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Table of Contents
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LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

THE ART AND METHOD OF
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES

ROBERT S. WEISS

THE FREE PRESS

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 3

PREPARATION FOR INTERVIEWING

WHAT DO YOU INTERVIEW ABOUT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now, for some reason, my colleague told me what I wanted to know. He said, yes, he could think of a specific interview. A week before our lunch he had interviewed someone for a book on which he was working. The morning of his interview he had listed the ten to twelve questions he wanted answered. He was able to list them because he knew, in general, the kind of information that would give his account substance. The questions he listed were the ones important to the book that he thought his respondent could answer.

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

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

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

A GOOD REPORT

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

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

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

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

DIACHRONIC REPORTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

SYNCHRONIC REPORTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FROM SUBSTANTIVE FRAME TO INTERVIEW GUIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the guide is more fully detailed, interviewers may have to be cautioned not to shift from qualitative interviewing to survey-style interviewing in order to cover everything. Focusing closely on the guide, at the cost of attention to the respondent and the flow of the interview, is always a mistake. Some of my worst interviews have been produced by a conscientious attempt to cover the topics in a guide. Permitting the respondent to talk about what the respondent wants to talk about, so long as it is anywhere near the topic of the study, will always produce better data than plodding adherence to the guide. Even though the interviewer should try to cover the guide, the interviewer should be prepared to concentrate attention on matters on which the respondent is especially able to report, even at the cost of skimping on other matters.

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

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

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

4. GRATIFICATIONS AND BURDENS OF WORK
   a. What is R going for in his work? Obtain incidents in which R's work was gratifying to him. What were the gratifications? If not noted, ask about challenge, achievements, contributions.
   b. What does R have in mind as he does his work? Instances of "flow"? Ask, if appropriate, "Can you think of a time when you lost yourself in your work?"
   c. Obtain incidents in which R was unhappy at work and when work produced distress.
   d. Obtain incidents of stress. How did these incidents develop? What was their outcome?
5. RECOGNITION AND REWARDS
   a. How does R see his standing at work? How does he come to know it?
   b. Obtain incidents in which R's work was responded to by others. If not volunteered, ask about performance reviews, salary and bonuses, verbal recognition.

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

QUANTITATIVE ITEMS

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

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

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

STANDARD GUIDES AND TAILORED GUIDES

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

EARLY INTERVIEWS AS LEARNING EXPERIENCES

When we try to imagine developments in a situation we don't know firsthand (such as what it is like to be a member of a submarine crew), we must adapt images from experiences we have had. We construct our initial understandings from the heroes, villains, and other characters who are members of our internal repertory company; the places we have been ourselves or have read about or have seen on television; and the plot developments our lives have taught us to anticipate. Our construction is never exactly right. When we actually interview someone in the situation, we inevitably discover that we didn't understand fully, and perhaps not at all.

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

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

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

Just as interview guides take a while to stabilize, so too can research aims. Every funding agency requires that investigators know what they are after and be able to list the aims of the study in their proposals. Sometimes there are indeed specific questions the investigator hopes to answer. Yet it is often the case that the investigator knows only that the area of study is attractive, possibly because it is important and yet murky, possessed of mysteries. It is as though the area dares the investigator to discover what is going on. You couldn't very well write *that* into a research proposal.

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

TO TAPE OR NOT TO TAPE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

know what changes you have made in the respondent's actual comments.

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

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

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

TRANSCRIPTION

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

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

If a study's budget is limited, consideration might be given to listening to a tape once, transcribing only what seems likely to be useful and paraphrasing the rest or noting something like "From minute 24 through 29 discussion of relationship with boss." Another approach is to take notes on what is contained on the tape, never transcribing at all except for quotations to be used in the report. Still another approach is to take notes during the interview even though it is also being tape-recorded. The notes, when typed, can provide an index to the tape, and transcription can be done as needed.

Not long ago I participated in a study whose budget was too tight to fund the costs of transcription of interviews, let alone the travel costs of face-to-face interviews with respondents spread across the country. The aim of the study was to diagnose the source of a malaise within a national organization and to prescribe its remedy. I conducted taped telephone interviews with half a dozen organization members. I took sketchy notes on the interviews but did not transcribe any of the tapes. While writing my part of the report I listened to a couple of the tapes to remind myself of their contents and also drew from them a few telling quotations. Mostly, I relied on what I had learned while conducting the interviews and could consult my notes to be reminded of the remainder.

As in so much else in qualitative interview studies, there is no single right way. Everything depends on what is to be accomplished, the level of resources, and the nature of constraints.

HOW LONG SHOULD AN INTERVIEW LAST?

Most survey studies try to keep interviews to an hour or less. But qualitative interviews can run as long as 8 hours—with breaks, of course. If the interview is easy and sustaining, the respondent interested and cooperative, and the material instructive, and if there are no time constraints, a reasonable expectation is that the interview will go for an hour and a half or 2 hours. I do not often observe respondents getting tired or restless at the 2-hour point unless something has gone wrong in the interview. I may be tired, but respondents seem more often to be enlivened.

If there is tension in the interview because the respondent is ambivalent about being interviewed, then holding the interview to an hour might be right. If you don't know what to anticipate, you might ask respondents to plan on an hour and a half, with the option of ending earlier or going on for a bit. Half an hour seems about the minimum time for an interview. Although any interchange, no matter how brief, can produce an interesting observation, I find it difficult to develop a coherent account in an interview of under half an hour.

Once in a while a respondent seems willing to go on longer than I am. I believe it is good policy to support the fullest report a respondent can give and to continue an interview as long as it is productive. Nevertheless, interviewing can be wearing, and I can only do it for so long. When I become too tired to be fully in touch with what I am being told and it is possible for me to schedule another interview, I call a halt and make another appointment. But if the respondent lives far from me, and I'm not up for another two-hour drive out and two-hour drive back, or if there is no possibility of rescheduling, I'll stay with an interview as long as there is material to cover.

HOW MANY INTERVIEWS WITH THE SAME RESPONDENT?

It is almost always desirable, if time and costs permit, to interview respondents more than once. You have to keep your frame pretty narrow if you plan to cover it all in a single sitting. Furthermore, a first meeting is partly about establishing the research partnership. Interviewer and respondent get to know each other, get a sense of the rhythm of interchange, and establish the outlines of the respondent's story. When they meet again they know each other better. Also, in the intervening time the respondent may have begun thinking about the areas discussed, and memories may have surfaced. Or the respondent may have been made more sensitive to the issues of the interview and may therefore have newly noted incidents worth reporting.

With increasing contact and increasing confidence in the research procedure respondents are likely to be more willing to report fully. In the study of occupationally successful men it was only in a fourth interview that a respondent talked about his wife's alcoholism. In a study of women who were single parents, where we interviewed a small sample every 2 weeks for about 5 months, we normally did not learn about the emotional ups and downs in relationships with boyfriends until the fifth or sixth interview.

Only infrequently does the cost of a second interview with a respondent outweigh its usefulness. Third interviews are generally also worth doing. Of importance here is the number of areas to be covered in the interviewing. Fourth and fifth interviews are likely to produce a sense of diminishing returns, except when they provide information on continuing stories in respondents' lives. It is not that nothing at all is learned from fourth or subsequent interviews; respondents can always report on new events or new aspects of already described events. The question is whether the investigator might not gain more by interviewing additional respondents.

Sometimes it is desirable to interview a few respondents many times but most respondents only a few times. That can provide the study with both extensive case reports and a reasonable sample size.

DO YOU PAY RESPONDENTS?

Some funded studies now pay respondents for their time. A New York City study of drug users, for example, paid respondents twenty-five dollars plus two subway tokens for completed interviews. My impression is that with very low income respondents the opportunity for payment can be an important incentive for participating in a study.

In a study with middle-income respondents we acknowledged the contribution respondents made to the study by giving them a gift certificate to a restaurant after our first interview. Most were pleased and it may have aided rapport when we returned for further interviews, but I doubt that it was necessary for us to have done this.

My guess is that in most studies the reward for a respondent is the interview itself and the contribution he or she can make to the study. Payment doesn't seem to make a difference in a respondent's willingness to participate. If the interview goes well, payment is largely irrelevant to the respondent's experience, except for those who truly need the money; if it doesn't go well, payment won't make the experience better. Still, a gift to acknowledge a respondent's contribution is likely to be appreciated.

WHERE DO YOU HOLD THE INTERVIEW?

An argument can be made for interviewing people in the investigator's office: if you interview people in their home you're not going to hear much that is inconsistent with their commitment to their home roles and if you interview people in their offices they are less likely to discuss problems with coworkers. Since most people seem to prefer your coming to them, most of my interviewing has been in respondents' homes. Some investigators think that's fine; they can observe the setting within which the respondent lives, may meet members of the respondent's family, and may observe the respondent in interaction with them.

On the rarest of occasions the safety of interviewers may come into question. Interviewing respondents within their homes can pose a slight but nevertheless real risk, perhaps especially for women. I have told people who have interviewed for me to trust their intuitions, and to end the interview if they feel uneasy. Once a woman who was interviewing for me did not want to return for a second interview with a male respondent. She had no special reason; she just hadn't felt comfortable with him. That feeling of discomfort was enough to go on. She may have been responding to minimal cues she was not able to identify, or she may have developed a sense of the respondent that told her the situation was dangerous. We found a male interviewer to take over for her.

With few exceptions, however, respondents who have agreed to be interviewed in their homes will go to some effort to be hospitable. Indeed, by far the most common response to a stranger within one's home is friendly interest and desire to be of help.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Reasons of economy may make it seem desirable to interview by telephone. I have conducted many telephone interviews and regularly find that useful information can be developed. It helps for me to have met the respondent or at least to be able to identify myself with a project the respondent recognizes, so that the respondent knows I am who I purport to be. But even with my identity established, I don't feel as much in touch with the respondent in a telephone interview as I do in a face-to-face interview. My shallower connection to the respondent generally produces a shorter interview. In one study in which I did both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews, the face-to-face interviews ran an hour and a half or more, while the telephone interviews ran about 45 minutes, and sometimes less.

A research project that compared telephone and face-to-face interviewing found that telephone respondents broke off contact more quickly, were both more acquiescent and more evasive, and were more cautious about self-revelation.[10] But a team that has done a great deal of telephone interviewing describes it as "the next best thing to being there."[11] This strikes me as right: it's better to be there, but telephone interviews are the next best thing.