in their own words: making the most of qualitative interviews

Successfully conducting in-depth interviews requires much more than being a good listener. Researchers must choose interview subjects carefully, push for concrete details, and pore over reams of transcripts to develop their stories. But the result can be a rich and compelling understanding of people's lives.

Photos courtesy of Cindy Miller

Two photographs of an interview conducted by Cindy Miller with a village elder at a temple in Thanjavur, near Tamil Nadu, India, 1997. In response to Miller's questions about changes taking place in the area, the elder used both words and hand gestures to make detailed comments abut local landmarks. Field notes by interviewers (or photo and video recordings) may be necessary to preserve gestures and visual evidence that audio equipment cannot record.

In the 1840s, British sociologist-journalist Henry Mayhew sought to learn about the lives of London's seamstresses—how they did their work and managed to survive on so little income. He found his answers by asking the women themselves and his interviews made vivid the dismal conditions of their lives. One young woman, after describing how little she was paid for long hours of work, said: "I was single…. I had a child, and he used to cry for food. So, as I could not get a living for him myself by my needle, I went into the streets and made out a living that way." The novels of Charles Dickens captured readers' sympathies, but they were only fiction. Mayhew presented the experiences of real people.

Such "qualitative interviews" are now so common that it is easy to forget how radical Henry Mayhew's procedure—which assumes that ordinary people can provide valid accounts of their own lives—was in his day. Indeed, qualitative interviewing was considered by many researchers so simple that it required no special techniques; listening attentively and respectfully was enough. More recently, practitioners have recognized that training is needed to make the most of interviewing and to avoid its pitfalls.

Studies based on in-depth interviews illuminate the social world. They describe the survival struggles of families on welfare, the ups and downs of physicists' careers and the tendency of two-job couples to assign homemaking to the wives. They reveal the emotional and social implications of organizational charts, from prisons to medical schools. Diane Vaughan's interview study of the bureaucratic processes that led to the disastrous 1986 *Challenger* launch has become an important reference for institutions—medical schools as well as NASA—trying to reduce catastrophic errors.

The type of interview used in these studies is often called "qualitative" to distinguish it from an interview done for a survey. Qualitative interviews ask about the details of what happened: what was done and said, what the respondent thought and felt. The aim is to come as close as possible to capturing in full the processes that led to an event or experience. The researchers' report will likely be a densely detailed description of what happened, but it may also provide a basis for a theory of why it happened. In contrast, surveys ask well-crafted questions that elicit brief answers. The answers are then added up and expressed as numbers or percentages. Surveys are quanti-

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Photo by Tamara Casso

This array of Botox bottles and syringes was photographed at a medical clinic during one of Tamara Casso's interviews with dermatologists. By using the objects to demonstrate Botox procedures, the dermatologist was able to give Casso a detailed account of her craft.

tative; they report the distribution of people's actions or opinions in tables or statistics (see "Sense and Nonsense about Surveys," *Contexts*, Summer 2002). In-depth interviews yield descriptions of experiences, processes and events.

More than any other technique social scientists use, in-depth interviewing can shed light on events that would otherwise remain unknown because they happened in the past or out of public sight. In-depth interviews can provide vivid descriptions of personal experience—for example, what it feels like to succeed or to fail at an undertaking, or the emotional consequences of a new child or a death in the family. They are the best source of information about people's thoughts and feelings and the motives and emotions that lead them to act as they do.

but can we trust what we are told?

For her study of religiously inspired terrorism, national security expert Jessica Stern interviewed leaders of terrorist groups. They seemed entirely truthful when they told her about their commitment to producing a better world, but when she asked about the sources of their funds, they exaggerated the importance of small gifts and minimized contributions from wealthy donors. Most of those who were widely known to have received funds from governments simply lied. The adequacy and accuracy of interview data depends on what respondents are willing to report.

Lies or evasions such as these are not the only way interview findings can be compromised. Even respondents who want to be accurate may distort. Memory of an event is never simply a replay of a mental videotape. It is a reconstruction, an integration of fragments of stored knowledge, perceptions and emotions. From these elements people build a coherent story, perhaps accompanied by visualized scenes of the event. The account and its accompanying images may be close to what happened, but inevitably there will be omissions, distortions and additions.

Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus and her students have repeatedly demonstrated that memory is vulnerable to false associations. In one study, they showed subjects who lived in the Disneyland area advertisements in which Bugs Bunny appeared as a member of the Disneyland staff. Actually, Bugs Bunny has never entered Disneyland; he is a Warner Brothers property. But nearly a quarter of the subjects who read the false advertisements later reported meeting Bugs Bunny at Disneyland. They seemed to have put together memories of

Photo by Worth Stokes

Photos by Worth Stokes

In the photo on the left, Drew Oberholtzer interviews a woman in her one-room apartment in Giarmata, Romania, as part of a study by Worth Stokes of how people are experiencing the recent social and economic changes in Eastern Europe. To document what they heard from interviewees, the researchers used audio recordings and photographs. Stokes' Eastern European study relied on translators to explain the study's intentions, to translate questions and answers, and to secure informed consent for interviewing and photographing family members. In the photo on the right, the woman in the middle is one of the two Romanian translators.

an actual visit to Disneyland with awareness of a link between Disneyland and Bugs Bunny, forgetting that the awareness stemmed from the advertisements. How can sociologists depend on data that are so fallible? And how can readers assess the trustworthiness of their reports?

To begin with, things are not so bad; it is easy to exaggerate the unreliability of interview data. Loftus and her students found that when her subjects reported a false memory, they tended to be less confident than when they reported something that had actually happened. Other indicators of the trustworthiness of a report include the density of detail the respondent provides, the apparent vividness of recall, and the extent to which the respondent's description makes sense in the context of his or her life.

Reports based mainly on interviews are often strengthened by the inclusion of other kinds of information. Jessica Stern, in her report on terrorism, provided a context for her interviews by describing the settings in which the interviews were held: homes, hotel rooms, restaurants, house trailers and isolated terrorist camps. She also described the dress, manner and facial features of the terror group members she interviewed and her own reactions of sympathy, repugnance and fear. In her *Challenger* report, Diane Vaughan relied on interviews to explain what could not be understood from NASA's internal memos, but she reported the memos as well. Often a survey can strengthen arguments based primarily on qualitative interviews, by showing how one person's story or opinion fits into larger patterns.

The interviewer's direct observations can also help readers judge whether skepticism is appropriate. Did a respondent seem to be straightforward or evasive? The interviewer's observations of settings can corroborate what respondents say, as when a view of spacious grounds supports a respondent's claim that an organization is successful, but it can also contradict their claims, as when someone professing asceticism is interviewed in an opulent setting.

doing it right

The cooperation of the respondent is of paramount importance to the success of an interview. While full cooperation cannot always be achieved, cooperation is likely to be maximized by an interviewer who is respectful and friendly, yet task-focused. In my own research, I bring two copies of consent forms describing the study to my interviewees, both copies bearing my signature. After briefly explaining the study, I give both forms to the respondent, ask him or her to read one and, if comfortable with it, to sign one of the copies and keep the other. I usually have a tape recorder and ask if it is all right to turn it on. My aim is to establish that the respondent and I are coworkers in producing information the study requires.

A good research partnership is more important to the quality of the interview than the phrasing of specific questions. If the respondent and I get along well, he or she will accept that the detailed accounts I request are important for the study and will tolerate any fumbling or uncertainty in my questions.

In qualitative interviewing, questions are usually formulated during the interview rather than written out beforehand. There are no magic phrasings which will reliably elicit illuminating responses. However, there are several principles that are helpful. Concrete observations are almost always

from interview to report

The following excerpts are from a study of retirement. The first part illustrates the sort of specific interview material a researcher might obtain. It is drawn from one of about a dozen interviews that address "puttering." The second part illustrates how such data are integrated into a general report.

Excerpts

Interviewer: What are your days like?
Respondent: Very quiet and uneventful.
Interviewer: Like yesterday, what, how did yesterday work? Maybe start in the morning.
Respondent: Well, I, I got up, had some breakfast I went out, ah, went out for about three or four hours and did a little bit of window shopping, a little Christmas shopping. I got back around noontime or so. Ah, I had lunch, watched the news... then just puttered around the house. Then I usually go to bed around 9 or 10 o'clock. Last night it was 10 o'clock. I had supper and watched television for a while and then I usually go to bed. But, like I said, very unexciting, very uneventful.

* * *

Interviewer: If you wanted to describe a really boring hour and get across what it felt like and what was going on....
Respondent: Well I don't have a problem with that. I, ah, I can sit down and do absolutely nothing for an hour. And it doesn't bother me. I enjoy a chance to relax and not have the pressure of having to do something.

Report

Puttering is a relaxed way of moving through a day, engaging in activities as they attract one's attention, undertaking nothing that demands energy and concentration. The dishes need doing, so why not do them now? It's nice out, and a bit of gardening might be enjoyable. It's noontime, time for a sandwich and the news on television. Later, magazines need to be picked up and a room straightened. There is time for a bit of reading. E-mail may be checked, or an hour taken to organize the attic. Nothing has special urgency.

Retirees seem not to be bored by puttering. There is always something to fill time with, and the puttering is regularly interrupted by an activity to attend to, a hobby to pursue, a walk or a bit of shopping or coffee with a friend. Mr. Oldsten was among the many respondents who liked taking it easy. He had been the purchasing director for a high-tech company, a job that was frequently stressful. His wife was still employed and so he spent most of the day alone.

> *Yesterday, I got up, had some breakfast, I went out for about three or four hours and did a little bit of window shopping. I got back around noontime or so. I had lunch, watched the news, then just puttered around the house. I had supper and watched television for a while. I usually go to bed around 9 or 10 o'clock, last night it was 10 o'clock. Very unexciting, very uneventful. I can sit down and do absolutely nothing for an hour. And it doesn't bother me. I enjoy a chance to relax and not have the pressure of having to do something.*

more useful than a respondent's generalizations. It is hard to guess from generalizations what underlying events the respondent is drawing on, or even whether the generalizations are based on specific events at all. So if a respondent says, "We got along fine," the interviewer should ask something like, "When you say that, what are you thinking of?" or "Can you tell me the last time that happened?" or "Can you think of a time that really showed that happening?" It can sometimes help for an interviewer to add, "The more concrete you can be, the better."

Respondents can provide fuller and more accurate reports if they are asked about events that happened recently. To know about the respondent's use of time, it makes sense to ask about yesterday; to learn about an event that occurs frequently, it makes sense to ask about the last time it happened. Should the respondent object that yesterday or the most

recent event was not typical, it is then possible to ask what made it unusual, and then to ask for a description of an earlier day or event that was more nearly typical.

When a respondent is describing an important sequence of events, the interviewer might mentally check that the description contains adequate detail. In a study of work stress in an organization, a respondent might say, "I knew I was in trouble so I looked up this vice president and asked him for help." The interviewer might then have the respondent fill in what happened between when he recognized that he had a problem and when he asked for help from a particular executive. So, the interviewer might ask, "Could you start with when you realized you were in trouble and walk me through what happened next? How did the thought of going to the vice president come to you and what happened then?"

Although qualitative interviews are sometimes called conversational, they are not. Imagine a conversation in which a retiree, asked by a friend whether he had gone back to the office to see the people he had worked with, had replied, "People who come back after they've retired, the people who're there are nice, but there's nothing to talk about." The friend would hardly press the retiree for details he had not volunteered by asking, "Is there a specific time you're thinking of? Can you walk me through what happened?" But those are the questions an interviewer would ask.

shaping the study

Good interviews are windows into people's lives. Researchers can often edit the transcripts to cut out the questions and rearrange respondents' answers into engrossing first-person stories. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis, in his book *Children of Sanchez*, painted a compelling portrait of the lives of people in an impoverished Mexican family by presenting edited transcripts of qualitative interviews with the family's father and his four adult children. Journalist Studs Terkel has used excerpts from qualitative interviews as the entire content of books such as *Working*, in which his respondents discuss their jobs.

Both Lewis and Terkel focused on the stories of particular individuals, but many social scientists want to generalize about people's experiences and so want the breadth of information that multiple cases can provide. They want to be able to report not only about one particular retiree's experience, but about the experience of a population of retirees. That requires a sample of cases that includes the full range of important differences in the population. For example, an investigator studying the experience of retiring would want to talk with retirees from a range of occupations, both men and women, the married and unmarried, and people who liked their work and those who hated it.

Sometimes the topic makes it difficult to obtain a good sample. For example, in a study of active drug users an investigator may be restricted to a small group within which he or she finds acceptance. Investigators in such situations must make do, but they must also be aware of the limitations of their sample. They may learn how their respondents are distinct, but in any case, generalizations from unsystematic "convenience samples" have to be treated with caution.

Several factors must be taken into account when determining how many people should be interviewed. The more varied the population, the larger the sample needs to be to cover an adequate range. A study of retired executives requires a broader sample than one of retired bankers. Also important is the extent to which the investigator wants more than one respondent from the same category—for example, how many retired bankers? Redundancy can compensate for omissions and distortions, and can also uncover important variations among people who are apparently similar.

If there seem to be between a half dozen and a dozen important types of respondents, and if the investigator would like five instances of each variation, a sample size of between 30 and 60 is a rough ideal. The larger the sample, the more confidence the investigator will have that there is adequate range and enough redundancy to make other important, perhaps unsuspected, differences apparent.

Most investigators find that the amount of data produced by qualitative interviewing sets an upper limit on the number of respondents. One and a half hours of interviewing can produce 40 single-spaced pages of typescript. A study with 80 respondents might come close to filling a file drawer. Follow-up interviews with each respondent can double the volume. In my experience, 100 respondents are the most that can be dealt with comfortably, and so large a sample will almost surely provide enough material to yield an adequate basis for trustworthy generalization.

what to do with the data

Analyzing interview data can be daunting. There is likely to be a great deal of it, and no obvious place to start. Researchers may read through a few transcripts and feel excited by what is there, yet wonder how they can ever extract the essential message of those few transcripts, let alone the entire set. But there are fairly systematic ways of proceeding.

Just as in solving a jigsaw puzzle, the analysis of qualitative interview material requires sorting and integrating. For a study

These audio tapes and written transcripts provide a durable record of in-depth interviews with teachers from two different schools about recent school reforms. The transcripts were subsequently coded and imported into a computer database so that passages from different interviewees addressing the same issue could be compared systematically.

on retirement, one might begin by separating out the materials that deal with the decision to retire, with retirement parties, with the immediate reaction to being retired and so on. Within each of the sorted sets of materials, the investigator will identify "meaning units"—passages that deal with the same issue. A respondent's description of being urged to retire by a boss can be a single meaning unit, whether it was a brief comment or a full story. The investigator then summarizes all the meaning units dealing with an issue. That summary, perhaps augmented by interpretations or explanations, constitutes a report on the particular sector. The final study is then produced by integrating all of the sector reports into a single coherent story.

Before computers, researchers made marginal notes on interview transcripts, cut out passages with scissors, and sorted the resulting slips of paper into physical file folders. Computers have changed all this into virtual cutting and sorting. Some investigators use one of several computer programs designed specifically to assist in analyzing interview materials.

Investigators sometimes want to do more than use responses to narrate a subject, they want to explain what they have found. Developing an explanatory theory is a task that inevitably challenges the investigator's knowledge, insight and creativity. But researchers have the ability to return to their interview transcripts to assess the validity of their conclusions in light of everything they were told.

rooting out bias

In recent years, social scientists who do qualitative interview studies have questioned some of the assumptions that underlie this method. Two lines of critique have been especially important. The feminist critique focuses primarily on the relationship of interviewer and respondent, while the constructivist approach is more concerned with interpretation of interview materials.

The feminist critique arose from the experiences female investigators had while interviewing other women. The researchers were struck by the difference between their relationships with respondents and the sort of relationships that had been taken for granted in earlier studies. Previously, rapport was recognized as important, but respondents were largely related to only as providers of data, people whose words would be taken down, analyzed and interpreted. Feminist scholars feel that this approach dehumanizes respondents and requires researchers to deny any identification with the interviewees. They feel it is essential to acknowledge their kinship with respondents. After all, the researchers were themselves insiders in their respondents' worlds: they too have families and family problems, work to which they are committed and priorities to juggle. It is more in keeping with this reality to replace inquiring with sharing.

Feminist investigators, among whom Ann Oakley has been a leading figure, also dislike the idea that after extracting information from respondents, they have nothing further to do with them. They want to acknowledge that interviewing establishes a relationship and that gaining access to someone's private life brings with it responsibilities. They feel it important to be of help to those respondents who are doing badly or, at the least, to accurately represent their plight. They also dislike the idea of owning the data drawn from respondents' lives. Some discuss their reports with their respondents and modify statements with which respondents disagree.

Constructivist investigators, such as Kathy Charmaz, were worried by investigators' insufficiently reflective leap from the reports of respondents to more general conclusions. They recognize that interpretations are not implicit in the data, but rather are influenced by the ideas and concerns that investigators bring to the data. In their view, investigators should acknowledge explicitly that their conclusions do not capture reality in the way that one might capture a butterfly. Instead, investigators shape respondents' reports in many possible ways. For example, a respondent's description of a problem with a boss may be classified as an instance of organizational friction rather than as a cause of work stress.

The constructivist perspective recasts the question of how close to reality an investigator can really get by talking to people. It argues that there is no single clear-cut reality to be located by means of interviews. Rather, what an investigator makes of interview information depends on his or her preconceptions and concerns. The interviews themselves may provide a basis

Photo by Steven J. Gold

A Chinese-Vietnamese newspaper publisher (left) examines and comments about a set of photographs during an interview in Los Angeles with Steven J. Gold, 1991. The publisher's daughter (right) helps with translation. The interview was part of Gold's multi-site study of immigrant businesses.

for a number of interpretations, each of them consistent with the interview information.

The feminist and constructivist critiques draw attention to problems of ethics and interpretation that are implicit in the conduct of qualitative interview studies. When judging the credibility of a report these issues should be considered alongside other possible challenges, such as respondent credibility and the potential for investigator bias.

Perhaps the major threat to the validity of qualitative interviewing studies, more than distortions during the interview, is investigator bias. An investigator who is determined, consciously or unconsciously, to have a particular theme emerge from his or her study can choose respondents whose interviews are likely to produce that picture, encourage the respondents to give answers consistent with it and write a report that neglects whatever might disconfirm it. Only a small minority of qualitative interview studies are significantly biased and these can usually be recognized easily.

reading interview studies

How can a reader evaluate a qualitative interview study? A good place to begin is with the sample. If the study was of people in a similar situation, did the sample have adequate range and redundancy? Did the interviews take place in a setting that encouraged respondents to provide full and accurate reports? If an event was witnessed by a number of people, are all relevant perspectives represented? And did the interview guide cover the full range of relevant issues? (Reports will often include an "interview guide," a list of the topics covered in the interviews, in an appendix.)

The trustworthiness of the data interpretation also can be judged by how closely it seems to be linked to the interviews, whether it appears to take all the interviews into consideration and the extent to which key points are buttressed by convincing quotations. Also worth considering is the investigator's use of supporting data from quantitative studies or from interviewers' observations. Finally, the investigator's conclusions

could be matched against the conclusions of other studies and evaluated for their consistency with everything else the reader knows.

More than 150 years after Mayhew's groundbreaking work, qualitative interviewing is and will remain a fundamental method of social science. Even if other sources of information exist in archives or are accessible to observation, only qualitative interviewing can provide firsthand access to the experience of others. An oft-repeated joke describes a drunk searching for a lost wallet under a streetlight. "Did you drop it here?" someone asks. "Nope," he replies. "Dropped it in the alley. But the light's better here." Qualitative interviewing is looking in the dark alley, whatever might be the problems of doing so. If we want to learn from the experiences of other people, we must ask them to inform us. Although we are much more knowledgeable about how to conduct an interview than was Mayhew, and more aware of the difficulties that can arise as we try to achieve understanding from the information we obtain, fundamentally our approach remains the same. ■

recommended resources

Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000. This is both a brief exposition of how to do a qualitative study and a discussion of constructivist ideas.

Hermanowicz, Joseph C. *The Stars Are Not Enough: Scientists—Their Passions and Professions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Hermanowicz describes the interplay of ambition, career and self-appraisal among physicists.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell, with Anne Machung. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking, 1989. This study describes the unequal distribution of familial responsibilities in two-job families.

Lewis, Oscar. *The Children of Sanchez, Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Random House, 1961. In this classic study, Lewis recounts the life stories of a Mexican worker and his children.

Oakley, Ann. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." In *The American Tradition in Qualitative Research* Vol. III, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001. This is an influential feminist critique of traditional approaches to interviewing.

Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. Stern uncovers the aims, strategies and motives of terrorists who believe they are doing God's work.

Vaughan, Diane. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. This book describes the rational decision making that led to the tragically mistaken Challenger launch.

Weiss, Robert S. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press, 1994. This is a text on qualitative interview methods.