

The last two chapters dealt with learning about the world firsthand. In the next chapter we turn to a discussion of learning about the world through secondhand accounts—in-depth interviewing.

NOTES

1. An increasing number of field researchers emphasize the importance of understanding your effects on a setting rather than trying to eliminate them altogether (see Emerson 1981). Some researchers also advocate active involvement in the field as a means of revealing social processes that would otherwise remain hidden (Bodemann 1978). Although these points make sense, we still feel that it is essential to “come on slow” in the field until you have developed an understanding of the setting and the people within it.
2. See the *Ethics in the Field* section in this chapter for a discussion of the ethical issues raised by this research.
3. Ryave and Schenkein (1974) have conducted an ethnomethodological study of how people “do walking.” As they demonstrate, walking is a practical accomplishment in which people produce and recognize appearances to navigate in public places.
4. Humphreys’ research has generally been criticized on the grounds of violating people’s privacy and confidentiality. Although the charge of being an accomplice to acts of fellatio seems frivolous today, this demonstrates how researchers place themselves in jeopardy by observing acts others consider illegal or immoral.
5. As Van Maanen (1983, 276–277) points out, there is no legal protection guaranteed to social scientists on the grounds of research confidentiality (also see Nejelski and Lerman 1971). Researchers are not legally bound to report criminal acts, but they are legally obligated to testify and turn over data in court proceedings.

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CHAPTER 4

In-Depth Interviewing

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IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS we described the methodology of participant observation (field research in natural settings). This chapter deals with in-depth qualitative interviewing, a research approach that is related but different in many ways. After a discussion of the types of interviewing and the strengths and limitations of this method, we discuss specific strategies and tactics for qualitative interviewing.

As Benney and Hughes (1970) point out, the interview is the “favored digging tool” of social researchers (see also Kvale 1996). Social scientists rely largely on verbal accounts to learn about social life. When most people hear the term *interviewing*, they think of structured research tools such as attitude surveys, opinion polls, and questionnaires. These interviews are typical

administered to a large group of respondents or subjects (Benney and Hughes 1970). People may be asked to rate their feelings along a scale, select the most appropriate answer from among forced-choice responses, or respond to a predetermined set of open-ended questions in their own words. Although these research approaches differ in many respects, they all adopt a standardized format: the researcher has the questions and the research subject has the answers. In fact, in most structured interviewing each person is supposed to be asked identically worded questions to assure comparable findings. The interviewer serves as a cheerful data collector; the role involves getting people to relax enough to answer the predefined series of questions completely.

In stark contrast to structured interviewing, qualitative interviewing is flexible and dynamic. Qualitative interviewing has been referred to as nondirective, unstructured, nonstandardized, and open-ended interviewing. We use the phrase *in-depth interviewing* to refer to this qualitative research method. By in-depth qualitative interviewing, we mean repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. The in-depth interview is modeled after a conversation between equals rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange. Far from being an impersonal data collector, the interviewer, and not an interview schedule or protocol, is the research tool. The role entails not merely obtaining answers but learning what questions to ask and how to ask them. As a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviewing has much in common with participant observation. Like observers, interviewers "come on slow" initially. They try to establish rapport with informants, ask nondirective questions early in the research, and learn what is important to informants before focusing the research interests.

The primary difference between participant observation and in-depth interviewing lies in the settings and situations in which the research takes place. Whereas participant observers conduct their studies in natural field situations, interviewers conduct theirs in situations specifically arranged for the purposes of the research. The participant observer gains firsthand knowledge of what people say and do in their everyday lives. The interviewer relies extensively on verbal accounts of how people act and what they feel.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW STUDIES

Three closely related types of qualitative interview studies can be distinguished. The first is the life history or sociological autobiography.¹ In the life history, the researcher attempts to capture the salient experiences in a per-

son's life and that person's definitions of those experiences. The life history presents people's views on their lives in their own words, much the same as a common autobiography. E. W. Burgess (in Shaw 1966) explains the importance of life histories:

In the life history is revealed as in no other way the inner life of the person, his moral struggles, his successes and failures in securing his destiny in a world too often at variance with his hopes and ideals. (p. 4)

Becker (1966) notes that life histories provide a touchstone by which to evaluate theories of social life.

What distinguishes the life history from popular autobiographies is that the researcher actively solicits the person's experiences and views and constructs the life history as a final product. Becker (1966) describes the role of the researcher in sociological life histories:

The sociologist who gathers a life history takes steps to ensure that it covers everything we want to know, that no important fact or event is slighted, that what purports to be factual squares with available evidence and that the subject's interpretations are honestly given. The sociologist keeps the subject oriented to the questions sociology is interested in, asks him about events that require amplification, tries to make the story told jibe with matters of official record and with material furnished by others familiar with the person, event, or place being described. He keeps the game honest for us. (p. vi)

The life history has a long tradition in the social sciences and figures prominently in the work of the Chicago school in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (Shaw 1931, 1966; Shaw, McKay, and McDonald 1938; Sutherland 1937; see also Angell 1945; Frazier 1978). Much of the discussion in this chapter is based on the life histories of a transsexual (Bogdan 1974); and two persons labeled mentally retarded (Bogdan and Taylor 1976, 1994).

The second type of in-depth interviewing is directed toward learning about events and activities that cannot be observed directly. In this type of interviewing, the people being interviewed are informants in the truest sense of the word. They act as observers—eyes and ears in the field—for the researcher. The role of such informants is not simply to reveal their own views, but to describe what happened and how others viewed it. Examples of this kind of interviewing include Erikson's (1976) study of a town's reaction to a natural disaster in West Virginia and Domhoff's (1975) study of power elites. Erikson's research could not have been conducted unless he happened to stumble across a natural disaster—an unlikely occurrence—whereas Domhoff probably would not have been able to gain access to intimate places frequented by the powerful.

The final type of qualitative interviewing is intended to yield a picture of a range of settings, situations, or people. Interviewing is used to study a relatively large number of people in a relatively short period of time compared to what would be required in participant observation research. For instance, several in-depth interviews with 20 teachers could probably be conducted in the same amount of time it would take to conduct a participant observation study of a single classroom. Rubin's (1976) study of working-class families, based on 100 detailed interviews with husbands and wives, and DeVault's (1991) study of mealtime routines in 15 families are good examples of this type of interviewing.

Although researchers select in-depth interviewing for different purposes, the basic interviewing techniques are similar for these different types of studies. In each case, interviewers try to establish rapport with informants through repeated contacts over time and to develop a detailed understanding of their experiences and perspectives. This chapter describes approaches and strategies for in-depth interviewing as defined here. However, many of the points in the following pages can be applied to any interviewing approach.

CHOOSING TO INTERVIEW

Every research approach has its strong points and drawbacks. We tend to agree with Becker and Geer (1957) that participant observation provides a yardstick against which to measure data collected through any other method. That is, no other method can provide the depth of understanding that comes from directly observing people and listening to what they have to say at the scene. Yet participant observation is not practical or even possible in all cases. The observer can hardly go back in time to study past events or force entry into all settings and private situations. The studies conducted by Erikson (1976) and Domhoff (1975) illustrate this point. Further, participant observation requires a commitment of time and effort that is not always warranted by the additional understanding gained as opposed to other methods. Our life histories of people labeled mentally retarded provide a ready example. Although we might take the position that the best way to construct life histories is to follow people around for a lifetime, it would be foolish to suggest this as an alternative to in-depth interviewing.

Thus no method is equally suited for all purposes. The choice of research method should be determined by the research interests, the circumstances of the setting or people to be studied, and practical constraints faced by the researcher. In-depth interviewing seems especially well suited in the following situations.

The research interests are relatively clear and well defined. Although research interests are necessarily broad and open-ended in qualitative research, the clar-

ity and specificity of researchers' interests vary. For instance, one researcher may be generally interested in schools and teachers, whereas another may be interested in how teachers got into the profession. Interviewing is well suited for studies in which researchers have a relatively clear sense of their interest and the kinds of questions they wish to pursue. In the previously cited example, interviewing would be appropriate for studying how teachers entered the profession but less well suited for pursuing a general and unspecified interest in teachers and schools. Your prior direct experiences and reading of other qualitative studies can help you define your research interests.

Settings or people are not otherwise accessible. As noted previously, in-depth interviewing is called for when a researcher wishes to study past events or cannot gain access to a particular type of setting or people.

The researcher has time constraints. Participant observers sometimes "spin their wheels" for weeks—even months—at the beginning of the research. It takes time to locate settings, negotiate access, arrange visits, and get to know informants. Although interviewers can face similar problems, studies based on interviewing usually can be completed in a shorter period of time than those based on participant observation. Whereas the participant observer's time can be taken up with waiting for someone to say or do something, the interviewer usually collects data throughout the period spent with informants. The pressure to produce results in grant-funded studies or to write dissertations can severely limit the length of time the researcher can devote to a study. Interviewing makes the most efficient use of the researcher's limited time. Needless to say, this is not a justification for superficial or shoddy research.

The researcher is interested in understanding a broad range of settings or people. In qualitative research, an "N of 1" can be just as illuminating as a large sample (and very often more so). However, there are instances in which the researcher may want to sacrifice the depth of understanding that comes with focusing intensively on a single setting or person for the breadth that comes with studying a range of places and people.

Interviewing multiple informants lends itself to building general theories about the nature of social phenomena. Analytic induction is one method of constructing theories from qualitative data that requires a sizable number of cases (Robinson 1951; Turner 1953). Through analytic induction, Lindesmith (1968) developed a theory of opiate addiction based on interviews with a large number of opiate users.

It is also important to point out the limitations of interviewing. First, people say and do different things in different situations. Since the interview is a particular kind of situation, you cannot assume that what a person says during an interview is what that person believes or will say or do in other situations. Deutscher and colleagues (Deutscher 1973; Deutscher, Pestello, and Pestello, 1993) deal head-on with the difference between people's word

and deeds. Deutscher, Pestello, and Pestello are especially critical of attitude and public opinion research in which it is assumed that people have fixed attitudes that determine what they will do in any given situation.

Deutscher, Pestello, and Pestello cite a study by Richard LaPiere (1934–1935) to illustrate the difference between what people say and what they do. In the early 1930s LaPiere accompanied a Chinese couple to hotels, auto camps, tourist homes, and restaurants across the United States. Out of 251 establishments, only 1 refused to accommodate the couple. Six months later, LaPiere sent a questionnaire to each of the establishments asking them if they would accept members of the Chinese race as guests. Of 128 establishments that replied, only 1 indicated that it would accept Chinese people! As Deutscher and his colleagues explain, the artificiality of the questionnaire and tightly controlled interview produces unreal responses.

Second, if researchers do not directly observe people in their everyday lives, they will be deprived of the context necessary to understand many of the perspectives in which they are interested. In their comparison of participant observation and interviewing, Becker and Geer (1957) list a number of shortcomings of interviews that relate to this general point: interviewers are likely to misunderstand informants' language since they do not have opportunities to study it in common usage; informants are unwilling or unable to articulate many important things, and only by observing these people in their daily lives can researchers learn about these things; interviewers have to make assumptions about things that could have been observed, and some of the assumptions will be incorrect.

Despite these limitations, few if any researchers would argue for abandoning interviewing as a basic approach for studying social life. Becker and Geer (1957, 32) state that interviewers can benefit from an awareness of these limitations and "perhaps improve their batting average by taking account of them."

It is precisely because of these limitations that we emphasize the importance of in-depth interviewing, getting to know people well enough to understand what they mean, and creating an atmosphere in which they are likely to talk freely. In addition, we always recommend that interviewers try to spend time with people "on their own turf" as they go about their day-to-day lives.

SELECTING INFORMANTS

Like participant observation, qualitative interviewing calls for a flexible research design. Neither the number nor the type of informants needs to be specified beforehand. The researcher starts out with a general idea of which people to interview and how to find them, but is willing to change course after the initial interviews.

Those new to qualitative research usually want to know exactly how many people they need to interview to complete a study. This is a difficult, not impossible question to answer prior to conducting some research. A Kvale (1996) points out:

To the common question, "How many interview subjects do I need?" the answer is simply, "Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know." (p. 101)

The size of the sample in an interviewing study is something that should be determined toward the end of the research and not at the beginning. In general, however, you will find that there is an inverse relationship between the number of informants and the depth to which you interview each. The greater the number of interviews with each informant, the fewer informants you will need to have enough data to write a research article, dissertation, or monograph.

The strategy of theoretical sampling can be used as a guide for selecting people to interview (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In theoretical sampling, the actual number of cases studied is relatively unimportant. What is important is the potential of each case to aid the researcher in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied. After completing interviews with several informants, you consciously vary the type of people interviewed until you have uncovered a broad range of perspectives held by the people in whom you are interested. You would have an idea that you have reached this point when interviews with additional people yield no genuinely new insights.

Informants can be found in a number of ways. As discussed in the chapter on pre-fieldwork in participant observation, one of the easiest ways to build a pool of informants is *snowballing*—getting to know some informants and having them introduce you to others.

A potential drawback of the snowball technique is that it can limit the diversity of your informants. Therefore you need to be prepared to use a range of different approaches to identifying people. You can locate potential informants through the same sources the participant observer uses to gain access to private settings: checking with friends, relatives, and personal contacts; involving yourself with the community of people you want to study; approaching organizations and agencies; advertising in media sources; and announcements through the Internet. In the study of families of young children with which Taylor was involved, the researchers used a range of techniques to locate the families, including checking birth records; contacting day care centers, neighborhood centers, preschools, churches, and social clubs; distributing handouts at local stores; and, in some neighborhood

conducting a door-to-door survey (the researchers had identification cards that indicated their affiliation with a university research project).

Life histories are written on the basis of in-depth interviews with one person or a small handful of people. Although all people have one good story to tell—their own—some people have better stories and make better research partners for the purpose of constructing a life history. Obviously, it is essential that a person have the time to devote to the interviewing. Another important consideration is people's willingness and ability to talk about experiences and articulate feelings. People simply do not have equal ability to provide detailed accounts of what they have been through and what they feel about it. Spradley (1979) also argues that strangers make better informants than friends, relatives, clients, and others with whom one has a prior relationship, although this will not always be the case.

In constructing life histories, the researcher looks for a particular type of person who has had certain experiences. For example, life histories have been written on the experiences of juvenile delinquents (Shaw 1931, 1966; Shaw, McKay, and McDonald 1938), a professional fence (Klockars 1974, 1977), a transsexual (Bogdan 1974), a professional thief (Sutherland 1937), and persons labeled mentally retarded (Bogdan and Taylor 1976, 1994). Although you might be interested in studying a certain type of person, keep in mind that people's past experiences may not have had an impact on their lives and current perspectives. What is important to you may not be important to a potential informant. Practically all youth engage in activities that someone could define as juvenile delinquency. Yet, for most youth, participation in these activities has little to do with how they view themselves. Spradley (1979) suggests that one of the requirements for good informants is "thorough enculturation"; that is, knowing a culture (or subculture, group, or organization) so well that they no longer think about it.

There are no easy steps to take to find a good informant for a life history. In this kind of research, informants are seldom *found*; rather, they emerge in the course of one's everyday activities. You just happen to stumble across someone who has an important story to tell and wants to tell it. Of course, the more involved you are in different social circles, the more likely you are to establish the contacts and reputation necessary to find a good informant.

We met Ed Murphy and Pattie Burt (the subjects of life histories of people labeled mentally retarded) through our involvement with local community groups. Ed was recommended to us as a guest speaker for a course one of us was teaching. Ed was articulate in his presentation of his experience of living at an institution and being labeled mentally retarded. In fact, the word *retarded* lost meaning as he spoke. We kept in touch with Ed after his talk at the course, running into him at a local association. About two years after we first met him, we approached him with the idea of working on his life history.

One of us met Pattie when she was living at a local institution. When she told him that she wanted desperately to leave the institution, he helped her get out. For a brief period of time, she lived with the other author and his family. We saw Pattie frequently over the next 15 months, when she was living in a series of different homes. We began interviewing her shortly after she moved to her own apartment in a nearby town.

Bogdan's life history of Jane Fry, a transsexual, came about in a similar manner. Bogdan met her when she spoke to a class taught by a colleague. Her presentation of life as a transsexual was striking in the insight it provided and the vividness of her description of her experiences. Some time after that, the author ran into Jane again at a local crisis intervention center, which she was volunteering. Through that meeting and several other encounters, he got to know her well enough to ask her about writing her life history.

APPROACHING INFORMANTS

In most in-depth interviewing, you will not know how many interviews to conduct with informants until you actually begin speaking with them. Some people will warm up only gradually; others will have a lot to say and you will want to spend quite a few sessions with them. Interviewing projects usually take anywhere from several sessions to over 25 sessions—and 50 to 100 hours of interviewing—for life histories.

Since you cannot always tell beforehand exactly how many interviews you will want to conduct, it is advisable to "come on slow" with informants initially. Tell them that you would like to set up an interview or two with them but do not ask for a commitment to spend a lot of time being interviewed. After you have conducted a couple of interviews, you can discuss your plans more directly. We met with Ed Murphy and Jane Fry several times before we raised the possibility of writing their life histories. Interestingly enough, both had thought about writing their autobiographies previously (many people have probably thought about this at some point in their lives). Jane had even attempted to write her life history several years earlier, only to have abandoned the project after writing a few pages. Ed and Jane were both enthusiastic about the project by the end of our first serious discussions with them.

It is usually not too difficult to line up people for initial interviews, as long as they can fit you into their schedules. Most people are willing to talk about themselves. In fact, people are often honored by the prospect of being interviewed for a research project. In the family study, many parents felt honored that they were selected to participate in a university study of child rearing. Of course, it is very flattering to be asked to tell your life story. Whe

approaching potential informants, we tell them that it seems they have had some interesting experiences or have something important to say and that we would like to sit down with them and talk about it some time. If they seem receptive to the idea, we schedule the first meeting.

If, after a couple of sessions, you decide that you will want to interview an individual for a number of sessions over time, you should try to clarify any issues that might be on the individual's mind and any possible misunderstandings. Life histories, in particular, are a collaborative endeavor. The tone you want to establish is that of a partnership rather than a researcher-subject relationship (Klockars 1977). The following issues are those that are most easily misunderstood and hence the most important to raise.

1. *Your motives and intentions.* Many people will wonder what you hope to get out of the project. They may even fear that the final product will be used to their disadvantage. If you are a social scientist, your motivation will probably have something to do with contributing knowledge to your field and professional advancement. You can discuss this with informants. Although people may not grasp your precise research interests, most will be able to understand educational and academic goals.

You probably will not be clear on whether and where the results of your study will be published. However, you should explain that you will try to have the study published in a book or journal or, in the case of students, as a dissertation or thesis. In very few instances are studies of this kind published commercially. This should be explained also. Finally, although you would not be willing to spend your time on the project unless you thought that something would come of it, you should alert informants to potential difficulties in having the study published.

2. *Anonymity.* It is usually wise to use pseudonyms for people and places in written studies. There are few legitimate research interests served by publishing people's names. The risks are substantial: embarrassment of the informant or others, legal problems, self-aggrandizement, and concealment of important details and information. Although people might want to have their names published for a variety of reasons, you should resist doing so and explain this to informants. In Jane Fry's life history, she wanted very much to see her name in print, and Bogdan initially agreed to this. However, as the interviewing progressed, it soon became apparent that this would create numerous problems and both parties agreed to the use of pseudonyms.

3. *Final say.* One way to gain informants' trust is to tell them that they will have the opportunity to read and comment on drafts of any books or articles prior to publication. Some researchers even guarantee veto power to informants over what is published. Although we are reluctant to give infor-

mants final say over the content of written materials, it strengthens the researcher's relationships with informants and the quality of the study. Informants review draft manuscripts.

4. *Money.* Money can corrupt the relationship between the interviewer and informant, turning it into an employer-employee relationship rather than a research partnership. It also raises the specter of encouraging the informant to fabricate a good story to get some money. Yet many large-scale research projects pay informants for interviews.² The family study paid parents nominal fees for participating in interviews. This clearly served as an inducement for some parents to stay involved in the study when they wanted to drop out. However, if people have to be paid to be interviewed, it is debatable whether they will talk candidly about anything of real importance in their lives.

Splitting book royalties with informants is a different matter than paying them for interviews. This creates a spirit of partnership in the research endeavor. Since informants usually do not have their names appear in print to receive professional credit, it is reasonable to give them a share of the proceeds from a book, although most academic books do not earn sizable royalties.

Bogdan worked out Jane Fry's royalties for *Being Different* with a lawyer. Like many subjects of life histories, she was poor at the time and received public assistance. To make sure that the royalty payments did not affect her benefits, the lawyer helped set up a special trust fund for her.

5. *Logistics.* Finally, you will have to settle on a rough schedule and place to meet. The frequency and length of the interviews will depend on your respective schedules. You will usually need at least an hour for an interview. Anything less is too short to explore many topics. In order to preserve the flow of interviews, you should try to meet at frequent intervals. It is difficult to pick up where you left off when you are not interviewing regularly. The length of the overall project will depend on how freely the interviewee speaks and what you hope to cover. Life histories usually take at least a few months to complete. Klockars' (1974) life history of a professional female took 15 months of weekly or biweekly meetings (Klockars 1977). You should try to find a private place where you can talk without interruption and where the informant will feel relaxed. Many people feel most comfortable in their own homes and offices. However, in many people's homes it is difficult to talk privately. In the large-scale family study, some parents tried to listen surreptitiously on their spouses' interviews, an obvious inhibiting factor. In our research with Ed Murphy and Jane Fry, we conducted the interviews in our private offices, located in a converted house, after working hours. We interviewed Pattie Burt at her own apartment. Nothing prevents the researcher from setting up interviews in a public restaurant or bar as long as privacy is assured.

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERVIEW IN CONTEXT

The interview is form of social interaction. It involves a face-to-face encounter between two—and sometimes more—persons, each of whom is sizing up the other and constructing the meanings of the other's words, expressions, and gestures. An understanding of the interview as a form of social interaction can help you to be a better interviewer and to make sense out of the data you collect.

In social interaction, we all attempt to manage the impressions others have of us (Goffman 1967) and we say different things depending upon the person with whom we are speaking. What informants say to interviewers will depend on how they view the interviewers and how they think the interviewers view them.

Interviews are subject to the same fabrications, deceptions, exaggerations, and distortions that characterize other conversations between persons. Benney and Hughes (1970, 137) write: "Every conversation has its own balance of revelation and concealment of thoughts and intentions."

Even when informants have come to accept and trust interviewers, what they say cannot be taken at face value as indicative of deeply held beliefs and feelings. In social interaction, meanings are not simply communicated, but constructed. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) point out that, in conventional research, subjects are viewed as "passive vessels of answers." In this view, information and attitudes exist inside of people's heads and can be elicited by asking the right questions in the right way. As Holstein and Gubrium argue, however, knowledge and social meanings are constructed during the interview process.

By virtue of being interviewed, people develop new insights and understandings of their experiences. They may not have thought about or reflected on events in which the interviewer is interested, and even if they have, they interpret things a bit differently each time. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note that knowledge is always "knowledge-in-the-making." From this perspective, informants are not merely reporters of experience, but narrators. They may tell their stories a bit differently each time and may construct the meanings of events and experiences a bit differently.

Much of human experience cannot be put easily into words (DeVault 1990). By asking questions and probing for meanings, interviewers encourage people to articulate things that they have not articulated before. As in other forms of social interaction, interviewers sometimes have to fill in the meanings that people are not able to express themselves. DeVault (1990) writes:

My procedure . . . involves noticing ambiguity and problems of expression in interview data, then drawing on my own experience in an investigation aimed

at "filling in" what has been incompletely said. The point is not simply to reproduce my own perspective in my analysis; the clues I garner from this kind of introspection are only a beginning and should lead me back to hear respondents in new ways. (p. 104)

MANAGING THE INTERVIEW SITUATION

The interviewer strives to create an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable talking openly about themselves. In what kinds of situations are people most likely to express their views? In structured interviewing, the interviewer is instructed to act as a disinterested figure; the interview situation is designed to resemble laboratory conditions. Yet, as Deutscher (1973: 150) notes, people seldom express their true feelings and views under these circumstances: "Real expressions of attitude or overt behavior rarely occur under conditions of sterility which are deliberately structured for the interview situation."

In qualitative interviewing, the researcher attempts to construct a situation that resembles those in which people naturally talk to each other about important things. The interview is relaxed and conversational, since this is how people normally interact. The interviewer relates to informants on a personal level. Indeed, the relationship that develops over time between the interviewer and informant is the key to collecting data.

Certainly, there are differences between the interview situation and those in which people normally interact: interviewers sometimes hold back from expressing some of their views; the conversation is understood to be private and confidential; the flow of information is largely, though not exclusively, one-sided; and interviewers communicate a genuine interest in people's views and experiences and usually refrain from disagreeing with them. However, it is only by designing the interview along the lines of everyday conversation that the interviewer can learn about what is important to people. In fact, the interviewer has many parallels in everyday life: the good listener, the shoulder to cry on, the confidante.

Like participant observation, in-depth interviewing requires an ability to relate to others on their own terms. There is no simple formula for successful interviewing, but the following points set the tone for the atmosphere the interviewer should try to create.

BEING NONJUDGMENTAL

As informants begin to share more experiences and feelings with the interviewer, they let down their public fronts and reveal parts of themselves they ordinarily keep hidden. It is common for people to preface or conclude

revelations with disclaimers and comments such as: "You must think I'm crazy for doing that," and, "I can't justify what I did, but . . ."

An important part of interviewing is being nonjudgmental. Benney and Hughes (1970, 140) write: ". . . the interview is an understanding between two parties that, in return for allowing the interviewer to direct their communication, the informant is assured that he will not meet with denial, contradiction, competition, or other harassment." In other words, if you want people to open up about their feelings and views, you have to refrain from making negative judgments about them or putting them down.

The best way to avoid the appearance of judging people is to try to accept them for who and what they are and to keep from judging them in your own mind. When you simply cannot do this, you can state your position, but gently.

During the interview, you should go out of your way to reassure people that they are "all right" in your eyes after they have revealed something personal, embarrassing, or discrediting. Communicate your understanding and empathy: "I know what you mean," "That happened to me once," "I've thought of doing that myself," and "I have a friend who did the same thing."

Of course, if people make negative judgments about things they have done in the past, it is appropriate to agree with them, but without condemning their moral character or who they are as persons.

LETTING PEOPLE TALK

In-depth interviewing sometimes requires a great deal of patience. Informants can talk at length about things in which you have no great interest. Especially during initial interviews, you should try to force yourself not to interrupt an informant even though you are not interested in a topic.

You can usually get a person back on track through subtle gestures, such as refraining from nodding your head or taking notes (Patton 1980), and by gently changing the subject during breaks in the conversation: "I'd like to go back to something you said the other day." Over time, informants usually learn to read your gestures and know enough about your interests to talk about some things and not others.

When people start talking about something important, let the conversation flow. Sympathetic gestures and relevant questions can keep them on a subject.

PAYING ATTENTION

It is easy to let your mind drift during extended interviews. This is especially true when you tape-record sessions and do not have to concentrate on

remembering every word. Paying attention means communicating a sincere interest in what informants are saying and knowing when and how to probe and ask the right questions. As Thomas Cottle (1973b) so clearly expresses it, paying attention also means being open to seeing things in a new and different way:

If there is a rule about this form of research it might be reduced to something as simple as pay attention. Pay attention to what the person does and says and feels; pay attention to what is evoked by these conversations and perceptions, particularly when one's mind wanders so very far away; and finally, pay attention to the responses of those who might, through one's work, hear these people. Paying attention implies an openness, not any special or metaphysical kind of openness, but merely a watch on oneself, a self-consciousness, a belief that everything one takes in from the outside and experiences within one's own interior is worthy of consideration and essential for understanding and honoring those whom one encounters. (p. 351)

BEING SENSITIVE

Interviewers always have to be attuned to how their words and gestures affect informants. They sometimes have to play dumb—what Kvale (1996, 21) refers to as "deliberate naiveté"—without being insulting. They must be sympathetic, but not patronizing. They have to know when to probe, but stay away from open wounds. They have to be friendly, but not ingratiating. Being sensitive is an attitude researchers must bring to interviewing and, for that matter, to participant observation. Robert Coles (1971b) strikes at the heart of the matter when he writes:

Somehow we all must learn to know one another. . . . Certainly I ought to say that I myself have been gently and on occasion firmly or sternly reminded how absurd some of my questions have been, how misleading or smug were the assumptions they convey. The fact is that again and again I have seen a poor, a lowly, an illiterate migrant worker wince a little at something I have said or done, smile a little nervously, glare and pout, wonder a little in his eyes about me and my purposes, and through his grimace let me know the disapproval he surely has felt; and yes, the criticism he also feels, the sober thought-out criticism, perhaps not easily put into words . . . (p. 29)

GETTING PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM

The hallmark of in-depth qualitative interviewing is learning how people construct their realities—how they view, define, and experience the world.

Presumably, researchers have some general questions to ask prior to starting the interviews. Yet they have to be careful not to push their own agendas too early in the interviewing. By asking structured or forced-choice questions initially, the researcher creates a mind-set in informants about the right or wrong things to say that can make it difficult if not impossible to get at how they really see things.

It is during the early interviews that the researcher sets the tone of the relationship with the informant. In these initial interviews, the interviewer should come across as someone who is not quite sure which questions will be most relevant to informants' experiences and who is willing to learn from the informants. Robert Coles (1971b) eloquently describes this frame of reference when he writes:

My job... is to bring alive to the extent I possibly can a number of lives... entrusted to a person like me, an outsider, a stranger, a listener, an observer, a doctor, a curious... fellow who one mountaineer described as "always coming back and not seeming to know exactly what he wants to hear or know." (p. 39)

The qualitative interviewer has to find ways of getting people to start to talk about their perspectives and experiences without overly structuring the conversation and defining what the interviewee should say. Kvale (1996, 34) explains: "The interviewer leads the subject toward certain themes, but not to certain opinions about these themes."

Unlike the participant observer, the interviewer cannot stand back and wait for people to do something before asking questions. Therefore you will need to find ways to get the conversation started in the beginning. There are different ways to guide initial interviews: descriptive questioning, solicited narratives, the log-interview approach, and personal documents.

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONING

Probably the best way to start off interviewing informants is by asking open-ended, descriptive questions. Descriptive questions allow people to tell you about things that are important to them and the meanings that they attach to these things. In practically any interviewing, you can come up with a list of descriptive questions that will enable people to talk about topics in which you are interested without structuring exactly what the responses should be. Spradley (1979; see also McCracken 1988) refers to these as "grand-tour" questions.

The following are examples of good descriptive questions:

- "Everyone has a life story. I wonder if you can tell me a bit about your

- "Can you tell me about . . . ?" (Kvale 1996, 133)
- "If you were to write your autobiography, what would the chapter be?"
- "I'm interested in how people become involved with. . . . Could you tell me about the first time you thought about being a . . . ?"
- "Could you tell about a typical day in your life?"
- "I'd like to know about people who are important to you. Could you start by listing people in your life?"
- "I'd like to know about your job. Would you tell me about the kinds of things you do in your work?"
- "It's been a long time since I was in elementary school. Could you tell me about things you do in school every day?"

In our life histories with people labeled retarded, we started the interviewing by asking the informants to give us chronologies of the major events in their lives. Pattie Burt listed such events as her birth, her placement in various foster homes, her institutionalization, and renting her own apartment. Ed Murphy listed the deaths of his father, mother, and sister, as well as the places where he lived.

In our interviewing with Ed Murphy, we frequently started sessions by having him list events and experiences (sometimes this took an entire session). Since Ed's institutionalization had had a profound effect on his life, we pursued this experience in great depth. For instance, we asked him to outline such things as the wards where he lived at the institution, a typical day in different wards, his friends at the institution, and his work assignments.

As informants mention specific experiences, you can probe for greater detail. It is also a good idea to take note of topics to revisit at a later time.

SOLICITED NARRATIVES

Many of the classic life histories in the social sciences have been based on a combination of in-depth interviews and narratives written by informants themselves. Shaw (1931, 1966), Shaw, McKay, and McDonald (1938), and Sutherland (1937) made extensive use of this approach in their life histories of delinquents and criminals.

Shaw and colleagues used various techniques to construct life histories of delinquents in the 1930s. Shaw (1966) reports that although the group relied heavily on personal interviews, written documents were preferred as a basis for these life histories. In *The Jack Roller*, Shaw (1966) first interviewed Stanley, the subject of the life history, to prepare a detailed chronology of delinquent acts and experiences. Shaw then returned this chronology to Stanley to use as a guide for writing his own story. Shaw (1966, 23) writes that Stanley was instructed "to give a detailed description of each event,

situation in which it occurred, and his personal reactions to the experience." In other life histories, such as *Brothers in Crime* (1938), the only instruction Shaw and his collaborators gave their informants was that the informants were to give a detailed description of their experiences during childhood and adolescence.

Sutherland was somewhat more directive in soliciting the life history *The Professional Thief* (1937). Although he does not describe his approach in detail, he indicates that the bulk of the life history was written by the thief on questions and topics suggested by the researcher. Sutherland then met with the thief for approximately 7 hours a week for 12 weeks to discuss what the thief had written. The final life history includes the thief's original narrative, the interview material, minor passages written by Sutherland for editorial reasons, and footnotes based on a broad range of sources including interviews with other thieves and detectives.

In *Being Different*, Bogdan asked Jane Fry to write a detailed chronology of her life prior to starting the interviews. He used this chronology as a basis for his interviewing with her. Toward the end of the interviewing, he and Jane went over the chronology point by point to pick up any forgotten items.

Not all people are able or willing to write about their experiences. However, even sketchy outlines and chronologies can be used to guide open-ended, in-depth interviews.

THE LOG-INTERVIEW APPROACH

In the log-interview approach, informants keep a running record of their activities for a specified period of time and this is used to provide a basis for in-depth interviews. Zimmerman and Wieder (1977), who refer to this as the "diary-interview method," have described specific procedures associated with this approach.

In a study of counterculture life styles, Zimmerman and Wieder asked informants to maintain an annotated chronological log of their activities. Informants were instructed to record activities in as much detail as they could, to make entries at least daily, and to address a standard set of questions regarding each activity: Who? What? When? Where? How? Since Zimmerman and Wieder were interested in sexual activities and drug use, they instructed informants to describe these activities specifically.

Zimmerman and Wieder had two researchers review each diary and prepare a set of questions and probes to ask informants based on the narrative. They report that for every 5 to 10 pages of diary entries, the researchers generated 100 questions that involved 5 hours of interviewing.

Like solicited narratives, the log-interview approach is ill suited for informants who are not adept at recording their activities in writing. As Zimmer-

man and Wieder point out, daily telephone interviews and tape recording can be used as substitutes for having informants maintain written logs.

PERSONAL DOCUMENTS

Personal documents—people's own diaries, letters, pictures, records, calendars, and memorabilia—can be used to guide interviews without imposing structure on informants. Most people store old documents and records and are willing to show at least some of these to others. If you have at least a general idea of what experiences you want to cover in the interviews, you can ask informants to see documents relating to these experiences before starting the interviews. Later in the interviewing, these materials can spark memories and help people recall old feelings.

Jane Fry kept old letters and other documents and had actually written autobiographical narratives at critical points in her life. She shared those freely with the researcher. Not only did these documents provide a framework for interviewing, they were eventually incorporated into her life history.

In Taylor's study of the Duke family, he informally interviewed Winnie the mother, about people and events portrayed in a tattered family photo album she kept. This provided an opportunity to learn about other family members as well as about memorable events in the Duke family's life.

In some interviewing research, the interviewer has a good sense of what on informants' minds prior to starting the interviews. For example, some researchers turn to interviewing after conducting participant observation; some also use their own experiences to guide their research. Becker's (1966) study of jazz musicians stemmed from his own experience in a band. In our research we had spent a considerable amount of time with some of our informants before we started to interview them formally. We had heard Ed Murphy talk about his life in institutions before the idea of writing his life history ever occurred to us. When researchers have a body of direct experience to build on, they can be somewhat more directive and aggressive in their initial questioning.

THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

In multiple-informant studies, some researchers use an interview guide to make sure key topics are explored with a number of informants (Kvale 1996). The interview guide is not a structured schedule or protocol. Rather, it is a list of general areas to be covered with each informant. In the interview situation the researcher decides how to phrase questions and when to ask them. The interview guide serves solely to remind the interviewer to ask about certain things.

The use of an interview guide presupposes a certain degree of knowledge about the people one intends to study. Thus an interview guide is useful when the researcher has already learned something about informants through fieldwork or preliminary interviews or other direct experience. The interview guide can also be expanded or revised as the researcher conducts additional interviews. As the researcher begins to identify themes in interview data, questions are added to the interview guide so that these areas can be covered with new informants.

An interview guide is especially useful in team research and evaluation or other funded research (Patton 1980). In team research, the guide provides a way of ensuring that all the interviewers are exploring the same general areas with informants. We have used interview guides in a research project that involved short-term, intensive field visits to a number of sites by a half dozen researchers (see Bogdan and Taylor 1990; Taylor 1982). In funded research and qualitative evaluation, the interview guide can be used to give sponsors a sense of what the researcher will actually cover with informants.

Whether or not you use a formal interview guide, it is always a good idea to try to come up with a set of open-ended, descriptive questions prior an interview. We think of these as conversation starters. Some people may not be able to relate to your initial questions ("Tell me about your life.") or may respond with terse or yes-and-no answers. If you have a set of questions in your mind, you can explore different ways of getting people to talk.

PROBING

One of the keys to successful interviewing is knowing when and how to probe. The general strategy of qualitative interviewing can be described as follows: ask open-ended, descriptive questions about general topics; wait for people to talk about meaningful experiences in their lives or what is important from their points of view; probe for details and specific descriptions of their experiences and perspectives. Throughout the interviewing, the researcher follows up on topics that have been raised by asking specific questions, encourages the informant to provide details, and constantly presses for clarification of the informant's words.

Although the tone of qualitative interviewing is conversational, probing distinguishes this kind of interviewing from everyday conversations. In normal conversation, people fill in the gaps in meaning in the other person's words. Most people share commonsense understandings and taken-for-granted meanings and assume that they know what lies behind the other person's words. As an interviewer, of course you use this stock of cultural knowledge to conduct the interview and to make sense out of what a person says. However, to be a good interviewer you must sometimes set aside what you think you know. What the other person means may be very different

from what you think he or she means. Just as important, because meaning may be taken for granted, you may not be aware of them yourself. By asking the other person to explain what is meant, you try to make explicit what both of you may know but may take for granted and are ordinarily unable to articulate.

Even seemingly objective words can have different cultural meanings. Deutscher (1973) explains:

When an American truck driver complains to the waitress at the diner about his "warm" beer and "cold" soup, the "warm" liquid may have a temperature of 50°F, while the "cold" one is 75 degrees. . . . The standard for the same objects may well vary from culture to culture, from nation to nation, from region to region and, for that matter, within any given social unit—between classes, age groups, sexes, or what have you; what is "cold" soup for an adult may be too "hot" to give a child. (p. 191)

Qualitative interviewers have to force themselves to constantly ask informants to clarify and elaborate on what they have said, even at the risk of appearing naive. Spradley (1979) comments that the interviewer has to teach the informants to be good informants by continually encouraging them to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences.

During the interview, you should continue to probe for clarification until you are sure what exactly the informant means. Rephrase what the person said and ask for confirmation; ask the person to provide examples of what he or she means; and tell the person when something is not clear to you. You should also follow up on your informant's remarks until you have a clear picture in your own mind of the people, places, experiences, and feelings in his or her life. Ask specific questions: for example,

- Can you tell me what the place looked like?
- How did you feel then?
- Can you remember what you said then?
- What were you doing at the time?
- Who else was there?
- What happened after that?

The skillful interviewer comes up with questions that will help jar a person's memory. Many past events lie hidden deep within a person's memory and remote from daily life. Try to think up questions that will bring back some of these memories: for example,

- How does your family describe you at that time?
- Do your parents ever tell stories about how you were when you were growing up?

- What kinds of stories do you tell when you get together with your brothers and sisters?

Just as the participant observer can become more aggressive in the later stages of the research, the interviewer's questioning can become more directive as he or she learns about informants and their perspectives. It is not uncommon to find that informants are unwilling or unable to talk about certain things that are obviously important to them. In our interviewing with Ed Murphy, for example, he was reluctant to talk in personal terms about being labeled mentally retarded. Instead, he talked about how the label unfairly stigmatized other mentally retarded people. In order to get Ed to speak about the experience of being labeled retarded, we came up with questions that allowed him to maintain an identity as a normal person: "You're obviously a bright guy, so why do you think you wound up at an institution for the retarded?" "A lot of kids have problems learning; how did you do in school?" There were also times during our interviewing with Ed Murphy when we confronted him with his tendency to avoid certain topics. We tried to impress upon him the importance of talking about these experiences. When he was reluctant to talk about his family, we told him something like the following: "I think it's important to know about your family life. A lot of families don't know how to deal with disabled children. I think you should try to talk about your feelings and experiences." Although Ed continued to be uncomfortable with some topics, he eventually talked about many of those he had avoided.

Like the participant observer, the interviewer also can use what Douglas (1976) calls the *phased-assertion tactic* and other aggressive questioning techniques. The phased-assertion tactic involves acting as if you are already in the know in order to gain more information.

Learning how to probe successfully in qualitative interviewing takes practice at being an active listener and recognizing potentially important themes when they are mentioned. It is not uncommon for novice interviewers to skip from topic to topic and fail to probe for details on and clarification of an informant's comments. Especially if you are new to qualitative interviewing, it is a good idea to have initial interviews transcribed as soon as possible after they are conducted. Review these carefully not only for potential themes but to assess your own skill at probing. An experienced interviewer can also be helpful in pointing out comments that you should have probed in more depth.

CROSS-CHECKS

Although qualitative interviewers try to develop an open and honest relationship with informants, they have to be alert to exaggerations and distor-

tions in their informants' stories. As Douglas (1976) points out, people hide important facts about themselves in everyday life. Anyone may "lie a bit cheat a bit," to use Deutscher's (1973) words. Further, all people are prone to exaggerating their successes and denying or downplaying their failures.

As emphasized throughout this book, the issue of truth in qualitative research is a complicated one. What the qualitative researcher is interested in is not truth per se, but rather perspectives. Thus the interviewer tries to elicit a more or less honest rendering of how informants actually view themselves and their experiences. Shaw (1966) explains this quite well in his introduction to *The Jack Roller*:

It should be pointed out, also, that the validity and value of the personal document are not dependent upon its objectivity or veracity. It is not expected that the delinquent will necessarily describe his life-situations objectively. On the contrary, it is desired that his story will reflect his own personal attitudes and interpretations. Thus, rationalizations, fabrications, prejudices, exaggerations are quite as valuable as objective descriptions, provided, of course, that these reactions be properly identified and classified. (pp. 2-3)

After writing these words, Shaw quotes W. I. Thomas' (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 572) famous dictum, "If men³ define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." In contrast to participant observers, interviewers lack the firsthand knowledge of how people act in their day-to-day lives. This can make it difficult to sort out the difference between purposeful distortions and gross exaggerations on the one hand and genuine perspective (which are necessarily subjective and biased) on the other.

If you know a person well enough, you can usually tell when he or she is evading a subject or "putting you on." In in-depth interviewing, you spend enough time with people to read between the lines of their remarks and probe for sufficient details to know whether a story is being consciously fabricated. In his discussion of Shaw's *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* Ernest Burgess (in Shaw 1931) argues that the validity of a life history depends on the manner in which it was obtained:

The validity of the statement of attitudes in the life-history seems, in my judgment, to be closely dependent upon the following conditions: (a) a document reported in the words of the person; i.e., a written autobiography or a verbatim record of an oral narrative; (b) a document representing a free, spontaneous, and detailed expression of past experiences, present aspirations, and future plans; (c) a document secured in a favorable situation where the tendencies to deception or prejudice are absent or at a minimum. (p. 240)

The researcher also has the responsibility for imposing cross-checks on the informants' stories. You should examine an informant's statements for

consistency between different factual accounts of the same event or experience (Klockars 1977). In the research with Jane Fry, for example, Bogdan checked Jane's story for inconsistencies. Jane frequently skipped from one topic to another. Since she covered the same events several times over the course of the interviews, Bogdan could compare different versions given at different times.

You should also draw on as many different sources of data as possible to check out informants' statements. In the early work of the Chicago school, the researchers regularly compared informants' stories with official records maintained by police and social work agencies. Sutherland (1937) submitted the life history of a professional thief to other professional thieves and detectives to get their views on the veracity of the story. In our research we held our informants' narratives up against accounts by other knowledgeable persons and our own observations and experiences. For example, we had conducted extensive participant observation at the institutions at which Ed Murphy and Pattie Burt had lived. In constructing Jane Fry's life history, Bogdan interviewed others who had been through similar experiences. For instance, he questioned a former Navy officer on the accuracy of Jane's account of life in the Navy. In his conclusion to Jane Fry's life story, Bogdan juxtaposed Jane's accounts of experiences with psychiatric records, although his purpose was less to check out her story than to compare competing ideologies of transsexualism.

Probably the best way to deal with contradictions and internal inconsistencies is to raise the issue directly. Gently confront the person with what you believe: "Maybe you could explain something for me. One time you told me this, but what you said another time doesn't go along with that. I don't get it." Suspected lies and deceptions often turn out to be misunderstandings.

It is also important to point out that inconsistencies in a person's story are not necessarily a source of concern. As Merton and Kendall (1946) have noted, people sometimes hold logically contradictory views. Further, because people are in a constant process of constructing their stock of social knowledge and the meaning of their experiences, they can be expected to say, and believe, different things at different times and in different situations (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

RELATIONS WITH INFORMANTS

The interviewer-informant relationship is largely one-sided. Through the relationship, the interviewer has the opportunity to conduct a study and thereby to gain the status and rewards that come with receiving a degree or publishing books or articles. It is unclear what, if anything, informants stand to gain from the relationship, other than the satisfaction that someone thinks

their lives and views are important. Although informants have few tangible rewards to gain, they are asked to devote considerable time and energy to the endeavor.

Due to the one-sided nature of the relationship, interviewers often (but not always, since some people welcome an interviewer's undivided attention to their lives, experiences, or perspectives) have to work hard at maintaining informants' motivation in the interviewing. The best way to do this is to relate to informants as people and not merely sources of data.

Since informants are expected to open up during interviews—to share private and sometimes intimate aspects of themselves—there has to be some exchange in terms of what interviewers say about themselves. It is probably unwise for interviewers to hold back their feelings completely. Obviously, the interviewer should not express an opinion on every subject that comes up, especially during initial interviews. Somewhere between total disclosure and total detachment lies the happy medium that the interviewer should try to meet. The best advice is to be discreet in the interview but to talk about yourself in other situations. Researchers have to decide for themselves how they will relate to informants as fellow human beings. Our own view is that we should be willing to relate to informants in terms other than interviewer-informant. Interviewers can serve as errand-runners, drivers, baby-sitters, advocates, and—whether or not they intend to—Rogerian therapists (if you are an effective interviewer, you are bound to elicit painful memories and feelings, and you have to be prepared to deal with these). In our life history interviewing, we occasionally had lunch or dinner with our informants. This contact strengthened our relationship with them, in addition to enabling us to talk with them informally and learn about their everyday lives. In the cases of Jane Fry, a transsexual, and Ed Murphy, a man labeled retarded with minor physical disabilities, we learned a lot by just observing how people reacted to them and how they reacted in turn.

In many interviewing projects, the informant is one of society's underdogs (Becker 1966), powerless by virtue of his or her economic or social status. Researchers, in contrast, are likely to be secure in their status at universities. For this reason, researchers are in a good position to help informants lobby for their rights. When Jane Fry was discriminated against by a community college, Bogdan found a lawyer for her and put her in touch with a mental health rights group.

As with any relationship, tensions can arise between you and your informants during the course of the interviewing. It is not uncommon for rapport to wane during extended projects (Johnson 1975). Informants can get tired of answering questions or begin to see the interviewing as an imposition on their lives. You can begin to get impatient when informants are reluctant to address questions or skirt certain topics. Either of you can become bored with the endeavor.

You should try to be sensitive to your informants' low spots and feelings. When you think something is wrong, try to clear the air by expressing your concerns. Sometimes it is a good idea to take a break from the interviewing altogether.

A common problem in large studies is canceled or missed appointments. In the large-scale family study, a sizable number of parents canceled interviews at the last minute or failed to be at home at the agreed-upon time. The research team came up with a set of tactics to prevent cancellations, including phone calls on the day preceding the interviews, appointment cards, buying calendars for some families, arriving an hour early on the scheduled day, and leaving notes expressing bewilderment when families were not home. When parents repeatedly missed appointments, they were asked directly whether they wanted to continue in the study. Although these tactics reduced the number of cancellations, it became obvious that some parents simply did not want to participate in the study but, for whatever reason, were reluctant to say so. There was disagreement within the research team over what to do about these families, with some members arguing that they should be left alone if they did not want to participate and others advocating continued attempts to obtain the data. As it turned out, the study dropped many of these families from the research when continued attempts to schedule appointments failed.

TAPE-RECORDING INTERVIEWS

In the chapter on participant observation, we advised researchers to rely on their memories to record data, at least until they had developed a feel for the setting. Recording devices can make people self-conscious.

Although tape-recording can alter what people say in the early stages of the research, interviewers can usually get by with taping interviews. In interviewing, informants are acutely aware that the interviewer's agenda is to conduct research. Since the interviewees already know that their words are being weighed, they are less likely to be alarmed by the presence of a tape recorder. The interviewer often also has an extended period of time in which to get informants to relax and become accustomed to the tape recorder. In participant observation, researchers interact with a number of people, some of whom never get to know, let alone trust, the observer.

A tape recorder allows the interviewer to capture more than he or she could by relying on memory. The interviewer's data consist almost entirely of words. Unlike participant observers, interviewers cannot sit back for a while and observe during lapses in conversations. It is possible that many of the most important life histories in the social sciences would never have been written without the use of electronic recording devices. Oscar Lewis (1963,

xii) writes in his introduction to *The Children of Sanchez*: "The tape recorder, used in taking down the life histories in this book, has made possible the beginning of a new kind of literature of social realism."

The remarks should not make us lose sight of the fact that most people's memories are better than they suspect. Although we have used tape recorders in most of our interviewing, we have relied on our memories to record the substance of brief one-hour interviews. Some researchers, such as Thomas Cottle (1972), regularly conduct interviews without tape recorders.

Obviously, you should not record interviews if it makes informants ill at ease (Klockars 1977). Even if informants do not mind the fact that the interviews are being taped, try to minimize the recorder's presence. Use a small recorder and place it out of sight. The microphone should be unobtrusive and sensitive enough to pick up voices without the participants having to speak into it. Find a recorder that will accommodate long-playing tapes so that the conversation will not be interrupted often.

A few final words of caution: label each tape clearly and make sure your equipment is functioning properly before each interview. In one of our studies, we forgot to check out the tapes and recorder before some of the interviews. When we listened to the tapes later, they were barely audible. Our typist would not even try to transcribe them, and we ended up spending many hours playing and replaying them to pick up all of the data.

GROUP INTERVIEWS

One method that has become increasingly popular in the social sciences and applied research in recent years is group interviewing. In this approach, interviewers bring together groups of people to talk about their perspectives and experiences in open-ended discussions. As with in-depth interviewing, the researcher uses a nondirective approach. In group interviewing, as opposed to one-to-one interviewing, the researcher must act as a group facilitator and moderator, managing interactions between members of the group—for example, keeping people from interrupting or arguing with each other, dealing with overly talkative people who would monopolize the conversation, encouraging shy people to contribute, and so on.

Two geographers, Rowan Roundtree and Barry Gordon, employed the group interview approach to study how people define geographic space, specifically forests. Initially, Roundtree and Gordon intended to conduct observations in the field: that is, in wooded areas. This plan contained its drawbacks. Since most people go to forests to "get away from things," including other people, it would be difficult for the researchers to find people willing to be studied. Roundtree and Gordon were also interested in the definitions of people who might never have been in forests.

What the researchers decided to do instead of field interviews was to assemble groups of people, show them a set of 10 slides of forest areas, and encourage them to talk about what they had seen. The research was directed toward understanding how different people view and use forest areas.

Thomas Cottle (1973c) has used free-flowing group discussions in urban areas to examine how young people define their world. Cottle describes the approach on which his excellent paper, "The Ghetto Scientists," is based:

It is difficult to say how many of us were speaking that afternoon in the little park near the hospital. So much was going on, like a colossal basketball game and boys darting after girls, or a pretend fight, that our population kept shifting. Still, there were always four or five young people about ten years old, who joined me on the grass alongside the basketball court and the conversation tumbled along so that we all could follow it and the newcomers could be cued in easily. The girls and boys were speaking about school, their studies, teachers, parents, and brothers and sisters, although there was an unusual side trip into politics. In times like these I wish I could be totally free to say anything to young people, young black people, in this case. It is not that I am thinking anything particular about them as much as holding back ideas that for one reason or another I feel should remain hidden. Maybe it has to do with the laziness of the day or the fact that none of the young people seem especially eager to latch onto some topic. Maybe it is the way some of us do research; entering poor areas of cities and just speaking with people, letting conversations run on without interpretation or analysis. Maybe too, some of us have a strong desire to know what these people think of us and the work we do.

A more formal approach to group interviews, known as *focus groups* (Krueger 1988; Morgan 1988), has become especially popular in applied and evaluation research in recent years. In marketing and political opinion research, for example, the focus group has become almost as commonplace as large-scale public opinion polls. In contrast to polls, focus groups are designed to explore how and why people make the decisions they do.

Focus groups are designed to use group dynamics to yield insights that might not be accessible without the kind of interaction found in a group (Morgan 1988, 12). As Rubin and Rubin (1995) write:

In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion. (p. 140)

Just as one-to-one interviews must be understood as a form of social interaction, group interviews must be interpreted in terms of group dynamics. Most people cannot be expected to say the same things in a group that they might say to an interviewer in private. Group discussions can also lead to a

superficial consensus in which some members defer to those who are most outspoken.

Group interviews seem most appropriate when the researcher has specific topics to explore and is not interested in private aspects of people's lives.

THE INTERVIEWER'S JOURNAL

It is a good idea to maintain a detailed journal during your interviewing. The interviewer's journal can serve several purposes. First of all, the journal should contain an outline of topics discussed in each interview. This will help you to keep track of what has already been covered in the interviewing and to go back to specific conversations when you want to follow up on something that the informant has said. In our interviewing with Ed Murphy, we neglected to do this and wasted quite a bit of time listening to tapes and reading transcripts looking for specific things.

Second, the journal takes the place of observer's comments recorded in participant observation field notes. Like the observer, you should make note of emerging themes, interpretations, hunches, and striking gestures and non-verbal expressions essential to understanding the meaning of a person's words. Holstein and Gubrium (1995, 78) recommend that the interviewer act as "an 'ethnographer of the interview,' who records for future analysis not only what is said but the related interactional details of how the interview was accomplished."

The following are examples of the kinds of comments that should be included in the journal:

- By the faces she was making, I think she was being sarcastic when she talked about her mother. She didn't seem to want to say anything really negative about her mother though.
- That's the third time she's raised that topic on her own. It must be important to her. I'll have to look into this in the future.
- I really hit a sensitive nerve when I asked him about why his wife left him. He stiffened right up and made it quite clear that he didn't want to go into this. I don't really trust the story he told me about this.
- Somehow we were both bored tonight. We just wanted to get the interview over with. Maybe this was because of the topic or maybe we were both tired today.
- I think I was a bit too aggressive tonight. I wonder if he just said those things to keep me off his back. I'll have to keep this in mind when I go over the conversation.

Notes like this will assist in guiding future interviews and interpreting data at a later time.

Finally, the journal is a good place to keep a record of conversations with informants outside of the interview situation. Ed Murphy often talked at length about important things in his life during breaks in the interviewing and informal contacts with the researchers. Such data are clearly important and should be analyzed along with those collected during the interview.

You should try to force yourself to write journal entries after each contact with informants as well as at other times when you think of something important to record. Every once in a while, look through your journal to get a sense of what you have covered and what you have learned.

In the past several chapters we have presented the strategies and tactics of the predominant qualitative research methods—participant observation and in-depth interviewing. In the next chapter we present examples of other ways in which qualitative research can be conducted. We shift our focus in this chapter from a how-to approach to a descriptive one. Our goal in this chapter is to encourage creativity and innovation in research.

NOTES

1. Many of the classic life histories prepared by the Chicago school of sociology were actually based on written documents solicited by the researchers rather than on in-depth interviewing. We discuss this later in the chapter. Also, in the Chicago school the phrase *personal documents* was used to refer to both written materials and narratives based on in-depth interviewing.
2. In addition, many of the authors or subjects of the life histories prepared by the Chicago school were paid to write their stories (see Shaw, McKay, and McDonald 1938; Sutherland 1937).
3. Yet another *sic* here. If women define situations as real, the same thing applies. To add insult to injury, Smith (1995) points out that the "Thomas Theorem," or "dictum," quoted here was originally published in a book written by both W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas. Yet, classic sociology textbooks attributed this famous quote almost exclusively to W. I. Thomas. According to Smith, this reflects a professional ideology that systematically ignored the contributions of women to sociology.

CHAPTER 5

Montage: Discovering Methods

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IN 1966 a team of social scientists published a book, entitled *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in Social Sciences*, with which they hoped to "broaden the social scientist's current narrow range of utilized methodologies and to encourage creative and opportunistic exploitation of unique measurement possibilities" (Webb et al. 1966, 1).¹ The team went on to write: "Today, the dominant mass of social science research is based upon interviews and questionnaires. We lament this overdependence upon a single, fallible method" (Webb et al. 1966, 1).

Although the authors of *Unobtrusive Measures* align themselves with quantitative research methods and a positivist world view, their plea for creativity and innovation should be heeded by qualitative researchers as well. We must guard against the overdependence cited by these researchers; that is, we must be careful not to be boxed in by a limited repertoire of research approaches.

We have concentrated thus far in this book on two research approaches: participant observation—the mainstay of qualitative methods—and in-depth interviewing, a popular tool among social researchers. Moreover, we