

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

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

R: My present boss?

I: Well...

R: ... or my past boss?

I: Your ... maybe we can talk about both.

R: Well, my past bosses were two people for whom I had a great deal of respect.

I: Yes, you did mention ... perhaps we can go into that a little bit.

In this interview excerpt the interviewer was determined to get an interesting story of troubles with a coworker and refused to accept the respondent's unwillingness or inability to come up with one. The interviewer also refused to accept the respondent's indications of material he could develop comfortably. I find it remarkable that the respondent continued to be cooperative, despite the interviewer's competing with him for the floor, disregarding his comments, and abruptly shifting topics.

COMMENTS

The interviewer's question suggests an absence of interest in what the respondent just said. My guess is that the interviewer is continuing to search for stressful or distressing experiences and has hit on the idea of asking about specific relationships. But to introduce this now abruptly shifts the interview away from where the respondent is.

The respondent is flustered—as well he might be. He tries now to reorient himself. He asks a question partly to gain time until he can get a grip on the new interview topic.

And, in stumbling fashion, the interview goes on.

Interview IV. Refusing Respondent Leads

Here is another excerpt from an interview in which the interviewer did not listen well. In this excerpt the respondent tried to contribute usefully to the study, but the interviewer failed to elicit from the respondent the meanings of a critical incident. The interview topic was the way that recognition and informal evaluation affected the respondent.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: I was wondering if, you know, what sort of an audience you have for your work? Is there some sort of group that you're doing it to impress as ... or who you might look for out there somewhere else ... or maybe your colleagues or ... you know ...

RESPONDENT: Well, obviously, uh, first I wanted to satisfy my boss, in the sense that he's—you know, I serve at his pleasure, so to speak. My annual evaluation is in his hands, so I certainly have to impress him properly and give him the level of confidence in me, you know. That's only for my benefit. About my peers within ...

I: Which would be ...

COMMENTS

It's all right to ask questions awkwardly as long as your concern is communicated and you don't inadvertently introduce an element that requires special attention. Here the interviewer does inadvertently supply a possible motivation for competent performance ("doing it to impress"), a motivation many respondents would want to disclaim.

The respondent reacts to the "doing it to impress" part of the question. He doesn't flatly reject the idea that he works to impress, but he does correct the implication that he might work only to impress. Of course he works to satisfy his boss, and in that sense to impress him, but that's his job. The respondent is starting to consider whether he works to impress his peers when the interviewer interrupts him.

The interviewer wants to know exactly who is meant. This is not necessary, and because it interrupts the respondent, is questionable.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

R: ... within the company ...

I: Within the company.

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

The interviewer's insistence that the respondent identify his peers before saying whether he works to impress them appears to have flustered the respondent.

I: Yeah. Like who would be your peers?

The interviewer establishes control over the interview by requiring that the respondent provide this unessential information before going on with his story.

R: Well, former associates ...

The respondent would have a right to be annoyed around here. He doesn't seem to be. He might be getting a bit cautious in his response, though; a bit concerned with whether the interviewer will understand.

I: Oh, former associates ...

R: Or competitive associates. You know, people from other companies.

I: Uh-huh. You all know each other in ...

R: It's ... we may probably know of each other, probably more than we know each other, because we are—although it's a fairly large community in the sense of numbers, it's very small in the sense of knowledge of companies and people and, uh ...

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

Has the interviewer forgotten that the issue was whether the respondent worked with this audience in mind? Or is the inter-

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

viewer assuming that the respondent has agreed that he wants to impress competitive associates? Actually, he hasn't agreed to this at all.

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

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

I: The clients?

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

R: The clients. In the sense that it tells me that I've done a good job for them, and it tells me that my company has done a good job. And when there's an opportunity in the future, we certainly want to be considered—or even more than considered, even handed the project. Well, these are ... I like to leave a good trail.

I: Yeah ...

R: Both, again, for my own accomplishment and also for the good of the company. But we were having lunch today in a west suburb. I was there this morning. We had lunch—the client, my boss, and myself. And out from another table comes somebody I knew from a company I worked for three years ago, who I haven't seen in

The respondent is virtually interviewing himself. He holds to a theme and looks for concrete instances. Without any help from the interviewer he here presents an incident that illustrates how people outside the company learn how you are doing.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

almost—what?—three years. And through the whole chitchat . . . I introduced him and introduced the people to him and, you know, these chance meetings, chance encounters, this is how things get spread around.

I: So what did you talk about?

R: Well, just what his company was doing and what I'm doing and who these people are who were having lunch together.

I: Was it kind of the idea of impressing them with your association with the client, or was it really friendly?

R: No. Just sort of a friendly informational-type thing. Like that.

I: And it kind of gets spread around?

COMMENTS

Okay, I guess. But more useful might be what went through the respondent's mind when the fellow he once worked with came up to his table to meet him, his client, and his boss.

This is superficial, as well as general. A former colleague comes over to say hello and maybe check out how the respondent is doing. This would very likely elicit appraisals of relative success. It would be natural now to ask what had been the respondent's thoughts as the former colleague came up.

This question is at least a stab at obtaining the respondent's thoughts and feelings during the incident, but it overstructures by asking if the respondent was aiming to impress—and is a bit demeaning by making that supposition.

This pretty much repeats the previous statement about what was talked about. The respondent is indicating that there's nothing more of note here.

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

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

COMMENTS

ter for the respondent. Instead of pursuing this, the interviewer asks a leading question about what will now happen to the information about the respondent gained by his former coworker. Sometimes leading questions are useful because they demonstrate that the interviewer is in touch or because they suggest a useful direction for development. Here the leading question only narrows the possible response.

R: Yeah. Now he'll go back and say, you know, that he saw me yesterday and who I was with.

One of the several problems in this excerpt is the extent to which the interviewer provided wordings for the respondent. When an interviewer introduces a phrase in a question (here the phrase is "and it kind of gets spread around"), then the phrase is the interviewer's and not the respondent's, even though the respondent may accept that phrase ("Yeah, it gets spread around").

The same observation holds for this interviewer's insistence, despite the respondent's objections, on pursuing the theme of working to impress. Does this respondent really work to impress others? I would say no, not in the sense the interviewer intends. He wants recognition for his competence, but that's different from being competent in order to gain recognition. However, the interviewer kept returning to this theme, and at a couple of points elicited very qualified agreement. But it would be wrong to accept this qualified agreement as validating the interviewer's assumption.

Interview V. Losing the Research Partnership

Despite the serious interviewing flaws in the two previous excerpts, the interviewer in each was able to maintain an interviewing partnership. When things really go badly, the research partnership is likely to be questioned by the respondent. The following example of bad interviewing is from an interview conducted by a student in a class on interviewing.

The student interviewer was concerned with identity formation among delinquents, an interesting issue for which qualitative interviewing would seem to be the appropriate data-gathering approach. The student hoped to demonstrate that criminal behavior stemmed from the development of a criminal identity and that one process leading to the development of a criminal identity was taking as a role model a figure from organized crime. The excerpt is from the student's interview with a 17-year-old who had recently been convicted of theft. The 17-year-old has just said that organized crime figures had long been heroes of his.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

INTERVIEWER: Did looking up to them change your behavior? Would you have gotten into crime without them?

RESPONDENT: Yes, I tried to be an enforcer for them. I started thieving and eventually I got into trouble.

COMMENTS

The student makes a couple of errors here: a minor one (asking two different questions at once) and a more important one (asking the respondent for conclusions rather than observations).

The problem is that the student wants a quick confirmation of his hypothesis. He would like the respondent to say, "Yes, looking up to them made me a thief." The student interviewer would have done better to elicit his respondent's thoughts and memories and to let them confirm or disconfirm his hypothesis.

This statement in itself doesn't contribute much, but what a wonderful collection of markers it is: "tried to be an enforcer" (note the "tried"); "started thieving"; and "got into trouble." Given the research aim, I would pick up on "tried to be an enforcer" and ask "Could you tell me about trying to be an enforcer?" with the expectation of then asking "Could you go

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

I: Why were they your role models?

R: Because they were into organized crime. They had a lot of power.

I: How do you mean?

COMMENTS

back to where the idea came from?" and "How did things develop from there?" I'd also make a mental note of the other markers and be ready to return to them when there was opportunity.

The student is determined to confirm his hypothesis; he neglects the markers.

The word "power" strikes me as another marker. I would guess that it is an expression of something of cognitive and emotional importance to the respondent. It might be valuable to follow it up.

It's going to be tough to get to the reason power is attractive, but maybe the respondent can describe the imagery associated with power. In general, it's difficult to get respondents to explore cognitive and emotional complexes. Asked for elaboration, respondents are apt to state the complex in new words rather than provide its imagistic and emotional bases. Although the question "How do you mean?" can be a good one if a respondent is already in a scene (if this respondent had said, "The guy I was working for showed me he liked me"), here it's too unfocused. The respondent can't know whether the interviewer is asking for a definition ("What do you mean by power?") or for an elaboration of the idea of power. A better question might

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

R: They had the power to choose whether a person could live or die. They had the power to snap their fingers and people would do what they say.

COMMENTS

have been "How did they show their power?"

The respondent does provide some development of his idea of the crime bosses' power. He conceives of the crime bosses as having not only a Godlike power of life and death but also a royal power of command. It would be important to move to concrete material now. One possibility would be to ask the respondent when he first became aware of the crime bosses' power or first saw it displayed. The respondent's stories would then show what images were indexed by his words. But also the interviewer should note that the response is a bit testy. Attention to the interviewing partnership might be in order.

I: Like how? What do you have in mind?

This question, at this point, makes me think the interviewer was out of sync with the respondent. The respondent has just tried to answer "How do you mean?" by specifying the display of power he had in mind. Now the interviewer is again asking a kind of "How do you mean?" question.

R: Come on, man. You know as much as I do. They don't like somebody, they get one of their people in, they say go hit him in the head. Pretty soon he's not around anymore. That's all there is to it. They had that kind of power.

This is a rejection of "What do you have in mind?" Manifestly, the respondent rejects the interviewer's pose of naïveté. But there is also in the respondent's asperity an objection to a sense of artificiality in the interview, to

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT

the absence of genuine partnership.

COMMENTS

The level of the respondent's asperity seems mild to me. Nevertheless, the respondent is questioning the assumptions of the interviewing partnership: "Come on, man. You know as much as I do." The respondent goes on to provide an answer, but he has put the interviewer on notice that he is aware that the interviewer is playing a role and that he is made uncomfortable by it. And he refuses, at least for the moment, to provide anything more than a sketchy, if vivid, indication of what he has in mind.

There's nothing irreparable here as yet. But note how the student interviewer's failure to pick up markers, insistence on a particular line of thought, and, finally, unfocused response to the respondent's reference to crime-boss power led the respondent to challenge the research partnership. The partnership may have been fragile to begin with—and certainly the student was courageous to undertake a tape-recorded interview with a 17-year-old who had recently been convicted of theft—but closer attention to the respondent's thought and imagery and more concern for maintaining the interviewing partnership would almost surely have produced a better interview.

What is essential in interviewing is to maintain a working research partnership. You can get away with phrasing questions awkwardly and with a variety of other errors that will make you wince when you listen to the tape later. What you can't get away with is failure to work with the respondent as a partner in the production of useful material.