

Qualitative Interviewing



The combination of a question mark and an exclamation point is called an *interrobang*. A sentence ending with an *interrobang* asks a question in an emotionally intense manner, expressing excitement, wonder, disbelief, doubt, or concern:

You did what ?

You lost everything ?



The symbol on the left means
NO interrobanging.

Qualitative interviewing asks questions (?) without the exclamatory bang (!). You may want to insert this symbol on your interview guide to remind you:

NO interrobanging.

Beyond Silent Observation

After much cloistered study, three youth came before Halcolm to ask how they might further increase their knowledge and wisdom. Halcolm sensed that they lacked experience in the real world, but he wanted to have them make the transition from seclusion in stages.

During the first stage, he sent them forth under a six-month vow of silence. They wore the identifying garments of the muted truth seekers so that people would know they were forbidden to speak. Each day, according to their instructions, they sat at the market in whatever village they entered, watching but never speaking. After six months in this fashion, they returned to Halcolm.

"So," Halcolm began, "you have returned. Your period of silence is over. Your transition to the world beyond our walls of study has begun. What have you learned so far?"

The first youth answered, "In every village the patterns are the same. People come to the market. They buy the goods they need, talk with friends, and leave. I have learned that all markets are alike and the people in markets always the same."

Then the second youth reported, "I too watched the people come and go in the markets. I have learned that all life is coming and going, people forever moving to and fro in search of food and basic material things. I understand now the simplicity of human life."

Halcolm looked at the third youth: "And what have you learned?"

"I saw the same markets and the same people as my fellow travelers, yet I know not what they know. My mind is filled with questions. Where did the people come from? What were they thinking and feeling as they came and went? How did they happen to be at this market on this day? Who did they leave behind? How was today the same or different for them? I have failed, Master, for I am filled with questions rather than answers, questions for the people I saw. I do not know what I have learned."

Halcolm smiled. "You have learned most of all. You have learned the importance of finding out what people have to say about their experiences. You are ready now to return to the world, this time without the vow of silence.

"Go forth now and question. Ask and listen. The world is just beginning to open up to you. Each person you question can take you into a new part of the world. The skilled questioner and attentive listener know how to enter into another's experience. If you ask and listen, the world will always be new."

—From Halcolm's *Epistemological Parables*

Chapter Preview

This chapter opens with reflections on what it means to be living and undertaking research in what has been called “The Interview Society.” From there, we will move into the knowledge and skills that are essential for high-quality interviewing. It may seem straightforward to assert that interviewing is a skill. Like any skill, it can be done well or poorly. More to the point, like any skill, it has to be learned and practiced. *And there's the rub.* A lot of people engaged in interviewing lack fundamental skills, have never been trained, and are actually lousy interviewers—and don't seem to know it. Does that sound like the start of a rant? It is—and the focus of MQP Rumination # 7 in this chapter: *Interviewing as an Unnatural Act: Overcoming the Overconfidence of Incompetence.*

This chapter begins by discussing different approaches to interviewing derived from diverse theoretical and methodological traditions, like ethnography versus phenomenology, and different uses of interviews, helping people (the counseling interview) versus finding wrongdoing (the investigative interview). We then move to different types of interview formats: standardized versus free flowing. Later sections consider the content of interviews and skills of interviewing: what questions to ask and how to phrase questions. The chapter ends with a discussion of how to record the responses obtained during interviews. This chapter will emphasize skill and technique as ways of enhancing the quality of interview data, but no less important is a genuine interest in and caring about

the perspectives of other people. If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer. Unless you are fascinated by the rich variation in human experience, qualitative interviewing will become drudgery. On the other hand, a deep and genuine interest in learning about people is insufficient without disciplined and rigorous inquiry based on skill and technique. Here's an overview of this chapter's modules:

Module 57 The Interview Society: Diversity of Applications

Module 58 Distinguishing Interview Approaches and Types of Interviews

Module 59 Question Options and Skilled Question Formulation

Module 60 Rapport, Neutrality, and the Interview Relationship

Module 61 Interviewing Groups and Cross-Cultural Interviewing

Module 62 Creative Modes of Qualitative Inquiry

Module 63 Ethical Issues and Challenges in Qualitative Interviewing

The chapter then closes with my personal reflections on interviewing:

Module 64 Personal Reflections on Interviewing, and Chapter Summary and Conclusion

The Interview Society: Diversity of Applications

The word interview has roots in Old French and meant something like “to see one another.” (Narayan & George, 2012, p. 515)

The word interview has origins associated with the French entre voir, meaning “to be in the sight of” and referring to a meeting of people face to face. It also has Latin origins with the prefix: “inter” meaning among and between and “view” referring to seeing, looking or inspection. (Skinner, 2013, p. 16)

We live in an “interview society” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646), where “interviewing has become a fundamental activity and interviews seem to have become crucial for people to make sense of their lives” (Gobo, 2011, pp. 24–25). But the very popularity of interviewing may be its undoing as an inquiry method because so much interviewing is being done so badly that its credibility may be undermined. Television, radio, magazines, newsletters, and websites feature interviews. In their ubiquity, interviews done by social scientists become indistinguishable in the popular mind from interviews done by talk show hosts. The motivations of social scientists have become suspect, as have our methods. Popular business magazine *Forbes* (self-proclaimed “The Capitalist Tool”) has opined, “People become sociologists because they hate society, and they become psychologists because they hate themselves” (quoted by Geertz, 2001, p. 19). Such glib sarcasm, anti-intellectual at the core, can serve to remind

us that we bear the burden of demonstrating that our methods involve rigor and skill. Qualitative research interviewing, seemingly straightforward, easy, and universal, can be done well or poorly. This chapter is about doing it well. But as context for the challenges of doing it well, Exhibit 7.1 presents an overview of interviewing used for purposes other than research and evaluation. These diverse uses of interviewing compete with qualitative inquiry for attention, credibility, and utility. Exhibit 7.1 reminds us that the generic word *interview* covers a huge variety of applications, purposes, and uses, such as the following, each with its own criteria for quality, or lack thereof:

1. Journalism interviews
2. Celebrity television talk show interviews
3. Personnel evaluation and human resource interviews
4. Clinical and diagnostic interviews
5. Motivational interviewing
6. Audit and compliance interviews
7. Interrogation interviews
8. Cognitive interviewing for survey research
9. Cognitive interviewing for eyewitness enhancement
10. Religion-based interviewing

EXHIBIT 7.1 Ten Diverse Purposes and Uses of Interviews in the Interview Society

Qualitative inquiry for research and evaluation is but one of many uses of interviewing in the Information Age, also dubbed the “Interview Society” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). Below are 10 types of interviews conducted to achieve a specific outcome other than

research or evaluation. These diverse uses of interviewing compete with qualitative inquiry for attention, credibility, and utility. This reminds us that the generic word *interview* covers a huge variety of applications, purposes, and uses.

DIVERSE INTERVIEW TYPES AND USES	PRIMARY INTERVIEW PURPOSE	SPECIAL INTERVIEW CHALLENGES
1. Journalism interviews	Getting a story that will attract readers (print and Internet media) and viewers (television and cable news)	Tight deadlines; fierce competition for stories, space (print media), and time (TV and cable news). Errors can lead to loss of credibility and reputation (Farhi, 2013)

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DIVERSE INTERVIEW TYPES AND USES	PRIMARY INTERVIEW PURPOSE	SPECIAL INTERVIEW CHALLENGES
2. Celebrity television talk show interviews	Entertainment (Bushkin, 2013)	Making the interviews interesting, titillating, and revealing (Public Radio Program Directors Association, 2008)
3. Personnel evaluation and human resource interviews	Hiring effective employees (Hoevemeyer, 2005); exit interviews to learn from departing employees (Work Institute, 2013); "stay interviews" to keep valued personnel from leaving and increase retention (Scott, 2011; Sullivan, 2013)	Getting beyond rehearsed and self-serving answers to real workplace behaviors and actual performance (Turner, 2004)
4. Clinical and diagnostic interviews	Diagnosing psychological needs and problems (Morrison, 2014); interviewing children and adolescents with severe emotional problems (McConaughy, 2013)	Establishing trust; appropriately interpreting responses to make a diagnosis and to determine an intervention
5. Motivational interviewing	Involves "attention to natural language about change" and then creating conversational exchanges in which people talk themselves into change, based on their own values and interests (Miller & Rollnick, 2012, p. 4). See also Hohman (2011) and Westra (2012)	Moving from talk to behavior; sustaining change
6. Audit and compliance interviews	"Interviews are a useful audit tool to gather information about internal controls and fraud risks.... First, employees involved in the day-to-day operations of a functional area ... are in an excellent position to identify weak internal controls and fraud risks. Second, ... they may have knowledge of suspected, or actual, frauds that interviews can bring to light. Third, ... when interviewed, employees are often willing, even relieved, to talk about these issues" (Leinicke, Ostrosky, Rexroad, Baker, & Beckman, 2005, p. 1)	Uncovering illegal behavior when stakes are high for those being interviewed; verifying allegations
7. Interrogation interviews	Getting a confession to a crime or terrorist activity (Starr, 2013; Zulawski & Wicklander, 1998)	False confessions under the stress and manipulation of intense interrogation (Schwartz, 2010; Starr, 2013)
8. Cognitive interviewing for survey research	For survey questions that are nontrivial, the question-answering process involves a number of cognitive steps, some conscious, some not. Cognitive interviewing aims to decipher the thought processes involved in answering survey questions to increase validity and reliability (Willis, 1999)	Getting at and making explicit internal thought processes and unconscious reactions to language. Identifying and resolving data collection problems (Clarke & Long, 2013)
9. Cognitive interviewing for eyewitness enhancement	A nonhypnotic investigatory approach for enhancing and deepening eyewitness testimony to increase accuracy and completeness (Culver, 2013; Memon, Meissner, & Fraser, 2010)	Separating strong perceptions and beliefs from the reality of what is actually happening
10. Religion-based interviewing	Determining if a follower is true to the faith or assessing readiness for conversion from one religion to another (Richardson, 1998)	Distinguishing true beliefs from insincere expressions of belief done for convenience (e.g., marriage, access to resources, status, conformity)

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

In-depth qualitative interviews are *long*, ranging from a couple of hours to full days, and in some cases of longitudinal interviews, they are for several days over an extended period of time. Why do people participate in such lengthy interviews?

I am persuaded that the long interview offers the respondent benefits as well as risks. When I proposed long interviews with individuals between the ages of 65 and 75, funding agencies expressed concern that these interviews might prove fatiguing. I, too, was alarmed that my respondents might be dangerously taxed by the experience of answering intimate questions over a long period. Our fears proved unfounded. Almost without exception, respondents proved more durable and energetic than their interviewer. Again and again, I was left clinging to consciousness and my tape recorder as the interview was propelled forward by respondent enthusiasm. Something in the interview process proved so interesting and gratifying that it kept replenishing respondent energy and involvement.

—Grant McCracken (1988, p. 27)
The Long Interview

Distinguishing Qualitative Inquiry for Research and Evaluation From Other Types of Interviewing

Qualitative inquiry can take place in any of the settings where other kinds of interviewing are occurring. So, for example, to study journalism is different from engaging in journalism. Moreover, qualitative research can be integrated into journalism in what Iorio (2009) has called *Taking It to the Streets*, where “It” refers to qualitative research and “Streets” references where journalists find their stories. In a similar vein, there’s a critical and important difference between doing qualitative inquiry in a clinical setting (Hays & Singh, 2012) versus doing diagnostic interviews in a clinical setting (McConaughy, 2013; Morrison, 2014). Yet to the people being interviewed in a clinical setting, the differences in purpose and approach may not be at all obvious. To them, an interview is an interview is an interview. But the purpose of a diagnostic interview is to arrive at a diagnosis of a patient’s problem and determine a treatment plan. In contrast, a qualitative research interview aims to understand the patient’s experience of the clinical setting.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING VERSUS THERAPEUTIC INTERVIEWING

Here are four ways by which qualitative interviewing differs from therapeutic interviewing.

1. *Aims and practices differ.* “In therapeutic interviewing the functioning of the patient is the object of concern. Whatever the therapist does is, or should be, motivated by the aim of helping the patient.... In research interviewing, on the other hand, the interviewer’s questioning is motivated by the aim of eliciting information useful to a study. The interviewer is without license to produce change in the respondent’s functioning and has no right to give interpretations or advice.”
2. *Focus and substance of research interviewing and therapeutic interviewing are different.* “Therapists are likely to encourage patients not only to talk about their internal states but also to find sources in earlier life for current images and feelings.... The research interviewer is much more likely to want to hear about scenes, situations, and events the respondent has witnessed. The interviewer in a qualitative research study will want respondents to talk about their internal states only if this would be useful for the study....”
3. *Interview relationship is different.* “Therapists are responsible to patients for helping them improve in functioning. Because the patient looks to the therapist for help, the therapist will almost surely become an authoritative figure in the patient’s life and thoughts. In contrast, the research interviewer is a partner in information development. The interviewing relationship is defined as one of equals, although interviewer and respondent have different responsibilities. And while therapists remain for some time important figures in the lives of patients, interviewers are ordinarily recognized by respondents as transient figures in their lives.”
4. *Compensation differs.* “The patient pays the therapist for the therapist’s help. The interviewer is paid not by the respondent but by the study. Indeed, the respondent may also be compensated by the study; at the very least, the respondent is likely to be thanked by the interviewer for the interview.”

—Robert S. Weiss (1994, pp. 134–135)
Learning From Strangers

To emphasize the distinctive niche of qualitative inquiry interviewing, let’s briefly review some diverse interview-based studies to get a sense of what in-depth qualitative interviews can yield.

Examples of Qualitative Interview Findings

- **Interviews with homeless youth:** Formerly homeless youth told their stories through in-depth interviews and reflected on the factors and principles they experienced in Minnesota shelters and programs that helped them move forward on their life's journey. The findings have been used to improve programs for homeless youth (Murphy, 2014). See Exhibit 7.20, pp. 511–516, at the end of this chapter for one of the case studies that came out of those interviews.
- **Interviews with Native Alaskans:** Colorectal cancer is the leading type of cancer among Native Alaskan people and the second leading cause of cancer mortality. Screening has the potential to reduce both colorectal cancer incidence and mortality. Culturally sensitive interviews captured reactions to an innovative colorectal cancer educational program (Cueva, Dignan, Lanier, & Kuhnley, 2013).
- **Interviews on the sensitizing concept “respect”:** Harvard sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) has created powerful portraits of what *respect* means in modern society based on in-depth interviews. She has also studied “exits”: how relationships come to an end (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012).
- **Interviews with immigrants:** Immigrants to the United States tell stories of how they've adapted, including answers to the intriguing question “What's the smartest thing you did in your home country that you maintain here and that Americans would benefit from?” (Kolkey, 2011).
- **Interviews with new mothers:** Mothers report how they learn to cope with their newborn baby's crying. Experienced mothers knew that the infant's frequent crying would diminish after a while, whereas first-time mothers had to learn how to respond to the crying. With growing experience, mothers could decipher the reason and urgency of different kinds of crying and used more successful soothing techniques. At the same time, they learned to assess and mitigate their own stress reactions by self-soothing and adopting realistic expectations of normal infant behavior (Kurth et al., 2013).
- **Interviews with incest perpetrators:** Getting inside the heads of child sexual abuse perpetrators to uncover their complete incapacity for empathy and how they think about and justify their actions (Gilgun, 1994, 1995; Gilgun & Connor, 1989).

- **Interviews with elderly people:** Five years of interviews with more than 1,000 Americans past the age of 65 yielded *30 Lessons for Living* (Pillemer, 2011).

Anywhere there are people there is the potential for interviewing them to capture their experiences, beliefs, fears, triumphs—any and all aspects of their stories. An interview, when done well, takes us inside another person's life and worldview. The results help us make sense of the diversity of human experience.

Inner Perspectives

Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed door there is a world of secrets. (Oakley, 1981, p. 41)

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe and to understand what we've observed. The issue is not whether observational data are more desirable, valid, or meaningful than self-reported data. The fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things.

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful and knowable and can be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind to gather their stories.

Program evaluation interviews, for example, aim to capture the perspectives of program participants, staff, and others associated with the program. What does the program look and feel like to the people involved? What are their experiences in the program? What thoughts do people knowledgeable about the program have concerning program operations, processes, and outcomes? What are their expectations? What changes do participants perceive in themselves as a result of their involvement in the program? It is

THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

One of the first books ever written on asking high-quality questions was by Stanley L. Payne in 1951. Drawing on his experience as president of Interview Research Institute, a pioneering market research organization, he wrote a short and insightful volume titled *The Art of Asking Questions*. He opened the book by describing why he thought it was needed. His rationale remains relevant today as a justification and context for this chapter.

What is the need for this first book on question wording? If it all boils down to the familiar platitudes about using simple, understandable, bias-free, nonirritating wordings, all of us recognize these obvious requirements anyway. Why say more?

Oblivious of the Obvious

One reason for elaborating on the subject is that all of us, from time to time, forget these requirements. Like some churchgoers, we appear to worship the great truths only one day a week and to ignore them on working days. Or we remember a certain example, but fail to see how it applies to other situations. In combatting our very human frailty, a more provocative set of examples and a detailed list of points to consider may be more helpful than the isolated examples and the broad generalities which we now so often disregard. (Payne, 1951, p. 3)

A Lecture on Taking too Much for Granted

If all the problems of question wording could be traced to a single source, their common origin would probably prove to be in taking too much for granted. We questioners assume that people know what we are talking about. We assume that they have some basis for testimony. We assume that they understand our questions. We assume that their answers are in the frame of reference we intend. Frequently, our assumptions are not warranted. (Payne, 1951, p. 16)

the responsibility of the evaluator to provide a framework within which people can respond comfortably, accurately, and honestly to these kinds of questions. Evaluators enhance the utility of qualitative data by generating relevant and high-quality findings.

Any interviewer faces the challenge of making it possible for the person being interviewed to bring

the interviewer into his or her world. We enter the interviewee's world through what he or she tells us. As eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1986) insightfully observed, "Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness" (p. 373).

Rigorous and Skillful Interviewing

I know how to listen when clever men are talking. That is the secret of what you call my influence.

—Hermann Sudermann (1857–1928)
German dramatist and novelist

The premise here is that *the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer*. This chapter discusses ways of obtaining high-quality information by talking with people who have that information. Skilled interviewing is about asking questions well so that interviewees want to share their stories. An interview is an interaction, a relationship. Every interview is also an observation—a *two-way observation*. You, as the interviewer, are being watched and assessed, even as you are observing the person you're interviewing and assessing the responses you're hearing. Establishing rapport matters. Being nonjudgmental matters. Being authentic and trustworthy matter. Interview skills include asking genuinely open-ended questions; being clear so that the person being interviewed understands what is being asked; asking follow-up questions and probing, as appropriate, for greater depth and detail; and making smooth transitions between sections of the interview or topics. Skilled interviewing requires distinguishing different kinds of questions—descriptive questions versus questions that ask for interpretations or judgments. It means distinguishing both questions and answers that are behavioral, attitudinal, or knowledge focused. And skilled interviewing involves the art of listening, and *really hearing*. These and other interviewing skills can and do affect the quality and meaningfulness of responses. Exhibit 7.2 sets the stage for this chapter by providing 10 principles of and skills for high-quality interviewing. We'll examine these in more depth later in the chapter.

EXHIBIT 7.2 Ten Interview Principles and Skills

An interview is an interaction, a relationship. The interviewer's skills and experience can and do affect the

quality of responses. Here are 10 skills and competencies to cultivate.

INTERVIEW PRINCIPLES/SKILLS	ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES
1. <i>Ask open-ended questions.</i> Ask relevant and meaningful open-ended questions that invite thoughtful, in-depth responses that elicit whatever is salient to the interviewee.	<p><i>What is a strong memory you have of your first year of high school?</i> not <i>Do you have any strong memories from high school?</i></p>
2. <i>Be clear.</i> Ask questions that are clear, focused, understandable, and answerable.	<p><i>What was most important to you about your experience?</i> not <i>What was important that you'll remember and can use and will tell people about and that made the program effective at least as you think about it now?</i></p>
3. <i>Listen.</i> Attend carefully to responses. Let the interviewees know that they've been heard. Respond appropriately to what you hear.	<p><i>That's very helpful. You've explained very well why that was important to you.</i></p>
4. <i>Probe as appropriate.</i> Follow up in complete responses with clarifying probes. Interviewees will only then learn what degree of depth and detail you seek through probes.	<p><i>It would be helpful to hear more about that. Tell me more about what happened and how you were involved.</i></p>
5. <i>Observe.</i> Watch the interviewee to guide the interactive process. Acknowledge what is going up. Adapt the interview as appropriate to fit the reactions of the person interviewed. Every interview is also an observation.	<p><i>I can see that the question evoked strong emotions. Take your time, or if you'd like, we can change topics for the moment and come back to this later.</i></p>
6. <i>Be both empathic and neutral.</i> Show interest and offer encouragement nonjudgmentally; empathic neutrality.	<p><i>I appreciate your willingness to share your story. Every story is unique and we've heard all kinds of things. There's no right or wrong answer to any of these questions. What matters is that it's your story.</i></p>
7. <i>Make transitions.</i> Help and guide the interviewee through the interview process.	<p><i>You've been describing how you got into the program. Now the next set of questions is about what you experienced in the program.</i></p>
8. <i>Distinguish types of questions.</i> Separate purely descriptive questions from questions about interpretations and judgments. Distinguish behavior, attitude, knowledge, and feeling questions.	<p>Descriptive behavior question: <i>What did you do in your art class?</i> Interpretive opinion question: <i>What were the strengths and weaknesses of the class in your opinion?</i></p>
9. <i>Be prepared for the unexpected.</i> The world can intrude during an interview. Be flexible and responsive.	<p>Despite a commitment to a two-hour interview, only a half-hour may be available. Make the most of it. Interruptions occur. Things may emerge that need more time.</p>
10. <i>Be present throughout.</i> Interviewees can tell when the interviewer is distracted, inattentive, or uninterested.	<p>Checking the time regularly, glancing at your text messages, looking around instead of staying engaged with the person talking, these things are noticed.</p>

MQP Rumination # 7

Interviewing as an Unnatural Act: Overcoming the Overconfidence of Incompetence

I am offering one personal rumination per chapter. These are issues that have persistently engaged, sometimes annoyed, occasionally haunted, and often amused me over more than 40 years of research and evaluation practice. Here's where I state my case on the issue and make my peace.



Study after study shows that we tend to be overconfident about our competence. In experiments, people who perform poorly on a variety of tasks are typically quite confident about their competence. In fact, they're often more confident than those who actually perform well. This phenomenon has been dubbed "illusory superiority" (Hoorens, 1993). Certain overconfident people are "unskilled and unaware of it" (Dunning & Kruger, 1999). Their difficulties in recognizing their own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments—"an absence of self-insight among the incompetent" (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008). Incompetent people also lack the skill to recognize competence in others.

Illusory superiority is rampant in interviewing. Many people who think of themselves as good interviewers are unskilled and unaware of it. They display an absence of self-insight about their interviewing incompetence and lack the skill to recognize interviewing competence in others. They don't know what they don't know. Who are these people, and what evidence do I have for these assertions? Read on.

Evidentiary Ruminating

By definition, ruminations express opinions. A particularly strong opinion may become a rant. People who rant often display overconfidence about their overgeneralizations. The irony that I may be displaying my own illusory superiority is not lost on me. So, given that this is a research text, let me at least report the basis for my assertions and make this an evidentiary rumination—or rant. You decide which label is most appropriate.

In the 1970s, I directed the Minnesota Center for Social Research at the University of Minnesota. That's when I began training staff and graduate students in qualitative methods, especially interviewing. I noticed from the beginning that some displayed an affinity for interviewing and were receptive to training, while others thought they were naturally gifted as interviewers and were inattentive during training. I also became convinced, as the title of this

rumination asserts, that interviewing is an *unnatural act*. That's why training is necessary. Normal interpersonal and social interactions don't involve one person systematically asking questions, the other answering, and the first person listening, probing, taking the responses deeper, but not sharing his or her own experiences. Interviewing is an unnaturally unbalanced interaction.

Every interview is also an observation, so the skills required include appropriate questioning, focused listening, astute observation, and sensitive responding, all while taking notes (even when the interview is being recorded). There's a lot to learn and then practice, for it's not enough to grasp the basic concepts. Putting them into practice, actually becoming a skilled interviewer, requires practicing, listening to, and studying transcripts of your own interviews and getting feedback about how well you're doing—the usual things that accompany professional development and learning.

Having developed training processes for my own research and evaluation staff, I began offering qualitative workshops to others, first through the University of Minnesota and then through a variety of organizations that provide training. For many years, I have taught qualitative methods workshops for the American Evaluation Association, the Evaluators' Institute, and the International Program in Development Evaluation Training. I also take on special commissions from other organizations to train their staff or prepare people for fieldwork projects. All in all, I do at least 30 days of qualitative methods training a year with a heavy emphasis on interviewing skills as well as the other skills and topics covered in this book.

Finally, as a full-time independent organizational development and evaluation consultant, I engage in a lot of interviewing. When I undertake a new assignment, I routinely begin by interviewing key people. Part of what I ask is how they get information. I find out from junior staff how they experience the communication and interviewing skills of their managers and senior personnel in the organization. I also have opportunities to review a lot of research and evaluation projects, read interview transcripts, and enquire into the skills of colleagues and others engaged in qualitative fieldwork. Many are accomplished, highly skilled, and exemplary interviewers. Many others manifest remarkable patterns of *illusory superiority*, proclaiming their skill even as

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they demonstrate fundamental incompetence. Here are some types to watch out for.

A Typology of Clueless Incompetent Interviewers

Myopic Managers

I was once involved in helping a major international organization set up an institutional learning system that featured interviewing as a core element to extract lessons in real time as projects unfolded. Junior staff interviewed senior staff as projects began to be implemented. Midway through projects, midlevel staff interviewed other midlevel staff in specialized program areas where they didn't ordinarily have contact with one another. Senior staff interviewed midlevel staff as projects came to an end. To implement this organization-wide learning system, interview protocols were developed, and everyone committed to interview training. Well, almost everyone. Senior managers were quite happy to commit their underlings to interview training, but they were insistent that they didn't need such basic training themselves. Having this reported to me by the senior vice president in charge of the learning system, I wrote the following memo, which he agreed to send to all senior staff:

I understand that you are cooperating with the institutional learning process by committing your staff to participate in interview training but that you, yourselves, have opted out of training. I would ask you to reconsider. First, even if you are already a skilled interviewer, the project would benefit from each of you serving as a role model demonstrating support for this effort, not just by sending your staff but by committing your own time and leadership to this organization-wide initiative.

Second, and more importantly, I doubt that most of you are skilled interviewers for this kind of open-ended, in-depth qualitative inquiry interviewing. Most managerial interviewing is directed at solving problems. Someone comes into your office, and you ask just enough questions to tell them what to do to solve the problem and get them out of your office. You may be good at that kind of problem-solving interviewing, but that's not in-depth, get-the-full-story, lessons-focused interviewing. Indeed, without naming names, I know from interviewing your staff about your interviewing skills that most of you ask bad questions, listen poorly, interrupt as the person is trying to explain what's going on, and give off all kinds of signals that you aren't paying attention, are annoyed that you're having to deal with the problem before you, and that you're not interested in understanding the situation in depth and detail.

Let me be blunt. In my many years of experience, I've found managers in a wide variety of organizations to be at the top of the class in deceiving themselves about their competence as interviewers, even for problem solving. To do a good job and make your own contribution to this important initiative, I invite you to participate in the customized senior manager interview training we've designed for you. I believe it will not only increase your skills for this learning initiative, but you'll pick up techniques that will enhance your day-to-day problem solving and strategic interviews with your staff. If you come and don't find it worthwhile, I'll apologize for wasting your time and return my training fee.

And one last thing: I've heard that the junior staff is betting that there's nothing I can say to convince you that you need training because you regularly and consistently avoid any professional development training. I invite you to prove them wrong in this case.

The senior managers did decide to participate in interview training though only for a half-day instead of the full day I proposed. The feedback was generally positive. No one asked for an apology or return of my fee. They affirmed that they learned some things that they could apply to their work generally. Their feedback also affirmed a finding from the research on illusory superiority: Those who begin a learning experience by overestimating their baseline competence do improve when they are given focused training and feedback. The trick is to get them into training and provide meaningful feedback.

DSM-Enthralled Therapists

A second group especially susceptible to illusory superiority in interviewing is therapists, especially those who are well trained in and focused on making a diagnosis based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* or any other diagnostic framework. Therapists engage in in-depth interviewing, but it is for the purpose of diagnosing a problem and prescribing a treatment or intervention. That is a crucial medical task, but it is not open-ended qualitative interviewing. I've had a lot of therapists in my classes and workshops over the years. They pose special challenges in reorienting them to qualitative inquiry interviewing because they have developed deeply ingrained habits of diagnostic interviewing. They have as much to unlearn as they have to learn, and I find that they are generally surprised, and initially discouraged, by the degree of difficulty in making the transition. Those who prevail, however, find that the world opens up to them in quite a different way when they are in discovery and leaning mode rather than mired in a diagnostic mind-set and set of protocols.

Endemic Academics

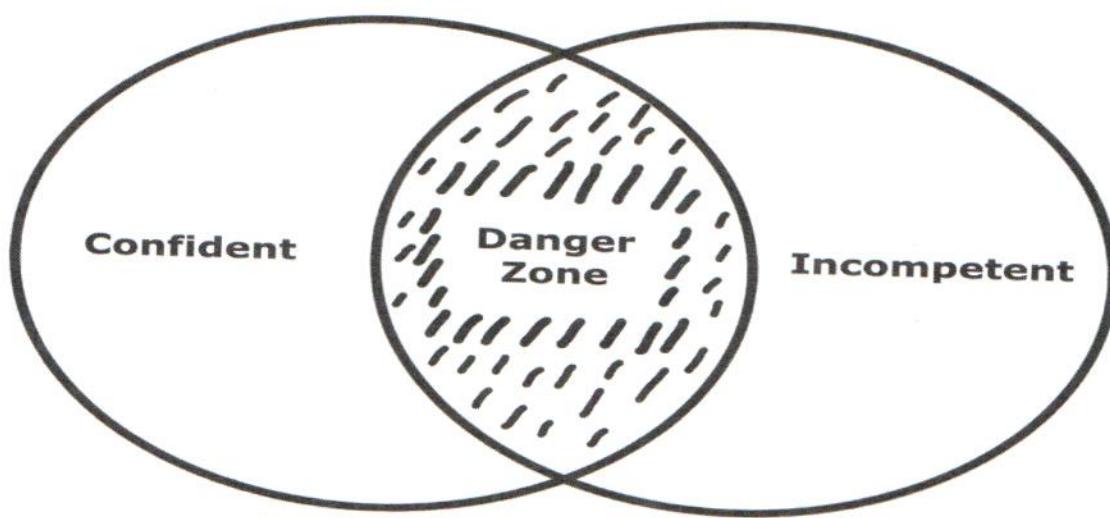
Illusory superiority might well be considered endemic to academia. Somehow having attained a doctorate in whatever field makes high-achieving scholars suddenly and miraculously qualified to teach, administer, advise, evaluate—the list goes on and on and includes interviewing. I review all kinds of projects, site visits, evaluations, and fieldwork that require interviewing as a primary or at least major form of data collection. When I am asked to review such qualitative studies, I enquire into the training and experience of the people doing the data collection. Too often I find that the scholars, researchers, and evaluators conducting these studies have never had any interview training. They describe themselves, when challenged, as being self-trained, which I treat as a euphemism for “untrained but don’t know it.” I know of prestigious researchers and evaluators who undertake a great deal of fieldwork and think they’re great interviewers—and tell their colleagues, students, and friends as much. They’re very smart, have impressive disciplinary knowledge, are held in high esteem for their peer-reviewed publications, but are lousy interviewers. Lousy how? They ask leading questions, interrupt respondents’ responses, talk as much or more than they listen, make instantaneous judgments, and

commit the whole series of novice errors warned against in this chapter. Worst of all, they are oblivious to doing so and feel insulted and defensive when their competence is challenged.

Illusory Superiority: The Good News

The three illusorily superior types I’ve been ruminating about—(1) myopic mangers, (2) DSM-enthralled therapists, and (3) endemic academics—do not exhaust the possibilities. Not even close. Exhibit 7.1 (pp. 423–424) identifies 10 types of interviewing done for purposes other than research and evaluation. Those well schooled in these other interviewing approaches and purposes will find it difficult to become skilled qualitative interviewers. *The skill set and mind-set are different.*

There is, however, some good news in this otherwise bleak rumination. As I noted earlier, those who begin a learning experience by overestimating their baseline competence do improve when they are given focused training and feedback. The trick is to get them training and feedback. Reading this book can be a starting point. But you must find ways of practicing, getting feedback, and continuing to learn. Interviewing is a skill. Acquire it. Then, like many other skills, once acquired, *use it or lose it.*



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**Learn from yesterday, live for today,
hope for tomorrow. The important
thing is to not stop questioning.**

—Nobel Prize-winning physicist
Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

Relativity: The Special and the General Theory (1916)

Different inquiry traditions emphasize different questions and fieldwork methods. Interviewing varies in important ways, then, within different traditions and inquiry approaches. Traditional social science interviewing emphasizes standardized questions and consistency across interviewers and interviewees, while social constructionist interviewing places priority on individualized interactions and adapting the interview as appropriate to the emergent relationship that is formed between the interviewer and the interviewee in the course of an interview. Ethnographic interviewing involves conversational interactions that are part of long-term, in-depth fieldwork to support and deepen direct observations in the field about cultural patterns. Phenomenological interviewing, in contrast, aims to elicit a personal description of a *lived experience* so as to describe a phenomenon as much as

possible in concrete and lived-through terms. Exhibit 7.3 contrasts the focus and methods of interviewing across 12 different qualitative inquiry traditions. These distinctions and comparisons build on the discussion in Chapter 3 of the variety of philosophical, theoretical, and methodological frameworks for undertaking qualitative inquiry. Exhibit 7.3 highlights the following interviewing approaches:

1. The ethnographic interview
2. The traditional social science research interview
3. The phenomenological interview
4. Social constructionist interviewing
5. The hermeneutic interview
6. Narrative inquiry interviewing
7. The life story interview
8. Interpretive interactionism
9. Oral history interviewing
10. Postmodern interviewing
11. Investigative interviewing
12. Pragmatic interviews

EXHIBIT 7.3 Twelve Contrasting Interview Approaches Grounded in Different Qualitative Inquiry Traditions and Frameworks

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEW APPROACHES	INTERVIEWING TO GATHER QUALITATIVE DATA WITHIN A SPECIFIC INQUIRY TRADITION	DIFFERENT THEORETICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AFFECT HOW INTERVIEWS ARE CONDUCTED AND ANALYZED
TYPE OF INQUIRY	PURPOSE AND FOCUS	EXPLANATION AND ELABORATION
1. <i>The ethnographic interview</i>	Conversational interactions that are part of long-term, in-depth fieldwork. Interviews support direct observations in the field (Skinner, 2013).	Ethnographic interviews "serve comparative and representative purposes—comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes . . . , most valuable when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the insider's perspective. . . . They seem to be casual conversations. . . but have a specific but implicit research agenda. The researcher uses informal approaches to discover how the people conceptualize their culture and organize it into meaningful categories" (Fetterman, 2008a, pp. 290–291).

TYPE OF INQUIRY	PURPOSE AND FOCUS	EXPLANATION AND ELABORATION
2. <i>The traditional social science research interview</i>	<p>Standardize questions so that each person gets the same stimulus and interviewer effects are minimized. Interviewers must be well trained to maintain objectivity and control bias (Hyman, 1954). The interviewer "asks questions and records answers. At this point, the researcher's concern shifts to measurement error, or inaccuracies in the responses to questions" (Singleton & Straits, 2012, p. 86).</p> <p>Open-ended questions have "the potential to provide an outcome that is not representative of a respondent's perception of events . . . , distorted by the interaction of the interviewer and respondent" (Frey, 2004, p. 768).</p>	<p>Interviews follow "a closely prescribed form" (Bornat, 2004, p. 771). The interviewer, according to Hyman (1954), "has a kind of professional task orientation which enables him to preserve objectivity; that interviewers themselves regard over-involvement in the interview socially to be a fault to be avoided" (p. 283). Experienced interviewers are superior in competence and in "the avoidance of bias" (p. 300). They make "continuous efforts to eliminate or reduce bias in interviewing by intensive instruction and training, by means of manuals, specifications for particular surveys, and by continuing supervision and inspection of the interviewer's work" (p. 305). Quality, reliability, and validity are attained through standardization of questions and procedures, and conscientious efforts to maintain objectivity and control bias.</p> <p>"Rules of standardized interviewing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read the questions exactly as written. 2. . . . Use nondirective follow-up probes to elicit a better answer. 3. Record answers to questions without interpretation or editing. . . . 4. Maintain a professional, neutral relationship with the respondent" (Singleton & Straits, 2012, p. 86).
3. <i>The phenomenological interview</i>	<p>The interview focuses on capturing <i>lived experience</i> (Van Manen, 1990). "The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process . . . aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114; see also King & Horrocks, 2012).</p>	<p>The interview evokes "descriptions of lived-through moments, experiential anecdotal accounts, remembered stories of particular experiences, narrative fragments, and fictional experiences. . . . By capturing a personal description of a lived experience, the researcher aims to describe a phenomenon as much as possible in concrete and lived-through terms. In other words, the focus is on the direct description of a particular situation or event as it is lived through without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations" (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p. 618).</p>
4. <i>Social constructionist interviewing</i>	<p>Social constructionist interviews are dialogical performances, social meaning-making acts, and co-facilitated knowledge exchanges (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p. 430).</p> <p>The constructionist approach involves "interpretive practice" that "requires flexibility and dexterity that cannot be</p>	<p>According to Koro-Ljungberg (2008), "In order for researchers to understand the meaning-making activities that take place during an interview, they must focus on the actions of individuals that influence the immediate social process and context of the interview, as well as those actions that have been influenced by other sociopolitical contexts or discourses" (p. 430). Constructionist</p>

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TYPE OF INQUIRY	PURPOSE AND FOCUS	EXPLANATION AND ELABORATION
	captured in mechanical scriptures or formulas" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 347; see also Gergen & Gergen, 2008).	interviewing "should shift the focus from mining individual minds to the coconstruction of (temporarily) shared discourses. . . Rather than the researcher studying what participants know about a particular topic or what kind of experiences they have had, they instead engage in dialogue with participants and thus actively contribute to the knowledge production. The goal of the interview is to examine how knowing subjects . . . experience or have experienced particular aspects of life as they are coconstructed through dialogue" (p. 431).
5. <i>The hermeneutic interview</i>	"The research interview is a conversation about the human life world, with the oral discourse transformed into texts to be interpreted" (Kvale, 1996, p. 46). An interview generates text through which we "enter the hermeneutic circle and build an interpretation of the text" (Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller, & Argyris, 1989, p. 147).	"Hermeneutics is then doubly relevant to interview research, first by elucidating the dialogue producing the interview texts to be interpreted, and then by clarifying the subsequent process of interpreting the interview texts produced, which may again be conceived as a dialogue or a conversation with the text" (Kvale, 1996, p. 46). "Even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language . . . and this is inevitably an interpretive process" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 181).
6. <i>Narrative inquiry interviewing</i>	Narrative inquiry revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them (Chase, 2008, p. 421; see also King & Horrocks, 2012).	Narrative analysis takes as its object the story itself—the interviewees' own life experience. "The approach is slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety; nuances of speech, the organization of a response, relations between researcher and subject, social and historical contexts" (Riessman, 2003, p. 342).
7. <i>The life story interview</i>	What distinguishes the life story interview is that it keeps the presentation of the life story in the words of the person telling the story. The finished product is entirely a first-person narrative, with the researcher removed as much as possible from the text. The life story interview reveals "how a specific human life is constructed and reconstructed in representing that life as a story" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 116).	"A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person remembers of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 125; see also Atkinson, 1998, 2012). Wengraf's <i>Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method</i> (2013) involves several lengthy sessions beginning with the opening question "Please tell me the story of your life, all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally; begin wherever you like, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for afterwards," and sticks to the promises given in the question (p. 163).

TYPE OF INQUIRY	PURPOSE AND FOCUS	EXPLANATION AND ELABORATION
8. <i>Interpretive interactionism</i>	Interpretive interactionism interviewing brings symbolic interactionist and sociological perspectives to biography: "the intersection between the public and private lives of individuals, groups, and human collectivities" (Denzin, 1983, pp. 129–130).	"Interpretive interactionism takes as its fundamental subject matter the everyday life world.... An interpretive, phenomenological, symbolic interactionism that may be synthesized or combined with a structuralist approach to the study and analysis of power, knowledge, and control in everyday life.... A fundamental thrust is on the hermeneutic interpretation of ongoing, lived social history. Interpretive interactionism attempts to study biographies as these articulate a particular historical moment in the life world.... Individuals are placed back in history; without living people, there is no experience" (Denzin, 1983, pp. 129–130). The focus is on the epiphany: life-changing moments and events, "radical experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings people give to themselves and their life experiences" (Denzin, 2001, p. 34).
9. <i>Oral history interviewing</i>	<p>Oral history is "pursuing the past through the spoken word" (Henige, 1988, p. 3).</p> <p>The synthesis of people's stories and reminiscences providing firsthand knowledge of a particular place, event, and/or period of time, "new knowledge about and insights into the past through an individual biography" (Shopes, 2011, p. 451).</p>	Oral history "is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analyzing their memories of the past" (Abrams, 2010, p. 1). A collection of stories creates a sense of history, which (a) empowers us, (b) may serve to illuminate the present situation, (c) forces us to make sense of who we are, (d) requires us to document a life, and (e) inspires respect and awareness that other persons' stories are as valid as our own (Janesick, 2010, p. 15). According to Shopes (2011), "An oral history interview is an inquiry in depth . . . , not a casual or serendipitous conversation but a planned and scheduled, serious and searching exchange, one that seeks a detailed, expansive, and reflective account of the past" (p. 452). Community oral history is a participatory approach. "An oral history interview is an inquiry in depth . . . , not a casual or serendipitous conversation but a planned and scheduled, serious and searching exchange, one that seeks a detailed, expansive, and reflective account of the past" (p. 452). Community oral history is a participatory community-based approach (Mackay, Quinlan, & Sommer, 2013).
10. <i>Postmodern interviewing</i>	"The interview conversation is constructed as much within the interview as it stems from predetermined questions. Interview roles are less clear than they once were;	Standardized representation gives way to "representational invention, where the dividing line between fact and fiction is blurred to encourage richer understanding . . . with radical postmodernism completely displacing reality with

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TYPE OF INQUIRY	PURPOSE AND FOCUS	EXPLANATION AND ELABORATION
	in some cases they are even exchanged to promote new opportunities for understanding the shape and evolution of selves and experience" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 3).	representation. Here, questions shift from the substance, process, and indigenous constitution of experience, to the representational devices used by society and researchers to convey the image of objective or subjective reality" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, pp. 4–5). "Postmodern sensibilities" inform postmodern interviewing. "Although there is no such thing as postmodern interviewing per se, postmodern epistemologies have profoundly influenced our understanding of the interview as both a product and a process" (Borer & Fontana, 2012, p. 46.).
11. <i>Investigative interviewing</i>	Based on a conflict paradigm of society, Douglas (1976) says, "It's a war of all against all and no one gives anyone anything for nothing, especially the truth" (p. 55). "The problems are considerable in getting the truth from others in our society. . . Researchers have to use more in-depth and investigative methods to get at these private regions of life than they would to study the public realms which are open to almost anyone" (p. 9).	According to Douglas (1976), "People are extremely adept at constructing complex and convoluted forms of falsehoods and deceptions to front out others, such as researchers, and sometimes even themselves, from the most important parts of their lives" (p. 9). All competent adults are assumed to know that there are at least four major problems lying in the way of getting at social reality by asking people what is going on and that these problems must be dealt with if one is to avoid being taken in, duped, deceived, used, put on, fooled, suckered, made the patsy, left holding the bag, fronted out, and so on. These four problems are (1) misinformation, (2) evasions, (3) lies, and (4) fronts. Three major problems that are less apparent to most people but often of more importance to a social researcher seeking to understand what is going on and why are (1) taken-for-granted meanings, (2) problematic meanings, and (3) self-deceptions (p. 57). Investigative interviewing involves "the sociologist as detective" (Sanders, 1976), as in Cressey's (1976) classic study of violations of financial trust that involved interviewing convicted felons.
12. <i>Pragmatic interviews</i>	Straightforward questions about real-world issues aimed at getting straightforward answers that can yield practical and useful insights. "Pragmatism results in a problem-solving, action-oriented inquiry process" (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2011, p. 290). "Pragmatism [involves] . . . intense reliance on personalized seeing, hearing, experiencing in specific social settings" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 156).	The "pragmatic maxim" calls for focusing on the practical effects of beliefs and actions (Peirce, 1878). This is the basis for interviewing program participants from a <i>utilization-focused evaluation</i> perspective (Patton, 2008, 2012a) or undertaking action research interviews with people in organizations and communities (Argyris, 1982; Argyris et al., 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schon, 1983a; Stringer, 2007). "Action-oriented" qualitative research seeks solutions to problems (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p. 187). These tend to be relatively short, focused interviews, often lasting an hour or less.

Variations in Qualitative Interview Question Formats: Alternative Protocols and Instruments

On her deathbed, the writer Gertrude Stein asked her beloved companion, Alice B. Toklas, "What is the answer?"

When Alice, unable to speak, remained silent, Gertrude asked, "In that case, what is the question?"

The question in this section is how to format questions. There are three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through open-ended interviews. They involve different types of preparation, conceptualization, and instrumentation. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and each serves a different purpose. The three alternatives are as follows:

1. The informal conversational interview
2. The interview guide
3. The standardized open-ended interview

These three approaches to the design of the interview differ in the extent to which interview questions are determined and standardized *before* the interview occurs. Exhibit 7.4 presents an overview of variations in interview instrumentation. Let's look at each approach in greater depth for each serves a different purpose and poses quite varying interviewer challenges.

The Informal Conversational Interview

The informal conversational interview is the most open-ended approach to interviewing. It relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction, often as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork. Thus, the conversational interview is sometimes referred to as "ethnographic interviewing." It is also called "unstructured interviewing" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652). The conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whichever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking to one or more individuals in that setting. Most of the questions will flow from the immediate context. No predetermined set of questions would be appropriate under many emergent field circumstances where the fieldworker doesn't know beforehand what is going to happen, who will be present, or what will be important to ask during an event, incident, or experience.

Data gathered from informal conversational interviews will be different for each person interviewed. The same person may be interviewed on different occasions with questions specific to the interaction or event at hand. Previous responses can be revisited and deepened. This approach works particularly well where the researcher can stay in the setting for some period of time so as not to be dependent on a single interview opportunity. Interview questions will change over time, and each new interview builds on those already done, expanding information that was picked up previously, moving in new directions, and seeking elucidations and elaborations from various participants.

Being unstructured doesn't mean that conversational interviews are unfocused. Sensitizing concepts and the overall purpose of the inquiry inform the interviewing. But within that overall guiding purpose, the interviewer is free to go where the data and respondents lead.

The conversational interviewer must "go with the flow." Depending on how the interviewer's role has been defined, the people being interviewed may not know during any particular conversation that "data" are being collected. In many cases, participant-observers do not take notes during such conversational interviews, instead writing down what they learned later. In other cases, it can be both appropriate and comfortable to take notes or even use a tape recorder.

The strength of the informal conversational method resides in the opportunities it offers for flexibility, spontaneity, and responsiveness to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be personalized to deepen communication with the person being interviewed and to make use of the immediate surroundings and situation to increase the concreteness and immediacy of the interview questions.

A weakness of the informal conversational interview is that it may require a greater amount of time to collect systematic information because it may take several conversations with different people before a similar set of questions has been posed to each participant in the setting. Because this approach depends on the conversational skills of the interviewer to a greater extent than do more formal, standardized formats, this go-with-the-flow style of interviewing may be susceptible to interviewer effects, leading questions, and biases, especially with novices. The conversational interviewer must be able to interact easily with people in a variety of settings, generate rapid insights, formulate questions quickly and smoothly, and guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation by the structure of the questions.

Data obtained from informal conversational interviews can be difficult to pull together and analyze.

EXHIBIT 7.4 Variations in Interview Instrumentation

TYPE OF INTERVIEW	CHARACTERISTICS	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Informal conversational interview	Questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things; there is no predetermination of question topics or wording.	It increases the salience and relevance of questions; interviews are built on and emerge from observations; the interview can be matched to individuals and circumstances.	Different information is collected from different people with different questions. It is less systematic and comprehensive if certain questions do not arise naturally. Data organization and analysis can be quite difficult.
Interview guide approach	Topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form; interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview.	The outline increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent. Logical gaps in data can be anticipated and closed. Interviews remain fairly conversational and situational.	Important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted. Interviewer flexibility in sequencing and wording questions can result in substantially different responses from different perspectives, thus reducing the comparability of responses.
Standardized open-ended interview	The exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format.	Respondents answer the same questions, thus increasing comparability of responses; data are complete for each person on the topics addressed in the interview. Interviewer effects and bias are reduced when several interviewers are used. It permits evaluation users to see and review the instrumentation used in the evaluation and facilitates organization and analysis of data.	There is little flexibility in relating the interview to particular individuals and circumstances; standardized wording of questions may constrain and limit naturalness and relevance of questions and answers.
Closed, fixed-response interview	Questions and response categories are determined in advance. Responses are fixed; respondent chooses from among these fixed responses.	Data analysis is simple; responses can be directly compared and easily aggregated; many questions can be asked in a short time.	Respondents must fit their experiences and feelings into the researcher's categories; the interview may be perceived as impersonal, irrelevant, and mechanistic and can distort what respondents really meant or experienced by so completely limiting their response choice.

Because different questions will generate different responses, the researcher has to spend a great deal of time sifting through responses to find patterns that have emerged at different points in different

interviews with different people. By contrast, interviews that are more systematized and standardized facilitate analysis but provide less flexibility and are less sensitive to individual and situational differences.

The Interview Guide

An interview guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed. The guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus, the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined. The guide serves as a checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered.

The advantage of an interview guide is that it makes sure that the interviewer/evaluator has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation. The guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored. A guide is essential in conducting focus group interviews for it keeps the interactions *focused* while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge. With an interview guide in hand,

the investigator has a rough travel itinerary with which to negotiate the interview. It does not specify precisely what will happen at every stage of the journey, how long each lay-over will last, or where the investigator will be at any given moment, but it does establish a clear sense of the direction of the journey and the ground it will eventually cover. (McCracken, 1988, p. 37)

Interview guides can be developed in more or less detail, depending on the extent to which the interviewer is able to specify important issues in advance and the extent to which it is important to ask questions in the same order to all respondents. Exhibit 7.5 provides an example of an interview guide used with participants in an employment training program. This guide provides a framework within which the interviewer could develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. Usually, the interviewer would not be expected to go into totally new subjects that are not covered within the framework of the guide. The interviewer does not ask questions, for example, about previous employment or education, how the person got into the program, how this program compares with other programs the trainee

has experienced, or the trainee's health. Other topics might still emerge during the interview—topics of importance to the respondent that are not listed explicitly on the guide and therefore would not normally be explored with each person interviewed. For example, trainees might comment on family support (or lack thereof) or personal crises. Comments on such concerns might emerge when, in accordance with the interview guide, the trainee is asked for reactions to program strengths, weaknesses, and so on, but if family is not mentioned by the respondent, the interviewer would not raise the issue.

The Standardized Open-Ended Interview

This approach requires carefully and fully wording each question before the interview. For example, the interview guide for the employment training program above simply lists "work experiences" as a topic for inquiry. In a fully structured interview instrument, the question would be completely specified:

You've told me about the courses you've taken in the program. Now I'd like to ask you about any work experiences you've had. Let's go back to when you first entered the program and go through each work experience up to the present. Okay? So what was your first work experience?

Possible probes

Who did you work for?

What did you do?

What do you feel you learned doing that?

What did you especially like about the experience, if anything?

What did you dislike, if anything?

Transition

Okay, tell me about your next work experience.

Why so much detail? To be sure that each interviewee gets asked the same questions—the same stimuli—in the same way and in the same order, including standard probes. The *standardized open-ended interview* consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words. Flexibility in probing is more or less limited, depending on the nature of the interview and the skills of interviewers.

EXHIBIT 7.5 Evaluation Interview Guide for Participants in an Employment Training Program

What has the trainee done in the program?

- ✓ Activities?
- ✓ Courses?
- ✓ Groups?
- ✓ Work experiences?

What are his achievements?

- ✓ Skills attained?
- ✓ Products produced?
- ✓ Outcomes achieved?
- ✓ Knowledge gained?
- ✓ Things completed?
- ✓ What can the trainee do that is *marketable*?

How has the trainee been affected in areas other than job skills?

- ✓ Feelings about self?
- ✓ Attitudes toward work?
- ✓ Aspirations?
- ✓ Interpersonal skills?

What aspects of the program have had the greatest impacts?

- ✓ Formal courses

- ✓ Relationships with staff
- ✓ Peer relationships
- ✓ The way he or she was treated in the program
- ✓ Contacts
- ✓ Work experiences

What problems has the trainee experienced?

- ✓ Work related
- ✓ Program related
- ✓ Personal
- ✓ Family, friends, world outside the program

What are the trainee's plans for the future?

- ✓ Work plans?
- ✓ Income expectations?
- ✓ Lifestyle expectations/plans?

What does the trainee think of the program?

- ✓ Strengths? Weaknesses?
- ✓ Things liked? Things disliked?
- ✓ Best components? Poorest components?
- ✓ Things that should be changed?

The standardized open-ended interview is used when it is important to minimize variation in the questions posed to interviewees. A doctoral committee may want to see the full interview protocol before approving a dissertation proposal. The institutional review board for protection of human subjects may insist on approving a structured interview, especially if the topic is controversial or intrusive. In evaluations, funders and other key stakeholders may want to be sure that they know what program participants will be asked. In team research, standardized interviews ensure consistency across interviewers. In multisite studies, structured interviews provide comparability across sites.

In participatory or collaborative studies, inexperienced and nonresearcher interviewers may be involved in the process so that the standardized questions can compensate for variability in skills. Some evaluations

rely on volunteers to do the interviewing; at other times, program staff may be involved in doing some interviewing; and in still other instances, interviewers may be novices, students, or others who are not social scientists or professional evaluators. When a number of different interviewers are used, variations in data created by differences among interviewers will become particularly apparent if an informal conversational approach to data gathering is used or even if each interviewer uses a basic guide. The best way to guard against variations among interviewers is to carefully word questions in advance and train the interviewers not to deviate from the prescribed forms. The data collected are still open ended, in the sense that the respondent supplies his or her own words, thoughts, and insights in answering the questions, but the precise wording of the questions is determined ahead of time.

When doing action research or conducting a program evaluation, it may only be possible to interview participants once for a short, fixed time, like a half-hour, so highly focused questions serve to establish priorities for the interview. At other times, it is possible and desirable to interview participants before they enter the program, when they leave the program, and again after some period of time (e.g., six months) after they have left the program. For example, a chemical dependency program would ask participants about sobriety issues before, during, at the end of, and after the program. To compare answers across these time periods, the same questions need to be asked in the same way each time. Such interview questions are written out in advance *exactly* the way in which they are to be asked during the interview. Careful consideration is given to the wording of each question before the interview. Any clarifications or elaborations that are to be used are written into the interview itself. Probes are placed in the interview at appropriate places to minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent, thereby reducing the need for interviewer judgment during the interview. The standardized open-ended interview also makes data analysis easier because it is possible to locate each respondent's answer to the same question rather quickly and to organize questions and answers that are similar.

Exhibit 7.19 (pp. 508–511) at the end of this chapter, provides an example of a standardized open-ended evaluation interview sequence for participants in an Outward Bound wilderness program for disabled persons. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the program, the second interview was used at the end of the 10-day experience, and the third interview took place six months after the program. Questions are specified for able-bodied and disabled participants.

In summary, the four major reasons for using standardized open-ended interviews are as follows:

1. The exact instrument used in the study is available for inspection by those who will use the findings of the study.
2. Variation among interviewers can be minimized where a number of different interviewers must be used.
3. The interview is highly focused so that interviewee time is used efficiently.
4. Analysis is facilitated by making responses easy to find and compare.

In program evaluations, potential problems of legitimacy and credibility for qualitative data can make it politically wise to produce an exact interview form that the evaluator can show to primary decision makers and evaluation users. Moreover, when generating a standardized form, evaluation users can participate more completely in writing the interview instrument. They will not only know precisely what is going to be asked, but, no less important, they will also understand what is *not* going to be asked. This reduces the likelihood of the data being attacked later because certain questions were missed or asked in the wrong way. By making it clear, in advance of data collection, exactly what questions will be asked, the limitations of the data can be known and discussed before evaluation data are gathered.

While the conversational and interview guide approaches permit greater flexibility and individualization, these approaches also open up the possibility, indeed, the likelihood, that more information will be collected from some program participants than from others. Those using the findings may worry about how conclusions have been influenced by qualitative differences in the depth and breadth of information received from different people.

In contrast, in fieldwork done for basic and applied research, the researcher will be attempting to understand the holistic worldview of a group of people. Collecting the same information from each person poses no credibility problem when each person is understood as a unique informant with a unique perspective. The political credibility of consistent interview findings across respondents is less an issue under basic research conditions.

The weakness of the standardized approach is that it does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview was written. Moreover, a structured interview reduces the extent to which individual differences and circumstances can be queried.

Combining Approaches

These contrasting interview strategies are by no means mutually exclusive.

A conversational strategy can be used within an interview guide approach, or you can combine a guide approach with a standardized format by specifying certain key questions exactly as they must be asked while leaving other items as topics to be explored at the interviewer's discretion. This combined strategy offers the interviewer flexibility in probing and in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in

greater depth, or even to pose questions about new areas of inquiry that were not originally anticipated in the interview instrument's development. A common combination strategy involves using a standardized interview format in the early part of an interview and then leaving the interviewer free to pursue any subjects of interest during the latter parts of the interview. Another combination would include using the informal conversational interview early in an evaluation project, followed midway through by an interview guide, and then closing the program evaluation with a standardized open-ended interview to get systematic information from a sample of participants at the end of the program or when conducting follow-up studies of participants.

A *sensitizing concept* can provide the bridge across different types of interviews. In doing follow-up interviews with recipients of MacArthur Foundation fellowships, the sensitizing concept "enabling," a concept central to the Fellowship's purpose, allowed us to focus interviews on any ways in which receiving the fellowship had *enabled* recipients. *Enabling*, or *being enabled*, broadly defined and open-ended, gave interviewees room to share a variety of experiences and outcomes while also letting us identify some carefully worded, standardized questions for all interviewees, some interview guide topics that might or might not be pursued, and a theme for staying centered during completely open-ended conversations at the end of the interviews.

Summary of Interviewing Formats

All three qualitative formats for interviewing share the commitment to ask genuinely open-ended questions that offer the persons being interviewed the opportunity to respond in their own words and to express their own personal perspectives. While the three strategies vary in the extent to which the wording and sequencing of questions are predetermined, no variation exists in the principle that the response format should be open-ended. The interviewer never supplies or predetermines the phrases or categories that must be used by respondents to express themselves, as is the case in fixed-response questionnaires. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences. This openness distinguishes qualitative interviewing from the closed questionnaire or test used in quantitative studies. Such closed instruments force respondents to fit their knowledge, experiences, and feelings into the researcher's categories. The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express *their own* understandings in their own terms.

CULTURE AS A SENSITIZING CONCEPT

"Culture" is certainly one of the more contentious and complex words in our lexicon. Like the term "force" to a physicist or "life" to a biologist, or even "god" to a theologian, "culture" to the ethnographer is multivocal, highly ambiguous, shape-shifting, and difficult if not impossible to pin down. When put into use, contradictions abound. Culture is taken by some of its most distinguished students as cause and consequence, as material and immaterial, as coherent and fragmented, as grand and humble, as visible (to some) and invisible (to many). . . .

One of the charming but endlessly frustrating things about culture is that everybody uses the term, albeit in vastly different ways. The notion of culture as used by ethnographers today is more a loose, sensitizing concept than a strict, theoretical one. It signals a conviction that agency and action (be it word or deed) rest on social meanings that range from the rather bounded and particularistic to more or less institutionalized and broad. . . . Certainly the view of culture as an integrated, shared system of interlocking ideas, routines, signs, and values passed on more or less seamlessly from generation to generation has withered away (thankfully). . . .

But as long as meanings are taken to be central to accounts of human activity and meanings are seen as coming forth—somehow, somehow—from human interaction, it is most unclear what conceptual framework might step up to replace culture as a way to imagine and think about such matters as "how things work." . . . Culture and the meaning making and remaking processes associated with the concept, however trimmed down and inevitably flawed, still seem to me indispensable.

—John Van Maanen (2011, p. 154)
Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography

Anticipating Analysis and Reporting in Developing an Interview

Look to the end at the beginning to increase the likelihood of ending up where you want to be at the end.

—Halcolm

The overarching purpose of an inquiry frames analysis, and anticipating analysis can inform the kind of interview protocol and instrumentation developed.

For example, a program evaluation might interview 20 participants, about an hour each, covering a set of discrete topics, like the following:

1. What influenced your decision to participate in the program?
(Program recruitment)
2. Describe the program activities in which you participated.
(Program processes)
3. What did you get out of participating in the program?
(Program outcomes)

The evaluation report will analyze and present the responses from the 20 participants *question by question*, or section by section, what is called cross-sectional analysis. Organizing and sequencing the interview in anticipation of this format for the final report will greatly facilitate analysis.

A different kind of analysis and reporting involves constructing case studies. A case study integrates all the responses in an interview into a coherent story

of that person or place (the case). If 20 participants are interviewed for individual case studies, the analysis and report will be presented as holistic cases and patterns across cases rather than question by question.

Yet a third kind of analysis is illumination of one or more sensitizing concepts. Responses across participants and across questions will be synthesized to present varying perspectives on and meanings of the sensitizing concept, for example, *empowerment*, or *power* (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Brooks, 2014).

Thus, the interview protocol and format is part of the overall design of the study and flows from prior decisions. The overarching purpose of the study and the primary inquiry questions lead to a purposeful sampling strategy. Those inquiry and design decisions anticipate the kind of analysis that will be needed to fulfill the purpose of the study, whether research or evaluation. The interview format (degree of standardization vs. degree of flexibility) flows from this combination of design considerations, the background and experience of the interviewer(s), and the expectations of the audience for the study (What approach will be most credible?). Exhibit 7.6 summarizes these analysis alternatives and their implications for formatting and constructing qualitative interviews.

EXHIBIT 7.6 Anticipating Analysis and Reporting to Organize, Sequence, and Format Interviews

Three examples of how anticipating the analysis and report can influence the qualitative interview format.

ANTICIPATED REPORT FORMAT	UNIT OF ANALYSIS	NATURE OF THE ANALYSIS	INTERVIEW FORMAT ALIGNMENT
1. Cross-sectional analysis	Responses to specific interview questions	Report findings question by question.	Standardized questions asked in a standardized sequence facilitates analysis question by question.
2. Case studies	Each interviewee	Integrate and synthesize interview responses from throughout the interview into a coherent story.	Interview guide enhances flexibility to pursue various topics in greater or lesser depth depending on relevance to each person (case).
3. Sensitizing concept illumination	The sensitizing concept	Extract quotations and perspectives from across different interviewees while also placing those quotes in the context of each interviewee as a case.	A combination of interview approaches (some standardized questions, some guide topics, and pursuing some conversational leads) will permit focusing on the sensitizing concept in a variety of ways as the interview unfolds.



Know What You Want to Find Out, and Listen Attentively to Whether Your Question Was Answered

If you ask me, I'm gonna tell you.

—Comedienne Roseanne Barr

Six kinds of questions can be asked of people. On any given topic, it is possible to ask any of these questions. Distinguishing types of questions forces you, the interviewer, to be clear about what is being asked and helps the interviewee respond appropriately.

Experience and Behavior Questions

Questions about what a person does or has done aim to elicit behaviors, experiences, actions, and activities that would have been observable had the observer been present: “If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing? What experiences would I observe you having?” “If I had been in the program with you, what would I have seen you doing?”

Opinion and Values Questions

Questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people ask about opinions, judgments and values—“head stuff” as opposed to actions and behaviors: Answers to these questions tell us what people *think* about some experience or issue. They tell us about people’s goals, intentions, desires, and expectations. “What do you believe?” “What do you think about _____?” “What would you like to see happen?” “What is your opinion of _____?”

Feeling Questions

Emotional centers in the brain can be distinguished from cognitive areas. Feeling questions aim at eliciting emotions—*feeling* responses of people to their experiences and thoughts. Feelings tap the affective dimension of human life. In asking feeling questions—for example, “How do you feel about that?”—the interviewer is looking for adjective responses: anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, confident, and so on.

Opinions and feelings are often confused. It is critical that interviewers understand the distinction

between the two in order to know when they have the kind of answer they want to the question they are asking. Suppose an interviewer asks, “How do you feel about that?” If the response is “I think it’s probably the best that we can do under the circumstances,” the question about feelings has not really been answered. Analytical, interpretive, and opinion statements are not answers to questions about feelings.

This confusion sometimes occurs because interviewers give the wrong cues when asking questions—for example, by asking opinion questions using the format “How do you feel about that?” instead of “What is your opinion about that?” or “What do you think about it?” When you want to understand the respondents’ emotional reactions, you have to ask about *and listen for* feeling-level responses. When you want to understand what someone thinks about something, the question should explicitly tell the interviewee that you’re searching for opinions, beliefs, and considered judgments—not feelings.

Knowledge Questions

Knowledge questions inquire about the respondent’s factual information—what the respondent knows. Certain things are facts, like whether it is against the law to drive while drunk and how the law defines drunkenness. These things are not opinions or feelings. Knowledge about a program may include knowing what services are available, who is eligible, what the rules and regulations of the program are, how one enrolls in the program, and so on.

Sensory Questions

Sensory questions ask about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. Responses to these questions allow the interviewer to enter into the sensory experience of the respondent. “When you walk through the doors of the program, what do you see? Tell me what I would see if I walked through the doors with you.” Or again, “What does the counselor ask you when you meet with him? What does he actually say?” Sensory questions attempt to have interviewees describe the stimuli that they experience. Technically, sensory data are a type of behavioral or experiential data—they capture the experience of the senses. However, the types of questions asked to gather sensory data are sufficiently distinct to merit a separate category.

Background/Demographic Questions

Age, education, occupation, and the like are standard background questions that identify characteristics of the person being interviewed. Answers to these questions help the interviewer locate the respondent in relation to other people. Asking these questions in an open-ended rather than closed manner elicits the respondent's own categorical worldview. Asked about age, a person aged 55 might respond "I'm 55" or "I'm middle-aged" or "I'm at the cusp of old age" or "I'm still young at heart" or "I'm in my mid-50s" or "I'm 10 years from retirement" or "I'm between 40 and 60 (smiling broadly)," and so forth. Responses to open-ended, qualitative background inquiries tell us about how people categorize themselves in today's endlessly categorizing world. Perhaps nowhere is such openness more important and illuminative than in asking about race and ethnicity. For example, professional golf star Tiger Woods has African, Thai, Chinese, American Indian, and European ancestry—and resists being "assigned" to any single ethnic category. He came up with the name "Cablinasian" to describe his mixed heritage. In an increasingly diverse world with people of mixed ethnicity and ever-evolving labels (e.g., Negro, colored, black, African American, person of African descent), qualitative inquiry is a particularly appropriate way of finding out how people perceive and talk about their backgrounds.

Distinguishing Question Types

Behaviors, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory data, and background demographics—these are the universe of kinds of questions it is possible to ask in an interview. Any kind of question one might want to ask can be subsumed in one of these categories. Keeping these distinctions in mind can be particularly helpful in planning an interview, designing the inquiry strategy, focusing on priorities for inquiry, and ordering the questions in some sequence. Before considering the sequence of questions, however, let's look at how the *dimension of time* intersects with the different kinds of questions.

The Time Frame of the Questions

Questions can be asked in the present, past, or future tense. For example, you can ask people what they're doing now, what they have done in the past, and what they plan to do in the future. Likewise, you can inquire about present attitudes, past attitudes, or future attitudes. By combining the time frame of questions with the different type of questions, we can construct a

matrix that generates 18 different types of questions. Exhibit 7.7 shows that matrix.

EXHIBIT 7.7 A Matrix of Questions Options

QUESTION FOCUS	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
Behaviors/experiences			
Opinions/values			
Feelings/emotions			
Knowledge			
Sensory			
Background			

Asking all 18 questions about any particular situation, event, or programmatic activity may become somewhat tedious, especially if the sequence is repeated over and over throughout the interview. The matrix constitutes a set of options to help you think about what information is most important to obtain.

Sequencing Questions

No recipe for sequencing questions can or should exist, but the matrix of questions suggests some possibilities. The challenges of sequencing vary, of course, for different strategies of interviewing. Informal conversational interviewing is flexible and responsive so that a predetermined sequence is seldom possible or desirable. In contrast, standardized open-ended interviews must establish a fixed sequence of questions to fit the structured format. I offer, then, some suggestions about sequencing.

I prefer to begin an interview with questions about noncontroversial present behaviors, activities, and experiences like "What are you currently working on in school?" Such questions ask for relatively straightforward descriptions; they require minimal recall and interpretation. Such questions are hopefully fairly easy to answer. They encourage the respondent to talk *descriptively*. Probes should focus on eliciting greater detail—filling out the descriptive picture.

Once some experience or activity has been described, then opinions and feelings can be solicited, building on and probing for interpretations of the experience. Opinions and feelings are likely to be more grounded and meaningful once the respondent has verbally “relived” the experience. Knowledge and skill questions also need a context. Such questions can be quite threatening if asked too abruptly. The interviewer doesn’t want to come across as a TV game show host quizzing a contestant. So, for example, in evaluation interviewing, it can be helpful to ask knowledge questions (What are the eligibility requirements for this program?) as follow-up questions about program activities and experiences that have a bearing on knowledge and skills (How did you become part of the program?). Finding out from people what they know works best once some rapport and trust have been established in the interview.

Questions about the present tend to be easier for respondents than questions about the past. Future-oriented questions involve considerable speculation, and responses to questions about future actions or attitudes are typically less reliable than questions about the present or past. I generally prefer to begin by asking questions about the present; then, using the present as a baseline, I ask questions about the same activity or attitude in the past. Only then do I broach questions about the future.

Background and demographic questions are basically boring; they epitomize what people hate about interviews. They can also be somewhat uncomfortable for the respondent, depending on how personal they are. I keep such questions to a minimum and prefer to space them strategically and unobtrusively throughout the interview. *I advise never beginning an interview with a long list of routine demographic questions.* In qualitative interviewing, the interviewee needs to become actively involved in providing descriptive information as soon as possible instead of becoming conditioned to providing short-answer, routine responses to uninteresting categorical questions. Some background information may be necessary at the beginning to make sense out of the rest of the interview, but such questions should be tied to descriptive information about present life experience as much as possible. Otherwise, save the socio-demographic inquiries (age, socioeconomic status, birth order, etc.) for the end.

Practical Guidance on Wording Questions

An interview question is a stimulus aimed at eliciting a response from the person being interviewed. How a question is worded and asked affects how the interviewee responds. As Payne (1951) observed in his classic book on questioning, *asking questions is an art.*

PRAGMATIC INTERVIEWING: SKILLFULLY WORDING QUESTIONS

How qualitative interview questions are worded depends on a number of factors, including but not limited to these: the theoretical tradition that informs the inquiry, the nature and focus of the study, the relationships and interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee, the length of the interview and setting where the interview takes place, the interviewer’s experience as an interviewer, and the interview format being used (conversational, interview guide, standardized questions). Thus, general guidance on how to word questions must be adapted to purpose and context. What can be said with confidence is that skillful wording is a core competence that enhances the quality of responses. In the sections that follow, I offer some practical guidance about how to be strategic, intentional, thoughtful, and skillful in wording questions.

In qualitative inquiry, “good” questions should, at a minimum, be open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear. Let’s look at each of these criteria.

Ask Truly Open-Ended Questions

Qualitative inquiry—strategically, philosophically, and methodologically—aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses like fixed survey items (“strongly agree”). Rather, questions should be asked in a truly open-ended fashion so people can respond in their own words. Those open-ended responses are the heart of qualitative data, and they emerge from asking open-ended questions.

The standard fixed-response item in a questionnaire provides a limited and predetermined list of possibilities: “How satisfied are you with the program? (a) very satisfied, (b) somewhat satisfied, (c) not too satisfied, (d) not at all satisfied.” The closed and limiting nature of such a question is obvious to both questioner and respondent. Many researchers seem to think that the way to make a question open-ended is simply to leave out the structured response categories. But doing so does not make a question truly open-ended. It merely disguises what still amounts to a predetermined and implicit constraint on likely responses.

Consider the question “How satisfied are you with this program?” Asked without fixed-response choices, this can appear to be an open-ended question. On closer inspection, however, we see that the dimension along which the respondent can answer has already been identified—*degree of satisfaction*. The interviewee can use a variety of modifiers for the

word *satisfaction*—“pretty satisfied,” “kind of satisfied,” “mostly satisfied,” and so on. But, in effect, the possible response set has been narrowly limited by the wording of the question. The typical range of answers will vary only slightly more than what would have been obtained had the categories been made explicit from the start while making the analysis more complicated.

A truly open-ended question does not presuppose which dimension of feeling or thought will be salient for the interviewee. The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses those that are most *salient*. Indeed, in qualitative inquiry, one of the things the inquiry is trying to determine is what dimensions, themes, and images/words people use among themselves to describe their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Examples, then, of truly open-ended questions would take the following format:

What's your reaction to _____?

How do you feel about _____?

What do you think of _____?

The truly open-ended question permits those being interviewed to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express what they have to say. Moreover, to be truly open-ended, a question cannot be phrased as a dichotomy.

The Horns of a Dichotomy

Dichotomous response questions provide the interviewee with a grammatical structure suggesting a “yes” or “no” answer. Are you satisfied with the program? Have you changed as a result of your participation in this program? Was this an important experience for you? Do you know the procedures for enrolling in the program? Have you interacted much with the staff in the program? By their grammatical form, all of these questions invite a yes/no reply.

In contrast, in-depth interviewing strives to get the person being interviewed to talk—to talk about experiences, feelings, opinions, and knowledge. Far from encouraging the respondent to talk, dichotomous response questions limit expression. They can even create a dilemma for respondents who may not be sure whether they are being asked a simple yes/no question or if, indeed, the interviewer expects a more elaborate response. Often, in teaching interviewers and reviewing their fieldwork, I've found that those who report having difficulty getting respondents to talk are posing a string of dichotomous questions that program the respondent to be largely reactive and binary.

Consider this classic exchange between a parent and teenager. (Teenager returns home from a date.)

“Do you know that you're late?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you go to a movie?”

“Yeah.”

“Was it a good movie?”

“Yeah, it was okay.”

“So, it was worth seeing?”

“Yeah, it was worth seeing.”

“I've heard a lot about it. Do you think I would like it?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

“Anything else happen?”

“No. That's about it.”

Teenager then goes off to bed. One parent turns to the other and says, “Sure is hard to get him to talk to us. I guess he's at the age where kids just don't want to tell their parents anything.”

Dichotomous questions can turn an interview into an interrogation or quiz rather than an in-depth conversation. In everyday conversation, our interactions with each other are filled with dichotomous questions that we unconsciously ignore and treat as if they were open-ended. If a friend asks, “Did you have a good time?” you're likely to offer more than a yes/no answer. In a more formal interview setting, however, the interviewee will be more conscious of the grammatical structure of questions and is less likely to elaborate beyond “yes” or “no” replies when hit with dichotomous queries. Indeed, the more intense the interview situation, the more likely the respondent will react to the “deep-structure” stimulus of questions—which includes their grammatical framing—and to take questions literally (Bandler & Grinder, 1975).

In training interviewers, I like to play a game where I only respond literally to the questions asked without volunteering any information that is not clearly demanded in the question. I do this before explaining the difficulties involved in asking dichotomous questions. I have played this game hundreds of times, and the interaction seldom varies. On getting dichotomous responses to general questions, the interviewer will begin to rely on more and more specific dichotomous response questions, thereby digging a deeper and deeper hole, which makes it difficult to pull the interview

out of the dichotomous-response pattern. Exhibit 7.8 provides a transcription of an actual interview from a training workshop. In the left column, I have recorded the interview that took place; the right column records truly open-ended alternatives to the dichotomous questions that were asked.

The questions on the left in Exhibit 7.8 illustrate a fairly extreme example of posing dichotomous questions in an interview. Notice that the open-ended questions on the right side generate richer answers and quite different information than was elicited from the dichotomous questions. In addition, dichotomous

EXHIBIT 7.8 Interview Training Demonstration: Closed Versus Open-Ended Questions

Instruction to workshop participants: Okay, now we're going to play an interviewing game. I want you to ask me questions about an evaluation I just completed. The program evaluated was a leadership development initiative that involved taking higher education professionals into a wilderness setting for a week. That's all I'm going to tell you at this point. I'll answer your questions as precisely as I can, but I'll only answer

what you ask. I won't volunteer any information that isn't directly asked for by your questions.

In the left column below, I have recorded the interview questions actually asked and my answers; the right column records truly open-ended alternatives to the dichotomous questions that were asked and the answers I would have given to more open-ended questions.

ACTUAL QUESTIONS ASKED AND ANSWERS GIVEN	GENUINELY OPEN-ENDED ALTERNATIVES WITH RICHER RESPONSES
<p>Q1. Were you doing a formative evaluation?</p> <p>A. Mostly.</p>	<p>Q1a. What were the purposes of the evaluation?</p> <p>A. First, to document what happened, then, to provide feedback to staff and help them identify their "model," and finally to report to funders.</p>
<p>Q2. Were you trying to find out if the people changed from being in the wilderness?</p> <p>A. That was part of it.</p>	<p>Q2a. What were you trying to find out through the evaluation?</p> <p>A. Several things. How participants experienced the wilderness, how they talked about the experience, what meanings they attached to what they experienced, what they did with the experience when they returned home, and any ways in which it affected them.</p>
<p>Q3. Did they change?</p> <p>A. Some of them did.</p>	<p>Q3a. What did you find out? How did participation in the program affect participants?</p> <p>A. Many participants reported "transformative" experiences—their term—by which they meant something life changing. Others became more engaged in experiential education themselves. A few reported just having a good time. You'd need to read the full case studies to see the depth of variation and impacts.</p>
<p>Q4. Did you interview people both before and after the program?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q4a. What kinds of information did you collect from the evaluation?</p> <p>A. We interviewed participants before, during, and after the program; we did focus groups; we engaged in participant observation with conversational interviews; and we read their journals when they were willing. They also completed open-ended evaluation forms that asked about aspects of the program.</p>

ACTUAL QUESTIONS ASKED AND ANSWERS GIVEN	GENUINELY OPEN-ENDED ALTERNATIVES WITH RICHER RESPONSES
<p>Q5. Did you find that being in the program affected what happened?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q5a. How do you think your participation in the program affected what happened?</p> <p>A. We've reflected a lot on that and we talked with staff and participants about it. Most agreed that the evaluation process made everyone more intentional and reflective—and that increased the impact in many cases.</p>
<p>Q6. Did you have a good time?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q6a: What was the wilderness experience like for you?</p> <p>A: First, I learned a great deal about participant observation and evaluation. Second, I came to love the wilderness and have become an avid hiker. Third, I began what I expect will be a deep and lifelong friendship with one staff member.</p>

questions can easily become leading questions. Once the interviewer begins to cope with what appears to be a reluctant or timid interviewee by asking ever more detailed dichotomous questions, guessing at possible responses, the interviewer may actually impose those responses on the interviewee.

One sure sign that an interview is going poorly is when the interviewer is doing more talking than the person being interviewed. Consider the excerpt from an actual interview in Exhibit 7.9. The interviewee was a teenager who was participating in a chemical dependency program. The person conducting this interview said that she wanted to find out two things in this portion of the interview: (1) What experiences were most salient for John? (2) How personally involved was John becoming in his treatment? As you'll see in the transcript, she learns that the "hot-seat" therapeutic experience was highly salient for John, but she really gets very little information about the reasons for that salience. With regard to the question of his personal involvement, the only data she has come from his acquiescence to leading questions. To see how few qualitative data are actually generated in her interview, I've listed below the actual *data* from the interview—his verbatim responses:

Okay.

Yeah, . . . the hot seat.

Right.

One person does it every day.

Yeah, it depends.

Okay, let's see, hmmmm . . . there was this guy yesterday who really got nailed. I mean he really caught a lot of crap from the group. It was really heavy.

No, it was them others.

Yeah, right, and it really got to him.

He started crying and got mad and one guy really came down on him and afterwards they were talking, and it seemed to be okay for him.

Yeah, it really was.

It was pretty heavy.

The lack of a coherent story line in these responses reveals how little we've actually learned about John's perspective and experiences. Study the transcript, and you'll find that the interviewer was talking more than the interviewee. The questions put the interviewee in a passive stance, able to confirm or deny the substance provided by the interviewer but not really given the opportunity to provide in-depth, descriptive detail in his own words.

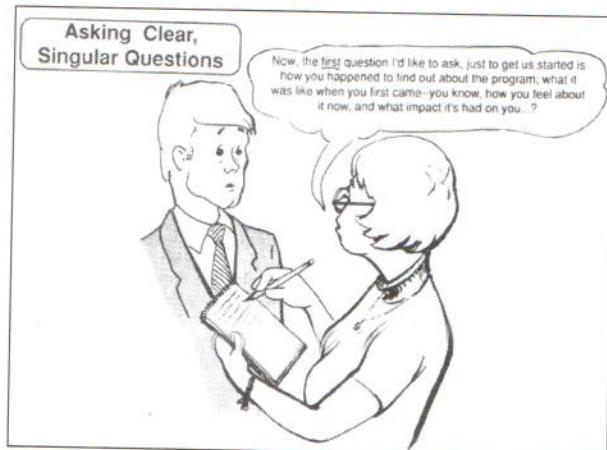


EXHIBIT 7.9 Interview Transcript With Commentary

The interview below took place with a teenager during his residency in a chemical dependency treatment program.

The interview transcript is on the left. My commentary is in the column on the right.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT	COMMENTARY
Q1. Hello, John. It's nice to see you again. I'm anxious to find out what's been happening with you. Can I ask you some questions about your experience?	The opening is dominated by the interviewer. No informal give and take. The interviewee is set up to take a passive/reactive role.
A. Okay.	
Q2. I'd like you to think about some of the really important experiences you've had here. Can you think of something that stands out in your mind?	An introductory cue sentence is immediately followed by a dichotomous response question.
A. Yeah, . . . the hot seat.	John goes beyond the dichotomous response.
Q3. The hot seat is when one person is the focus of attention for the whole group, right?	The interviewer has provided the definition rather than getting John's own definition of the hot seat.
A. Right.	
Q4. So, what was it like . . . ? Was this the first time you've seen the "hot seat" used?	Began open ended, then changed the question and posed a dichotomous question. The question is no longer singular or open.
A. One person does it everyday.	Not really an answer to the question.
Q5. Is it different with different people?	Question follows the previous answer, but still a dichotomous format.
A. Yeah, it depends.	
Q6. Can you tell me about one that really stands out in your mind?	Can you? Is this an inquiry about willingness, memory, capacity, or trust?
A. Okay, let's see, hmm. . . . There was this guy yesterday who really got nailed. I mean, he really caught a lot of crap from the group. It was really heavy.	Before responding to the open request, John reacts to the dichotomous format.
Q7. Did you say anything?	Dichotomous question.
A. No, it was them others.	
Q8. So what was it like for you? Did you get caught up in it? You said it was really heavy. Was it heavy for you or just the group?	Multiple questions. Unclear connections. Ambiguous, multiple-choice format at the end.
A. Yeah, right, and it really got to him.	John's positive answer ("Yeah, right") is actually uninterpretable, given the questions asked.
Q9. Did you think it was good for him? Did it help him?	Dichotomous questions.
A. He started crying and got mad, and one guy really came down on him, and afterwards, they were talking, and it seemed to be okay for him.	The question asks for a judgment. John wants to describe what happened. The narrowness of the interview questions are limiting his responses.
Q10. So it was really intense?	Leading question, setting up an easy acquiescence response.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT	COMMENTARY
A. Yeah, it really was.	Acquiesces to leading question. Accepts interviewer's term, <i>intense</i> , so we don't learn what word he would have chosen.
Q11. And you got really involved.	Another leading question.
A. It was pretty heavy.	John doesn't actually respond to the question. Ambiguous response.
Q12. Okay, I want to ask you something about the lecture part of the program. Anything else you want to say about the hot seat?	Transition. John is cued that the hot-seat questions are over. No response really expected.
(John doesn't answer verbally. He sits and waits for the next questions.)	

Asking Singular Questions

One of the basic rules of questionnaire writing is that each item must be singular—that is, no more than one idea should be contained in any given question. Consider this example:

How well do you know and like the staff in this program?

- a. A lot
- b. Pretty much
- c. Not too much
- d. Not at all

This item is impossible to interpret in analysis because it asks two questions:

1. How well do you know the staff?
2. How much do you like the staff?

When one turns to open-ended interviewing, however, many people seem to think that singular questions are no longer called for. Precision gives way to vagueness and confused multiplicity, as in the illustration in this section. I've seen transcripts of interviews conducted by experienced and well-known field researchers in which several questions have been thrown together, which they might think are related but which are likely to confuse the person being interviewed about what is really being asked.

To help the staff improve the program, we'd like to ask you to talk about your opinion of the program: What

you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What you like? What you don't like? What you think could be improved or should stay the same? Those kinds of things—and any other comments you have.

The evaluator who used this question regularly in interviewing argued that by asking a series of questions he could find out which was most salient to the person being interviewed because the interviewee was forced to choose what he or she most cared about in order to respond to the question. The evaluator would then probe more specifically in those areas that were not answered in the initial question.

It's necessary to distinguish, then, between giving an overview of a series of questions at the beginning of a sequence, and then asking each one singularly, versus laying out a whole series of questions at once, and then seeing which one strikes a respondent's fancy. In my experience, multiple questions create tension and confusion because the person being interviewed doesn't really know what is being asked. An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of a program is not the same as reporting what one likes and dislikes. Likewise, recommendations for change may be unrelated to strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a parent participating in a family education program aimed at helping parents become more effective as parents.

Q: Based on your experience, what would you say are the strengths of this program?

A: The other parents. Different parents can get together and talk about what being a parent is

like for them. The program is really parents with parents. Parents really need to talk to other parents about what they do, and what works and doesn't work. It's the parents, it really is.

Q: What about weaknesses?

A: I don't know. . . . I guess I'm not always sure that the program is really getting to the parents who need it the most. I don't know how you do that, but I just think there are probably a lot of parents out there who need the program and . . . especially maybe single-parent families. And fathers. It's really hard to get fathers into something like this. It should just get to everybody and that's real hard.

Q: Let me turn now to your personal likes and dislikes about the program. What are some of the things that you have really liked about the program?

A: I'd put the staff right at the top of that. I really like the program director. She's really well educated and knows a lot, but she never makes us feel dumb. We can say anything or ask anything. She treats us like people, like equals even. I like the other parents. And I like being able to bring my daughter along. They take her into the child's part of the program, but we also have some activities together. But it's also good for her to have her activities with other kids, and I get some time with other parents.

Q: What about dislikes? What are some things you don't like so much about the program?

A: I don't like the schedule much. We meet in the afternoons after lunch, and it kind of breaks into the day at a bad time for me, but there isn't any really good time for all the parents, and I know they've tried different times. Time is always going to be a hassle for people. Maybe they could just offer different things at different times. The room we meet in isn't too great, but that's no big deal.

Q: Okay, you've given us a lot of information about your experiences in the program, strengths and weaknesses you've observed, and some of the things you've liked and haven't liked so much. Now I'd like to ask you about your recommendations for the program. If you had the power to change things about the program, what would you make different?

A: Well, I guess the first thing is money. It's always money. I just think they should put, you know, the legislature should put more money into programs like this. I don't know how much the director gets paid, but I hear that she's not even getting paid as much as school teachers. She should get paid like a professional. I think there should be more of these programs and more money in them.

Oh, I know what I'd recommend. We talked about it one time in our group. It would be neat to have some parents who have already been through the program come back and talk with new groups about what they've done with their kids since they've been in the program, you know, like problems that they didn't expect or things that didn't work out, or just getting the benefit of the experiences of parents who've already been through the program to help new parents. We talked about that one day and thought that would be a neat thing to do. I don't know if it would work, but it would be a neat thing. I wouldn't mind doing it, I guess.

Notice that each of these questions elicited a different response. Strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, and recommendations—each question meant something different and deserved to be asked separately. Qualitative interviewing can be deepened through thoughtful, focused, and distinct questions.

A consistent theme runs through this discussion of question formulation: *The wording used in asking questions can make a significant difference in the quality of responses elicited.* The interviewer who throws out a bunch of questions all at once to see which one takes hold puts an unnecessary burden on the interviewee to decipher what is being asked. Moreover, multiple questions asked at the same time suggests that the interviewer hasn't figured out what question should be asked at that juncture in the interview. Taking the easy way out by asking several questions at once transfers the burden of clarity from the interviewer to the interviewee.

Asking several questions at once can also waste precious interview time. In evaluation interviews, for example, both interviewers and respondents typically have only so much time to give to an interview. To make the best use of that time, it is helpful to think through priority questions that will elicit relevant responses. This means that the interviewer must know what issues are important enough to ask questions about and to ask those questions in a way that the person being interviewed can clearly identify what he or she is being asked—that is, to ask clear questions.

Clarity of Questions

If names are not correct, language will not be in accordance with the truth of things.

—Confucius

The interviewer bears the responsibility to pose questions that make it clear to the interviewee what is being asked. Asking understandable questions facilitates establishing rapport. Unclear questions can make the person being interviewed feel uncomfortable, ignorant, confused, or hostile. Asking singular questions helps a great deal to make things clear. Other factors also contribute to clarity.

First, in preparing for an interview, find out what special terms are commonly used by people in the setting. For example, state and national programs often have different titles and language at the local level. CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act Programs) was designed as a national program in which local contractors were funded to establish and implement services in their area. We found that participants only knew these programs by the name of the local contractor, such as "Youth Employment Services," "Work for Youth," and "Working Opportunities for Women." Many participants in these programs did not even know that they were in CETA programs. Conducting an interview with these participants where they were asked about their "CETA experience" would have been confusing and disruptive to the interview.

When I was doing fieldwork in Burkina Faso, the national government was run by the military after a coup d'état. Local officials carried the title "commandant" (commander). However, no one referred to the government as a military government. To do so was not only politically incorrect but risky too. The appropriate official phrase mandated by the rulers in the capitol, Ouagadougou, was "the people's government."

Second, clarity can be sharpened by understanding what language participants use among themselves in talking about a setting, activities, or other aspects of life. When we interviewed juveniles who had been placed in foster group homes by juvenile courts, we had to spend a good deal of preparatory time trying to find out how the juveniles typically referred to the group home parents, to their natural parents, to probation officers, and to each other in order to ask questions clearly about each of those sets of people. For example, when asking about relationships with peers, should we

use the word *juveniles*, *adolescents*, *youth*, *teenagers*, or what? In preparation for the interviews, we checked with a number of juveniles, group home parents, and court authorities about the proper language to use. We were advised to refer to "the other kids in the group home." However, we found no consensus about how "kids in the group home" referred to group home parents. Thus, one of the questions we had to ask in each interview was "What do you usually call Mr. and Mrs. _____?" We then used the language given to us by that youth throughout the rest of the interview to refer to group home parents.

Third, providing clarity in interview questions may mean avoiding using labels altogether. This means that when asking about a particular phenomenon or program component, it may be better to first find out what the interviewee believes that phenomenon to be and then ask questions about the descriptions provided by the person being interviewed. In studying officially designated "open classrooms" in North Dakota, I interviewed parents who had children in those classrooms. (*Open classrooms* were designed to be more informal, integrated, community based, project oriented, and experiential than traditional classrooms.) However, many of the teachers and local school officials did not use the term *open* to refer to these classrooms because they wanted to avoid political conflicts and stereotypes that were sometimes associated with the notion of "open education." Thus, when interviewing parents, we could not ask their opinions about "open education." Rather, we had to pursue a sequence of questions like the following:

What kinds of differences, if any, have you noticed between your child's classroom in the past year and the classroom this year? (Parent responds.)

Ok, you've mentioned several differences. Let me ask you your opinion about each of the things you've mentioned. What do you think about _____?

This strategy avoids the problem of collecting responses that later turn out to be uninterpretable because you can't be sure what respondents meant by what they said. Their opinions and judgments are grounded in descriptions, in their own words, of what they've experienced and what they're assessing.

A related problem emerged in interviewing children about their classrooms. We wanted to find out how basic skills were taught in "open" classrooms. In preparing for the interviews, we learned that many teachers avoided terms like *math time* or *reading time* because they wanted to integrate math and reading

into other activities. In some cases, we learned during parent interviews, children reported to parents that they didn't do any "math" in school. These same children would be working on projects, such as the construction of a model of their town using milk cartons, that required geometry, fractions, and reductions to scale, but they did not perceive of these activities as "math" because they associated math with worksheets and workbooks. Thus, to find out the kind of math activities children were doing, it was necessary to talk with them in detail about specific projects and work they were engaged in without asking them the simple question, "What kind of math do you do in the classroom?"

Another example of problems in clarity comes from follow-up interviews with mothers whose children were victims of sexual abuse. A major part of the interview focused on experiences with and reactions to the child protection agency, the police, welfare workers, the court system, the school counselor, probation officers, and other parts of the enormously complex system constructed to deal with child sexual abuse. We learned quickly that mothers could seldom differentiate the parts of the system. They didn't know when they were dealing with the courts, the child protection people, the welfare system, or some treatment program. It was all "the system." They had strong feelings and opinions about "the system," so our questions had to remain general, about the system, rather than specifically asking about the separate parts of the system (Patton, 1991).

The theme running through these suggestions for increasing the clarity of questions centers on the importance of using language that is understandable and part of the frame of reference of the person being interviewed. It means taking special care to find out what language the interviewee uses. Questions that use the respondent's own language are most likely to be clear. This means being sensitive to "languaculture" by attending to "meanings that lead the researcher beyond the words into the nature of the speaker's world" (Agar, 2000, pp. 93–94). This sensitivity to local language, the "emic perspective" in anthropology, is usually discussed in relation to data analysis in which a major focus is illuminating a setting or culture through its language. Here, however, we're discussing languaculture not as an analytical framework but as a way of enhancing data collection during interviewing by increasing clarity, communicating respect, and facilitating rapport.

Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's worldview, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, an answer

may make no sense at all—or there may be no answer. A Sufi story makes this point quite nicely.

A man had fallen between the rails in a subway station. People were all crowding around trying to get him out before the train ran him over. They were all shouting, "Give me your hand!" but the man would not reach up.

Mulla Nasrudin elbowed his way through the crowd and leaned over the man. "Friend," he asked, "what is your profession?"

"I am an income tax inspector," gasped the man.

"In that case," said Nasrudin, "take my hand!"

The man immediately grasped the Mulla's hand and was hauled to safety. Nasrudin turned to the amazed by-standers. "Never ask a tax man to give you anything, you fools," he said. (Shah, 1973, p. 68)

Before leaving the issue of clarity, let me offer one other suggestion: Be especially careful asking "why" questions.

Why to Take Care Asking "Why?"

Three Zen masters were discussing a flapping flag on a pole. The first observed dryly: "The flag moves."

"No," said the second. "Wind is moving."

"No," said the third. "It is not flag. It is not wind. It is mind moving."

"Why" questions presuppose that things happen for a reason and that those reasons are knowable. "Why" questions presume cause-effect relationships, an ordered world, and rationality. "Why" questions move beyond what has happened, what one has experienced, how one feels, what one opines, and what one knows to the making of analytical and deductive inferences.

The problems in deducing causal inferences have been thoroughly explored by philosophers of science (Bunge, 1959; Nagel, 1961). On a more practical level and more illuminative of interviewing challenges, reports from parents about "why" conversations with their children document the difficulty of providing causal explanations about the world. The infinite regression quality of "why" questions is part of the difficulty engendered by using them as part of an interview. Consider this parent-child exchange:

Dad, why does it get dark at night?

Because our side of the earth turns away from the sun.

Dad, why does our side of the earth turn away from the sun?

Because that's the way the world was made.

Dad, why was the world made that way?

So that there would be light and dark.

Dad, why should there be dark? Why can't it just be light all the time?

Because then we would get too hot.

Why would we get too hot?

Because the sun would be shining on us all the time.

Why can't the sun be cooler sometimes?

It is, that's why we have night.

But why can't we just have a cooler sun?

Because that's the way the world is.

Why is the world like that?

It just is. Because . . .

Because why?

Just because.

Oh.

Daddy?

Yes.

Why don't you know why it gets dark?

In a program evaluation interview, it might seem that the context for asking a "why" question would be clearer. However, if a precise reason for a particular activity is what is wanted, it is usually possible to ask that question in a way that does not involve using the word *why*. Let's look first at the difficulty posed for the respondent by the "why" question and then look at some alternative phrases.

"Why did you join this program?" The actual reasons for joining the program probably consist of some constellation of factors, including the influences of other people, the nature of the program, the nature of the person being interviewed, the interviewee's expectations, and practical considerations. It is unlikely that an interviewee can sort through all of these levels of possibility at once, so the person to whom the question is posed must pick out some level at which to respond.

- "Because it takes place at a convenient time." (*grammatical reason*)
- "Because I'm a joiner." (*personality reason*)
- "Because a friend told me about the program." (*information reason*)

- "Because my priest told me about the program and said he thought it would be good for me." (*social influence reason*)
- "Because it was inexpensive." (*economic reason*)
- "Because I wanted to learn about the things they're teaching in the program." (*outcomes reason*)
- "Because God directed me to join the program." (*personal motivation reason*)
- "Because it was there." (*philosophical reason*)

Anyone being interviewed could respond at any or all of these levels. The interviewer must decide before conducting the interview which of these levels carries sufficient importance to make it worth asking a question. If the primary evaluation question concerns characteristics of the program that attracted participants, then instead of asking "Why did you join?" the interviewer should ask something like the following: "What was it about the program that attracted you to it?" If the evaluator is interested in learning about the social influences that led to participation in a program, either voluntary or involuntary participation, a question like the following could be used:

Other people sometimes influence what we do. What other people, if any, played a role in your joining this program?

In some cases, the evaluator may be particularly interested in the characteristics of participants, so the question might be phrased in the following fashion:

I'm interested in learning more about you as a person and your personal involvement in this program. What is it about you—your situation, your personality, your desires, whatever—what is it about you that you think led you to become part of this program?

When used as a probe, "why" questions can imply that a person's response was somehow inappropriate. "Why did you do that?" may sound like doubt that an action (or feeling) was justified. A simple "Tell me more, if you will, about your thinking on that" may be more inviting.

The point is that by thinking carefully about what you want to know and being sensitive to what the interviewee will hear in your question, there is a greater likelihood that respondents will supply answers that make sense—and are relevant, usable, and interpretable. My cautions about the difficulties raised with "why" questions come from trying to analyze such questions when responses covered such a multitude of dimensions that it was clear different people were responding to different things. This makes analysis unwieldy.

Perhaps my reservations about the use of "why" questions come from having appeared the fool when asking such questions during interviews with children. In our open classroom interviews, several teachers had mentioned that children often became so involved in what they were doing that they chose not to go outside for recess. We decided to check this out with the children.

"What's your favorite time in school?" I asked a first grader.

"Recess," she answered quickly.

"Why do you like recess?"

"Because we go outside and play on the swings."

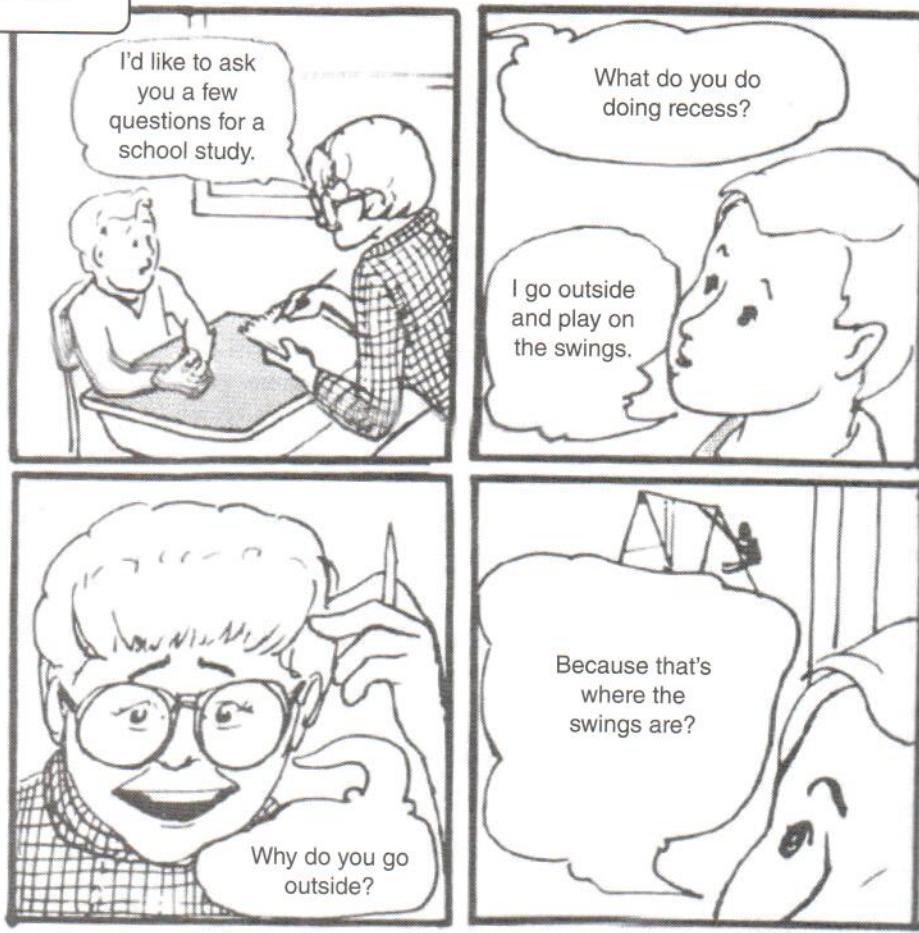
"Why do you go outside?" I asked.

"Because that's where the swings are!"

She replied with a look of incredulity that adults could ask such stupid questions, then explained helpfully, "If you want to swing on the swings, you have to go outside where the swings are."

Children take interview questions quite literally, and so it becomes clear quickly when a question is not well thought out. It was during those days of interviewing children in North Dakota that I learned about the problems with "why" questions.

Why Questions





The four essential elements of the universe are light, energy, time, and rapport.

—Halcolm

Rapport Through Neutrality

As an interviewer, I want to establish rapport with the person I am interviewing, but that rapport must be established in a way that it does not undermine my neutrality concerning what the person tells me. I must be nonjudgmental. Neutrality means that the person being interviewed can tell me anything without engendering either my favor or disfavor. I cannot be shocked;

I cannot be angered; I cannot be embarrassed; I cannot be saddened. Nothing the person tells me will make me think more or less of her or him. Openness and trust flow from nonjudgmental rapport.

At the same time that I am neutral with regard to the content of what is being said to me, I care very much that that person is willing to share with me what he or she is saying. *Rapport is a stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. Neutrality is a stance vis-à-vis the content of what that person says.* Rapport means that I respect the people being interviewed, so what they say is important because of who is saying it. I want to convey to them that their knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important. Yet I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me.

EMPATHIC NEUTRALITY

Empathic neutrality is one of the 12 core strategies of qualitative inquiry discussed in Chapter 2. (See Exhibit 2.1 and pages 46–47.)

Naturalistic inquiry involves fieldwork that puts one in close contact with people and their problems. What is to be the researcher's cognitive and emotional stance toward those people and problems? No universal prescription can capture the range of possibilities, for the answer will depend on the situation, the nature of the inquiry, and the perspective of the researcher. But thinking strategically, I offer the phrase "empathic neutrality" as a point of departure. It connotes a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding. What is *empathic neutrality*? In essence, it is understanding a person's situation and perspective without judging the person—and communicating that understanding with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness.

Reflections on Empathic Neutrality From an Experienced International Program Evaluator

For me there is a big difference between being empathetic when you interview (like when I work with full-blown AIDS patients, abused women, or orphans—seriously how can you not be touched?) and taking on evaluations because you are empathetic (as I often do) and therefore care about getting good empirical data. Let me explain.

SIDE BAR

Being empathetic, and really caring, should make an evaluator do an even better EMPIRICAL job. For me, when I am involved emotionally (which I usually am), I need to try even harder because I realize that it is UP TO ME (I take that all on....) to make sure that when the critics come around, I have ensured that the program has a strong Theory of Change and Theory of Action and data to evaluate the program, and, data to support making changes in order to make it a stronger program. That holds true for impact evaluations as well. If I don't find a program effective then I also think how that money could be spent on a MORE EFFECTIVE program that WILL change people's lives. It's not that I want the program to be successful in itself (thus my neutrality), I want people to have better lives (the basis for empathy). If I was neutral about influencing people's lives, I wouldn't try so hard. I care, so I work very hard to do a good job.

I am sometimes told, "But you are [an] inside evaluator so you are biased." AGHH! I am an inside evaluator so I know all the dirty laundry, which makes me better able to identify critical points of data to inform improvements. If anything being inside enables me to [be] MORE critical, because you can't hide anything from me.

—Donna Podems, PhD
Director, Otherwise Research and Evaluation
Cape Town, South Africa

Rapport is built by conveying empathy and understanding without judgment. In this section, I want to focus on ways of wording questions that are particularly aimed at conveying that important sense of neutrality.

Using Illustrative Examples in Questions

One kind of question wording that can help establish neutrality is the *illustrative examples format*. When phrasing questions in this way, I want to let the person I'm interviewing know that I've pretty much heard it all—the bad things and the good—and so I'm not interested in something that is particularly sensational, particularly negative, or especially positive. I'm really only interested in what that person's genuine experience has been. I want to elicit open and honest judgments from them without making them worry about my judging what they say. Consider this example of the illustrative examples format from interviews we conducted with juvenile delinquents who had been placed in foster group homes. One section of the interview was aimed at finding out how the juveniles were treated by group home parents.

Okay, now I'd like to ask you to tell me how you were treated in the group home by the parents. Some kids have told us they were treated like one of the family; some kids have told us that they got knocked around and beat up by the group home parents; some kids have told us about sexual things that were done to them; some of the kids have told us about fun things and trips they did with the parents; some kids have felt they were treated really well and some have said they were treated pretty bad. What about you—how have you been treated in the group home?

A closely related approach is the *illustrative extremes format*—giving examples only of extreme responses. This question is from a follow-up study of award recipients who received a substantial fellowship with no strings attached.

How much of the award, if any, did you spend on entirely personal things to treat yourself well? Some fellows have told us they spent a sizable portion of the award on things like a new car, a hot tub, fixing up their house, personal trips, and family. Others spent almost nothing on themselves and put it all into their work. How about you?

In both the *illustrative examples format* and the *illustrative extremes format*, it is critical to avoid asking leading questions. Leading questions are the opposite of neutral questions; they give the interviewee hints about what would be a desirable or appropriate kind

of answer. Leading questions "lead" the respondent in a certain direction. Below are questions I found on transcripts during review of an evaluation project carried out by a reputable university center.

"We've been hearing a lot of really positive comments about this program. So what's your assessment?"

or

"We've already heard that this place has lots of troubles, so feel free to tell us about the troubles you've seen."

or

"I imagine it must be horrible to have a child abused and have to deal with the system, so you can be honest with me. How bad was it?"

Each of these questions builds in a response bias that communicates the interviewer's belief about the situation prior to hearing the respondent's assessment. The questions are "leading" in the sense that the interviewee can be led into acquiescence with the interviewer's point of view.

In contrast, the questions offered below to demonstrate the *illustrative examples format* included several dimensions to provide a balance between what might be construed as positive and negative kinds of responses. I prefer to use the *illustrative example format* primarily as a clarifying strategy after having begun with a simple, straightforward, and truly open-ended question: "What do you think about this program?" or "What has been your experience with the system?" Only if this initial question fails to elicit a thoughtful response, or if the interviewee seems to be struggling, will I offer *illustrative examples* to facilitate a deeper response.

Role-Playing and Simulation Questions

Providing context for a series of questions can help the interviewee hone in on relevant responses. A helpful context provides cues about the level at which a response is expected. One way of providing such a context is to role-play with persons being interviewed, asking them to respond to the interviewer as if he or she were someone else.

Suppose I was a new person who just came into this program, and I asked you what I should do to succeed here, what would you tell me?

or

Suppose I was a new kid in this group home, and I didn't know anything about what goes on around here, what

would you tell me about the rules that I have to be sure to follow?

These questions provide a context for what would otherwise be quite difficult questions, for example, “How does one get the most out of this program?” or “What are the rules of this group home?” The role-playing format emphasizes the interviewees’ expertise—that is, it puts him or her in the role of expert because he or she knows something of value to someone else. The interviewee is *the insider with inside information*. The interviewer, in contrast, as an outsider, takes on the role of novice or apprentice. The “expert” is being asked to share his or her expertise with the novice. I’ve often observed interviewees become more animated and engaged when asked role-playing questions. They get into the role.

A variation on the role-playing format involves the interviewer dissociating somewhat from the question to make it feel less personal and probing. Consider these two difficult questions for a study of a tough subject: teenage suicide.

“What advice would you give someone your age who was contemplating suicide?”

versus

“Think of someone you know and like who is moody. Suppose that person told you that he or she was contemplating suicide. What would you tell that person?”

The first question comes across as abrupt and demanding, almost like an examination to see if he or she knows the right answer. The second question, with the interviewee allowed to create a personal context, is softened and, hopefully, more inviting. While this technique can be overused and can sound phony if asked insensitively, with the right intonation communicating genuine interest and used sparingly, with subtlety, the role-playing format can ease the asking of difficult questions to deepen answers and enhance the quality of responses.

Simulation questions provide context in a different way, by asking the person being interviewed to imagine himself or herself in the situation in which the interviewer is interested.

Suppose I was present with you during a staff meeting.. What would I see going on? Take me there.

or

Suppose I was in your classroom at the beginning of the day when the students first come in. What would

I see happening as the students came in? Take me to your classroom, and let me see what happens during the first 10 to 15 minutes as the students arrive—what you’d be doing, what they’d be doing, what those first 15 minutes are like.

In effect, these questions ask the interviewee to become an observer. In most cases, a response to this question will require the interviewee to visualize the situation to be described. I frequently find that the richest and most detailed descriptions come from a series of questions that ask a respondent to reexperience and/or simulate some aspect of an experience.

Presupposition Questions

Presupposition questions involve a twist on the theme of empathic neutrality. Presuppositions have been identified by linguists as a grammatical structure that creates rapport by assuming shared knowledge and assumptions (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Kartunnen, 1973). Natural language is filled with presuppositions. In the course of our day-to-day communications, we often employ presuppositions without knowing we’re doing so. By becoming aware of the effects of presupposition questions, we can use them strategically in interviewing. The skillful interviewer uses presuppositions to increase the richness and depth of responses.

What then are presuppositions? Linguists Bandler & Grinder (1975) define presuppositions as follows:

When each of us uses a natural language system to communicate, we assume that the listener can decode complex sound structures into meanings, i.e., the listener has the ability to derive the Deep-Structure meaning from the Surface-Structure we present to him auditorily.... We also assume the complex skill of listeners to derive extra meaning from some Surface-Structures by the nature of their form. Even though neither the speaker nor the listener may be aware of this process, it goes on all the time. For example, if someone says: I want to watch Kung Fu tonight on TV we must understand that Kung Fu is on TV tonight in order to process the sentence “I want to watch ...” to make any sense. These processes are called presuppositions of natural language. (p. 241)

Used in interviewing, presuppositions communicate that the respondent has something to say, thereby increasing the likelihood that the person being interviewed will, indeed, have something to say. Consider the following question: “What is the most important experience you have had in the program?” This question presupposes that the respondent has had an

EXHIBIT 7.10 | Illustrative Dichotomous Versus Presupposition Questions

Listed below, on the left, are typical dichotomous questions used to introduce a longer series of questions. On the right are presupposition questions that bypass the

dichotomous lead-in query and, in some cases, show how adding "if any" retains a neutral framing.

DICHOTOMOUS LEAD-IN QUESTION	PRESUPPOSITION LEAD-IN QUESTION
1. Do you feel you know enough about the program to assess its effectiveness?	1. How effective do you think the program is? (Presupposes that a judgment can be made)
2. Have you learned anything from this program?	2. What, if anything, have you learned from this program? (Presupposes that some learning is likely)
3. Do you do anything now in your work that you didn't do before the program began?	3. What, if anything, do you do now that you didn't do before the program began? (Presupposes change)
4. Are there any conflicts among the staff?	4. What kinds of staff conflicts have you observed here? (Presupposes conflicts)

important experience. Of course, the response may be "I haven't had any important experiences." However, it is more likely that the interviewee will internally access an experience to report as important rather than dealing first with the question of whether or not an important experience has occurred.

Contrast the presupposition format—"What is the most important experience you have had in the program?"—to the following dichotomous question: "Have you had any experiences in the program that you would call really important?" This dichotomous framing of the question requires the person to make a decision about what an important experience is and whether one has occurred. The presupposition format bypasses this initial step by asking directly for description rather than asking for an affirmation of the existence of the phenomenon in question. Exhibit 7.10 contrasts typical dichotomous response questions with presuppositions that bypass the dichotomous lead-in query and, in some cases, show how adding "if any" retains a neutral framing. Compare the two question formats, and think about how you would likely respond to each.

A naturalness of inquiry flows from presuppositions making more comfortable what might otherwise be embarrassing or intrusive questions. The presupposition includes the implication that what is presupposed is the natural way things occur. It is natural for there to be conflict in programs. The presupposition provides a stimulus that asks the respondent to mentally access the answer to the question directly without making a decision about whether or not something has actually occurred.

I first learned about interview presuppositions from a friend who worked with the agency in New York City that had responsibility for interviewing carriers of venereal disease. His job was to find out about the carrier's previous sexual contracts so that those persons could be informed that they might have venereal disease. He had learned to avoid asking men "Have you had any sexual relationships with other men?" Instead, he asked, "How many sexual contacts with other men have you had?" The dichotomous question carried the burden for the respondent of making a decision about some admission of homosexuality and/or promiscuity. The presupposition form of the open-ended question implied that some sexual contacts with other men might be quite natural and focused on the frequency of occurrence rather than on whether or not such sexual contacts have occurred at all. The venereal disease interviewers found that they were much more likely to generate open responses with the presupposition format than with the dichotomous response format.

The purpose of in-depth interviews is to find out what someone has to say. By presupposing that the person being interviewed does, indeed, has something to say, the quality of the descriptions received may be enhanced. However, a note of warning: Presuppositions, like any single form of questioning, can be overused. Presuppositions are *one* option. There are many times when it is more comfortable and appropriate to check out the relevance of a question with a dichotomous inquiry (Did you go to the lecture?) before asking further questions (What did you think of the lecture?)

EXHIBIT 7.11 Summary of Question Formats to Facilitate Communicating Interviewer Neutrality

TYPE OF QUESTION	EXAMPLES FROM AN EVALUATION INTERVIEW FOR A PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
1. Illustrative examples format	Now, I'd like to ask you to tell me how you were treated by staff in the program. Some participants have told us that they were treated with respect; some have said that the staff was arrogant and condescending. Some have said staff played favorites; others have said that staff gave the same attention to everyone. Some participants have reported forming close relationships with certain staff; others have said that they didn't get close to any staff. So we've heard lots of diversity in how participants felt treated by staff. What about you—what was your experience with the program staff?
2. Illustrative extremes format	Next, we'd like to ask you about the impact of participating in the program. Some participants have described the experience as transformative; others have said it didn't have much impact on them. What was the impact on you?
3. Role-playing question	You've now completed this program and know a lot about it. If I was a new participant just coming into this program, what advice would you give me about how to get the most out of it?
4. Simulation question	You said the group trust-building exercise gave you important new insights into yourself. Take me into that exercise. Take me through what happened from the beginning to the end.
5. Presupposition questions	What significant relationships did you form with other participants, if any? (Presumes that some significant relationships were probably formed)

Summary of Skillful Questioning to Communicate Neutrality

We've reviewed five question formats to communicate neutrality and help establish rapport. Exhibit 7.11 reviews and summarizes these question types: (1) illustrative examples format, (2) illustrative extremes format, (3) role-playing questions, (4) simulation questions, and (5) presupposition questions. But as important as skillful questioning is, and I believe it's quite important, it is even more important to be attentive to and mindful about the overall patterns of interaction that emerge during an interview and ultimately determine the kind of relationship that gets built between interviewer and interviewee. Rapport and empathy reside in that relationship.

Beyond Skillful Questioning: Relationship-Focused, Interactive Interview Approaches

The interview is a specific form of conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee....

If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk with them? Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction. Human beings talk with each other, they interact, pose questions and answer questions. Through conversations we get to know other people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings and hopes and the world they live in. In an interview conversation, the researcher asks about, and listens to, what people themselves tell about their lived world, about their dreams, fears and hopes, hears their views and opinions in their own words, and learns about their school and work situation—their family and social life. The research interview is an interview where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. (Kvale, 2007, pp. xvii, 1)

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, some approaches to interviewing focus on standardizing the interview protocol so that each person interviewed is asked the same questions in the same way. That standardization is considered the foundation of validity and reliability in traditional social science interviewing (see Exhibit 7.1, pp. 423–424). In contrast, other qualitative methodologists emphasize

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that the depth, honesty, and quality of responses in an interview depend on the *relationship* that develops between the interviewee and the interviewer (Josselson, 2013). Exhibit 7.12 presents six relationship-focused, interactive interview approaches aimed at

establishing rapport, empathy, mutual respect, and mutual trust. It is important not to get so caught up in trying to word questions perfectly that you miss the dynamics of the unfolding relationship that is at the heart of interactive interviewing.

EXHIBIT 7.12 Six Relationship-Focused, Interactive Interview Approaches

Below are six relationship-focused, interactive interview approaches aimed at establishing rapport, empathy, mutual respect, and mutual trust.

INTERVIEW APPROACH	INTERVIEW EMPHASIS	ELABORATION OF THE APPROACH AND RESOURCES
1. <i>The interview conversation</i> (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008)	"An interview is literally an <i>interview</i> , an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (Kvale, 1996, p. 2).	"In an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own words, learns about their views on their work situation and family life, their dreams and hopes" (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). "Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction. Human beings talk with each other—they interact, pose questions, and answer questions. Through conversations we get to know other people, get to learn about their experiences, feelings, and hopes and the world they live in....The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation" (Kvale, 1996, p. 5).
2. <i>Responsive interviewing</i> (Rubin & Rubin, 2012)	Responsive interviewing "emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7).	"Responsive interviewing accepts and adjusts to the personalities of both conversational partners.... Responsive interviewing brings out new information, often of startling candor, and often suggests unanticipated interpretations. The freshness and depth of the interviews makes them exciting to do and, later on, to read.... Responsive interviewing is generally gentle and cooperative, feels respectful, and is ethical" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7).
3. <i>The active interview</i> (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 2003)	An interview is a social interaction with the interviewer and the interviewee sharing in constructing a story and its meanings; both are participants in the meaning-making process. The interviewer facilitates the interviewees in "subjectively creating" their story (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 8).	"Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details.... This activated subject pieces experiences together, before, during, and after occupying the respondent role. As a member of society, he or she mediates and alters the knowledge that the respondent conveys to the interviewer; he or she is 'always already' an active maker of meaning" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, pp. 8–9).
4. <i>Creative interviewing</i> (Douglas, 1985)	Situationally adaptive interviewing that varies interview questions and interviewing processes to	"Creative interviewing is purposefully situated interviewing. Rather than denying or failing to see the situation of the interview as a determinant of what goes on in the questioning and answering processes, creative interviewing

INTERVIEW APPROACH	INTERVIEW EMPHASIS	ELABORATION OF THE APPROACH AND RESOURCES
	fit the particular situation and context in which the interview interaction occurs.	embraces the immediate, concrete situation; tries to understand how it is affecting what is communicated; and, by understanding these effects, changes the interviewer's communication processes to increase the discovery of the truth about human beings" (Douglas, 1985, p. 22).
5. <i>Reflective interviewing</i> (Roulston, 2010)	Integrates the theoretical conception of the interview, the researcher's relationship to the inquiry and participants, and the methodological review of the interview interaction to inform design (Roulston, 2010, p. 1).	" <i>The reflective interviewer understands</i> [italics added]: research subjectivities; subject positions occupied by the researcher in relation to research participants . . . ; theoretical perspectives and assumptions that relate to interviewing . . . ; and how to analyze interview interaction to inform data analysis and interview practice" (Roulston, 2010, p. 4). "Qualitative interviewers and social researchers learn by doing, and reflection on doing" (Roulston, 2010, p. 6).
6. <i>Portraiture interviewing</i> (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)	Portraiture is a negotiated co-creation between the social scientist and the person being depicted. "The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of authentic and compelling narrative" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv).	Portraiture interviewing "blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portaitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv).

Pacing and Transitions in Interviewing

The longer an interview, the more important it is to be aware of pacing and transitions. The popular admonition to “go with the flow” alerts us to the fact that flow varies. Sometimes there are long stretches of calm water in a river trip; then around a corner, there are rapids. A river narrows and widens as it flows. To “go with the flow,” you must be aware of the flow. Interviews have their own flow. Here are some ways to manage the flow.

Prefatory Statements and Announcements

The interaction between interviewer and interviewee is greatly facilitated when the interviewer alerts the interviewee to what is about to be asked before it is actually asked. Think of it as warming up the respondent, or ringing the interviewee’s mental doorbell. This is done with prefatory statements that introduce

a question. These can serve two functions. First, a preface alerts the interviewees to the nature of the question that is coming, directs their awareness, and focuses their attention. Second, an introduction to a question gives respondents a few seconds to organize their thoughts before responding. Prefaces, transition announcements, and introductory statements help smooth the flow of the interview. Any of several formats can be used.

The *transition format* announces that one section or topic of the interview has been completed and a new section or topic is about to begin.

We've been talking about the goals and objectives of the program. Now I'd like to ask you some questions about actual program activities. What are the major activities offered to participants in this program?

or

We've been talking about your childhood family experiences. Now I'd like to ask you about your memories of and experiences in school.

The transition format essentially says to the interviewee, "This is where we've been . . . , and this is where we're going." Questions prefaced by transition statements help maintain the smooth flow of an interview.

An alternative format is the *summarizing transition*. This involves bringing closure to a section of the interview by summarizing what has been said and asking if the interviewee has anything to add or clarify before moving on to a new subject.

Before we move on to the next set of questions, let me make sure I've got everything you said about the program goals and objectives. You said the program had five goals. First, . . . Second, . . .

Before I ask you some questions about program activities related to these goals, are there any additional goals or objectives that you want to add?

The *summarizing transition* lets the person being interviewed know that the interviewer is actively listening to and recording what is being said. The summary invites the interviewee to make clarifications, corrections, or additions before moving on to a new topic.

The *direct announcement format* simply states what will be asked next. A preface to a question that announces its content can soften the harshness or abruptness of the question itself. Direct prefatory statements help make an interview more conversational and easily flowing. The transcriptions below show two interview sequences, one without prefatory statements and the other with prefatory statements.

- **Question without preface:** How have you changed as a result of the program?
- **Question with preface:** Now, let me ask you to think about any changes you see in yourself as a result of participating in this program. (Pause). How, if at all, have you been changed by your experiences in this program?

The *attention-getting preface* goes beyond just announcing the next question to making a comment about the question. The comment may concern the importance of the question, the difficulty of the question, the openness of the question, or any other characteristic of the question that would help set the stage. Consider these examples:

- This next question is particularly important to the program staff. How do you think the program could be improved?

CONTEXTUALIZING A QUESTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

How you introduce a question can have a significant impact on how interviewees respond. Kim Manturuk, Senior Research Associate at the University of North Carolina Center for Community Capital, interviewed low-income people about whether they had enough food to eat. Manturuk (2013) found that asking the question straight out could be offensive.

We added an introduction along the lines of "In these difficult economic times, more people are finding it difficult to always have the kinds of foods they like." . . . We found that, by setting it up so that the cause of food insecurity was the economy (and not an individual failing), people seemed more comfortable answering. (p. 1)

- This next question is purposefully vague so that you can respond in any way that makes sense to you. What difference has this program made to the larger community?
- This next question may be particularly difficult to answer with certainty, but I'd like to get your thoughts on it. In thinking about how you've changed during the past year, how much has this program caused those changes compared with other influences on your life at this time?
- This next question is aimed directly at getting your unique perspective. What's it like to be a participant in this program?
- As you may know, this next issue has been both controversial and worrisome. What kinds of staff are needed to run a program like this?

The common element in each of these examples is that some prefatory comment is made about the question to alert the interviewee to the nature of the question. The attention-getting format communicates that the question about to be asked has some unique quality that makes it particularly worthy of being answered.

Making statements about the questions being asked is a way for the interviewer to engage in some conversation during the interview without commenting judgmentally on the answers being provided by the interviewee. What is said concerns the questions and not the respondent's answers. In this fashion, the interview can be made more interesting and interactive. However, all of these formats must be used selectively and strategically. Constant repetition of the same format or mechanical use of a particular approach will make the interview more awkward rather than less so. Exhibit 7.13 summarizes the pacing and transition formats we've just discussed.

EXHIBIT 7.13 Summary of Pacing and Transition Formats

PACING AND TRANSITION FORMATS	EXAMPLES FOR A WORKPLACE CULTURE INTERVIEW
1. Straight transition statements	We've been talking about what it was like when you first started working here. Now, I'd like to ask about the people you work with most closely.
2. Summarizing transition	So you've told me about how senior management roles are different from middle management roles. Your descriptions of the differences are very helpful. Before we move on to how work teams operate, is there anything that you want to add to what you've said about management roles?
3. Preparatory preface	Now, let me ask you to think about the training you've received since you came to work here. (Pause). Let's start by listing to the different kinds of training you've received; then, I'd like to ask you to tell me about each one.
4. Attention-getting preface	This next set of questions is very important to understanding what it's like to work here. I'm going to ask you to tell me about conflicts among people. I want to reiterate that your answers are confidential and will not be identified as coming from you. We find that all organizations have at least some conflicts among people. So let me ask you to think about an example of a conflict you've experienced and tell me about it.

Probes and Follow-Up Questions

Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired. The word *probe* is usually best avoided in interviews—a little too proctological. The expression “Let me probe that further” can sound as if you’re conducting an investigation of something illicit or illegal. Quite simply, a probe is a follow-up question used to go deeper into the interviewee’s responses. As such, probes should be conversational, offered in a natural style and voice, and used to follow up initial responses.

One natural set of conversational probes consists of *detail-oriented questions*. These are the basic questions that fill in the blank spaces of a response.

When did that happen?

Who else was involved?

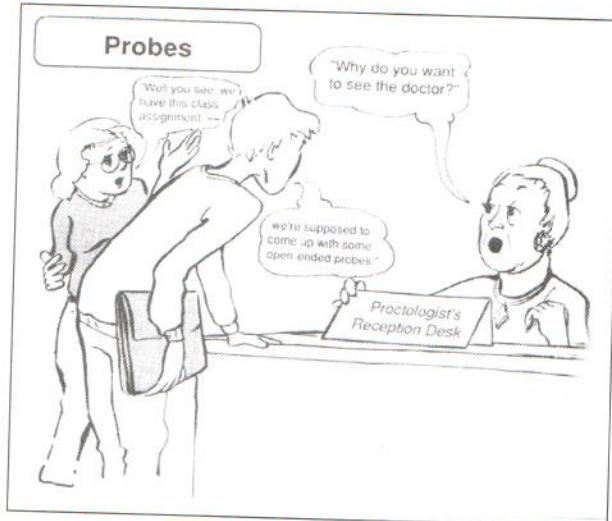
Where were you during that time?

What was your involvement in that situation?

How did that come about?

Where did that happen?

These *detail-oriented probes* are the basic “who,” “where,” “what,” “when,” and “how” questions that are used to obtain a complete and detailed picture of some activity or experience.



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At other times, an interviewer may want to keep a respondent talking about a subject by using *elaboration probes*. The best cue to encourage continued talking is nonverbal—gently nodding your head as positive reinforcement. However, overenthusiastic head nodding may be perceived as endorsement of the content of a response or as wanting the person to stop talking because the interviewer has already understood what the respondent has to say. Gentle and strategic head nodding is aimed at communicating that you are listening and want to go on listening.

The verbal corollary of head nodding is the quiet “uh-huh.” A combination may be necessary; when

the respondent seems about to stop talking and the interviewer would like to encourage more comment, a combined “uh-huh” with a gentle rocking of the whole upper body can communicate interest in having the interviewee elaborate.

Elaboration probes also have direct verbal forms:

- Would you elaborate on that?
- That's helpful. I'd appreciate a bit more detail.
- I'm beginning to get the picture. (The implication is that I don't have the full picture yet, so please keep talking.)

If something has been said that is ambiguous or an apparent non sequitur, a *clarification probe* may be useful. Clarification probes tell the interviewee that you need more information, a restatement of the answer, or more context.

You said the program is a “success.” What do you mean by “success”? I’m not sure I understand what you meant by that. Would you elaborate, please?

I want to make sure I understand what you’re saying. I think it would help me if you could say some more about that.

A *clarification probe* should be used naturally and gently. It is best for the interviewer to convey the notion that the failure to understand is the fault of the interviewer and not a failure of the person being interviewed. The interviewer does not want to make the respondent feel inarticulate, stupid, or muddled. After one or two attempts at achieving clarification, it is usually best to leave the topic that is causing confusion and move on to other questions, perhaps returning to that topic at a later point.

Another kind of clarifying follow-up question is the *contrast probe* (McCracken, 1988, p. 35). The purpose of a contrast probe is to “give respondents something to push off against” by asking, “How does *x* compare with *y*?” This is used to help define the boundaries of a response. How does this experience/feeling/action/term compare with some other experience/feeling/action/term?

A major characteristic that separates probes from general interview questions is that probes are seldom written out in an interview. *Probing is a skill that comes from knowing what to look for in the interview, listening carefully to what is said and what is not said, and being sensitive to the feedback needs of the person being interviewed.* Probes are always a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues. Silence at the end of a response can indicate as effectively as anything else that the interviewer would like the person to continue. Probes are used to communicate what the interviewer wants. More detail? Elaboration? Clarity?

ENTERING INTO THE WORLDS OF OTHERS THROUGH INTERVIEWING IN THE FIELD

In *Far From the Tree*, Andrew Solomon (2012) reports his inquiry into family experiences of deafness, dwarfism, autism, schizophrenia, disability, prodigies, transgender, crime, and children born of rape. Over 10 years, he interviewed more than 300 families. He reflects,

I had to learn a great deal to be able to hear these men and women and children. On my first day at my first dwarf convention, I went over to help an adolescent girl who was sobbing. “This is what I look like,” she blurted between gasps, and it seemed she was half laughing. “These people look like me.” Her mother, who was standing nearby, said, “You don’t know what this means to my daughter. But it also means a lot to me, to meet these other parents who will know what I’m talking about.” She assumed I, too, must be a parent of a child with dwarfism; when she learned that I was not, she chuckled, “For a few days, now, you can be the freakish one” (p. 41).

Follow-Up Questions: Listening for Markers

Follow-up questions pick up on cues offered by the interviewee. While probes are used to get at information the interviewer knows is important, follow-up questions are more exploratory. The interviewee says something almost in passing, maybe as an afterthought or a side comment, and you note that there may be something there worth following up on. Weiss (1994) calls these “markers.”

I define a marker as a passing reference made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state.... 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. (p. 77)

In interviewing participants in the wilderness-based leadership program, one section asked about any concerns leading up to participation. In the midst of talking about having diligently followed the suggested

training routine (hiking at least a half-hour every day leading up to the program), a participant mentioned that she knew a friend whose boyfriend had died in a climbing accident on a wilderness trip; then, she went on talking about her own preparation. When she had finished describing how she had prepared for the program, I returned to her comment about the friend's boyfriend. Quite unexpectedly, pursuing this casual offhand comment (marker) opened up strong feelings, not about possible injuries or death but about the possibility of forming romantic relationships on the 10-day wilderness experiences. It turned out to mark a decisive shift in the interview into a series of important and revealing interpersonal issues that provided a crucial context for understanding her subsequent program experiences.

Probes and follow-up questions, then, provide guidance to the person interviewed. They also provide the interviewer with a way to facilitate the flow of the interview, a subject we now go to.

Process Feedback During the Interview

Previous sections have emphasized the importance of thoughtful wording so that interview questions are clear, understandable, and answerable. Skillful question formulation and probing concern the content of the interview. This section emphasizes feedback about how the interview *process* is going.

A good interview feels like a connection has been established in which communication is flowing two ways. Qualitative interviews differ from interrogations or detective-style investigations. The qualitative interviewer has a responsibility to communicate clearly what information is desired and why that information is important, and to let the interviewee know how the interview is progressing.

An interview is an interaction in which an interchange occurs and a temporary interdependence is created. The interviewer provides stimuli to generate a reaction. That reaction from the interviewee, however, is also a stimulus to which the interviewer responds. You, as the interviewer, must maintain awareness of how the interview is flowing, how the interviewee is reacting to questions, and what kinds of feedback are appropriate and helpful to maintain the flow of communication.

Support and Recognition Responses

A common mistake among novices is failing to provide reinforcement and feedback. This means letting the interviewee know from time to time that the purpose of the interview is being fulfilled. Words of thanks,

support, and even praise will help make the interviewee feel that the interview process is worthwhile and support ongoing rapport. Here are some examples:

- Your comments about program weaknesses are particularly helpful, I think, because identification of the kind of weaknesses you describe can really help in considering possible changes in the program.
- It's really helpful to get such a clear statement of what it feels like to be an "outsider" as you've called yourself. Your reflections are just the kind of thing we're trying to get at.
- We're about halfway through the interview now, and from my point of view, it's going very well. You've been telling me some really important things. How's it going for you?
- I really appreciate your willingness to express your feelings about that. You're helping me understand—and that's exactly why I wanted to interview you.

You can get clues about what kind of reinforcement is appropriate by watching the interviewee. When verbal and nonverbal behaviors indicate that someone is really struggling with a question, going mentally deep within, working hard trying to form an answer, after the response it can be helpful to say something like the following: "I know that was a difficult question and I really appreciate your working with it because what you said was very meaningful and came out very clearly. Thank you."

At other times, you may perceive that only a surface or shallow answer has been provided. It may then be appropriate to say something like the following:

I don't want to let that question go by without asking you to think about it just a little bit more, because I feel you've really given some important detail and insights on the other questions and I'd like to get more of your reflections about this question.

In essence, the interviewer, through feedback, is "training" the interviewee to provide high-quality and relevant responses.

Maintaining Control and Enhancing the Quality of Responses

Time is precious in an interview. Long-winded responses, irrelevant remarks, and digressions reduce the amount of time available to focus on critical questions. These problems exacerbate when the interviewer fails to maintain a reasonable degree of control over the process. Control is facilitated by (a) knowing what you want to find out, (b) asking focused questions to get relevant answers, (c) listening attentively

CREATIVE BUMBLING

If doing nothing can produce a useful reaction, so can the appearance of being dumb. You can develop a distinct advantage by waxing slow of wit. Evidently, you need help. Who is there to help you but the person who is answering your questions? The result is the opposite of the total shutdown that might have occurred if you had come on glib and omniscient. If you don't seem to get something, the subject will probably help you get it. If you are listening to speech and at the same time envisioning it in print, you can ask your question again, and again, until the repeated reply will be clear in print. Who is going to care if you seem dumber than a cardboard box? Reporters call that *creative bumbling*.

—John McPhee (2014, p. 50)
Journalist

to assess the quality and relevance of responses, and (d) giving appropriate verbal and nonverbal feedback to the person being interviewed.

Knowing what you want to find out means being able to recognize and distinguish relevant from irrelevant responses. It is not enough just to ask the right questions: You, the interviewer, must listen carefully to make sure that the responses you receive provide meaningful answers to the questions you ask. Consider the following exchange:

- Q:** What happens in a typical interviewer training session that you lead?
- A:** I try to be sensitive to where each person is at with interviewing. I try to make sure that I am able to touch base with each person so that I can find out how she or he is responding to the training, to get some notion of how each person is doing.
- Q:** How do you begin a session, a training session?
- A:** I believe it's important to begin with enthusiasm, to generate some excitement about interviewing.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the importance of distinguishing different kinds of questions and answers: behavior, opinion, knowledge, feelings (see Exhibit 7.7, p. 445). In the interaction above, the interviewer is asking descriptive, behavioral questions. The responses, however, are about beliefs and hopes. The answers do not actually describe what happened. Rather, they

describe what the interviewee thinks *ought* to happen (opinions). Since the interviewer wants behavioral data, it is necessary to first recognize that the responses are not providing the kind of data desired, and then to ask appropriate follow-up questions that will lead to behavioral responses, something like this:

Interviewer: Okay, you try to establish contact with each person and generate enthusiasm at the beginning. What would help me now is to have you actually take me into a training session. Describe for me what the room looks like, where the trainees are, where you are, and tell me what I would see and hear if I were right there in that session. What would I see you doing? What would I hear you saying? What would I see the trainees doing? What would I hear the trainees saying? *Take me into a session so that I can actually experience it, if you will.*

It is the interviewer's responsibility to work with the person being interviewed to facilitate the desired kind of responses. At times, it may be necessary to give very direct feedback about the difference between the response given and what is desired.

Interviewer: I understand what you try to do during a training session—what you hope to accomplish and stimulate. Now I'd like you to describe to me what you actually do, not what you expect, but what I would actually see happening if I were present at the session.

It's not enough to simply ask a well-formed and carefully focused initial question. Neither is it enough to have a well-planned interview with appropriate basic questions. The interviewer must listen actively and carefully to responses to make sure that the interview is working. I've seen many well-written interviews that have resulted in largely useless data because the interviewer did not listen carefully and thus did not recognize that the responses were not providing the information needed. The first responsibility, then, in facilitating the interview interaction is knowing what kind of data you are looking for and managing the interview so as to get quality responses.

Verbal and Nonverbal Feedback

Giving appropriate feedback to the interviewee is essential in pacing an interview and maintaining control of

SKILLFUL AND EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

Anyone who uses interviewing in their evaluation work—and, let's face it, most of us do—learns over time the importance of following a fruitful line of questioning:

Focused but not narrow; flexible but not directionless.

We need to make sure that our interview (1) goes after what's most important; (2) doesn't go off on tangents; (3) keeps the interviewee engaged; and (4) doesn't get prematurely evaluative by throwing in conclusions while still gathering the evidence.

—E. Jane Davidson and Patricia Rogers
Genuine Evaluation Blog (January 4, 2013)

the interview process. Head nodding, taking notes, “uh-huhs,” and silent probes (remaining quiet when a person stops talking to let him or her know that you’re waiting for more) are all signals to the person being interviewed that the responses are on the right track. These techniques encourage greater depth in responses, but you also need skill and techniques to stop a highly verbal respondent who gets off the track. The first step in stopping the long-winded respondent is to cease giving the usual cues that encourage talking: stop nodding the head, interject a new question as soon as the respondent pauses for breath, stop taking notes, or call attention to the fact that you’ve stopped taking notes by flipping the page of the writing pad and sitting back, waiting. When these nonverbal cues don’t work, you simply have to interrupt the long-winded respondent.

Let me stop you here for a moment. I want to make sure I fully understand something you said earlier. (Then ask a question aimed at getting the response more targeted.)

or

Let me ask you to stop for a moment because some of what you’re talking about now I want to get later in the interview. First, I need to find out from you....

Interviewers are sometimes concerned that it is impolite to interrupt an interviewee. It certainly can be awkward, but when done with respect and sensitivity, the interruption can actually help the interview. It is both patronizing and disrespectful to let the respondent run on when no attention is being

paid to what is said. It is respectful of both the person being interviewed and the interviewer to make good use of the short time available to talk. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to help the interviewee understand what kind of information is being requested and to establish a framework and context that makes it possible to collect the right kind of information.

Reiterating the Purpose of the Interview as a Basis for Focus and Feedback

Helping the interviewee understand the purpose of the overall interview and the relationship of particular questions to that overall purpose are important pieces of information that go beyond simply asking questions. While the reason for asking a particular question may be absolutely clear to the interviewer, don’t assume it’s clear to the respondent. You communicate respect for the persons being interviewed by giving them the courtesy of explaining why the questions are being asked. Understanding the purpose of a question will increase the motivation of the interviewee to respond openly and in detail.

The overall purpose of the interview is conveyed in an opening statement. Specific questions within the interview should have a connection to that overall purpose. (We’ll deal later with issues of informed consent and protection of human subjects in relation to opening statements of purpose. The focus here is on communicating purpose to improve responses. Later, we’ll review the ethical issues related to informing interviewees about the study’s purpose.) While the opening statement at the beginning of an interview provides an overview about the purpose of the interview, it will still be appropriate and important to explain the purpose of particular questions at strategic points throughout the interview. Here are two examples from evaluation interviews.

- This next set of questions is about the program staff. The staff has told us that they don’t really get a chance to find out how people in the program feel about what they do, so this part of the interview is aimed at giving them some direct feedback. But as we agreed at the beginning, the staff won’t know who said what. Your responses will remain confidential.
- This next set of questions asks about your background and experiences before you entered this program. The purpose of these questions is to help us find out how people with varying backgrounds have reacted to the program.

The One-Shot Question

Informal, conversational interviewing typically takes place as a natural part of fieldwork. It is opportunistic and often unscheduled. A chance arises to talk with someone when the interview is under way. More structured and scheduled interviewing takes place by way of formal appointments and site visits. Yet the best-laid plans for scheduled interviews can go awry. You arrive at the appointed time and place only to find that the person to be interviewed is unwilling to cooperate or needs to run off to take care of some unexpected problem. When faced with such a situation, it is helpful to have a single, one-shot question in mind to salvage at least something. This *one-shot question* is the one you ask if you are only going to get a few minutes with the interviewee.

For an agricultural extension needs assessment, I was interviewing farmers in rural Minnesota. The farmers in the area were economically distressed, and many of them felt alienated from politicians and professionals. I arrived at a farm for a scheduled interview, but the farmer refused to cooperate. At first, he refused to even come out of the barn to call off the dogs surrounding my truck. Finally, he appeared and said,

I don't want to talk to you tonight. I know I said I would, but the wife and I had a tiff and I'm tired. I've always helped with your government surveys. I fill out all the forms the government sends. But I'm tired of it. No more. I don't want to talk.

I had driven a long way to get this interview. The fieldwork was tightly scheduled, and I knew that I would not get another shot at this farmer, even if he later had a change of heart. And I didn't figure it would help much to explain that I wasn't from the government. Instead, to try and salvage the situation, I took my one-shot question, a question stimulated by his demeanor and overt hostility.

I'm sorry I caught you at a bad time. But as long as I'm here, let me ask you just one quick question; then, I'll be on my way. Is there anything you want to tell the bastards in Saint Paul?

He hesitated for just a moment, grinned, and then launched into a tirade that turned into a full, two-hour interview. I never got out of the truck, but I was able to cover the entire interview (though without ever referring to or taking out the written interview schedule). At the end of this conversational interview, which had fully satisfied my data collection needs, he said, "Well, I've enjoyed talkin' with you, and I'm sorry about refusin' to fill out your form. I just don't want to do a survey tonight."

I told him I understood and asked him if I could use what he had told me as long as he wasn't identified. He readily agreed, having already signed the consent form when we set up the appointment. I thanked him for the conversation. My scheduled, structured interview had become an informal, conversational interview developed from a last ditch, one-shot question.

Here's a different example. The story is told of a young ethnographer studying a village that had previously been categorized in anthropological studies as aggressive and war oriented. He sat outside the school at the end of the day and asked each boy who came out his one-shot, stupid, European question: "What do men do?" The responses he obtained overwhelmingly referred to farming and fishing and almost none to warfare. In one hour, he had a totally different view of the society from that portrayed by previous researchers.

The Final or Closing Question

In the spirit of open-ended interviewing, it's important in qualitative interviewing to provide an opportunity for the interviewee to have the final say: "That covers the things I wanted to ask. Anything you care to add?" I've gotten some of my richest data from this question with interviewees taking me in directions that had never occurred to me to pursue.

In a routine evaluation of an adult literacy program, we were focused on what learning to read meant to the participants. At the end of the interview, I asked, "What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?" Without hesitation one young Hispanic woman replied, "About sexual harassment." The program had a major problem that the evaluation ended up exposing.

Experienced qualitative methodologist David Morgan (2012) offers this advice about bringing closure to an interview:

I think there are two basic points [for] closure: first [is] to avoid ending with the sense "OK, I've got my data, so long." The second is to give the participant[s] a chance to express their thoughts in their own voice.

The question I use most often is: "Out of all the things we've talked about today—or maybe some topics we've missed—what should I pay most attention to? What should I think about when I read your interview?" (p. 1)

It can also be helpful to leave interviewees with a way to contact you in case they want to add something that they forgot to mention, or clarify some point.

This way, you don't "close the door," but leave it ajar—and it is up to them whether they want to open it again.

I think it also gives the participants some power in the process—to decide when the process is over, rather than the researcher doing so. (Gustason, 2012, p. 1)

Beyond Technique

We've been looking with some care at different kinds of questions in an effort to polish interviewing technique and increase question precision. Below I'll offer suggestions about the mechanics of managing data collection—things like recording the data and taking notes. Before moving on, though, it may be helpful to step back and remember the larger purpose of qualitative inquiry so that we don't become overly technique oriented. You're trying to understand a person's world and worldview. That's why you ask focused questions in a sensitive manner. You're hoping to elicit relevant answers that are meaningful and useful in understanding the interviewee's perspective. That's basically what interviewing is all about.

HOW MUCH TECHNIQUE?

Sociologist Peter Berger is said to have told his students, "In science as in love, a preoccupation with technique may lead to impotence."

To which Halcolm adds, "In love as in science, ignoring technique reduces the likelihood of attaining the desired results. The path of wisdom joins that of effectiveness somewhere between the outer boundaries of ignoring technique and being preoccupied with it."

This chapter has offered ideas about how to do quality interviews, but ultimately, no recipe can prescribe the single right way of interviewing. No single correct format exists that is appropriate for all situations, and no particular way of wording questions will always work. The specific interview situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique situation for each interview. Therein lies the challenge of qualitative interviewing.

Maintaining focus on gathering information that is useful, relevant, and appropriate requires concentration, practice, and the ability to separate that which is foolish from that which is important. In his great novel *Don Quixote*, Cervantes (1964) describes a scene in which his uneducated sidekick Sancho is rebuked by the knight errant Don Quixote for trying to impress his cousin by repeating deeply philosophical questions and answers that he has heard from others, all the

while trying to make the cousin think that these were Sancho's own insights.

"That question and answer," said Don Quixote, "are not yours, Sancho. You have heard them from someone else."

"Whist, sir," answered Sancho, "if I start questioning and answering, I shan't be done till tomorrow morning. Yes, for if it's just a matter of asking idiotic questions and giving silly replies, I needn't go begging help from the neighbors."

"You have said more than you know, Sancho," said Don Quixote, "for there are some people who tire themselves out learning and proving things that, once learned and proved, don't matter a straw as far as the mind or memory is concerned." (p. 682)

Regardless of which interview strategy is used—the informal conversational interview, the interview guide approach, or a standardized open-ended interview—the wording of questions will affect the nature and quality of the responses received. So will careful management of the interview process. Constant attention to *both content and process*, with both informed by the purpose of the interview, will reduce the extent to which, in Cervantes's words, researchers and evaluators "tire themselves out learning and proving things that, once learned and proved, don't matter a straw as far as the mind or memory is concerned."

Mechanics of Gathering Interview Data

Recording the Data

No matter what style of interviewing you use and no matter how carefully you word questions, it all comes to naught if you fail to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed. The raw data of interviews are the actual quotations spoken by interviewees. Nothing can substitute for these data—the actual things said by real people. That's the prize sought by the qualitative inquirer.

Data interpretation and analysis involve making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said. These processes occur primarily during the analysis phase, after the data have been collected. During the interviewing process itself—that is, during the data collection phase—the purpose of each interview is to record as fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee's perspective. Some

method for recording the verbatim responses of people being interviewed is therefore essential.

As a good hammer is essential to fine carpentry, a good recorder is indispensable to fine fieldwork. Recorders do not “tune out” conversations, change what has been said because of interpretation (either conscious or unconscious), or record words more slowly than they are spoken. (Recorders, do, however, malfunction.) Obviously a researcher doing conversational interviews as part of covert fieldwork does not walk around with a recorder. However, most interviews are arranged in such a way that recorders are appropriate if properly explained to the interviewee:

I'd like to record what you say so I don't miss any of it. I don't want to take the chance of relying on my notes and maybe missing something that you say or inadvertently changing your words somehow. So, if you don't mind, I'd very much like to use the recorder. If at any time during the interview you would like to stop the recorder, just let me know.

When it is not possible to use a recorder because of some sensitive situation, interviewee request, or recorder malfunction, notes must become much more thorough and comprehensive. It becomes critical to gather actual quotations. When the interviewee has said something that seems particularly important or insightful, it may be necessary to say,

I'm afraid I need to stop you at this point so that I can get down exactly what you said because I don't want to lose that particular quote. Let me read back to you what I have and make sure it is exactly what you said.

This point emphasizes again the importance of capturing what people say in their own words.

But such verbatim note taking has become the exception now that most people are familiar and comfortable with recorders. More than just increasing the accuracy of data collection, using a recorder permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee. If you tried to write down every word said, you'd have a difficult time responding appropriately to interviewee needs and cues. Ironically, *verbatim* note taking can interfere with listening attentively. The interviewer can get so focused on note taking that the person speaking gets only secondary attention. Every interview is also an observation, and having one's eyes fixed on a note pad is hardly conducive to careful observation. In short, the interactive nature of in-depth interviewing can be seriously affected by an attempt to take verbatim notes. Lofland (1971) has made this point forcefully:

One's full attention must be focused upon the interviewee. One must be thinking about probing for further explication or clarification of what he is now saying; formulating probes linking up current talk with what he has already said; thinking ahead to putting in a new question that has now arisen and was not taken account of in the standing guide (plus making a note at that moment so one will not forget the question); and attending to the interviewee in a manner that communicates to him that you are indeed listening. All of this is hard enough simply in itself. Add to that the problem of writing it down—even if one takes shorthand in an expert fashion—and one can see that the process of note-taking in the interview decreases one's interviewing capacity. Therefore, if conceivably possible, *record*; then one can interview. (p. 89)

ADVICE FROM AN EXPERIENCED JOURNALIST ON RECORDING AN INTERVIEW

Whatever you do, don't rely on memory. Don't even imagine that you will be able to remember verbatim in the evening what people said during the day. And don't squirrel notes in a bathroom—that is, runoff to the john and write surreptitiously what someone said back there with the cocktails. From the start, make clear what you are doing and who will publish what you write. Display your notebook as if it were a fishing license. While the interview continues, the notebook may serve other purposes, surpassing the talents of a taperecorder. As you scribble away, the interviewee is, of course, watching you. Now, unaccountably, you slowdown, and even stop writing, while the interviewee goes on talking. The interviewee becomes nervous, tries harder, and spills out the secrets of a secret life, or may be just a clearer and more quotable version of what was said before. Conversely, if the interviewee is saying nothing of interest, you can pretend to be writing just to keep the enterprise moving forward.

—John McPhee (2014, p. 50)
Distinguished journalist

So if verbatim note taking is neither desirable nor really possible, what kinds of notes are taken during a recorded interview?

Taking Notes During Interviews

The use of the recorder does not eliminate the need for taking notes, but you take strategic and focused

notes, not verbatim notes. Notes can serve at least four purposes:

1. Notes taken during the interview can help the interviewer formulate new questions as the interview moves along, particularly where it may be appropriate to check out something said earlier.
2. Looking over field notes before transcripts are done helps make sure the inquiry is unfolding in the hoped-for direction and can stimulate early insights that may be relevant to pursue in subsequent interviews while still in the field—the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry.
3. Taking notes will facilitate later analysis, including locating important quotations, from the recording.
4. Notes are a backup in the event the recorder has malfunctioned or, as I've had happen, a recording is erased inadvertently during transcription.

When a recorder is being used during the interview, notes will consist primarily of key phrases, lists of major points made by the respondent, and key terms or words shown in quotation marks that capture the interviewee's own language. It is useful to develop some system of abbreviations and informal shorthand to facilitate taking notes, for example, in an interview on leadership writing "L" instead of the full word. Some important conventions along this line include (a) using quotation marks *only* to indicate full and actual quotations; (b) developing some mechanism for indicating interpretations, thoughts, or ideas that may come to mind during the interview, for example, the use of brackets to set off one's own ideas from those of the interviewee; and (c) keeping track of questions asked as well as answers received. Questions provide the context for interpreting answers.

Note taking serves functions beyond the obvious one of taking notes. Note taking helps pace the interview by providing nonverbal cues about what's important, providing feedback to the interviewee about what kinds of things are especially "noteworthy"—literally. Conversely, the failure to take notes may indicate to the respondent that nothing of particular importance is being said. And don't start making out your work "to do" list while someone is droning on endlessly. The person might think that you're taking notes. Enchanted, he or she will keep on talking. The point is that taking notes affects the interview process. Be mindful of those effects.

After the Interview: Quality Control

The period after an interview or observation is critical to the rigor and validity of qualitative inquiry. This is a time for guaranteeing the quality of the data.

Immediately after a recorded interview, check the recording to make sure it worked. If, for some reason, a malfunction occurred, you should immediately make extensive notes of everything that you can remember. Even if the recorder functioned properly, you should go over the interview notes to make certain that they make sense and to uncover areas of ambiguity or uncertainty. If you find things that don't quite make sense, as soon possible check back with the interviewee for clarification. This can often be done over the telephone. In my experience, people who are interviewed appreciate such a follow-up because it indicates the seriousness with which the interviewer is taking their responses. Guessing the meaning of a response is unacceptable; if there is no way of following up the comments with the respondent, then those areas of vagueness and uncertainty simply become missing data.

The immediate postinterview review is a time to record details about the setting and your observations about the interview. Where did the interview occur? Under what conditions? How did the interviewee react to questions? How well do you think you did asking questions? How was the rapport?

Answers to these questions establish a context for interpreting and making sense of the interview later. Reflect on the quality of information received. To what extent did you find out what you really wanted to find out in the interview? Note weaknesses and problems: poorly worded questions, wrong topics, poor rapport. Reflect on these issues, and make notes on the interview process while the experience is still fresh in your mind. These process notes will inform the methodological section of your research report, evaluation, or dissertation.

Reflection as Qualitative Data

This period after an interview or observation is a critical time for reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful. This kind of postinterview ritual requires discipline. Interviewing and observing can be exhausting, so much so that it is easy to forego this time of reflection and elaboration, put it off, or neglect it altogether. To do so is to seriously undermine the rigor of qualitative inquiry. Interviews and observations should be scheduled so that sufficient time is available for data clarification, elaboration,

and evaluation afterward. Where a team is working together, the whole team needs to meet regularly to share observations and debrief together. This is the beginning of analysis, because, while the situation and data are fresh, insights can emerge that might otherwise be lost. Ideas and interpretations that emerge following an interview or observation should be written down and clearly marked as emergent, field-based insights to be further reviewed later.

I think about the time after an interview as a period for postpartum reflection, a time to consider what has been revealed and what has been birthed. In eighteenth-century Europe, the quaint phrase “in an interesting condition” became the genteel way of referring to an expectant mother in “polite company.” The coming together of an interviewer and an interviewee makes for “an interesting condition.” The interviewer is certainly expectant, as may be the interviewee. What

emerged? What was created? Did it go okay? Is some form of triage necessary? As soon as a child is born, a few basic observations are made, and tests are performed to make sure that everything is alright. That’s what you’re doing right after an interview—making sure that everything came out okay.

Such an analogy may be a stretch for thinking about a postinterview debrief, but interviews are precious to those who hope to turn them into dissertations, contributions to knowledge, and evaluation findings. It’s worth managing the interview process to allow time to make observations about, reflect on, and learn from each interview.

Up to this point, we’ve been focusing on techniques to enhance the quality of the standard one-on-one interview. We turn now to some important variations in interviewing and specialized approaches. We begin with interviewing groups.

EXHIBIT 7.19 Examples of Standardized Open-Ended Interviews

The edited interviews below were used in evaluation of an Outward Bound program for the disabled. Outward Bound is an organization that uses the wilderness as an experiential education medium. This particular program consisted of a 10-day experience in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of Minnesota. The group consisted of half able-bodied participants and half disabled participants, including paraplegics; persons with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or other developmental disabilities; blind and deaf participants; and, on one occasion, a quadriplegic. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the program; the second interview was used at the end of the 10-day experience; and the third interview took place six months later. To save space, many of the probes and elaboration questions have been deleted, and space for writing notes has been eliminated. The overall thrust and format of the interviews have, however, been retained.

Precourse Interview: Minnesota Outward Bound School Course for the Able-Bodied and the Disabled

This interview is being conducted before the course as part of an evaluation process to help us plan future courses. You have received a consent form to sign, which indicates your consent to this interview. The interview will be recorded.

1. First, we'd be interested in knowing how you became involved in the course. How did you find out about it?
 - a. What about the course appealed to you?
 - b. What previous experiences have you had in the outdoors?
2. Some people have difficulty deciding to participate in an Outward Bound course, and others decide fairly easily. What kind of decision process did you go through in thinking about whether or not to participate?
 - a. What particular things were you concerned about?
 - b. What is happening in your life right now that stimulated your decision to take the course?
3. Now that you've made the decision to go on the course, how do you feel about it?
 - a. How would you describe your feelings right now?
 - b. What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?

4. What are your expectations about how the course will affect you personally?
 - a. What changes in yourself do you hope will result from the experience?
 - b. What do you hope to get out of the experience?
5. During the course you'll be with the same group of people for an extended period of time. What feelings do you have about being part of a group like that for nine full days?
 - a. Based on your past experience with groups, how do you see yourself fitting into your group at Outward Bound?

For the Disabled

6. One of the things we're interested in understanding better as a result of these courses is the everyday experience of disabled people. Some of the things we are interested in are as follows:
 - a. How does your disability affect the types of activities you engage in?
 - b. What are the things that you don't do that you wish you could do?
 - c. How does your disability affect the kinds of people you associate with? *Clarification:* Some people find that their disability means that they associate mainly with other disabled persons. Others find that their disability does not affect their contacts with people. What has your experience been along these lines?
 - d. Sometimes people with disabilities find that their participation in groups is limited. What has been your experience in this regard?

For the Able-Bodied

7. One of the things we're interested in understanding better as a result of these courses is feelings that able-bodied people have about being with disabled folks. What kinds of experiences with disabled people have you had in the past?
 - a. What do you personally feel you get out of working with disabled people?
 - b. In what ways do you find yourself being different from your usual self when you're with disabled people?
 - c. What role do you expect to play with disabled people on the Outward Bound course? *Clarification:* Are there any particular things you expect to have to do?

- d. As you think about your participation in this course, what particular feelings do you have about being part of an outdoor course with disabled people?
- 8. About half of the participants on the course are disabled people, and about half are people without disabilities. How would you expect your relationship with the disabled people to be different from your relationship with course participants who are not disabled?
- 9. We'd like to know something about how you typically face new situations. Some people kind of like to jump into new situations, whether or not some risk is involved. Other people are more cautious about entering situations until they know more about them. Between these two, how would you describe yourself?
- 10. Okay, you've been very helpful. Are there other thoughts or feelings you'd like to share with us to help us understand how you're seeing the course right now. Anything at all you'd like to add?

Postcourse Interview

We're conducting this interview right at the end of your course with Minnesota Outward Bound. We hope this will help us better understand what you've experienced so that we can improve future courses. You have signed a form giving your consent for material from this interview to be used in a written evaluation of the course. This interview is being tape-recorded.

- 1. To what extent was the course what you expected it to be?
 - a. How was it different from what you expected?
 - b. To what extent did the things you were concerned about before the course come true?
 - b-1. Which things came true?
 - b-2. Which didn't come true?
- 2. How did the course affect you personally?
 - a. What changes in yourself do you see or feel as a result of the course?
 - b. What would you say you got out of the experience?
- 3. During the past nine days, you've been with the same group of people constantly. What kind of feelings do you have about having been a part of the same group for that time?

- a. What feelings do you have about the group?
- b. What role do you feel you played in the group?
- c. How was your experience with this group different from your experiences with other groups?
- d. How did the group affect you?
- e. How did you affect the group?
- f. In what ways did you relate differently to the able-bodied and disabled people in your group?
- 4. What is it about the course that makes it have the effects it has? What happens on the course that makes a difference?
 - a. What do you see as the important parts of the course that make an Outward Bound course what it is?
 - b. What was the high point of the course for you?
 - c. What was the low point?
- 5. How do you think this course will affect you when you return to your home?
 - a. Which of the things you experienced this week will carry over to your normal life?
 - b. What plans do you have to change anything or do anything differently as a result of this course?

For the Disabled

- 6. We asked you before the course about your experience of being disabled. What are your feelings about what it's like to be disabled now?
 - a. How did your disability affect the type of activities you engaged in on the course? *Clarification:* What things didn't you do because of your disability?
 - b. How was your participation in the group affected by your disability?

For the Able-Bodied

- 7. We asked you before the course your feelings about being with disabled people. As a result of the experiences of the past nine days, how have your feelings about disabled people changed?
 - a. How have your feelings about yourself in relation to disabled persons changed?
 - b. What did you personally get out of being/working with disabled people on this course?

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- c. What role did you play with the disabled people?
- d. How was this role different from the role you usually play with disabled people?
8. Before the course, we asked you how you typically faced a variety of new situations. During the past nine days, you have faced a variety of new situations. How would you describe yourself in terms of how you approached these new experiences?
 - a. How was this different from the way you usually approach things?
 - b. How do you think this experience will affect how you approach new situations in the future?
9. Suppose you were being asked by a government agency whether or not they should sponsor a course like this. What would you say?
 - a. What arguments would you give to support your opinion?
10. Okay, you've been very helpful. We'd be very interested in any other feelings and thoughts you'd like to share with us to help us understand your experience of the course and how it affected you.

Six-Month Follow-Up Interview

This interview is being conducted about six months after your Outward Bound course to help us better understand what participants experience so that we can improve future courses.

1. Looking back on your Outward Bound experience, I'd like to ask you to begin by describing for me what you see as the main components of the course? What makes an Outward Bound course what it is?
 - a. What do you remember as the highlight of the course for you?
 - b. What was the low point?
2. How did the course affect you personally?
 - a. What kinds of changes in yourself do you see or feel as a result of your participation in the course?
 - b. What would you say you got out of the experience?
3. For nine days, you were with the same group of people, how has your experience with the Outward Bound group affected your involvement with groups since then?

For the Disabled

(*Check previous responses before the interview. If the person's attitude appears to have changed, ask if he or she perceives a change in attitude.)

4. We asked you before the course to tell us what it's like to be disabled. What are your feelings about what it's like to be disabled now?
 - a. How does your disability affect the types of activities you engage in? *Clarification:* What are some of the things you don't do because you're disabled?
 - b. How does your disability affect the kinds of people you associate with? *Clarification:* Some people find that their disability means that they associate mainly with other disabled persons. Other people with disabilities find that their disability in no way limits their contacts with people. What has been your experience?
 - c. As a result of your participation in Outward Bound, how do you believe you've changed the way you handle your disability?

For the Able-Bodied

5. We asked you before the course to tell us what it's like to work with the disabled. What are your feelings about what it's like to work with the disabled now?
 - a. What do you personally feel you get out of working with disabled persons?
 - b. In what ways do you find yourself being different from your usual self when you are with disabled people?
 - c. As you think about your participation in the course, what particular feelings do you have about having been part of a course with disabled people?
6. About half of the people on the course were disabled people, and about half were people without disabilities. To what extent did you find yourself acting differently with disabled people compared with the way you acted with able-bodied participants?
7. Before this course, we asked you how you typically face new situations. For example, some people kind of like to jump into new situations even if some risks are involved. Other people are more cautious, and so on. How would you describe yourself along these lines right now?

- a. To what extent, if at all, has the way you have approached new situations since the course been a result of your Outward Bound experience?
- 8. Have there been any ways in which the Outward Bound course affected you that we haven't discussed? If yes, how? Would you elaborate on that?
 - a. What things that you experienced during that week carried over to your life since the course?
 - b. What plans have you made, if any, to change anything or do anything differently as a result of the course?
- 9. Suppose you were being asked by a government agency whether or not they should support a course like this. What would you say?
 - a. Who shouldn't take a course like this?
- 10. Okay, you've been very helpful. Any other thoughts or feelings you might share with us to help us understand your reactions to the course and how it affected you?
 - a. Anything at all you'd like to add?

EXHIBIT 7.20 Interview Case Study Example

The Experience of Youth Homelessness: Thmaris Tells His Story

The following case study is one of 14 done as part of a study of youth homelessness in Minnesota (Murphy, 2014).

Thmaris (the name he created for himself for this case study)

Thmaris was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1990. He has an older and a younger brother, and was raised by his mother. His family moved to Minnesota in 1996 but didn't have housing when they moved here. As a result, they moved around a lot between extended family members' homes and family shelters, never staying anywhere for more than a year. His mother was addicted to alcohol and drugs, and it often fell on Thmaris and his older brother to take care of their younger brother. Consequently, Thmaris has been earning money for the family since he turned 12. Sometimes this was through a job—like the construction apprenticeship he had at age 12—and sometimes this was through stealing or dealing weed. Even though he stole and dealt when he had to, he recognized early on that he was happiest when he was working with his hands and providing for his family through a job.

When Thmaris was 13, his mother entered an alcoholic treatment program, and he and his brothers went to stay with his uncle. Thmaris remembers this as one of the lowest points in his life. There were six kids in a three-bedroom house, with people coming and going. There was never enough food or clothing, and it didn't feel safe. When his mother returned from the treatment center to get them from the uncle's home, Thmaris thought things

would get better, but they got much worse. His mother accused Thmaris's older brother of molesting Thmaris and their little brother, and these accusations tore his family apart. To this day, he doesn't understand why she did this.

She really went above and beyond to try to prove it and try to accuse him. I know that made him feel like nothing. I know it made him feel like the worse kinds of person. It wasn't true. There was no truth to it. My bigger brother, he's super protective and he's not that type of dude. It just hurt me for her to do something like that and to accuse her own son of something like that. She just accused him of the worst crime type ever. That really stuck with us.

Not only was it painful to watch his mother accuse their brother of something he didn't do, but also as a result, they lost their older brother, their protector, and the closest thing to a father figure that they had. This placed Thmaris in a tough position, where he felt that he had to align his loyalties either with this older brother or with his mother. If he placed his loyalties with his older brother, it would mean that he couldn't have a relationship with his younger brother.

He had to place us to a distance. He stepped back from being in our lives a lot. When he went to Chicago to stay with my dad, it was like we never saw him, we never talked to him. It was confusing for me because I'm the middle child. So I have a little brother and I have an older brother. When she sent my brother away, I always felt like she abandoned him, just threw him out of our lives. . . . I would go up to Chicago to see my brother, I'd

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stay there for a couple of months, just to get that big brother/small brother bond again. Then, I would come back because I didn't want my little brother growing up like, "Dang. Both of my brothers left me." It was just always really hard and I just felt like [my mother] just put me in a position to choose, to choose whether I want to be around my little brother or my big brother.

Once again, Thmaris found himself having to grow up quickly. With his older brother gone, he felt that he had become the sole provider for and protector of his younger brother.

His mother continued to cycle in and out of treatment programs, and Thmaris and his younger brother likewise cycled in and out of foster care. Foster care was a time of relative peace and stability for Thmaris and his brother as they developed a relationship with their foster mother that they maintain to this day. He was always drawn back to family though and ended up staying with his mother when he was 16. He remembers this year as the longest year of his life. At this time, she wasn't able to have the boys stay with her because she had Section 8 housing and they weren't named on her lease. He was angry at the world and fighting with anyone and everyone. He started running with a gang and was getting into a lot of trouble. There were many nights that his mother would lock him out as a consequence of this behavior.

After being locked out several times, Thmaris decided that he'd had it and told his mother that he was moving out. This was the night Thmaris became homeless. When he first moved out, he stayed with his girlfriend. When he couldn't stay with her, he would couch hop or sleep outside in public places. Thmaris's girlfriend at the time introduced him to the drop-in centers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. She had a baby and used to visit the drop-in centers to get pampers, wipes, and other baby supplies. Thmaris gravitated toward the drop-in center, which he felt had a smaller, more intimate feel to it. First and foremost, he used it as a place to get off of the streets and be safe. He also appreciated the support they provided for doing things such as writing resumes, applying for jobs, and locating apartments, but he only took advantage of them sporadically.

When asked to recall his first impressions of the drop-in center, Thmaris describes a place that had some clear rules and expectations. While at the drop-in center, Thmaris knew he couldn't use profanity, fight, smoke, bring in drugs, or be intoxicated. The expectation was that you try your hardest to succeed in whatever you want to do.

They help you with a lot of stuff. I just feel like there's nothing that you really need that you can't really get from here. If you really need underwear and socks and t-shirts, they have closets full of stuff like that. If you really need toothpaste and toothbrushes and deodorant and all that stuff, all the hygiene stuff, they have that here. If you have a whole lot of stuff but nowhere to go, they have lockers here where you can leave your stuff here and can't nobody really get in them. They have showers here that you can use if you really need it. I just feel like they have so many resources for you it's ridiculous.

During his first few years utilizing the drop-in center, Thmaris continued to be in a gang and was frequently in and out of jail. Being a gang member was his primary source of income, and he was loyal to his fellow gang members even when it got him in trouble. He recalls a time when he got arrested for auto theft.

I was in jail a lot. I remember back in 2009 I was running with this group of guys and they was doing breaking and entering and stuff like that. I knew it could come with jail time or whatever, but I just seen these guys with a lot of money and I was very broke at the time. So I'm like, well, I'm doing it with these guys.

One time we go to this one house, and there's a car there. The guy I'm with gets the car and he was driving it around. We get to the house, and he's like, "Well, I forgot to go to the store to get some something." He's like, "Could you go to the store?"

I'm like, "Yeah." So I get the car and I get the keys and I go to the store. And right away I was just surrounded by cops, and I got thrown in jail for auto theft. I could have easily just gave those guys up, but I had always been taught to be a man of responsibility. If I did something, then I should take responsibility for it. So I got thrown in jail; I got a year and a day of jail time over my head with five years' probation.

After this conviction, Thmaris was starting to use the resources at the drop-in center more consistently and secured a job delivering newspapers. Because he had a job and was making progress, he was accepted into a Transitional Living Program (TLP). Things were moving in a direction that Thmaris felt good about, but he violated the probation related to the auto theft and lost his place in the TLP program. He describes violating his probation because his probation officer was in Washington County and Thmaris was staying in St. Paul. It was hard to report to a parole officer in St. Cloud when Thmaris didn't have

consistent access to transportation, so Thmaris decided to serve his year and a day instead. He spent time in two correctional facilities before being released after eight months. By the time he was released, he had lost his job and his spot in the TLP.

Turning Point

Going to jail and losing his TLP was a turning point for Thmaris. When he got out of jail, he recalls saying to himself,

I need to stop with the crimes and committing crimes and just try to find something different to do with my life. . . . So I got back in school. I went to school for welding technology, and that's been my main focus ever since I got out at that time. It's been rare that I would go back to jail. If I did, it would be for arguing with my girlfriend or not leaving the skyway when they wanted me to, so it was like trespassing and stuff like that. After I got out of Moose Lake, it just really dawned on me that I needed to change my life and that the life that I was living wasn't the right path for me.

But he didn't know how to do this on his own, so when he got out of prison, he went straight to the drop-in center to ask his case manager for help.

Thmaris's case manager is supported by a Healthy Transitions grant through the Minnesota Department of Health. He works specifically with homeless, unaccompanied youth who spent at least 30 days in foster care between the ages of 16 and 18. Each time a young person visits the drop-in center for the first time, he or she is asked about his or her previous experience with the foster care system. If they report being in foster care between the ages of 16 and 18 for at least 30 days, then they will typically be up on the case load of one of the workers supported by the Healthy Transitions grant. Thmaris had two case workers previous to Rahim but was transferred to Rahim when Rahim began working with youth under Healthy Transitions. This was a lucky move for Thmaris because this relationship developed into one that has been deeply meaningful to him.

I just feel that ever since I turned 20 I realized that I'm an adult and that I have to make better choices, not just for me but the people around me. Didn't nobody help me with that but Rahim. . . . the things that he was able to do, he made sure that he did them. I remember days that I'd come down to Safe Zone, and I'd be like,

Rahim, I haven't eaten in two days or, Rahim, I haven't changed my underwear in like a week or whatever. He would give me bus cards to get to and from interviews. He would give me Target cards to go take care of my personal hygiene. He would give me Cub cards to go eat. It was like every problem or every obstacle I threw in front of him, he made sure that I would overcome it with him. He was like the greatest mentor I ever had. I've never had nobody like that.

Out of all the other caseworkers I had, nobody ever really sat me down and tried to work out a resolution for my problems. They always just gave me pamphlets like, "Well, go call these people and see if they can do something for you." Or, "You should go to this building because this building has that, what you want." It was like every time I come to him I don't have to worry about anything. He's not going to send me to the next man, put me on to the next person's caseload. He just always took care of me. If I would have never met Rahim, I would have been in a totally different situation, I would have went a totally different route.

Without the support of Rahim and the resources at the drop-in center, Thmaris is sure he would still be in a gang and dealing weed and would eventually end up in jail again.

And it wasn't just that Rahim was there for him, it's also that Rahim has been with the drop-in center for more than five years. This consistency has meant a lot to Thmaris, who shared, "I just seen a lot of case managers come and go. Rahim is the only one that has never went anywhere. So many years have gone past, and Rahim is here." After his turning point, Rahim recalls Thmaris coming in to the drop-in center with an intense focus on changing his life.

He was here, pretty close to everyday, and he'd never been here that frequently before. He was here all the time, working on job searches. He started to take school really, really seriously, which has been a really positive and strong thing for him. And we kind of sat together and figured out a path that hopefully would help provide for him over time. He got his high school diploma, which was really huge. I think just being successful at something was helpful. He's a smart kid. I think getting his high school diploma helped convince him of that.

Thmaris recalls this time similarly. "Everything I was doing [with Rahim] was productive. When you get that feeling like you're accomplishing something and you're doing good, it's like a feeling that you can't describe."

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Going Back to School

When Thmaris first thought about going back to school, he was planning to go just to get a student loan check like many of the homeless youth around him. But Rahim helped him see a different path. Knowing of Thmaris's past positive experiences with construction and building, Rahim urged Thmaris to consider careers that would allow him to work with his hands and to focus on the big picture. He also made sure that Thmaris had the support of a learning specialist from Saint Paul Public Schools, who helped Thmaris figure out what steps he would need to take to get from where he was then to his dream career of welding.

The first time I ever talked to him about school. I was like, "Yeah, man. I just feel like I should go to school and get a loan." And he was like, "Well, it's bigger than that. That loan money is going to be gone like that."

He didn't tell me, no, you shouldn't do that. He just said just think about the future. And I just thought about it. I was thinking and I was thinking. And then I was like, "What if I went to school for something that I want to get a job in?" He was, "Yeah, that's the best way to go."

I talked to him about construction, and he told me you already basically have experience in that because he knows all the jobs I had. So he was like you should go into something that's totally different but that pays a lot of money. Then I researched it and then just knew that I liked working with my hands. So I just put two and two together and was like, well, I want to go to school for welding. Ever since I learned how to weld it's like . . . I love it!

Thmaris loved welding but was intimidated by the engineering part of the learning, which he called "book work." Again, it was Rahim's belief in him that helped him persevere.

I started doing the book work, and I was getting overwhelmed. It was like every time I came down here—even if I just came down here to use the phone—Rahim would be like, "How's that welding class going?"

He just kept me interested in it. I don't know how to explain it. I was just thirsty—not even to get a job in it—but to show Rahim what I'd learned and what I accomplished.

He would tell me, "I'm proud of you." Then I'd show him my book work, and he'd be like, "Man, I don't even know how to read this stuff." And it just made me feel like I

was actually on the right path. It made me feel like I was doing what I was intended to do with my life. That's just how he makes me feel. He makes me feel like when I'm doing the right thing, and he makes sure that I know it.

Thmaris finished his welding certificate with a 4.0 grade point average and the high positive regard of his teachers, and he did this against great odds. He was homeless while completing the program, meaning that he had no consistent place to sleep, to do homework, or to even keep his books. Getting to campus was challenging because tokens were hard to come by. During this time, he was also dealing with one of his greatest challenges, unhealthy relationships with older women. In part, these relationships are a survival technique. Any time living with these women is time off of the streets. But these relationships are also, in part, a symptom of Thmaris's desire to be loved, to have a family, and to take care of others.

I just super easily fall in love. I always look for the ones that have been through the most, the ones that have always had a rough time, and I try to make their life better. That's the biggest thing for me, is trying to stay away from love. I don't know. I'm just so into love. It's probably because I wanted my mom and dad to be together so bad it killed me. Every time she brought a new man home it killed me inside. So I just want a family.

The relationship he was in while attending his first semester of welding classes ended badly. She threw away or burned everything Thmaris owned and paid people to jump him and "beat the hell out of him." They broke his hand and wrist so badly that surgery was required, and the healing time was long and painful. Despite all of this, Thmaris persevered. He completed his welding certificate and is now completing his general education requirements.

Leaving the Gang

To choose this different path, Thmaris had to leave his gang. His case manager helped him with this too by talking through what it was that the gang offered him. Certainly, it offered money and friends, but as Thmaris got older, it also offered more opportunities to serve extended jail time. While Thmaris was in jail for auto theft, no one from the gang came to see him, put money in the book for him, or checked on his little brother. Thmaris identified this as one of the greatest challenges he's had to overcome.

I think the first biggest thing I had to do was leave a lot of friends that weren't on the same level or the same

type of mentality that I was on. I had to leave them alone, regardless of if I knew them my whole life or not.

Thmaris's case manager thinks his commitment to school was critical in helping Thmaris leave his gang. He described leaving a gang as follows.

Leaving a gang is almost like drug addiction. You have to replace it with something. And in Thmaris's instance, he actually can replace it with this really furious effort towards getting his education, looking for jobs, and trying to do something different with himself. If he had just tried to quit the gang and replaced it with nothing and did nothing all day, it would've been a lot harder. But he replaced it with this welding certificate, and that was really good. He got very, very excited about welding. It's nice because he is naturally good at it.

Becoming a Father

Thmaris has also recently become a father. He currently has a three-month-old son, named after him, who is his pride and joy. But he and the mother have a rocky relationship, and it's frustrating to Thmaris, who would like to raise his child with his child's mother. He didn't grow up with his own father in the picture and would like something different for his own son. He feels that his son would be happier in life waking up each day seeing both of his parents.

Man, I just have so many plans for him. I just . . . I don't want to put him on a pedestal or anything because I don't want him to go through having a dad that thinks so highly of him and then it's so hard for him to meet my goals. I want him to make his goals. I want him to be happy. That's all I care about. Regardless if he wants to work at Subway instead of going to school . . . if that's your choice, that's your choice.

Becoming a father has also helped him give up the gang life and weed. He realizes that if he doesn't stop selling drugs, then he might not live long enough to see his son grow up.

I don't want to sell drugs all my life and then when I die and my son be like, "Wow. Dad didn't leave me nothing or he didn't teach anything but how to sell drugs." No, that's not what you would want for your son. You want your son to know what it is to work for his money. You want your son to know how it feels to come from a long day's work, tired, like, "Damn. I earned my money though."

Couch Hopping

Throughout his time visiting drop-in centers, Thmaris has never stayed at a youth or adult shelter. He typically couch hops or stays with women he is dating. Some nights, he walks the skyway all night or sleeps in a stairwell. After staying in family shelters when he was younger, he has vowed to himself that he would never stay in another shelter again.

When we first came to Minnesota that's all we did. We stayed in shelter as a family. It was like traumatizing to me because [in shelters] you see like humans at their weakest point. You see them hungry, dirty. I didn't like that. I don't like being around a whole bunch of people that was . . . I'm not saying that I feel like I'm better than anybody because I definitely don't. But I just felt like it was too much to take in. It was too stressful, and it just made me want to cry. It was crazy. I don't want to go back to a shelter ever again.

Where He Is Now

Currently, Thmaris isn't stably housed. He spends some nights at his baby's mother's house, some nights with friends, other nights outside, and some nights at a hotel room. But despite this, he feels very positive and hopeful about his life.

The fact that I have my certificate for welding and I'm certified for welding, that just blows me away. I would have never thought in a million years that I would have that. Even though I've still got to look for a job and I still got a long ways to go, I just feel proud of myself. . . . I know a lot of people that don't even have high school diplomas or a GED and they're struggling to get into college and people going to college just to go get a loan and stuff like that.

I just feel like I'm bettering myself. I've learned a lot over these past seven years. I've matured a great deal. I honestly feel that I'm bettering myself. I don't feel like I'm taking any steps back, regardless or not if I have employment or if I have my own house. I just feel like each day I live more and I learn more and I just feel . . . I'm just grateful to be alive, grateful to even go through the things I'm going through.

Thmaris credits having someone believe in him as critically important in helping him learn how to believe in himself. He says the following about his case manager:

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He just saw more in me. I didn't even see it at the time. He saw great potential, and he told me that all the time. "Man, I see great potential in you. I see that. You can just be way much more than what you are." Just to keep coming down here and having somebody have that much faith in you and believe in you that much, it's a life changer.

My mom always used to tell me that I wasn't shit, you know what I'm saying? She was a super alcoholic, and when she gets drunk she always say that. "You ain't shit, your daddy ain't shit, you ain't going to be shit." She was just always down on me. Just to hear somebody really have an interest in you or want you to better yourself, it just changed my life.

I honestly feel like if I didn't have Rahim in my corner, I would have been doing a whole bunch of dumb shit. I would have been right back at square one. I probably would have spent more time in jail than I did. I just felt like if it wasn't for him I probably wouldn't be here right now talking to you.

Through this relationship, Thmaris was able to learn things that others may take for granted, such as how to create an e-mail account, write a resume, apply for a job online, or use time productively.

To be honest, I never knew what a resume was, I never knew how to create an e-mail account, I never knew how to send a resume online, I never knew how to do an application for a job online. He taught me everything there was about that. He taught me how to look for an apartment, he taught me how to look for a job, he taught me how to dress, he taught me how to talk to a boss, how to talk to a manager, how to get a job. There's just a lot of stuff like that.

I also learned that there's always something to do productively instead of wasting your time. So I just thought about making my resume better. And I just thought about sending e-mails to companies that I knew were hiring, and just doing productive stuff. I never knew what "productive" was until Rahim. I just didn't think about time that was being wasted.

Thmaris hopes to open his own shop someday doing car modifications. He wants to make his son proud, and despite their difficult history and relationship, he wants to make his mother proud. He knows it will take a lot of work to do this but feels motivated and determined to do so.

That's what I basically learned from being at [the drop-in center]. I understand now the value of doing what you need to do versus what you want. A lot of people say, "Men do what they want and boys do what they can." But that's not it. It's "Men do what they need to do and boys do what they want." I'm so glad I learned that for real. Because I was always just doing what I wanted to do.

He's proud that he's been able to overcome the challenges in his life in order to get a high school diploma and graduate from his welding program. Feeling successful has just fueled Thmaris's ambition to experience more success.

You don't know how it felt when I graduated high school. I was like, "Wow, I did this on my own?" And it just felt so good. I'm thirsty again to get another certificate or diploma or whatever just because it's just the best feeling in the world. It's better than any drug. It's like, man, I don't even know how to explain it. It just felt like you just climbed up to the top of the mountain and just like you made it.

Thmaris feels that without the drop-in center and his case manager he might be in jail right now. He sees other young people "wasting their time" at the drop-in center and wishes he could tell them what he now knows.

If you're still stuck in that stage where you don't know what you want to do with your life, then come here and sit down with a case manager. Try to talk to somebody, and they'll help you better your situation.

For Thmaris, the drop-in center and his case manager were key to helping him quit his addiction, leave his gang, get a high school diploma and welding certificate, and start to build a life for himself that he's proud of.



APPLICATION EXERCISES

1. Construct an interview that includes (a) a section of standardized open-ended questions and (b) interview guide topics. (See Exhibit 7.4, pp. 437–438.) Interview at least three people. As part of the interview, look for opportunities to add in emergent, conversational questions not planned in advance. After doing the interviews, discuss the differences you experienced among these three interview format approaches. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
2. Discuss what in-depth interviewing can and cannot do. What are the strengths and weaknesses of in-depth, open-ended interviewing? As part of your discussion, comment on the following quotation by financial investment advisor Fred Schwed (2014):

Like all of life's rich emotional experiences, the full flavor of losing important money cannot be conveyed by literature. Art cannot convey to an inexperienced girl what it is truly like to be a wife and mother. There are certain things that cannot be adequately explained to a virgin either by words or pictures. Nor can any description I might offer here even approximate what it feels like to lose a real chunk of money that you used to own.

3. Exhibit 7.7 (p. 445) presents a matrix of question options. To understand how these options are applied in an actual study, review a real interview. The Outward Bound standardized interview, Exhibit 7.19 (pp. 508–511), at the end of this chapter, can be used for this purpose. Identify questions that fit in as many cells as you can. That is, which cell in the matrix (Exhibit 7.7) is represented by each question in the Outward Bound interview protocol?
4. Exhibit 7.12 (pp. 462–463) presents six approaches to *interactive, relationship-based interviewing*. What do these approaches have in common? How are they different from each other? Why are these approaches controversial from the perspective of traditional social science interviewing? (see Exhibit 7.3, Item 2, p. 433)
5. Exhibit 7.20 (pp. 511–516), at the end of this chapter, presents a case study of a homeless youth, Thmaris, based on an in-depth interview with him. What is your reaction to the case study? What purposes does it serve? How would you expect it might be used? What makes the case study effective?
6. Examine an oral history data set. Select and compare three oral histories from a collection. Here are examples:
 - The Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, with transcripts available through Smith College: <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/vof/vof-intro.html>
 - Oral history project transcripts made available by University of South Florida: <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/ohp>
7. Locate a qualitative study in your area of interest, discipline, or profession that made extensive use of interviewing as the primary method of data collection. What approach to interviewing was used? Why? How was the study designed and conducted to ensure high-quality data? What challenges, if any, are reported? How were they handled? What ethical issues, if any, are reported and discussed? Overall, assess how well the study reports on the interviewing methods used to allow you to make a judgment about the quality of the findings. What questions about the interviewing approach and its implications are left unanswered?