■ *Charles Briggs*
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Interview

Interviewing constitutes one of the most fascinating and poorly investigated realms of social scientific and linguistic inquiry. Practitioners in a range of disciplines rely on interviews, and the widespread use of interviewing by journalists, providers of social services, physicians, and employers, as well as the emphasis that politicians and corporations place on surveys, point to the central role that interviews play in creating the institutional structures of modern societies. For members of dominant sectors of society, interviewing simply becomes part of commonsense linguistic practice. Practitioners may also be reluctant to subject interviews to too profound a critique in view of their efficacy as means of imbuing social scientific discourses with authority. Although most researchers assume that interviews are relatively simple, straightforward, and well understood, the limited number of works that investigate the discursive foundations of interviewing in depth rather point to their complexity.

The major mode of structuring interviews is the recursive use of question-answer pairs, often with follow-up Q&A sequences (generally termed "probes"). The participation framework of interviews is organized around a central, asymmetrical opposition: the interviewer asks the questions, the respondent answers them, and the interviewer then signals when she or he considers the response adequate (by asking a new question). Formal or structured interviews are pragmatically distinct from informal, unstructured ones. The former involve the use of a predetermined set of questions, and their presentation by an interviewer is standardized as much as possible: questions are to be read as printed and presented in the same order. The standardization of responses may be maximized through the use of closed questions, in which the interviewee must choose between preselected alternatives. In survey interviews, professional social scientists write questions that reflect their research interests and chosen methodology. The researchers then hire a staff of interviewers, who are generally not social scientists, instruct them in how they are to present questions, and assign lists of interviewees

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that are produced by sampling techniques. Formal interviews are thus structured by an absent party, one who also controls rights to interpret the discourse, a fascinating sort of ventriloquism.

Informal interviews are generally conducted by the researchers themselves. While lists of questions are often prepared in advance, exact wordings and the order of presentation emerge in the course of the interview. Since the range of possible responses is less constrained, respondents are often invited to use a wider range of discursive forms (such as narratives). Unstructured interviews are generally associated with qualitative research and structured interviews with quantitative approaches; the work of William Labov and other sociolinguists suggests, however, that open questions posed during relatively unstructured phases of an interview may also be analyzed quantitatively. While formal interviewing constitutes an attempt to maximize reliability (that is, to reduce the effects of situational and interactional dynamics on data), open-ended methods stress validity, the accuracy of a given technique in measuring the phenomena in question. Critical perspectives suggest that reliability and validity are not only contradictory goals but are powerful textual constructions.

Recent attempts to incorporate issues of power and political economy into research on discourse suggest that studies of interviews can provide important perspectives on broader social questions. Michel Foucault played a key role in shifting the study of discourse to concerns with relations of power in broader institutional contexts. As Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs and others have argued, a vital part of the process of rendering discourse socially powerful is to gain control over its recontextualization—rights to determine when, where, how, and by whom it will be used in other settings. Interview discourse is maximally configured in terms of both form and content for recontextualization into the sorts of texts that the researcher anticipates creating-interviewees are granted very few rights over this process. In survey research, "instruments" (lists of questions) and techniques for "implementing" them maximize the social control of interviewers by the researchers who direct the study as well of interviewees by interviewers, creating hierarchies of discursive authority that also include individuals responsible for coding data. As Aaron Cicourel, Ann Oakley, and Américo Paredes suggested long ago, however, respondents often attempt to resist the discursive constraints imposed in both formal and informal interviews.

Drawing on research in linguistic anthropology, Pierre Bourdieu argues that forms of communicative competence constitute symbolic capital, the acquisition of which is constrained by such gate-keeping institutions as schools and professional societies. Interviews are used by members of dominant sectors in furthering their institutionalized needs, such as the compilation of census information and the use of surveying in enhancing consumption or devising political rhetoric. Dominated communities are common targets for interview projects.

Interviews currently form a crucial facet of the process of generating notions of both the public and political sphere. Implicit models of interviewing construct notions of public culture in individualist ways in that they view

questions and answers as discrete units of information and interviewees as bundles of separable demographic characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes; groups and societies can then be pictured as statistical aggregates. Bourdieu and others have suggested that polling is thus as much a form of political imagination as a scientific measurement of "public opinion."

These perspectives are cross-cut by the recent interest in ideologies of language—explicit and implicit notions of communication, text, language, and speech held by scholars and laypersons alike. These ideologies play a key role in constructing hierarchies of communicative practices, texts, professional discourses, genres, and styles. In turn, the people, disciplines, and institutions are stratified by virtue of how they are linked to these ideologically charged forms; the process works the other way round as well. The complexity of interviews emerges, in part, from the manner in which multiple ideologies and practices intersect in the research process, rendering questions and answers as well as the texts that recontextualize them heterogeneous and complex. At the same time that interviews embody and impose dominant linguistic ideologies, they provide sites for constructing alternative identities and practices.

Exploring questions regarding discursive practices and language ideologies is thus not only requisite to constructing and interpreting interviews but also for showing how research that takes interviews as objects rather than simply as tools can yield insights into central issues in social theory.

(See also *community, genres, ideology, participation, power*)

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Department of Ethnic Studies
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093-0522
clbriggs@weber.ucsd.edu