics of research with human beings is whether or not it forces the researcher to suffer with his subjects" (p. 225). This is an ambiguous standard, to be sure. And Jeffrey Reiman (1979:57) would add to this the consideration of whether the publication of the research results enhances the author's career or the informant's freedom. Even in a postmodern age characterized by little consensus on the answers to such ethical issues, the questions stay with us to haunt our enterprise.

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