CHAPTER 4

INTERVIEWING

GETTING STARTED

You have called the respondent to confirm that you are expected. You have checked your tape recorder. You have put your interview guide, fastened onto a clipboard, in your briefcase, first glancing at it to remind yourself of the interview's aims and content. You get in your car, a street map beside you. You find the respondent's home, park, ring the doorbell. The respondent comes to the door. You introduce yourself and are directed to a place to sit.

Your first concern should be to establish a good interviewing partnership. The way you act and what you say should communicate that you expect to work with the respondent to produce the interview. For example, as you bring out your tape recorder, you might ask, "Is using the tape recorder okay?" The point isn't the particular remark but, rather, the assumption of a collaborative relationship.

I bring two signed copies of a consent form to interviews. I give both to the respondent and say, "These are two copies of our consent form. Could you read one of them, and if it is all right would you sign it and give it to me and then hang on to the other?" Then I ask something like "Is there anything about the study you would like me to tell you before we begin?" Sometimes respondents want to know how they happened to be contacted. I then describe the sampling procedure. I almost always also say something about the general goal of the study, such as "We're trying

to learn about the experience of retirement and so are talking to people who know about it because they're doing it." I usually name the study's sponsor or give my academic affiliation to provide additional evidence that the study is legitimate.

When I can, I begin the interview where the respondent seems already to be. In a study of retirement, if a respondent mentioned, before I turned on the tape recorder, "I'm not actually retired; I've got a couple more weeks to go on the job," I might ask, after starting the tape recorder, "What's it like, being two weeks before the end of the job? Is that something you think about?" I might then go on to ask how the issue of retirement had arisen while the respondent was on the job, how other people had indicated that they were aware that the respondent was leaving, and how the respondent's job had changed since he scheduled a retirement date. If there is no evident place to start, I might begin by asking how the respondent happened to enter the situation about which I want to learn. "I would like to ask what your experience has been in retirement, maybe starting with how you happened to retire when you did."

In a pilot study of people who are HIV positive I generally started with how it happened that respondents got tested rather than how it happened that they became HIV positive, since their experience as people who were HIV positive actually began with the testing, not with the infection. Here is the start of my interview with one HIV-positive respondent:

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
INTERVIEWER: The idea of the study is to find out what happens to people as a result of their being tested and finding out that they are positive. What effects, if any, does that have on how they think, how they see the world, what they do. It's the kind of information that nobody has except the guy who's going through it. Nobody else has it.	*The setting is a small office in a testing station. The respondent has been told by his counselor that a study is being done and he has said he would participate. I want to establish a research partnership with the respondent.*
RESPONDENT: Right.	
I: I'm a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, downtown.	

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
And what I'm doing is talking to people who are in your situation, because you know what is going on and nobody else does, but it is important for other people to understand as well as they can. And so I'm going to ask you to work with me to tell your story. And that's it. That's what I'm doing.	*Now I explain what my role will be as interviewer and propose to the respondent that his role will be to provide information about "what is going on" in his life, to tell his story.*
R: Tell you what happened, huh?	
I: Exactly.	
R: Sure. That's a good idea. And it's about time.	*The respondent indicates that, yes, this makes sense to him.*
I: Yeah. It's amazing, with all the AIDS research, this hasn't been done. Anyway, here is a consent form for you to read. It describes the study, and if it's okay with you, you sign one copy and let me have it, and keep the other.	*Here I try to get in tune with the respondent by extending his comment "And it's about time." I then ask the respondent to read and sign the consent form.*
R: Oh, yeah. I have no problem. So, will it be used in, like, kind of segments, something where it's like people will be able to listen to us? Or is it strictly for doctors and psychologists?	*This suggests to me that the respondent may feel threatened by the form. "I have no problem" may mean that the respondent first felt discomfort, then rejected it. This, plus the question about who will listen to the tapes, makes me think that reassurance might be called for.*
I: Nobody will be listening to the tapes except for people on the project.	*My guess is that confidentiality might be an issue.*
R: It doesn't matter to me.	*The respondent says confidentiality is not an issue.*
I: What we'll do is, we'll transcribe it. We'll be reading the transcripts of your interview and the	*Just to be on the safe side, and to forestall the respondent's later feeling uncomfortable about what*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
transcripts of interviews with other people we interview and we'll compare them and summarize them and say this is what goes on. We might quote people, but if we do we will drop out identifying information.	*he's bought into, I go into detail about how his tapes will be used.*
R: Well, I don't care. I mean, if you do quote me and you have to use my name, it may be more effective, by using my name and saying what it is. But that's neither here nor there.	*Again the respondent says he doesn't care. Looking back, I think he wanted his story told.*
I: It's just our practice that we don't do it.	*Maybe I should have gone on to the interview at this point instead of staying with this, but I felt more had to be said about the ground rules.*
R: Yeah. I just figured that one or the other, it doesn't bother me.	*Respondent is holding his ground.*
I: Okay.	*"I accept your position."*
R: Really, it doesn't. It has no effect for me, for some reason. Denial or something.	*This could be interpreted as saying, "I'm going to be vulnerable to exposure but I don't care, although maybe I should."*
I: Also, if it is possible, it would be good if we could talk again, maybe next week or two weeks from now.	*I direct the respondent's attention to the interview at hand and its continuation.*
R: Yeah, sure.	*"Okay. I'm ready for the interview now."*
I: I guess I'd like to start by asking how you happen to be here. Could you just walk me through how you happened to get tested?	*And so we start. The phrase, "Could you just walk me through . . ." suggests the level of detail I would like the respondent to provide.*

In this excerpt I made explicit the terms of the interviewing relationship. After introducing the study and myself, I said, "What I'm doing is talking to people who are in your situation, because you know what is going on and nobody else does. . . . So I'm going to ask you to work with me to tell your story." Often, I don't describe in such detail the interviewing relationship I hope to establish, because it seems to me already pretty much understood. In this case the respondent must have struck me as uncertain of what would be expected of him.

THE INTERVIEWING RELATIONSHIP

The interviewing relationship is a research partnership between the interviewer and the respondent. The terms of this research partnership are ordinarily implicit, but if I were drafting a contract between myself and a respondent, I would include the following clauses:

1. The interviewer and the respondent will work together to produce information useful to the research project.
2. The interviewer will define the areas for exploration and will monitor the quality of the material. The respondent will provide observations, external and internal, accepting the interviewer's guidance regarding topics and the kind of report that is needed.
3. The interviewer will not ask questions out of idle curiosity. On the other hand, the interviewer will be a privileged inquirer in the sense that the interviewer may ask for information the respondent would not make generally available, maybe would not tell anyone else at all.
4. The interviewer will respect the respondent's integrity. This means that the interviewer will not question the respondent's appraisals, choices, motives, right to observations, or personal worth.
5. The interviewer will ensure, both during the interview and afterward, that the respondent will not be damaged or disadvantaged because of the respondent's participation in the interview. In particular, the interviewer will treat the respondent's participation and communications as confidential information.

There are other ways, besides the research partnership, of defining the interviewing relationship. Sometimes interviewers present themselves as the means by which the respondent can tell his story: "Through me you

can make your story known.'' This might be the approach of someone doing life history studies or of a reporter in an interview with the famous or the notorious.

It is also possible for the interviewer to take the role of the respectful student, awaiting instruction. One woman, an excellent interviewer, said she tried to make the government officials she interviewed feel that she was ready to admire their knowledge and authority and was, indeed, already awed to be in the presence of someone so important. She believed that disguising how much she knew and how perceptive and skeptical she was disarmed her respondents.

Some interviewers are willing to act as the respondents' antagonists. If they suspect the respondent is holding back information, they are ready to confront the respondent: ''You say you haven't ever used drugs. But you hung out with drug users. There must have been a time when you experimented.'' Interviews in police stations, of course, take on this quality, as do some employment interviews. Journalists sometimes read up on respondents, the better to confound the respondents' efforts to dissemble.

In my experience the research partnership definition of the interviewing relationship works best. It is the most easily sustainable, both for the interviewer and the respondent. And it is consistent with the reasons for having research interviews.

SOME INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES

Being a good interviewer requires knowing what kind of information the study needs and being able to help the respondent provide it. Here are some guidelines.

WHAT IS IT YOU WANT TO OBTAIN IN THE INTERVIEW?

In the great majority of research interviews you will want the respondent to provide concrete descriptions of something he or she has witnessed. This includes both scenes and events external to the respondent and the respondent's own thoughts and feelings. A task in almost every interview is to communicate to respondents that this is what is needed. Here is an interview excerpt that suggests the kind of information that is wanted and how it can be obtained. It is from an interview with a divorced father who was involved in a dispute with his former wife over his times of visitation. I conducted the interview as part of a study of the usefulness of a program for helping parents deal with visitation problems.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
RESPONDENT: It really appalls me that they [in the court] think that I'm some . . . some, I'm some symbol of money. That is the only reason that I even go to court and the court has any use for me is because I am a symbol of money. That is the only reason. They don't . . . they could care less if I saw my son. Okay? It's a different story if the mother wasn't seeing him. But they could care less if I didn't see him. They could care less if I didn't have a roof over my head. They could care less that I wouldn't be able to take my son because I don't have any money to feed him when I have him because I pay all the money out. They don't care about that.	*This response, a description of the courts as the respondent views them, is generalized. That it is so emotional may obscure the fact that it summarizes the respondent's experience rather than presents any specific experience. Note the respondent's use of "they" when he insists that "they" don't care about his relationship with his son, only about obtaining money from him for his wife. Later, when the respondent describes a specific incident, he will talk about specific people.*
INTERVIEWER: Could you walk me through the last time you went to court, just what happened?	*This is a way of asking for the concrete incident that led to the generalized emotional statement. The phrase "walk me through" is intended to communicate the level of concreteness wanted. "The last time" is intended to specify a particular incident.*
R: The last time I went to court was just before I went to see the counselor. Basically, I went down to go over custody and payments. Now think about it. I got to pay rent. I live in an apartment. I got to pay rent. I got to put food on the table, you know. I got to make payments on the car. I make three hundred dollars a week, gross. Take out my taxes, I make two hundred and forty-seven dollars.	*The respondent provides a time reference for his last time in court and a reason for having gone there but then returns to his outrage.*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
They want seventy dollars. Who pays for my rent?	
I: Okay. When you came to court, were you waiting around before you . . .	*I bring the respondent back to the court appearance, to what is likely to have been its beginning—waiting around.*
R: Oh yeah, wait around for hours, hours.	
I: Where were you waiting?	*I ask for specifics to keep the respondent in the incident.*
R: You wait downstairs in a lobby, waiting to be called. And then you go through this shenanigans.	
I: What happens while you're waiting to be called?	*I'm asking for the concrete details of the incident. Notice that I ask about what happens in the present tense. This is an error, because it encourages a generalized response. (I say more about this later in this chapter.)*
R: You sit. You sit. You sit. You don't even get called. I had the lawyer go stand in line. You don't even see a judge. You see some person who shuffles a million people around a day. And then you sit down with a mediator. He's my mediator. He's not my mediator. He's telling me what I'm supposed to do like he's a judge. He's telling me, "This is what you have to do."	*The response is generalized, quite possibly because of the present-tense question.*
I: Was your wife with you when you were seeing the mediator?	*I now supply a specific detail to bring the respondent back to the incident.*
R: Oh yeah.	

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
I: So it's the three of you—you, your wife . . .	*Again, requiring the specific.*
R: Me, the lawyer—I might just as well have left the lawyer at home. I mean, I might as well have left him at home. I mean, I mean, the lawyer couldn't do anything.	*The respondent is now in the incident. It only remains to ask about it.*
I: So what happened?	*Which I now do.*
R: What happened is, you know, it's like this. I want three weeks. I want three weeks vacation with my son. Not all at once. Three weeks.	*I can't tell if the respondent asked for this or if it was only in his mind.*
I: So did you say that or . . .	*For clarification.*
R: I mean, what's this guy? What's wrong with three weeks? What's the problem with three weeks? One week, three times a year. Spring, winter, and summer. You know, what's the big deal? I don't see any problem with that. Oh, no. The mediator says, "Two weeks." I say, "No, I want three weeks." I mean, I don't know what the problem is. What's wrong with three weeks?	*Apparently, the respondent asked and was refused. And then the respondent argued.*
I: So what did he say then?	*I ask the respondent to continue reporting on the level of what actually happened.*
R: He says, "Well, I'm only giving you two weeks and come back in a year and a half and we'll negotiate again." What do you mean, come back? I'm not coming back to this court again. Negotiate? What are we negotiating? This is my son. It's not a negotiating thing.	*The respondent is now providing a description of the incident, both what was happening in the event and what was happening internally. This is the level of concreteness needed for the study. Note how it develops further useful detail.*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
I: Did your lawyer say anything?	
R: My lawyer. My lawyer's like . . . he says, "Well, why can't we have the three weeks?" But, you know, it is the mother. I'm like, "Well, I'm the father. Without me there wouldn't be a child." Well, I'm like, well . . . nothing. Nothing. And I say, "I love my son and I love seeing my son and I love spending as much time as I want with my son. And I don't like you telling me when I can spend time with him."	*This is an instructive account of the frustrations of the noncustodial father and the feelings of helpless rage that develop. Note the respondent's anger at being told when he can see his son by someone who doesn't know him or his son.*
I: What did he say when you said that?	*Again phrasing the question on the level of the concrete event.*
R: "Well, that's the way it is."	*The respondent says that he was essentially just turned away by the mediator, not attended to.*
I: What were you thinking . . .	*Asking for the internal experience.*
R: What am I thinking? I want to kill the guy. I want to kill her. You know, 'cause she's sitting there smiling and smirking. I mean, I tell you, I tell you, I'm a very rational person. But when I left that day, I tell you, and I watched the news, right? And I see these guys and I'm sitting there going, "There's something going on behind the scene. You're not seeing the whole picture."	*A statement of the level of rage the experience induced. Notice the shift into the present tense. Here it is not generalized; instead, it describes a past incident as though it were occurring now.*
I: What do you mean by "these guys"?	*The respondent is alluding to thoughts. I ask him to develop them further.*
R: These people that are on TV and they're killing their wives. I	*This is a description of murderous rage. The responden't self-*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
mean, nothing should ever be drawn that far. All right, beating your wife—I never did any beating. I never had any restraining order. Because I'm—you know. But I tell you, if I was that type of person, the way I felt when I got out of there, I tell you, I could have knocked her off. 'Cause I was pissed.	*control is good enough so that he will not harm the mediator or his ex-wife. But this is the feeling that underlay the diatribe with which this excerpt began.*

This excerpt began with a generalized statement of the court experience of a noncustodial father. I wanted the respondent to move from this to as close to an observer's report as he could provide of his experiences, internal as well as external. Only that sort of concrete description of just what happened could constitute interpretable data regarding the experiences of noncustodial fathers in court.

Generalized descriptions can be good enough if they are about an issue of peripheral importance to the study. A respondent's statement that "I go to work about nine in the morning" would be acceptable if the study isn't especially concerned about the respondents' use of time. But if respondents' use of time is important to the study, the interviewer should attempt to obtain a concrete description of what happened the morning of the day preceding the interview.

We obtain descriptions of specific incidents by asking respondents to particularize. In the foregoing excerpt I asked, "Could you walk me through the last time you went to court, just what happened?" Other questions that might also have served to elicit a concrete description include: "Could you tell me about a time that displays that at its clearest?"; "Is there a specific incident you can think of that would make clear what you have in mind?"; and "Could you tell me what happened, starting from the beginning?"

It can sometimes seem to an interviewer to be an untrustworthy sampling of respondent behavior to ask only about the last time an incident occurred. To check this, it might be useful for the interviewer to ask if that occurrence was very different from previous occurrences and, if it was, to ask for the occurrence that preceded the most recent one as well. Often, however, the discussion of the most recent occurrence will produce so

much instructive particularity that it will be of secondary importance whether it is a typical event or not.

TENSE AND SPECIFICITY IN THE INTERVIEW

It is useful to bear in mind that reports of actual events are ordinarily made in the past tense: "I did . . . ," "He said . . . ," and so on. However, respondents may also make reports of actual events in the present tense to give their accounts a sense of immediacy and drama, as though the events were happening now. The respondent just quoted did that when he said, "My lawyer's like, he says, 'Well, why can't we have the three weeks?' "

A more frequent use of the present tense might be called "the generalized present." This is the tense respondents most frequently employ for a generalized description. It summarizes developments that occurred in the past and continue through the present. This is the tense used by the respondent in the excerpt just presented when he said, "You sit. You sit. You sit. You don't even get called." Notice that the respondent used the generalized present in response to a question by the interviewer that was itself in the generalized present: "What happens while you're waiting to be called?" This question assumed the generalized present and so pulled a response in the generalized present. A better question would have been, "What *happened* while you were waiting to be called?"

The generalized present is often requested in studies using a fixed-question–open-response format. Such a study might ask, for example, "What are the issues about which you and your wife tend to disagree?" As was exemplified in the excerpt, when a question is phrased in the generalized present, the response is likely to be in the generalized present.

There is a second generalizing tense, which I call "the generalized past." A respondent can signal this by use of the auxiliary "would," as in "I would sit there for hours." The respondent could also signal this tense by using "used to" or an equivalent: "I used to spend a whole day sitting there." Here too the respondent is summarizing, not describing a specific incident.[1]

Respondents often prefer to provide generalized accounts rather than concrete instances. One reason for this is that they can feel that they are being more responsible reporters if they remain general, since they are describing an entire class of events rather than a single idiosyncratic

event. The generalized material, they may think, is more inclusive and so constitutes better information. Actually, when respondents provide generalized accounts, their description expresses a kind of theory of what is most typical or most nearly essential in the class of the event. By doing this, respondents preempt the investigator's task of analysis; it is they who have decided what is important.[2]

In addition, a generalized account permits respondents to minimize elements about which they feel diffident. Respondents may feel that generalized accounts are appropriate for a report to someone like the interviewer, whom they don't know that well. Generalized accounts are more nearly public information, with none of the potentially embarrassing or revealing details of private life.

Interviewers, in qualitative interview studies, like their respondents, may imagine that the generalized present or generalized past will provide an overview that saves interview time and is less subject to the idiosyncrasies of the specific event. In addition, the interviewers may unconsciously prefer to phrase a question in the generalized present or past because it seems less prying, less intrusive, than a question that asks for a specific past event. The question, "What's it like when you and your wife quarrel?" can feel easier to ask than "Can you tell me about your most recent quarrel? Could you walk me through it?" Asking about a specific past event can make interviewers uncomfortable because it seems as though they are putting respondents on the spot.

But just because questions phrased in the generalized present or generalized past appear less intrusive, the interviewer should be wary of them. The point of qualitative interviewing is to obtain from respondents a field report on their external and internal experiences. This does require the respondent to provide a density of detail that would not be provided in ordinary conversation. If asking for detailed, concrete information in an interview constitutes an unacceptable invasion of privacy, the interviewing partnership is faulty.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are no magic questions. Any question is a good question if it directs the respondent to material needed by the study in a way that makes it easy for the respondent to provide the material. Sometimes the best question is one that in a very few words directs the respondent to give more detail or

fill in a gap: "What happened then?" Sometimes it is one that takes the time to tell the respondent just what is now needed: "Could you give me a concrete instance of that, a time that actually happened, with as much detail as you can?" Any question that helps the respondent produce the material you need is a good question.

On Phrasing the Question

Should every question be phrased in an open way, or might a question be a leading one in that it anticipates a response? Do you ask "What were your feelings then?" or "Were you unhappy about that?" Or might you even offer "You must have been unhappy"?

Most often, you will not want to affect the respondent's report by offering anticipations in your questions. If you have no reason to anticipate a particular response, you would ask, "What were your feelings when that was happening?" But sometimes you can help a respondent provide a full report by demonstrating your understanding, and one way to do this is to name the respondent's state. In this situation the right thing to say might be "You must have been unhappy about that." Or if you don't want to supply the characterization, "unhappy"—after all, if you do, the characterization of the feeling isn't the respondent's own—you might try "It sounds as though you had a pretty strong reaction." You don't have to be compulsively nondirective, but you should make sure that the words and images you may eventually quote in your report are the respondent's, not yours.

There may be a few points in an interview where you want to check on a surmise you have come to. One way to do this is to say, "It sounds like you are still pretty upset about that." But if the respondent agrees with this, you might do well to check whether the agreement comes because of politeness or because you have been right. I have sometimes asked "Is that exactly right?" just to make sure.

Helping Respondents Develop Information

Most important in an interview is obtaining concrete information in the area of inquiry. Once a respondent has alluded to an actual incident, perhaps in response to your asking, with respect to something of importance to the study, "Could you tell me the most recent time that happened?", you may have to help the respondent develop the incident

adequately. Here are forms of development you might want to obtain and some ways you might ask for them.

1. *Extending.* You might want to know what led to an incident. Questions that ask for this include "How did that start?" "What led to that?" Or you might want to know the consequences of an incident: "Could you go on with that? What happened next?"
2. *Filling in detail.* You might want more detail than the respondent has provided. A useful question often is "Could you walk me through it?" An interviewer who worked with me used to add "We need you to be as detailed as possible," and that seemed to work for her. Another approach to obtaining increased detail is to go to the beginning of the respondent's story for which you want detail and ask what followed, exemplifying in your question the density of detail you want: "So you were sitting there, talking with your guest, and this other fellow came over. What happened then?" You could even add "Can you walk me through it?"
3. *Identifying actors.* You might want to learn the social context of an incident, the other people who were there. You could ask "Was anyone else there when that was happening?" "Who else was there and what did they do?"
4. *Others the respondent consulted.* Especially in a study whose concerns include how respondents dealt with problems, you may want to ask whom the respondent talked with about an incident and what the respondent said: "Did you talk to anyone about what was going on?" This may also produce information about the respondent's view of the incident at the time.
5. *Inner events.* You will generally want to obtain information regarding some of the inner events that accompanied the outer events the respondent reports. Inner events include perceptions, what the respondent heard or saw; cognitions, what the respondent thought, believed, or decided; and emotions, how the respondent felt and what strivings and impulses the respondent experienced. They can also include the respondent's preconceptions, values, goals, hopes, and fears. You will usually want at least the cognitive and emotional events. Imagine a respondent reporting, "My boss called me in and told me he wanted me to fire one of the people working for me." After the respondent developed what happened, you could ask the respondent to de-

scribe his or her cognitive reactions by asking, "When that was happening, what thoughts did you have?" Then you might obtain emotional reactions by asking, "What were your feelings when he said that?" or "Can you remember how you reacted, emotionally?"

6. *Making indications explicit.* Respondents may indicate by a gesture, a grimace, or an expressive shrug feelings they haven't put into words. You won't have the gesture, grimace, or shrug in your transcript when you are analyzing your data, nor can you quote it as supporting material for your report. The problem is to communicate to the respondent that you sort of understand what he or she is indicating but that you want to be sure. To convey the message that the respondent's feelings are worth developing in words, you might try suggesting, perhaps by a nod, that you understand, and then ask for elaboration by the question, "You had some pretty definite feelings?" or "What were the feelings you had?"

Handling Difficult Questions

Some questions are hard to ask. People in survey research sometimes say that income is the most private of matters, more difficult to ask about than sexual behavior. Perhaps, but sexual behavior is difficult enough. However, often there is a relatively tactful way of entering a difficult area. To learn about men's extramarital experiences, in the study of how occupationally successful men organized their lives, we sometimes began by asking respondents about their experience of loneliness and then moved to questions about friendships with women other than their wives. Still, despite our efforts to be as tactful as possible, a few men responded by saying that they didn't want to get into that area. That told us something—although not very much.

In general, if there are difficult issues to be developed, it is important to establish a reliable research relationship before entering the area. It is also important for interviewers to know why the information is needed. Interviewers in any study should always understand its goals, so that they can know which of a respondent's leads to develop; but if they are to ask about sensitive issues, it is especially important that they know why they are asking. And they must thoroughly believe in the study's right to know. Otherwise they will communicate their absence of confidence in the questions.

Markers

I define a marker as a passing reference made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state. One respondent whom I interviewed in the study of retirement reported, "We went to our place on the Cape a couple of weeks after my mother died, and my husband spent all his time working on the house. He always has one more thing he has to do." The point of this response was to communicate how occupied the respondent's husband was, despite his retirement. The reference to the death of the respondent's mother—not previously mentioned by her—was a marker. The respondent was indicating that this was something significant for her, by which she dated events; that she understood that it might not be important for the study; and that if I wanted to pick it up, well, there it was.

After the respondent had finished developing the material about her husband's full schedule, I said, "You mentioned earlier that your mother had died. What happened?" The respondent then described how devoted she had been to her mother. That devotion explained why her inaccessibility to her husband had been an issue in his retirement. Now, with her mother dead, there were indications that things might be different. This was material important to the study.

Because markers occur in the course of talking about something else, you may have to remember them and then return to them when you can, saying, "A few minutes ago you mentioned . . ." But it is a good idea to pick up a marker as soon as you conveniently can if the material it hints at could in any way be relevant for your study. Letting the marker go will demonstrate to the respondent that the area is not of importance for you. It can also demonstrate that you are only interested in answers to your questions, not in the respondent's full experience.

Sometimes interviewers feel it is tactful not to pick up markers. This may, on occasion, be true, especially if the marker was dropped inadvertently. But most often respondents are in enough control of their report that if they don't want you to know about the area, they won't drop markers.

Respondents sometimes offer markers by indicating that much has happened that they aren't talking about. They might say, for example, "Well, there was a lot going on at that time." It is then reasonable to respond, "Could you tell me about that?" It is different when a respondent clearly states that an area is off-limits to the interview by saying something like, "There was a lot going on at that time, but I don't want

to talk about that.'' Now you can't possibly ask, ''Could you tell me about that?'' Still, if the topic appears relevant to the study and you have a good interviewing relationship, you might ask, ''Can you tell me anything about what sort of thing that was?''

MANAGING THE INTERVIEW

Intrusions

The first rule of interviewing is that if the respondent has something to say, the respondent must be able to say it. If you find yourself talking over the respondent, interrupting, or holding the floor while the respondent tries to interrupt, something is going wrong in the interview. You might want to withdraw some of your attention from the respondent for a moment or two to figure out why you are competing for the floor. But whether you figure it out or not, you ought to stop doing it.

It is easy to intrude in an interview. You can interrupt the respondent. You can finish the respondent's sentences. You can offer your associations to what the respondent is saying. You can suggest explanations for observations about which the respondent is perplexed; for example, if the respondent shrugs and says, ''I don't know why he said that,'' you could propose, ''Well, maybe he was trying to defend himself.'' You can insist on completing your question even if the respondent has already started to answer. You can hop from issue to issue following your own train of thought rather than the respondent's. With any and all of these, don't do it.

Never, never fight for control of the interview. The interview is a collaboration. If it should happen that a respondent is developing an irrelevant topic at great length, you may have to interrupt to say that there's another topic you would like to get to. But that should be done in the spirit of the collaboration; it's your responsibility to set topics. You can usually manage the redirection without discouraging the respondent from talking freely. In the retirement study a respondent who was nearing retirement wanted to talk about the details of his business and how hectic things were. His discussion was interesting but not useful for the study, so at a pause I asked, ''With all this going on, is it possible for you also to plan for retirement?'' We then moved to discuss the respondent's planning for his retirement.

Talking About Yourself

The interview is about the respondent, not about the interviewer. In my view, at least until the interviewing has ended, the interviewer should do only as much self-reporting as is consistent with the interview situation. It is usually enough for the interviewer to give business card information—location and profession—along with the study's aims and sponsorship.

If a respondent asks about some aspect of the study, the question should be answered fully—although not so fully that the respondent's attention wanders. If a respondent asks a question of the interviewer such as whether the interviewer had a difficult time finding the respondent's home, the question should be answered in a way that will satisfy the respondent's concern, but briefly. If a respondent asks a specific personal question, such as whether the interviewer had an experience similar to the one the respondent is describing, the interviewer should answer honestly rather than seem mysterious. But again the response should be brief; it's the respondent's experience that's important.

Some interviewers believe that self-disclosure fosters disclosure by respondents. I don't have much experience with self-disclosure as a facilitative technique, but the experience I do have leads me to question it. My own experience is that self-disclosure complicates an interview situation by shifting the respondent's attention to the interviewer and altering the respondent's relationship with the interviewer.

Monitoring the Information the Respondent Is Providing

You must carry into the interview a general idea of what you want to learn about. The interview guide is one statement of this. Your ability to judge what else might contribute to the study's report should make it possible to recognize when material not anticipated in the guide could be useful for the study. Even as you are listening closely, you should be assessing whether the material might be useful for the study's report. The guiding question is "Does this material help illuminate experience in the area of the study?"

Suppose your study is on the psychological and emotional concomitants of being engaged in a lawsuit. Your concern is what it feels like to be either the person sued or the person doing the suing. In an exploratory interview you find yourself being told by a plaintiff about his experiences

as a father when his son got into a dispute over ownership of baseball cards. Is this relevant material? Should you ask for its development in the interview? Or should you be thinking about how to redirect the respondent? If I could imagine any use for the material, I would want the respondent to develop it. It might occur to me that the stance of being a father protecting his child, or teaching the child to deal with conflict, carries over into the respondent's present adversarial action. For me, that possibility would be enough to justify encouraging the respondent to develop the material.

It can be hard to know what is relevant, especially in early interviews, before the frame of the study is firmly established. My policy is: If in doubt, see what's there.

Adequacy of the Respondent's Account

Suppose what you are being told is in exactly the right area. How do you know whether you are being told enough, whether you are being given enough development and enough detail? One test is visualizability. Can you call up the scene and imagine who is there in the setting being described and how the participants relate to each other? If you were to stage the scene in a theater, would you know what people to put there? Would you know who is saying what? Would you be able to move the plot forward? Actually, you'll never get enough information to do all of this, but you ought to be able to identify the major figures present on the scene, know the important things that were said, and maybe understand how the scene came to be or what happened next. If an event is of critical importance for your study, you should try to get as much information about what happened as your respondent can supply, up to the point where the respondent becomes restive.

Managing Transitions

The best questions fit in so well with what respondents are saying that they seem almost to be continuations of the respondents' own associations. They encourage respondents to say more about what is already in their minds. Transitions to new topics require respondents to stop and think, to relocate themselves; they may be necessary, but they tend to be unsettling.

Suppose that after a respondent has told an anecdote about his children, the interviewer nods and then asks, "How about at work, what is a typical day like?" The respondent will require time to reorient himself. He must redirect his mind from his relationship with his kids to his work situation. For a few moments, the respondent is apt to flounder. The verbal expression of this might be, "Well, ah, well, ah, the way it goes, I guess . . ." The interviewer has flustered the respondent.

I used to tell interviewers who worked for me that they could fluster respondents three times in an interview. Anything more and the respondent would wait for the next question, answer it briefly, and then wait for the next question. This is how respondents act in survey interviews. It isn't at all what is wanted in qualitative interviews.

Actually, how many times a respondent can be flustered and yet remain ready to give a full report depends largely on the quality of the interviewing partnership. A fully cooperative respondent can be flustered more than the three times I would tell interviewers was their limit. But where there is initial resistance—for example, where a respondent isn't sure he or she wants to be interviewed—even a single flustering can lead to responses that are stiff and sparse.

It is good practice to try to follow the respondent's associations so long as they remain within the interview's frame. The interviewer will still have a great deal of influence on the direction the respondent's associations take. The interviewer will be constantly communicating—by nods of agreement and understanding as well as by questions and comments—what is of value to the study and what is not. Even if few directive questions are asked, the interview will be an interactive product. Usually, without introducing new topics more than three or four times in the interview, the interviewer will find that the issues that have to be covered have been dealt with.

There are, however, a few ways of phrasing transitions that can prepare respondents for redirection. When it is evident to the interviewer that a particular line of inquiry has been adequately developed, the interviewer might say, perhaps nodding affirmatively, "Okay. Now there is another issue I wanted to ask you about. It is . . ." The respondent may still be flustered but will have warning that a question requiring reorientation is about to be made.

How Well Is the Interviewing Partnership Going?

Be alert to indications by the respondent of discomfort, antagonism, or boredom. If there is any suggestion of any of these, your immediate aim should be to restore an effective partnership. A way of doing this is to listen sympathetically to whatever the respondent wants to offer so long as it is within the study's frame. Often the respondent will have talked easily and comfortably in an area dealt with earlier in the interview, such as challenges at work and how they were overcome. Returning to that area may improve matters.

Use your own feelings in the interview as a guide to what is going on. If you are being bored by the respondent, something is wrong in the interview. The respondent may be avoiding emotional material or may be defensively providing only superficial elements. Chances are, if the respondent's account were rich and alive, you wouldn't be bored.

Sometimes in an interview I have felt sleepy, almost to the point of being unable to keep my eyes open; the same, I think, has happened to other interviewers. This is boredom to an extreme. Almost never, I believe, is it an indication of fatigue or sleep deprivation. Rather, it suggests that the interview has become lifeless and that the interviewer has bought into an unspoken agreement with the respondent just to get the interview over and done with.

If you find boredom with the interview setting in, find a topic with life in it. If the respondent becomes engaged, you will too. There is little value in mechanically plodding on, obtaining still more material that challenges your ability to remain awake. Keep in mind that you are at least as interested in the topics of the interview as a reader of the ultimate report will be. If you are bored by the material, you can be sure its readers will also be bored. The contrary is also the case: if you are fully engaged by the material and drawn in by it so that you feel your understanding is being enlarged by it, then others will be also.

One approach to finding engaging material, should an interview become boring, is to ask yourself what may be concerning the respondent that the respondent isn't expressing. If you attend closely, you may pick up clues to emotions underlying the respondent's account. Respondents may show their emotions in the phrases they use or in the stories they tell or in their posture or voice tone. Should you get a clue about which you feel fairly confident, you might try to check it out—tactfully. A phrasing

I use to check out such clues is "It sounds like . . ." (as in "It sounds like you're saying that you don't feel you've been properly recognized"). Other introductory phrasings for getting beyond superficials are "Sometimes people who are in situations like the one you're describing have feelings like . . ." or "I wonder if you might have been thinking . . ."

But if you're not comfortable making potentially facilitative comments of this sort, don't do it. And if you should run into an interview that becomes draggy, do as well as you can with standard techniques and keep in mind that not every interview can be stellar.

EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEWING

EXAMPLES OF GOOD INTERVIEWING

Interview I. Working with a Respondent to Produce Useful Material

Here is an example of effective interviewing, from the study of occupationally successful men. It shows how a good interviewer and a cooperative respondent can work together to produce material useful for a study.

The respondent had completed a brief first interview the week before. One aim of this second interview was to learn about stressful incidents at work—how they happened and how they were managed. The interview took place in the respondent's office.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
INTERVIEWER: Can you think of what has been the thing that has been most troubling of all the things that you've had to do while you've been here?	*The interviewer asks the respondent to find an instance of stress produced by a work assignment.*
RESPONDENT: [*pause*] Well, I think the most difficult task I've had at [firm name] was when I was . . . I've been here five years and it was my first year, and my task, which was really . . . ah . . . im-	*The respondent describes his first year as having been difficult because he felt unequipped to deal with an important client. The account is a bit distanced, with details smudged, but that's all*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
plicit, because I had to learn what we did . . . I was hired as someone who will manage people who did know—and they did. A fairly large group. And the greatest source of revenue this company had at the time was this one client. And I don't know—I mean, I didn't have a vague idea [*chuckles*]—but it turned out that I understand . . . well . . . what . . . ah, what we did from a conceptual standpoint. But I had absolutely no technical knowledge at all, and in this medium not having technical knowledge impairs your ability to do creative work. So I was in a severe disadvantage. And I found that to be very difficult, a very difficult situation to go through.	*right. The time at work the respondent is talking about seems genuinely to have been difficult, and continuing this line of questioning seems likely to produce useful material.*
And in addition to that, I was . . . I was brought in because the whole client relationship with this one client was a mess. And, uh, it was run by a person who at the time was a vice president of marketing for the company and someone else who was very creative but resented the fact that I was brought in to try and get this thing organized and sort of be the people person and get morale back up and, you know, all this other stuff.	*Here's something that may be interesting; the respondent was brought in to remedy problems with the client.*
So I got very . . . I got no support from them at all. Quite the contrary. So the—plus I hated the client. It was, uh, the combination of all this I felt was pretty awful.	*Conflict with the incumbents and dislike for the client. If this isn't a setting for stress, what is?*
I: Was there any incident where it	*The interviewer asks for a criti-*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
surfaced or crystallized, and now you can remember that as a time when you really had the, uh, the height of feelings of whatever distress there was?	*cal incident. He asks for an incident that will display the elements that made the respondent feel awful.*
R: Well, I . . . I can . . . [*pause*] I don't know, there were so many instances. I mean, I inherited this team. I found out . . . I had been here three days, and I found out that one of these guys that worked for me, an account supervisor, was just dishonest! You talk about dishonest subordinates, this guy was just dishonest. And he created . . . he was terribly destructive to the whole organization. He . . . I mean . . . again, in a technical environment, he lied about things that were . . . were not happening. And I thought, "This is awful!" And there'd be days when I'd know, without a doubt, that this guy cannot stay. So I fired him.	*The respondent is flustered. Maybe he's unwilling to experience the discomfort that would be associated with talking about a critical incident of trouble with colleagues. He shifts away from the tensions with the vice president and his creative colleague to describe something else, a problem with a subordinate.*
I: What was it like . . . uh, you know, going through that decision, that "I've got to get rid of him"?	*The interviewer accepts the story, although it is out of the area initially identified, and asks for the internal experience that accompanied the decision.*
R: [*pause*] Uhm . . . he . . . he was so blatant it was really not a . . . it wasn't a difficult decision, and it wasn't a, uh, an agonizing one in any sense. [*Spring in swivel chair squeaks.*] This guy was so blatant. And the thing that amazed me was that he'd been allowed to stay here. Why have you people not done	*Ah, here's the connection to the preceding material: the vice president (the fellow who had been in charge) and his sidekick (the creative colleague) should have fired the subordinate. This is further evidence for the respondent's side in the conflict with them.*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
anything about it? And I thought . . . I remember feeling a little resentful that—this is interesting, you know—you bring in a new guy and give him some pretty difficult tasks right off the bat! You know, you could've cleared house for me before I showed up. But you didn't. But that was consistent with the way these two people worked.	
I: Yeah.	*Encouraging further development.*
R: It was a certain amount of—it's interesting because one of them, the guy who was vice president of marketing, he and I are equals in this company now. He runs a division and I run a division. And actually we're quite good friends.	*The respondent is skipping to the end of the story. A lot must have happened between the respondent's first showing up (and firing a subordinate who needed firing) and this outcome.*
I: Back then things were not so good between you?	*The interviewer takes the respondent back to the beginning.*
R: [*laughs*] They weren't good at all!	
I: What did it feel like, realizing that you had opposition on a higher level?	*Picking up R's comment and asking for the feeling state that might underlie it.*
R: Well, I thought . . . this guy's personality . . . he's real slow talking . . . his values and mine were so different. And he was so clearly hostile—subtle in his own way—but to me clearly hostile. Uhm . . . that [*pause*] I never . . . well, I never . . . I guess . . . You know, I'm trying . . . trying to describe how I felt. I guess I never doubted my own self.	*Note the mixture of perception of the vice president and personal feeling state.*

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT	COMMENTS
I mean, I didn't know what was going on—but why should I? I just got here! [*chuckles*] Uh, and I, you know . . . so his . . . the way he treated me was just annoying, but never made me feel—I never doubted myself.	
And, uh, I made friends quickly here, and the team of people who worked for me rallied around me real quick because I fired this guy who was such a destructive force. Early on, uh, I got this whole team into, uh, one of the conference rooms, and, uh—I don't know whether I really planned this, I just sort of did it—but I sat them down and I said, you know, "I'm so-and-so and this is . . ." I was kind of introducing myself to them. [*chuckles*] No one had introduced me. And I said, "I'm so-and-so and this is my background and this is what we're supposed to do and, frankly, I will not pretend that I know the techniques." I said, "I really don't. And, uh, because I don't, uhm, I'm going to ask you to really help. And, uh, if you help, I'll learn and there are things that I do know, and I'll be able to, uh, I'll be able to do something for you as a team."	*It would be possible for the interviewer to now say, "You said something a moment ago about the way the vice president treated you. Could you describe that? Maybe describe a particular incident?" However, the interviewer doesn't interrupt, and the respondent now goes into how he established alliances with his subordinates. Firing the incompetent subordinate seems to have helped him establish himself.* *This is an unasked-for critical incident. The respondent describes how he presented himself to his subordinates in an initial meeting. He asked for their affiliation and pledged himself to function as team leader, with loyalty returned for loyalty given. The story is useful for understanding supervisor–subordinate relationships. There seems no need to develop it further.*
And, uh, then I subsequently, you know, pretty soon got rid of this other guy, so they believed that. And they supported me. You know, so it wasn't . . . I wasn't in a total vacuum. I mean, at least not in my group. You see they trans-	