

SOME NOTES ON INTERVIEWING

By Terry Lunsford and John Bilorusky, February 12, 2003

An “interview society?”

Some scholars say that we now live in an “interview society.” Today, we assume that each of us is a unique individual, an independent self who has worthwhile thoughts to offer, and a unique knowledge of her or his own experience. To find out what factory workers experience, today, we don’t ask their managers, as expert and “informed” observers; we ask workers themselves. At the same time, society now projects each of us, our opinions and often our innermost feelings, into the public sphere--for good and ill. “Privacy” now has very uncertain boundaries. We assume that people can be asked--even required--to share information about their lives, their thoughts, their most intimate affairs, for public consumption. Both asking and demanding other people’s thoughts often takes the form of an “interview.”

Types of interviews

“Interviews” occur in a wide range of different settings, many now familiar to us: Job intake and evaluation interviews. Medical history-taking, interpersonal counseling, the psychotherapeutic couch. Public opinion polling, police interrogation, lawyers’ questioning of jurors and witnesses in court. And, of course, “media” encounters: Celebrities chat on TV with celebrity hosts. Reporters thrust microphones in front of accident and trauma victims, calling for their eyewitness accounts and their feelings about their misfortunes. Radio talk-show hosts give callers their few minutes each of nationwide air time.

Similarly, many encounters that we call by other names are much like interviews” as well. A parent asks her child, “What did you do at school, today?” Friends ask each other: “How’s it been going?” and get long replies. Seatmates on an airplane inquire politely about each other’s lives, and sometimes tell each other surprisingly intimate, personal details.

Every such setting has its own supposed purposes, its own distinctive relations among the participants, its special methods of getting and giving information, its typical subtexts and hidden meanings.

Purposes of interviewing

So interviews try to get at human experience. But, within this, interviewing has many kinds of sub-goals. Some researchers simply want to get at what actions mean to the people acting, and to people observing them. Some want to uncover broader meanings, perspectives, and analytic frameworks behind a speaker’s surface comments. Some are seeking rich examples and narratives that will bring vividness and life to their research “results.” Some are gathering “evidence” on issues of fact, guilt, and responsibility.

Some are engaged in “getting to know” people, or groups, in some depth. Some interviews aim less at hearing what people have to say than at telling them things, and trying to reform them, through talk. Some people use interviews to make political and cultural impacts; for example, by getting leaders and their advisers to say things they don’t really intend. And so on.

Qualitative research interviewing

At WISR, we are especially interested in qualitative research interviews--those designed to help us learn about the experiences of the people whose lives we study, in the hope that we and they together can improve our lives, and our society.

Interviews have a long history in social research, and they stand for a major difference between “qualitative” research and behavioristic studies. The issue is whether observers of human action should concern themselves only with externally observable “behaviors,” or should also try to find out what meanings those actions have for the actors themselves. To behaviorists, asking people what they think and feel is simply too unreliable, subject to bias and errors, intended and unintended. To qualitative researchers, ignoring what people think their actions mean seems narrow and wasteful of important data--even mindless. Abraham Kaplan (The Conduct of Inquiry: Chandler, 1964) tells an anecdote that illustrates the latter view: An old farmer is asked if he believes in baptism. “Believe in it?” he replies. “I’ve seen it done!”

”Technical” issues: How to do it

Establishing rapport and trust (and deserving it): It’s commonly said that the first task of an interviewer is to establish rapport with the person being interviewed. If the “interviewee” doesn’t trust the “interviewer,” the process may not produce much useful information. How do interviewers go about fostering this trust? How should they go about it? What if the person interviewed really should not trust the questioner? What should each side do about that?

Formalized interviewing roles, and their consequences: Many interview settings have very clear roles: who is doing the questioning, who is supposed to give the answers, who holds the camera, who simply observes, etc. Other settings do not. People in casual conversations tend to switch back and forth between asking and telling. Teachers and students may subtly alter their roles and purposes, several times, during an in-depth talk that is formally about what paper the student should write. In our everyday lives, we often “interview” each other without calling it that. Roles of questioner and responder are frequently up for grabs, and their “mix” can change rapidly, back and forth, without anyone’s remarking on it.

What differences do formal roles make, in an interview? Does calling it an “interview” change anything important? How do these things affect the what each person says? The feelings that each person is likely to have? The uses of the information shared?

Feelings we have about talking with strangers: Historically, most people have been uncomfortable about giving information about themselves to people whom they don't know. How do you know what such a person is up to? What they will do with any information you give them? Today, it often seems that this situation has been reversed: Some people talk about their most intimate and trouble-laden affairs--on television, with no idea who is tuning in. Many seem unfazed about being asked the most probing questions by a stranger with a camera and a microphone. Still, psychologists tell us that most of us still worry, when we speak in public, about what others will think about us, whether we will appear fools, whether the things we say will be used against us. This usually affects what we say, and how we say it.

Normally, such feelings depend in part on how "public" or "private" the interview setting is; on whether the discussion is about "sensitive" topics; on our expectations about who is listening; on what uses we think will be made of our statements; and so on. What major factors like this seem most important to you, and to others whom you've observed?

Recording what people say: One of the things interviewers wrestle with is whether to audiotape, videotape, or write notes on an interview while it is being conducted. Clearly, this can affect lots of things: How attentive can the interviewer be to what the other person is saying? May notetaking make her appear disengaged, even if she is not? How accurately can the questions and answers be reproduced later? How much does an accurate record of the interview matter?

So recording or not recording can be very important to interviewers and interviewees. Will the sight of an audiotape recorder turn the person off, and make them less forthcoming? Is it worth it to have such a record? For what purposes? How much effort will it take to transcribe the tape record? Will note-taking distract you from listening to what is being said, especially its subtler aspects? Should you take just a few notes, and then fill in the important details in your notebook after the interview is over? What are the tradeoffs for each strategy?

Control: Who runs an interview? Who should run it? What difference does it make? And who owns or controls the results? Who should control them? Why?

Think of some settings in which this issue can matter a lot to the people involved.

Levels of meaning: Like other settings, interviews aren't simple. There are always many different things going on, beyond the explicit matter of one person asking another questions, and getting answers. What is this interview "about?" A lot of things, actually. What are some of the important ones?

If two people in a workplace are talking about a common task, for example, they may have very different implicit purposes: Let's say one is trying to get the task handled more efficiently, to lighten his job load; the other may be mainly concerned with "CYA," protecting the organization from outside critics. How do their formal statuses usually

affect the way such implicit differences are handled? How do people use “interviewing” tactics to deal with such situations?

Even your main purpose as a research interviewer--what you want to “find out”--isn't simple. It is a good idea to identify for yourself some central questions, a general, guiding idea of what you are after, that you can openly share with the other person. Have some sub-questions that you can fall back on, if the conversation lags. But be sure to listen carefully as you go along, and stay ready to improvise off your pre-set interview “schedule,” as new and interesting dimensions of your subject emerge. Every person is a world, and a keen listener often hears much more than she or he expected to learn at the start.

As an interviewer, you'll want to be alert to implicit levels of meaning, the hidden agendas, on both sides. Think about how you feel about them, and how your interviewee seems to feel. Similarly, don't assume that your interviewee is a simple person--that what you see is what you get: We are all complex people, multi-dimensional: We're often ambivalent, we all change over time, and often we are not really sure of our answers, even when telling our own feelings and opinions.

So plan to ask different kinds of questions, which zero in on a single topic of interest from different angles, and in different words. Often, you will learn things you didn't even know to ask, when you operate in this way.

Interviewing in different cultures: Like everything else we do, interviewing is powerfully affected by cultural differences. People from different ethnic groups and communities may have drastically different feelings about being interviewed by a researcher, especially someone from outside their group. Race, gender, sexual orientation, social class--all of the major divisions of our society raise issues, and sharpen most of the ones already mentioned.

Think about how these issues will affect your own research, and what you can do about them. How have they affected you personally in the past? How would you like someone culturally different to act, if she or he were interviewing you?

Styles of question-asking: Questioning styles vary widely, and can make a big difference in the interview process. “Cross-examination” isn't welcomed by most people; it usually gets their hackles up and makes them closemouthed. Acceptive, casual questions may be more disarming. But are comfortable questions necessarily harmless? What examples do you think of?

One fairly simple style difference is often overlooked by interviewers: the difference between closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions are those that can be answered yes or no. “Do you approve of the President's policy on Iraq?” You can just say no, if you want to, and you've answered the question. Open-ended questions, by contrast, are those that invite you to speak a sentence, a paragraph, to tell your life story if you wish. Such as: “How do you feel about the prospect of this

country going to war? Why?" One short-hand way to remember this distinction, and use each type when it's appropriate, is this: Questions beginning with "Do you" or "Have you" tend to be closed-ended, and they get you very little information--although it may be exactly what you want. Questions beginning with "What" or "How" or "Why" tend to be open-ended, and encourage much fuller statements from the person answering.

This difference often becomes vitally important--for example, in legal settings. Witnesses in court, or in a legal deposition, cannot simply refuse to answer a legitimate question if it is asked. Similarly, people on a jury panel, being questioned about their potential biases as jurors on a case, must respond to the judge's and lawyers' questions, if relevant, about their backgrounds and attitudes. But if they can simply say "yes" or "no" to most things asked, they can end up telling very little about themselves. Lawyers, trained and accustomed to asking closed-ended questions that will "pin down" the replies of witnesses, often automatically treat prospective jurors the same. They forget that they should ask mostly open-ended questions, when the task is not to pin someone down, but to learn broadly about the backgrounds and attitudes of people who may sit on their case as jurors.

How will such differences likely affect the way you ask questions, as a qualitative researcher?

Body language and its meanings: Volumes have been written on this topic. Some of you know the work of Paul Ekman, who has catalogued hundreds of specific movements of facial muscles, and the combinations involved in common facial expressions, like a smile or a smirk, or an expression of sadness or anger. Yet much ambiguity about body language remains. Unspoken communications can't be easily translated into spoken, or speakable, ones. Still, we all make inferences from the facial expressions, the ways of sitting and walking and talking, of the people with whom we converse. It is a useful exercise to watch people talking to each other, and ask yourself what body language you see, and what it means. How do you know? How sure are you? What else might it mean? And so on. It's fun.

Openness, deception, & manipulation, on both sides. Interviewers typically want their "subjects" to be open and candid with them. They don't always want to be equally candid, themselves. Anthropological researchers in recent years have rebelled against their discipline's past practices of deceiving and exploiting "native" informants. But the problem is more general. "Trick" questions and hidden agendas are common.

For example, an interviewer may ask an informant, "Have you ever heard of workplace problems between people of different races? What reactions have you heard from other people, about that incident?" And so on. Often, a hidden purpose of such questions is to let the person display his own racial attitudes, by describing something that (supposedly) happened "over there," among other people. More generally, we often ask each other questions and listen more to the feelings expressed in the answer than to the content of what is said. What are the ethics of such things?

Different kinds of hidden meanings arise in health care settings. Physicians routinely interview patients about their complaints, but just as routinely assign different meanings to the patient's symptoms than those the patient gives. The doctor is not actively trying to deceive his patient, he would say; he simply calls on a whole different body of knowledge in assessing the meaning of what the patient says. In a psychotherapeutic or counseling session, questioning and answering are even more complex. Therapists must routinely pay more attention to the hidden meanings of what their clients say than to its explicit content--and, almost as routinely, they must usually avoid saying so out loud. Similarly, a patient is offered a "consent" form to sign before she undergoes any significant medical or surgical treatment, and is asked if she agrees to her physician's doing a wide range of things to her body, as he judges necessary. In the law, this process is said to be for the patient's protection from risks for which she hasn't bargained. In practice, as many opinion surveys have shown, both patients and physicians see these forms as protections for the physician, from "frivolous" lawsuits. But these matters are not discussed in the physician/patient "interview."

Such examples suggest complex issues for us all, as researchers and as people who may be "researched." What should be the ground-rules for ethical researchers, in talking with people about their lives, when you plan to make their answers public, as parts of a research report? Why? What should be the rules for ethical interviewees? Why?

Encouraging openness, & detecting deception & manipulation, on both sides: If you want to encourage those you interview to speak openly and honestly, how do you go about it? Why? When you are the one being interviewed, how do you handle this issue?

On either side, do you try to "appear" truthful, yourself? How do you do that? Why? If not, what is your approach, and why?

What do you want from someone interviewing you, in the way of candor? What do you expect? What sorts of things in the interview setting affect these issues?

Some researchers have tried to find ways of detecting lies, from common facial giveaway signs. For example, it is said that someone who is lying often makes a "smile" sign, curving the lips upward at the corners, without also crinkling the corners of the eyes, as typically occurs in a "real" smile. One can now get systematic training in how to detect a wide range of such telltales--and, no doubt, in how to avoid revealing them.

What hidden meanings, or "subtexts," do you listen for, when you ask someone for information? How do you judge whether the other person is telling you the truth? How confident are you that you can tell the truth from a lie? Why?

Interviewing people in groups: For some research purposes, it may make more sense to interview people in groups than singly. People bring different experiences and perspectives to the discussion of any topic, and in a group these always interact. People feed off each other's thoughts in such a group; one person makes another think of things that wouldn't occur to her, alone. So you may get a much richer set of thoughts,

ideas, and the subtle interplays of opposed and overlapping viewpoints, than you will in a series of isolated, one-on-one inquiries.

Do group interviews introduce potential “bias?” Certainly, group pressures can sometimes stifle a person’s honest expression of views. Or an influential person may dominate and skew the discussion in a single direction. But these possible problems must be balanced against the benefits that can come from group discussions. And some can be dealt with by you as the interviewer.

What advantages do you think your own research might gain from interviewing some people in groups? And how might you go about overcoming any potential problems of the group process?

Sampling, key informants and critical incidents: So, whom should you interview, anyway, for your research? Obviously, this will vary with what you’re after, who is available, what it costs in effort and funds, and how much you have of each. As a qualitative researcher, you don’t have to get a large, random sample for statistical purposes. But you’ll want to talk to enough people to provide a rounded, probing, satisfying coverage of your subject from a range of viewpoints. “Sample” according to your purposes.

It’s worth remembering, also, that some people know much more about a topic than others, because of who they are, where they work, how they’ve been exposed to the issue. Such “key informants” can get you deep into a topic early in your research, if you can find them. Of course, you’ll want to check their views against those of others who are differently located.

Similarly, not all events are of the same importance. Some people use a “critical incident” approach, questioning a range of observers about a few significant things, which arguably go to the heart of the issue being studied. For example, you want to find out something about how an HMO does its job. How did they respond to the last accreditation visit? Not just what they said in their “compliance” report, but how did they go about gathering the data for the report? Whom did they give the job of writing it? Whose ox was gored, in the process? Who was pleased with the results? Why?

Think of critical incidents that you might ask people about, in your area of research interest. And who would know about those incidents, from different viewpoints? It’s one good place to start your interviewing process.