CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

WHY WE INTERVIEW

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

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

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

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

SURVEY INTERVIEWING AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERVIEWER: Is that right?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERVIEWER: What did your daughter say?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN UNDERTAKING A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

REASONS TO CONDUCT A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

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

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

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

4. *Developing holistic description.* By putting together process reports from people whose behaviors interrelate—putting together the reports of retailers and customers or of institutional psychiatrists and institutionalized patients—we can learn about systems. Qualitative interview study may well be the method of choice if our aim is to describe how a system works or fails to work. Thus, we might rely on qualitative interviewing of members of a family to understand the nature of their family life, and qualitative interviewing of members of an organization to understand how the organization works, how it moves toward goals or is paralyzed by internal friction. In general, the dense information obtained in qualitative interviewing permits description of the many sectors of a complex entity and how they go together.
5. *Learning how events are interpreted.* We might want to learn not so much about an event as about how it is interpreted by participants and onlookers. For example, we might be interested in studying responses to a film. Here we already know the "event" but want to learn the reactions of those who were its audience.[3] We might want to know how they thought about what happened in the film, what sorts of causes they identified, and what sorts of consequences they worried about. Qualitative interviewing enables us to learn about perceptions and reactions known only to those to whom they occurred.[4]
6. *Bridging intersubjectivities.* We might want to produce a report that makes it possible for readers to grasp a situation from the inside, as a participant might. Qualitative interview studies can approach the "you are there" vividness of a documentary. They can foster the kind of understanding that might be expressed as "Had I been in that situation, I'd have acted that way too." Quotations from interview material can help the reader identify with the respondent, if only briefly, by presenting events as the respondent experienced them, in the respondent's words, with the respondent's imagery.[5]
7. *Identifying variables and framing hypotheses for quantitative research.* Qualitative interview studies can provide preparation for quantitative research. Those who do quantitative research require variables to measure, issues about which to frame questions, and hypotheses to test. Variables, issues, and hypotheses can come from prior research, be inferred from theory, or be proposed on grounds of common sense, but where none of these does well enough, qualitative interviewing often is asked to fill the gap. The descriptions of process and system that are likely to emerge from a qualitative interview study can inform quantitative investigators about what matters in their intended topic.[6]

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

TIME

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

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

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

VALUE AS CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

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

The disparagement is unwarranted. Much of the important work in the social sciences, work that has contributed in fundamental ways to our understanding of our society and ourselves, has been based on qualitative interview studies. Qualitative interview studies have provided descriptions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way, including the human consequences of a disastrous flood[9] and the experiences of participants in the women's movement.[10] What we know about the effects of crises in personal lives comes largely from such studies,[11] as does much of what we know about the dynamics of post-traumatic stress disorder.[12] Nor should qualitative interview studies be thought of as only exploratory and ground-breaking, preliminary to other more structured approaches. While it can be valuable for the results of qualitative interview studies to be verified by other methods, it can also be valuable for the results of studies done by other methods to be illuminated by qualitative interview studies.

A COMPROMISE? FIXED QUESTION, OPEN RESPONSE

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

The hope of those who elect the fixed-question–open-response approach is that it will systematize the collection of qualitative material and facilitate the quantitative treatment of the material. In this approach qualitative information (albeit more in the form of summary statements than developed stories) will be collected, but because everyone will have been asked the same questions, the responses to each question can be categorized and worked with statistically. This approach makes it possible to report proportions and correlations as well as experiences and meanings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PHASES OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING RESEARCH

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

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

CHAPTER 2

RESPONDENTS: CHOOSING THEM AND RECRUITING THEM

AIMS AND SUBSTANTIVE FRAME OF THE STUDY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PANELS AND SAMPLES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PANEL OF INFORMANTS

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

1. *Events.* We may want to report on a happening like a flood, an epidemic, a riot, or a football game; that is, an event that involves people of different backgrounds, with different perspectives, who became involved in different ways. To get a sense of the scope of the event we might begin with professionals or experts: meteorologists in a study of a flood or public health officers in a study of an epidemic. The professionals and experts can suggest the issues that have been attended to in the past and that ought to be attended to now. There may be a literature with which we should become acquainted, and the experts may be able to direct us to studies of similar events. Following this, it would make sense to find people who were caught up in the event, so that we could learn how it was experienced.

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

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

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

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

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

The Key Informant

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

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

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

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

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

How Large a Panel?

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

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

REPRESENTATIONAL SAMPLES

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

Probability Sampling for Qualitative Research

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

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

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

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

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

Samples That Attempt to Maximize Range

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Convenience Sampling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arguments for the Generalizability of the Findings of Convenience Samples

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Corroboration from Other Studies. The findings and conclusions of other studies can sometimes buttress those of our qualitative interview study. They will not be able to corroborate every point of our study—if they could, our study would have been unnecessary. But the more we have of such corroboration for our findings, the more credible our findings become. This is especially the case when the results of a quantitative study can anchor a discussion based on qualitative interviewing. For example, a discussion of single parent overload might be anchored by a quantitative study's findings regarding the disposable time available to parents in various types of households.

An Invalid Argument for Generalization from Convenience Samples

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

Comparison Cases

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conceptually Important Cases

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

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

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

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

An N *of 1*

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

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

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

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

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

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

RECRUITING RESPONDENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

PREPARATION FOR INTERVIEWING

WHAT DO YOU INTERVIEW ABOUT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A GOOD REPORT

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

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

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

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

DIACHRONIC REPORTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

SYNCHRONIC REPORTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FROM SUBSTANTIVE FRAME TO INTERVIEW GUIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. *Past thoughts and feelings.* What were R's [the respondent's] thoughts and feelings regarding the children when the children were born? [Possible questions: "Can you remember when your child was born? Could you walk me through what your thoughts were? What your feelings were? Did you say anything to anyone? To the other parent? Do you remember when you first held the child? How did that happen? What went through your mind? What were your feelings?"] Was there a point where R really felt like a parent? What happened to produce this?
2. *Current thoughts and feelings.* Ask about occasions when R is with the children. What goes through R's mind at such times? What are R's feelings? Ask about most recent time R had worries about the children. What was the incident, what were the worries? Has R had fears in relation to the children? When? What did R fear? Has R had hopes? Ask about most recent time R was gratified by the children. What was the incident, what were the gratifications? Ask for times when R was dismayed or embarrassed by the children, when R was angry with them, when R felt burdened by them, when R was proud of them.
3. *The children and R's plans and activities.* To what extent is R's daily routine organized around the children's needs and activities? Ask about R's most recent workday and most recent weekend. How much are the children in R's mind while R is at work? At other times? Does R have any impulse to telephone? What happens in telephone calls? In the most recent telephone call, what was said? Does R make a special occasion of the children's birthdays, milestones at school? Ask about most recent such events.
4. *R's self-image and self-presentation.* Ask for incident when R has felt most like parent. Ask for most recent incident when R talked to friends or family about self as parent or about children. Was there such an incident in the last day or two? Is an incident of this sort frequent or infrequent?
5. *Separation from children.* Ask R about times of separation from the children. How did the separation occur? What were R's thoughts and feelings? Did R attempt to maintain contact by telephone? What were R's feelings on rejoining the children?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. A DAY AT WORK
   a. Ask R [the respondent] to walk you through a day at work—the previous day, if possible. When did R get in? What happened then? When did R leave? What thoughts on leaving? Did R take work home?
   b. Develop indications of emotional investment, tension, stress, and distress.
2. TASKS AT WORK
   a. Where is R in the work flow system? How does R's work come to him—who brings it or assigns it, and how? How does what R does involve him with others?
   b. Describe R's relationships with superiors, peers, subordinates, and clients—as they are typically, as they are at their best, and as they are at their worst.
3. HOW R CAME TO THIS WORK
   a. What led R to his current line of work? (We don't need a detailed work history; a summary is good enough.)
   b. Find out how R came to his current job and what his feelings about his current job are.

4. GRATIFICATIONS AND BURDENS OF WORK

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

5. RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

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

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

QUANTITATIVE ITEMS

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

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

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

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

STANDARD GUIDES AND TAILORED GUIDES

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

EARLY INTERVIEWS AS LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TO TAPE OR NOT TO TAPE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRANSCRIPTION

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

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

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