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PART IV INTERVIEWS

7 The 'Inside' and the 'Outside'

Finding Realities in Interviews

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In his *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, Silverman (1993) highlights the dilemmas facing interview researchers concerning what to make of their data. On the one hand, positivists have as a goal the creation of the 'pure' interview – enacted in a sterilized context, in such a way that it comes as close as possible to providing a 'mirror reflection' of the reality that exists in the social world. This position has been thoroughly critiqued over the years in terms of both its feasibility and its desirability. On the other hand, radical social constructionists suggest that no knowledge about a reality that is 'out there' in the social world can be obtained from the interview, because the interview is obviously and exclusively an interaction between the interviewer and interview subject in which both participants create and construct narrative versions of the social world. The problem with looking at these narratives as representative of some 'truth' in the world, according to these scholars, is that they are context-specific, invented, if you will, to fit the demands of the interactive context of the interview, and representative of nothing more or less.

For those of us who hope to learn about the social world, and, in particular, hope to contribute knowledge that can be beneficial in expanding understanding and useful for fostering social change, the proposition that our interviews are meaningless beyond the context in which they occur is a daunting one. This is not to say that we accept the positivist view of the possibility of untouched data available through standardized interviewing, but rather to suggest that we are not willing to discount entirely the possibility of learning about the social world beyond the interview in our analyses of interview data.

In this chapter, we try to identify a position that is outside of this objectivist-constructivist continuum yet takes seriously the goals and critiques of researchers at both of its poles. We will argue that information about social worlds is achievable through in-depth interviewing. The position we are attempting to put forward is inspired by authors such as Harding (e.g. 1987) and Latour (e.g. 1993), who posit explicitly anti-dualistic options for methodological and theorizing practices in media

studies and science studies – options which recognize that both emulation and rejection of dominant discourses such as positivism miss something critically important. Dominant discourses are totalizing only for those who view them as such; they are replete with fissures and uncolonized spaces within which people engage in highly satisfying and even resistant practices of knowledge-making.

We concur with Sanders that while

[w]e would do well to heed the cautions offered by postmodern ethnographers . . . [t]here is a considerable difference between being skeptical about the bases of truth claims while carefully examining the grounds upon which these claims are founded (a conventional interactionist enterprise) and denying that truth – as a utilitarian and liberating orientation – exists at all. (1995: 93, 97)

Narratives and worlds

As Silverman notes, for interviewers in the interactionist tradition, interview subjects construct not just narratives, but social worlds. For researchers in this tradition, 'the primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences' (Silverman, 1993: 91). While interactionists do not suggest that there is

'a singular objective or absolute world out-there' . . . [they] do recognize 'objectified worlds.' Indeed, they contend that some objectification is essential if human conduct is to be accomplished. Objectivity exists, thus, not as an absolute or inherently meaningful condition to which humans react but as an accomplished aspect of human lived experience. (Dawson and Prus, 1995: 113)

Research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. In fact, it is only in the context of non-positivistic interviews, which recognize and build on their interactive components (rather than trying to control and reduce them), that 'intersubjective depth' and 'deep-mutual understanding' can be achieved (and, with these, the achievement of knowledge of social worlds).

Those of us who aim to understand and document others' understandings choose qualitative interviewing because it provides us with a means for exploring the points of view of our research subjects, while granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality. As Charmaz explains:

We start with the experiencing person and try to share his or her subjective view. Our task is objective in the sense that we try to describe it with depth and detail. In doing so, we try to represent the person's view fairly and to portray it as consistent with his or her meanings. (1995: 54)

Silverman and others accurately suggest that this portrayal of what we do is in some ways romanticized. We will address below some of the

problems that make this the case. But the proposition that romanticizing negates, in itself, the objectivity Charmaz defines, or the subjectivities with which we work, does not follow.

We have no trouble acknowledging, for instance, that interviewees sometimes respond to interviewers through the use of familiar narrative constructs, rather than by providing meaningful insights into their subjective view. Indeed, as Denzin notes:

The subject is more than can be contained in a text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. What the subject tells us is itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings. Most important, language, which is our window into the subject's world (and our world), plays tricks. It displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent, so that what is always given is a trace of other things, not the thing – lived experience – itself. (1991: 68)

In addition to this displacing, the language of interviewing (like all other telling) fractures the stories being told. This occurs inevitably within a storyteller's narrative, which must be partial because it cannot be infinite in length, and all the more partial if it is not to be unbearably boring. In the qualitative interview process, the research commits further fractures as well. The coding, categorization and typologizing of stories result in telling only parts of stories, rather than presenting them in their 'wholeness' (Charmaz, 1995: 60). Numerous levels of representation occur from the moment of 'primary experience' to the reading of researchers' textual presentation of findings, including the level of attending to the experience, telling it to the researcher, transcribing and analysing what is told, and the reading.

Qualitative interviewers recognize these fissures from the ideal text (i.e. interviewees' subjective view as experienced by the interviewees themselves). Interviewers note, for example, that '[t]he story is being told to particular people; it might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener' (Riessman, 1993: 11). The issue of how interviewees respond to us based on who we are – in their lives, as well as the social categories to which we belong, such as age, gender, class and race – is a practical concern as well as an epistemological or theoretical one. The issue may be exacerbated, for example, when we study groups with whom we do not share membership. Particularly as a result of social distances, interviewees may not trust us, they may not understand our questions, or they may purposely mislead us in their responses. Likewise, given a lack of membership in their primary groups, we may not know enough about the phenomenon under study to ask the right questions.

Studying adolescents, as we have done in our own research, presents unique concerns along these lines. On the one hand, the meaning systems of adolescents are different from those of adults, and adult researchers must exercise caution in assuming they have an understanding of adolescent cultures because they've 'been there'. On the other hand, adolescents are in a transitional period of life, becoming increasingly oriented to adult worlds, though with 'rough edges' (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988: 60). As a

consequence, 'age begins to decrease in importance as a means of differentiating oneself, and other dimensions of cultural differentiation, such as gender and class [and race], become more crucial' (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988: 66). These dimensions are thus of critical importance in establishing research relationships, rapport and trust, and in evaluating both the information obtained, and the interaction that occurs, within in-depth interviews.

To treat a young person's age as the determinant or predictor of his or her experiences or ways of talking is to neglect another key point about age-ordering as well:

The idea of an ending of childhood is predicated upon a normative system wherein childhood itself is taken for granted. But childhood may also be 'ended' by narratives of personal or societal 'deviance' or by new stories reconstituting the modelling of childhood itself. (Rogers and Rogers, 1992: 153)

In our experience, much of what adolescents talk about in open-ended interviews is precisely how their acts seem wayward, delinquent, premature or otherwise not befitting proper youthful behaviour. Their discourse towards and with us (and *for* themselves) is much about where and who they are. It is about trying out social locations and identities:

Our approach is to treat the adolescents' reports as situated elements in social worlds. On the one hand they are ways of making sense to oneself and to another (cf. Mills, 1940). One cannot read the transcripts and fail to recognize that much of what goes on is two persons trying to understand topics that neither would consider in quite this manner or detail except in such special circumstances. The interviewees typically seem to enjoy the chance to 'think aloud' about such matters, and often they say this to the interviewer. Much of that thinking is directed at a major project of their present lives – figuring out what type of person they are and what type they want to be. The interview offers an opportunity to try out various possibilities on this older student who is asking questions, and with reference to how it fits with one's self-image or might work out if directed at other audiences. On the other hand, these ways of viewing self and world come from and build into the social world itself. Ways of thinking and talking derive from daily experiences and are also used in these. (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987: 34–5)

Life outside the interview

Interactionist research starts from a belief that people create and maintain meaningful worlds. As interactionist research with adolescents illustrates, this belief can be accepted 'without assuming the existence of a single, encompassing obdurate reality' (Charmaz, 1995: 62). To assume that realities beyond the interview context cannot be tapped into and explored is to grant narrative omnipotence. The roots of these realities are 'more fundamental and pervasive' (Dawson and Prus, 1995: 121; see also Dawson and Prus, 1993; Schmitt, 1993) than such a view can account for. A vivid illustration of this is to be found in Charmaz's work on the chronically ill, who, she notes, experience sickness regardless of whether they participate in

her interviews (1995: 50). We note that the adolescents in our studies experience their age-, gender- and ethnic-based identities and fluidity of identity whether or not we interview them – and within our interviews with them.

Language shapes meanings but also permits intersubjectivity and the ability of willful persons to create and maintain meaningful worlds (Dawson and Prus, 1993: 166). Recognizing this, we cannot accept the proposition that interviews do not yield information about social worlds. Rather, 'we take it that two persons can communicate their perceptions to one another. Knowing full well that there are both structures and pollutants in any discussion, we choose to study what is said in that discussion' (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987: 33). While certainly 'there is no way to stuff a real-live person between the two covers of a text', as Denzin (in Schmitt, 1993: 130) puts it, we can describe truthfully, delimited segments of real-live persons' lives. Indeed, in so delimiting, we may get *closer* to people's lived experience. As Charmaz (1995) notes, many people do not want themselves revealed in their totality. Recognizing this and responding accordingly may result in deeper, fuller conceptualizations of those aspects of our subjects' lives we are most interested in understanding.

Much the same deserves to be said about the interactionist researcher concerning the place and fullness of his or her life within the interview context. On the one hand, scholarship should preserve 'in it the presence, concerns, and the experience of the [researcher] as knower and discoverer' (Smith, 1987: 92; see also Harding, 1987) so that the subjectivity that exists in all social research will be a visible part of the project, and thus available to the reader for examination. As Harding (1987: 9) notes, when 'the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests' the research process can be scrutinized.

Yet on the other hand, these dictates do not necessitate, as some excessively revealing authors have taken them to mean, engaging in confessionals either with one's interviewees or with one's readers, or boring them with excessive details about oneself. It is precisely the 'concrete, specific desires and interests' that merit airing, not everything that might be aired.

In our experience, interviewees will tell us, if given the chance, which of our interests and formulations make sense and non-sense to them. Glassner and Loughlin (1987: 36) describe instances in their study in which the interviewer brought up a topic that was seen by the subject as irrelevant or misinterpretation, and they offered correction. Moreover, as Charmaz points out, 'creating these observations at all assumes that we share enough experience with our subjects and our readers to define things similarly' (1995: 64).

Of paramount importance regarding how (and how much) we present ourselves is the influence this presentation has on interviewees' ability and willingness to tell various sorts of stories. Richardson notes, 'People

organize their personal biographies and understand them through the stories they create to explain and justify their life experiences' (1990: 23; see also Lempert, 1994; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993). Highlighting two types of stories of particular relevance, Richardson first describes the 'cultural story' – 'Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other' (Richardson, 1990: 24). These narratives represent the basis on which individuals create cultural stories, or stories about social phenomena that are typically 'told from the point of view of the ruling interests and the normative order' (Richardson, 1990: 25). An interviewer who presents him- or herself as either too deeply committed to those interests and that order, or as clearly outside of them, restricts which cultural stories interviewees may tell and how these will be told.

Cultural stories are based in part on stereotypes. Richardson dubs an alternative to these the 'collective story'. Collective stories take the point of view of the interview subjects, and 'give voice to those who are silenced or marginalized in the cultural [story]' (Richardson, 1990: 25). They challenge popular stereotypes by 'resist[ing] the cultural narratives about groups of people and tell[ing] alternative stories' (Richardson, 1990: 25). A strength of qualitative interviewing is precisely its capacity to access self-reflexivity among interview subjects, leading to the greater likelihood of the telling of collective stories:

Respondents may reveal feelings, beliefs, and private doubts that contradict or conflict with 'what everyone thinks,' including sentiments that break the dominant feeling rules. . . . In other cases, interviewers will discover the anxiety, ambivalence, and uncertainty that lie behind respondents' conformity. (Kleinman et al., 1994: 43)

Here again, to be a candidate for 'good listener', the interviewer does best to present him- or herself as someone who is neither firmly entrenched in the mainstream nor too far at any particular margin. Ultimately, though, it is not where the interviewer locates him- or herself that is of greatest relevance to interviewees. In our experience, interviewees' principal concerns focus upon what will become of the interview. Those concerns extend beyond matters such as the protection of confidentiality. Interviewees want to know that what they have to say matters. They want to know what will become of their words. A researcher who interviewed AIDS patients observed:

Many of my respondents explicitly refer to their interviews as 'legacies.' They are participating in this project despite the pain it might cause them because they believe I will use their stories to help others. Thus they shoulder me with the responsibility of giving meaning to their lives and their deaths. (Weitz, 1987: 21)

More often, the upshot for both interviewer and interviewee is less monumental, if no less important. In interviews with adolescents we have found, for example, that to be taken seriously and regarded as a teacher by

someone whose societal role is that of 'teacher' is a defining and highly valued characteristic of the interview situation.

An illustration

We have suggested that narratives which emerge in interview contexts are situated in social worlds, they come out of worlds that exist outside of the interview itself. We argue not only for the existence of these worlds, but also for our ability as researchers to capture elements of these worlds in our scholarship. To illustrate some of the interactionist strategies for achieving that access we turn to a research effort one of us has recently completed (Miller, 1996).

The study involves in-depth, open-ended interviews with young women (ages 13 to 18) who claim affiliation with youth gangs in their communities. These interviews follow the completion of a survey interview administered by the same researcher. While the survey interview gathers information about a wide range of topics, including the individual, her school, friends, family, neighbourhood, delinquent involvement, arrest history, sexual history and victimization, in addition to information about the gang, the in-depth interview is concerned exclusively with the roles and activities of young women in youth gangs, and the meanings they describe as emerging from their gang affiliation.

Compared to the interviewees, the interviewer is ten to fifteen years older (although typically perceived as younger by the interviewees), of the same gender, but often of a different race (Miller is white, the majority of the interviewees are African American) and class background (upper middle versus middle, lower-middle, working class and poor). Some scholars have argued that researchers should be members of the groups we study, in order to have the subjective knowledge necessary to truly understand their life experiences. For example, Collins argues that in order to make legitimate knowledge claims, researchers should 'have lived or experienced their material in some fashion' (1990: 232).

We suggest, however, that the existence of social differences between the interviewer and interviewees does not mean that the interviews are devoid of information about social worlds. In fact, the interviews can be accomplished in ways that put these social differences to use in providing opportunities for individuals to articulate their feelings about their life experiences. As noted above, one potential benefit of social distances in research of this nature is that the interviewee can recognize him- or herself as an expert on a topic of interest to someone typically in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the social structure (in this case, particularly in terms of age, race and education). To find oneself placed in this position can be both empowering and illuminating because one can reflect on and speak about one's life in ways not often available. When individuals are members of groups that have been stereotyped and devalued by the larger culture, and

whose perspectives have been ignored (as in the case of female gang members), the promise of this approach is all the more apparent.

We have suggested that knowledge of social worlds emerges from the achievement of intersubjective depth and mutual understanding. For these to be present, however, there must be a level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Social distances that include differences in relative power can result in suspicion and lack of trust, both of which the researcher must actively seek to overcome. Rapport building is a key to this process. Establishing trust and familiarity, showing genuine interest, assuring confidentiality and not being judgemental are some important elements of building rapport (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987: 35). Miller has found that the last of these is particularly important when interviewing adolescent female gang members. These young women are members of a group frequently stigmatized by the social groups to which Miller herself belongs, a reality known to both the interviewees and the interviewer. Fortunately, Miller's research design proved useful in alleviating tensions that could result from this schism. Her administration of a survey interview with detailed questions about histories of delinquent involvement and arrest provided an opportunity to exhibit a neutral demeanour that neither condemned nor praised interviewees' responses, even on occasions when individuals reported brutal acts of violence. The benefit of administering a survey first (in addition to its value in providing collaborative evidence or 'triangulation') was that this layer of understanding was already in place when the in-depth interviews occurred.

The assurance of confidentiality is achieved as much by implicit assurances as by explicit guarantees. There were often opportunities for Miller to convey her concern about protecting the subjects' privacy. For example, when interviewing in open areas (such as the visiting room at a juvenile detention centre), she remained aware of the surroundings to ensure against eavesdropping, temporarily stopped the interview when others came within clear hearing range, and moved to more secluded areas when necessary. Likewise, when interviewees accidentally disclosed names, Miller immediately offered to erase these slips from the tape recording and did so in the interviewee's presence before continuing with the interview.

Cultural stories

Rapport involves more, however, than provisions of confidentiality, non-judgemental responses and other offerings from the interviewer. It involves the interviewee feeling comfortable and competent enough in the interaction to 'talk back' (Blumer, 1969: 22). When respondents talk back they provide insights into the narratives they use to describe the meanings of their social worlds and into their experience of the worlds of which they are a part. One way in which Miller's interviewees talked back – both to her and to the audiences for her works about them – was by weaving their personal narratives into larger cultural stories about gangs. In describing

their gangs, explaining their gang involvement and attributing personal meanings to being in gangs, they situated these topics in pre-existing narratives about gangs (i.e. cultural stories) both by embracing these stories and by challenging them. They gain at least part of their understanding, and convey their understanding to the interviewer, by drawing on the narratives which come out of the social worlds around them.

Scholars have noted 'the impact of "already established cultural standards" on individuals' (Schmitt, 1993: 126). In Miller's interviews, two somewhat divergent stories of the gang emerged – the 'bad' gang, which fits larger cultural stereotypes, and the 'good' gang, which is in some ways a challenge to larger cultural stereotypes. The description of the 'bad' gang was in many ways in keeping with the cultural story of the gang, with depictions of the gang as tough, brutally violent and, by definition, criminally active. This is the gang of cultural stories, circulated both among gang members and among the public in their images of gang violence. Although the young women were sometimes critical of this aspect of the gang life, more often, they adopted these narratives in order to describe a group from which they derived status. On one level they were adopting a cultural story of the gang as bad, a story told from the point of view of those in power (see Richardson, 1990: 25). On another level, they were attributing meanings that contrast with the negative connotations typically associated with this cultural story. These narratives challenge public views of gangs as evildoers by ascribing positive ('good') meanings to their being such.

Miller's interviewees also spoke of how the gang does good for them personally, describing the positive personal meanings they attributed to being affiliated with gangs. In doing so, they drew on alternative cultural stories of gang membership, stories that, rather than resisting the negative connotations associated with gangs in some cultural stories, instead provided sympathetic accounts of young people in gangs as having turned to the gang to fill voids in their lives.

Describing why she joined her gang, one young woman told Miller, 'well, I didn't get any respect at home. I wanted to get some love and respect from somebody somewhere else, so.' Another explained, 'I didn't have no family. . . . I had nothin' else.' Another young woman, when asked to speculate on why young people join gangs, suggested:

Some of 'em are like me, don't have, don't really have a basic home or steady home to go to, you know, and they don't have as much love and respect in the home so they want to get it elsewhere. And, and, like we get, have family members in gangs or that were in gangs, stuff like that.

These narratives, which are variations on familiar cultural stories, do not attempt to challenge public views of gangs as bad, but they do challenge the notion that the interviewee herself is bad. The interviewees deploy these narratives to make their actions explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand. Another way in which interviewees can

break clear of a dominant cultural story about their groups or themselves is by locating themselves and their narratives within *another* cultural story (cf. Goffman, 1974, on breaking frame). Adolescents have available to them, for example, cultural stories about adolescence as a life stage.

Stories about adolescence are about the transition from youth to adulthood, or becoming who/what one is not. Miller's interviewees spoke of their transitional status between youthful gang membership and adulthood, the time to 'do something' with one's life. One young woman explained that in some ways joining her gang 'was just weird, cause, I mean I don't know, I guess it's just not the right picture of my life would be to be part of a gang'. When asked to think about what she would be like in the future, one young woman said, 'I'll look back in the past and see what I did and how I changed and all that and I'll wonder why I acted like that and why I joined the gangs and all that.' A young woman who was an ex-gang member reflected back on both the positive and negative aspects of gang membership for her, including how it helped her grow up but also kept her from maturing:

Being in that gang gave me, now that I left, I still have that backbone of my own. But, before I didn't have that. I would, somebody could just cuss me and I start cryin' and run, 'I'm tellin' my mom and my dad,' and all this. But, now it's like I handle my own. I can handle it by myself. I don't, I mean, I need them for some things. But, then again I don't need 'em for others. But before I needed 'em for everything. . . . [The downside:] I started gettin' real mean and angry. I wasn't the same [person] that I was before. I was Miss Bad Ass. That's what they called me. I mean, I didn't, I didn't take, I disrespected people. I lost all manners. I mean, I just lost everything. It was like I was turnin' in, turnin' into somebody that I really wasn't. And, then I started seein' it for myself. And, how it was affectin' my family 'n stuff. So, that's why I said, 'No, I can't do this. I gotta get, gotta get outta this.'

There were also elements of the interviews that reflected the adolescent part of their personalities as well, in their present-orientedness and the seriousness with which they took some elements of gang lore. The gang was described by some young women as a permanent part of their lives, whether they wanted it or not, that once membership was established, there was no changing that status. For example, one young woman who planned to disassociate herself from her gang after she was raped by one of the members explained that she could stop spending time with them, but could never leave: 'I can change my whole life but I'll still be in the gang.' She told Miller she had gotten herself into something she couldn't get herself out of. Others described not wanting to get pregnant because it would mean that their babies would 'belong' to the gang from birth to death.

Collective stories

Some of the young women go further and describe their gang involvement in ways that directly challenge prevailing stereotypes about gangs as groups that are inherently bad or antisocial and about females' roles within gangs.

Sometimes this involves responding to cultural stories of the 'bad' gang in a manner that explicitly challenges what the interviewees know to be popular beliefs about youth gangs. In such cases, they attempt to convey the normalcy of their activities: 'It was really, it was just normal life, the only difference was, is, that we had meetings.' Another young woman pointed out: '[We] play cards, smoke bud, play dominoes, play video games. That's basically all we do is play. You would be surprised. This is a bunch of big kids. It's a bunch of big old kids in my set.' These narratives directly challenge cultural stories of the gang. As such, they are collective stories.

A proposition of this chapter is that interviews have the capacity to be interactional contexts within which social worlds come to be better understood. One way in which this is achieved is through interviewees' re-visioning of cultural stories, as we have just suggested. We have proposed that another sort of story can be told as well, one that privileges the social world under discussion and its stories over the stories of the larger society. Miller's interviews illustrate this possibility particularly in those places where the young women described the ordinariness of their daily lives within gangs. The gang activities thus described provide a vivid contrast to images of gangs as dangerous criminal enterprises; they reveal that the social worlds of young women in gangs are much more routine than cultural stories usually reveal. For example, when asked to describe a typical day, one girl explained:

A typical day would be sittin' back at the park or somethin' like that or one of our friend's houses, or a gang member's house, gettin' drunk, gettin' high and, you know, watchin' TV, listenin' to the radio. Actually, we listen to tapes and stuff, stackin' and all this stuff.

Another described:

Sometimes, sometimes we sit on the porch and just sit there and we just be watchin' the cars go back and forth. Just relaxin' in a chair. The guys'd have their forties and then they'd have their blunts or whatever, or weed. And be sittin' there smokin' on the porch. And, that's a typical day, just hangin' out.

The young women also broke away from the cultural stories about gangs by reframing their relationship with others in the gang in terms that fail to support notions of gang membership as all-encompassing or definitional. Here they were not necessarily trying to make their actions understandable to outsiders, but were expressing the value of their relationships on their own terms. Describing someone she admired in her gang, one girl explained:

We're, we're just, we're close. I mean, we show respect towards one another. She helps me out when I'm down. I mean, cause, even though we may have that title as a gang, I mean, we're still there for one another. I mean, we still have feelings. And I'm there for her, she's there for me.

Another young woman, describing what she values in her gang, told Miller:

I like the fact that if I decided to leave here [a placement facility] right now I would always have somewhere to stay. And I wouldn't have to worry about wealth, what am I going to have to wear tomorrow. What am I going to put on

or what's gonna happen or nothin' like that because I would have, I would have clean clothes, a place to sleep that's warm, food to eat. I mean, stuff like that. Havin', it's like, the best thing to me is like I have a back-up system. Like, if I, if I ever got tired of stayin' with my grandmother then I could go stay somewhere else and wouldn't have to worry about wealth or if their parents will let me stay here. I would just go knock on the door and they would say, 'Come on. Are you spendin' the night, or what?'

Another type of collective story that emerged from the interviews was specifically a story about the place of girls in gangs. Collective stories challenge stereotypes, and one common stereotype about girls in gangs is that their primary function is as sexual outlets for the male members. One young woman expressed her frustration that people outside of gangs often assume that she was sexed into the gang (an initiation that involves the girl having sex with some of the male members):

They be showin' these little movies on TV, like, well, the females have to get sexed in and the males have to get jumped in and like that. You know, you seen 'em on TV. And they, they just figure, well, if you a girl gang member then you got sexed in. And I, I really didn't. I wasn't even down for nothin' like that.

The young women Miller spoke to instead described their place in the gang as comparable to the male members in terms of activities, toughness and willingness to fight. Describing her initiation, one young woman explained:

I got my respect off the bat because instead of takin' six from the girls I took six from four guys. I took six hits to the head from four guys. I got my respect off the bat. So the girls, they had nothin' to say about me bein' a punk, neither did the guys.

They characterized themselves as tougher than most other girls. Describing which females wouldn't make good members, many referred to 'sissy girls', girls who 'don't want to mess up their nails or their hair or whatever'. One young woman explained:

I think some girls, they're just scared of that type of stuff. They're scared of fighting. They're scared of violence. . . . [But] I mean, even when I wasn't in it, I fought all the time. I never backed down from anybody. I didn't care, either.

According to this collective story, the gang is an arena in which they receive status and esteem from being strong and being willing to stand up for themselves, exhibiting traits much more commonly associated with males than females.

Conclusion

Silverman argues in *Interpreting Qualitative Data* that 'while "open-ended" interviews can be useful, we need to justify departing from the naturally occurring data that surrounds us and to be cautious about the "romantic" impulse which identifies "experience" with "authenticity"' (1993: ix). We agree, but with different words in scare quotes.

On the one hand, we have tried to suggest in this chapter some strategies by which interviews can be less-than-problematically open-ended, and that interviewers need not resort to romanticism, or to identifying experience with authenticity, in order to call upon interviewees' experiences and produce authentic accounts of social worlds. On the other hand, we would put in scare quotes 'naturally occurring data', because we question the grounds for any neat distinction between the natural and cultural, in sociological data as elsewhere (cf. Douglas, 1986).

All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us, some from our interactions with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use in theorizing about social life.

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8 Active Interviewing

James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium

In our 'interview society' (Silverman, 1993), the mass media, human service providers and researchers increasingly generate information by interviewing. The number of television news programmes, daytime talk-shows and newspaper articles that provide us with the results of interviews is virtually incalculable. Looking at more methodical forms of information collection, it has been estimated that 90 per cent of all social science investigations use interviews in one way or another (Briggs, 1986). Interviewing is undoubtedly the most widely applied technique for conducting systematic social inquiry, as sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, clinicians, administrators, politicians and pollsters treat interviews as their 'windows on the world' (Hyman et al., 1975).

Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. In this respect, interviews are special forms of conversation. While these conversations may vary from highly structured, standardized, quantitatively oriented survey interviews, to semi-formal guided conversations and free-flowing informational exchanges, all interviews are interactional. The narratives that are produced may be as truncated as forced-choice survey answers or as elaborate as oral life histories, but they are all constructed *in situ*, as a product of the talk between interview participants.

While most researchers acknowledge the interactional character of the interview, the technical literature on interviewing stresses the need to keep that interaction strictly in check. Guides to interviewing – especially those oriented to standardized surveys – are primarily concerned with maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows (Gorden, 1987). The interview conversation is thus framed as a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding or misdirection, a persistent set of problems to be controlled. The corrective is simple: if the interviewer asks questions properly, the respondent will give out the desired information.

In this conventional view, the interview conversation is a pipeline for transmitting knowledge. A recently heightened sensitivity to representational matters (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) – characteristic of poststructuralist, postmodernist, constructionist and ethnomethodological inquiry – has raised a number of questions about the very possibility of collecting knowledge in the manner the conventional approach presupposes. In varied ways, these alternate perspectives hold that meaning is socially constituted; all knowledge is created from the actions undertaken

to obtain it (see e.g., Cicourel, 1964, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967). Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself.

Sociolinguist Charles Briggs (1986) argues that the social circumstances of interviews are more than obstacles to respondents' articulation of their particular truths. Briggs notes that, like all other speech events, interviews fundamentally, not incidentally, shape the form and content of what is said. Aaron Cicourel (1974) goes further, maintaining that interviews virtually impose particular ways of understanding reality upon subjects' responses. The point is that interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents (also see Manning, 1967; Mishler, 1986, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Both parties to the interview are necessarily and ineluctably *active*. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. Participation in an interview involves meaning-making work (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

If interviews are interpretively active, meaning-making occasions, interview data are unavoidably collaborative (see Alasuutari, 1995; Holstein and Staples, 1992). Therefore, any technical attempts to strip interviews of their interactional ingredients will be futile. Instead of refining the long list of methodological constraints under which 'standardized' interviews should be conducted, we suggest that researchers take a more 'active' perspective, begin to acknowledge, and capitalize upon, interviewers' and respondents' constitutive contributions to the production of interview data. This means consciously and conscientiously attending to the interview process and its product in ways that are more sensitive to the social construction of knowledge.

Conceiving of the interview as active means attending more to the ways in which knowledge is assembled than is usually the case in traditional approaches. In other words, understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed. The *hows* of interviewing, of course, refer to the interactional, narrative procedures of knowledge production, not merely to interview techniques. The *whats* pertain to the issues guiding the interview, the content of questions, and the substantive information communicated by the respondent. A dual interest in the *hows* and *whats* of meaning production goes hand in hand with an appreciation of the constitutive activeness of the interview process.

This appreciation derives from an ethnomethodologically informed social constructionist approach that considers the process of meaning production

to be as important for social research as the meaning that is produced (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Pollner, 1987). In many significant ways, this also resonates with methodological critiques and reformulations offered by an array of feminist scholars (see DeVault, 1990; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987). In their distinct fashions, ethnomethodology, constructionism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and some versions of feminism are all interested in issues relating to subjectivity, complexity, perspective and meaning-construction. Still, as valuable and insightful as this is, these 'linguistically attuned' approaches can emphasize the *hows* of social process at the expense of the *whats* of lived experience. We want to strike a balance between these *hows* and *whats* as a way of reappropriating the significance of substance and content to studies of the social construction process. The aim is not to obviate interview material by deconstructing it, but to harvest it and its transactions for narrative analysis. While the emphasis on process has sharpened concern with, and debate over, the epistemological status of interview data, it is important not to lose track of *what* is being asked about in interviews and, in turn, *what* is being conveyed by respondents. A narrow focus on *how* tends to displace the significant *whats* – the meanings – that serve as the relevant grounds for asking and answering questions.

Taking the meaning-making activity of all interviewing as our point of departure, we will discuss how the interview cultivates its data. We begin by locating the active view in relation to more traditional conceptions of interviewing, contrasting alternate images of the subject behind the interview respondent.

Traditional images of interviewing

Typically, those who want to find out about another person's feelings, thoughts or actions believe that they merely have to ask the right questions and the other's 'reality' will be theirs. Studs Terkel, the consummate journalistic and sociological interviewer, says he simply turns on his tape recorder and invites people to talk. Writing of the interviews he did for his brilliant study of *Working*, Terkel notes:

There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature . . . the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you. . . . In short, it was conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were opened. (1972: xxv)

As unpretentious as it is, Terkel's image of interviewing permeates the social sciences; interviewing is generally likened to 'prospecting' for the true facts and feelings residing within the respondent. Of course there is a highly sophisticated technology that informs researchers about how to ask questions, what sorts of questions not to ask, the order in which to ask them, and the ways to avoid saying things that might spoil, contaminate or otherwise bias the data (Fowler and Mangione, 1990; Hyman et al., 1975).

The basic model, however, remains similar to the one Terkel exploits so adroitly.

The image of the social scientific prospector casts the interview as a search-and-discovery mission, with the interviewer intent on detecting what is already there inside variably cooperative respondents. The challenge lies in extracting information as directly as possible. Highly refined interview techniques streamline, systematize and sanitize the process. This can involve varying degrees of standardization (see Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954), ranging from interviews organized around structured, specially worded questions and an orientation to measurement, to flexibly organized interviews guided by more general questions aimed at uncovering subjective meanings. John Madge contrasts what he calls 'formative' with 'mass' interviews, categorizing them according to whether the respondent 'is given some sort of freedom to choose the topics to be discussed and the way in which they are discussed' (1965: 165). Formative interviews include the non-directive interviews favoured in Rogerian counselling (see Rogers, 1945), informal interviews and life histories. Most large-scale surveys fall into the mass interview category. Mainly, classification centres on the characteristics and aims of the interview process, with little attention paid to how interviews differ as occasions for knowledge production.

The subject behind the respondent

Regardless of the type of interview, there is always an image of the research *subject* lurking behind persons placed in the role of interview respondent (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Projecting a subject behind the respondent confers a sense of epistemological agency, which bears on our understanding of the relative validity of the information that is reported. In traditional approaches, subjects are basically conceived as passive *vessels of answers* for experiential questions put to respondents by interviewers. They are repositories of facts and the related details of experience. Occasionally, such as with especially sensitive interview topics or with recalcitrant respondents, researchers acknowledge that it may be difficult to obtain accurate experiential information. None the less, the information is viewed, in principle, as held uncontaminated by the subject's vessel of answers. The trick is to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication between the interviewer and respondent.

Much of the methodological literature on interviewing deals with the nuances of these intricate matters. The vessel-of-answers view cautions interviewers to be careful in how they ask questions, lest their manner of inquiry bias what lies within the subject. The literature offers myriad procedures for obtaining unadulterated facts and details, most of which rely upon interviewer and question neutrality. For example, it is assumed that the interviewer who poses questions that acknowledge alternative sides of an issue is being more 'neutral' than the interviewer who does not. The

successful implementation of neutral practices elicits truths held in the vessel of answers behind the respondent. Validity results from the successful application of the procedures.

In the vessel-of-answers approach, the image of the subject is epistemologically passive, not engaged in the production of knowledge. If the interviewing process goes 'by the book' and is non-directional and unbiased, respondents will validly give out what subjects are presumed to merely retain within them – the unadulterated facts and details of experience. Contamination emanates from the interview setting, its participants and their interaction, not the subject, who, under ideal conditions, serves up authentic reports when beckoned to do so.

What happens, however, if we enliven the image of the subject behind the respondent? Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms the facts and details. The respondent can hardly 'spoil' what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating.

This activated subject pieces experiences together, before, during and after assuming the respondent role. As a member of society, he or she mediates and alters the knowledge that is conveyed to the interviewer; he or she is 'always already' an active maker of meaning. As a result, the respondent's answers are continually being assembled and modified and the answers' truth value cannot be judged simply in terms of whether they match what lies in a vessel of objective knowledge.

From a more traditional standpoint, the objectivity or truth of interview responses might be assessed in terms of reliability, the extent to which questioning yields the same answers whenever and wherever it is carried out, and validity, that is, the extent to which inquiry yields the 'correct' answers (Kirk and Miller, 1986). When the interview is seen as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion, however, different criteria apply. The focus is on how meaning is constructed, the circumstances of construction, and the meaningful linkages that are made for the occasion. While interest in the content of answers persists, it is primarily in how and what the active subject/respondent, in collaboration with an equally active interviewer, produces and conveys about the active subject/respondent's experience under the interpretive circumstances at hand. One cannot simply expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production. Similarly, the validity of answers derives not from their correspondence to meanings held within the respondent, but from their ability to convey situated experiential realities in terms that are locally comprehensible.

This active image of the interview is best put in perspective by contrasting it with specific traditional approaches. The two approaches we have selected differ considerably in their orientations to the experiential truths held by the passive subject. The first orients to the rational, factual value of what is communicated. Typical of survey interviewing, it focuses

on the substantive statements, explanations and reasons with which the respondent articulates experience. We use Jean Converse and Howard Schuman's candid book *Conversations at Random* (1974) as an exemplary text. The second approach orients to the purportedly deeper and more authentic value of the subject's feelings. It emphasizes sentiment and emotion, the ostensible core of human experience. We use Jack Douglas's book *Creative Interviewing* (1985) to illustrate this approach.

Survey interviewing

While Converse and Schuman attempt to elaborate upon the most standardized of interviewing techniques, their book also considers the survey interview 'as interviewers see it' and richly illustrates how interpretively engaging and, relatedly, how difficult and exasperating the survey respondent can be. It describes the interesting and complex personalities and meanings that interviewers encounter while interviewing, depicting them, respectively, as 'the pleasure of persons' and 'connoisseurs of the particular'. But the authors caution the reader that, even though it will be evident throughout the book that the respondent can be quite interpretively active, this does not work against the pursuit of objective information. This information, the reader eventually learns, is derived from the repository of knowledge that lies passively behind the respondent. The authors do not believe that the respondent's conduct implicates his or her subject in the construction of meaning. As lively, uninhibited, entertaining and difficult as the respondent might be at times, his or her passive subject ultimately holds the answers sought in the research.

Converse and Schuman's book is filled with anecdotal reminders of what interviewers must learn in order to keep the subject's vessel of answers in view and the respondent on target. In part, it is a matter of controlling oneself as an interviewer so that one does not interfere with what the passive subject is only too willing to disclose. The interviewer must shake off self-consciousness, suppress personal opinion and avoid stereotyping the respondent. Learning the interviewer role is also a matter of controlling the interview situation to facilitate the candid expression of opinions and sentiments. Ideally, the interview should be conducted in private. This helps assure that respondents will speak directly from their vessels of answers, not in response to the presence of others. The seasoned interviewer learns that the so-called 'pull of conversation', which might have an interpretive dynamic of its own fuelled by the active subjectivity of both the respondent and the interviewer, must be managed so that the 'push of inquiry' (p. 26) is kept in focus. Ideally, the cross-pressures of conducting inquiry that will produce 'good hard data' are managed by means of 'soft' conversation (p. 22).

Throughout, Converse and Schuman's book provides glimpses of how problematic the image of the passive subject is in practice. The illustrations repeatedly tell us that interviews are conversations where meanings are not

only conveyed, but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted and recorded by the interviewer. While the veteran interviewer learns to manage the pressures of conversation for the purposes of inquiry, orienting to an active, meaning-making occasion seems to be a mere epistemological step away.

Creative interviewing

This is different from the approach exemplified in Douglas's book *Creative Interviewing*, but there are some marked similarities that borrow from traditional images. The word 'creative' in Douglas's title refers primarily to the interviewer, not the respondent, and, according to Douglas, derives from the difficulties he encountered attempting to probe respondents' 'deep experience'. Douglas writes that in his many empirical studies, he repeatedly discovered how shallow the standard recommendations were for conducting research interviews. Canons of rational neutrality, such as those Converse and Schuman espouse, failed to capture what Douglas calls his respondents' 'emotional wellsprings' and called for a methodology for deep disclosure.

Douglas's difficulties relate as much to his image of the passive subject as they do to shortcomings of standard interviewing technique. Like the image of the subject behind the survey respondent, Douglas also imagines his subjects to be repositories of answers, but in his case, they are well-guarded vessels of feelings. The respondent authentically communicates from an emotional wellspring, at the behest of an interviewer who knows that mere words cannot draw out or convey what experience ultimately is all about. Standard survey questions and answers touch only the surface of experience. Douglas aims more deeply by creatively 'getting to know' the real subject behind the respondent.

Creative interviewing is a set of techniques for moving past the mere words and sentences exchanged in the interview process. To achieve this, the interviewer must establish a climate for *mutual* disclosure. The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer's willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings. The interviewers' deep disclosure both occasions and legitimizes the respondent's reciprocal revelations. This, Douglas suggests, is thoroughly suppressed by the cultivated neutrality of the standard survey interview. As if to state a cardinal rule, he writes:

Creative interviewing, as we shall see throughout, involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction, largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimize *cooperative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding*. (1985: 25)

Douglas offers a set of guidelines for creative interviewing. One is to figure that, as he puts it, 'genius in creative interviewing involves 99 percent perspiration' (1985: 27); getting the respondent to deeply disclose requires much more work than obtaining mere opinions. A second admonition for

engaging in 'deep-deep probes into the human soul' is 'researcher, know thyself' (1985: 51). Continual self-analysis on the part of the interviewer, who usually is also the researcher, is necessary, lest the creative interviewer's own defence mechanisms work against mutual disclosure and understanding. A third guideline is to show a commitment to disclosure by expressing an abiding interest in feelings. Referring to a neophyte creative interviewer who 'has done some wondrously revealing life studies', Douglas writes that the creative interviewer is 'driven by . . . friendly, caring, and adoring feelings, but adds to those an endearing, wide-eyed sense of wonderment at the mysteries unveiled before her' (1985: 29).

The wellsprings tapped by creative interviewing are said to be emotional, in distinct contrast with the preferred rational image of facts that filters through Converse and Schuman's book. As Douglas puts it, knowledge and wisdom are '*partially* the product of creative interactions – of mutual searches for understanding, of soul communions' (p. 55). While Douglas's imagined subject is basically emotional, this subject, in the role of respondent, actively cooperates with the interviewer to create mutually recognizable meanings, paralleling what interviewers' accounts in Converse and Schuman's book suggest. In this regard, the mutuality of disclosure – the 'creative' thrust of creative interviewing – mediates, adds to and shapes what is said in its own right. What Douglas does not recognize, however, is that this ideally cooperative subject could alternatively constitute the wellsprings of experience in rational or other terms, not necessarily emotional ones. Thus, the subject behind Douglas's respondent remains an essentially passive, if concertedly emotional, fount of experience, not unlike the respondent who 'opens up' while having a drink with Studs Terkel.

The active interview

Ithiel de Sola Pool (1957), a prominent critic of public opinion polling, once argued that the dynamic, communicative contingencies of the interview literally activate respondents' opinions. Every interview, he suggests, is an 'interpersonal drama with a developing plot' (1957: 193). This metaphor conveys a far more active sense of interviewing than is traditionally conceived, an image of the interview as an 'occasion for constructing, not merely discovering or conveying, information. As Pool writes:

[T]he social milieu in which communication takes place [during interviews] modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying 'true' opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline. (1957: 192)

The active interview and interpretive practice

Conceiving of the interview as an interpersonal drama with a developing plot is part of a broader image of reality as an ongoing, interpretive

accomplishment. From this perspective, interview participants are practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and communicate the recognizable and orderly features of experience. But meaning-making is not merely artful (Garfinkel, 1967); meaning is not built 'from scratch' on each interpretive occasion. Rather, interpretation orients to, and is conditioned by, the substantive resources and contingencies of interaction.

Meaning is constituted at the nexus of the *hows* and the *whats* of experience, by way of *interpretive practice* – the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize and represent reality (Holstein, 1993; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Active interviewing is a form of interpretive practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources and orientations with what Garfinkel (1967) calls 'practical reasoning'. Linking artfulness to substantive contingencies implies that while reality is continually 'under construction', it is assembled using the interpretive resources at hand. Meaning reflects relatively enduring interpretive conditions, such as the research topics of the interviewer, biographical particulars and local ways of orienting to those topics (Gubrium, 1988, 1989, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994, 1995). Those resources are astutely and adroitly crafted to the demands of the occasion, so that meaning is neither predetermined nor absolutely unique.

An active subject

The image of the *active interview* transforms the subject behind the respondent from a repository of opinions and reasons or a wellspring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge. From the time one identifies a research topic, to respondent selection, questioning and answering, and, finally, to the interpretation of responses, interviewing itself is a concerted project for producing meaning. The imagined subject behind the respondent emerges as part of the project, not beforehand. Within the interview itself, the subject is fleshed out – rationally, emotionally, in combination, or otherwise – in relation to the give-and-take of the interview process and the interview's broader research purposes. The interview *and* its participants are constantly developing.

Two communicative contingencies influence the construction of the active subject behind the respondent. One kind involves the substantive *whats* of the interview enterprise. The focus and emerging data of the research project provide interpretive resources for developing both the subject and his or her responses. For example, a project might centre on the quality of care and quality of life of nursing home residents (see Gubrium, 1993). This might be part of a study relating to national debates about the organization of home and institutional care. If interviews are employed, participants draw out the substantiality of these topics, linking the topics to biographical particulars in the interview process, and thus producing a subject who responds to, or is affected by, the matters under discussion. For instance, a nursing home resident might speak animatedly during an

interview about the quality of care in her facility, asserting that, 'for a woman, it ultimately gets down to feelings', echoing Douglas's emotional subject and articulating a recognizable linkage between affect and gender. Another resident might coolly and methodically list her facility's qualities of care, never once mentioning her feelings about them. Offering her own take on the matter, the respondent might state that 'getting emotional' over 'these things' clouds clear judgement, implicating a different kind of subject, more like the rational respondent portrayed in Converse and Schuman's text. Particular substantive resources – such as the common cultural link between women and feelings or the traditional cultural opposition of clear thought and emotionality – are used to form the subject.

A second communicative contingency of interviewing directs us to the *how*s of the process. The standpoint from which information is offered is continually developed in relation to ongoing interview interaction. In speaking of the quality of care, for example, nursing home residents, as interview respondents, not only offer substantive thoughts and feelings pertinent to the topic under consideration, but simultaneously and continuously monitor who they are in relation to the person questioning them. For example, prefacing her remarks about the quality of life in her facility with the statement 'speaking as a woman', a nursing home resident informs the interviewer that she is to be heard as a woman, not as someone else – not a mere resident, cancer patient or abandoned mother. If and when she subsequently comments, 'If I were a man in this place', the resident frames her thoughts and feelings about the quality of life differently, producing an alternative subject. The respondent is clearly working at how the interview unfolds.

Narrative incitement, positional shifts and resource activation

Interviews, of course, hold no monopoly over interpretive practice. Nor are they the only occasions upon which subjects and their opinions, emotions and reports are interpretively constituted. Why, then, is interviewing an especially useful mode of systematic social inquiry? One answer lies in the interview situation's ability to incite the production of meanings that address issues relating to particular research concerns. In the traditional view of interviewing, the passive subject engages in a 'minimalist' version of interpretive practice, perceiving, storing and reporting experience when properly asked. Our active conception of the interview, however, invests the subject with a substantial repertoire of interpretive methods and stock of experiential materials. The active view eschews the image of the vessel waiting to be tapped in favour of the notion that the subject's interpretive capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated. The interview is a commonly recognized occasion for formally and systematically doing so.

This is not to say that active interviewers merely coax their respondents into preferred answers to their questions. Rather, they converse with

respondents in such a way that alternate considerations are brought into play. They may suggest orientations to, and linkages between, diverse aspects of respondents' experience, adumbrating – even inviting – interpretations that make use of particular resources, connections and outlooks. Interviewers may explore incompletely articulated aspects of experience, encouraging respondents to develop topics in ways relevant to their own everyday lives (DeVault, 1990). The objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas.

Pool's dramaturgic metaphor is apt because it conveys both the structuring conditions and the artfulness of the interview. As a drama of sorts, its narrative is scripted in that it has a topic or topics, distinguishable roles and a format for conversation. But it also has a *developing* plot, in which topics, roles and format are fashioned in the give-and-take of the interview. This active interview is a kind of limited 'improvisational' performance. The production is spontaneous, yet structured – focused within loose parameters provided by the interviewer, who is also an active participant.

While the respondent actively constructs and assembles answers, he or she does not simply 'break out' talking. Neither elaborate narratives nor one-word replies emerge without provocation. The active interviewer's role is to incite respondents' answers, virtually *activating narrative production*. Where standardized approaches to interviewing attempt to strip the interview of all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli (but see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, for a discussion of the inevitable failure of these attempts), the consciously active interviewer intentionally provokes responses by indicating – even suggesting – narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents. In the broadest sense, the interviewer attempts to activate the respondent's stock of knowledge (Schütz, 1967) and bring it to bear on the discussion at hand in ways that are appropriate to the research agenda.

Consider, for example, the ways in which diverse aspects of a respondent's knowledge, perspectives, roles and orientations are activated and implicated in an interview involving an adult daughter who is caring for her mother – a victim of senile dementia – at home. The daughter is employed part-time, and shares the household with her employed husband and their two sons, one a part-time college student and the other a full-time security guard. The extract begins when the interviewer (I) asks the adult daughter (R) to describe her feelings about having to juggle so many needs and schedules. This relates to the so-called 'sandwich generation', which is said to be caught between having to raise its own children and seeing to the needs of frail elderly parents. Note how, after the interviewer asks the respondent what she means by saying that she had mixed feelings, the respondent makes explicit reference to various ways of thinking about the matter, as if to suggest that more than one narrative resource (with contradictory responses) might be brought to bear on the matter. The

respondent displays considerable narrative control: she not only references possible *whats* of caregiving and family life, but, in the process, informs the interviewer of *how* she could construct her answer.

- I: We were talking about, you said you were a member of the, what did you call it?
- R: They say that I'm in the sandwich generation. You know, like we're sandwiched between having to care for my mother . . . and my grown kids and my husband. People are living longer now and you've got different generations at home and, I tell ya, it's a mixed blessing.
- I: How do you feel about it in your situation?
- R: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm being a bit selfish because I gripe about having to keep an eye on Mother all the time. If you let down your guard, she wanders off into the back yard or goes out the door and down the street. That's no fun when your hubby wants your attention too. Norm works the second shift and he's home during the day a lot. I manage to get in a few hours of work, but he doesn't like it. I have pretty mixed feelings about it.
- I: What do you mean?
- R: Well, I'd say that as a daughter, I feel pretty guilty about how I feel sometimes. It can get pretty bad, like wishing that Mother were just gone, you know what I mean? She's been a wonderful mother and I love her very much, but if you ask me how I feel as a wife and mother, that's another matter. I feel like she's [the mother], well, intruding on our lives and just making hell out of raising a family. Sometimes I put myself in my husband's shoes and I just know how he feels. He doesn't say much, but I know that he misses my company, and I miss his of course. [Pause] So how do you answer that?

The interviewer goes on to explain that the respondent can answer in the way she believes best represents her thoughts and feelings. But as the exchange unfolds, it is evident that 'best' misrepresents the narrative complexity of the respondent's thoughts and feelings. In the following extract, notice how the respondent struggles to sort her opinions to accord with categorically distinct identities. At one point, she explains that she knows how a wife could and should feel because she gathers from the way her husband and sons act that 'men don't feel things the same way'. This suggests that her own thoughts and feelings are drawn from a fund of gendered knowledge as well. Note, too, how at several points the interviewer collaborates with the respondent to define her identity as a respondent. At the very end of the extract, the respondent suggests that other respondents' answers might serve to clarify the way she herself has organized her responses, indicating that further narrative contextualizing might encourage even more interpretations of her own experience.

- R: I try to put myself in their [husband and sons'] shoes, try to look at it from their point of view, you know, from a man's way of thinking. I ask myself how it feels to have a part-time wife and mama. I ask myself how I'd feel. Believe me, I know he [husband] feels pretty rotten about it. Men get that way; they want what they want and the rest of the time, well, they're quiet, like nothing's the matter. I used to think I was going crazy with all the stuff on my mind and having to think about everything all at once and not being able to finish with one thing and get on to the other. You know how it gets -

doing one thing and feeling bad about how you did something else and wanting to redo what you did or what you said. The way a woman does, I guess. I think I've learned that about myself. I don't know. It's pretty complicated thinking about it. [Pause] Let's see, how do I really feel?

- I: Well, I was just wondering, you mentioned being sandwiched earlier and what a woman feels?
- R: Yeah, I guess I wasn't all that sure what women like me feel until I figured out how Norm and the boys felt. I figured pretty quick that men are pretty good at sorting things out and that, well, I just couldn't do it, 'cause, well, men don't feel things the same way. I just wouldn't want to do that way anyway. Wouldn't feel right about it as a woman, you know what I mean? So, like they say, live and let live, I guess.
- I: But as a daughter?
- R: Yeah, that too. So if you ask me how I feel having Mother under foot all the time, I'd say that I remember not so far back that I was under foot a lot when I was a little girl and Mother never complained, and she'd help Dad out in the store, too. So I guess I could tell you that I'm glad I'm healthy and around to take care of her and, honestly, I'd do it all over again if I had to. I don't know. You've talked to other women about it. What do they say?
- I: Well, uh
- R: Naw, I don't want to put you on the spot. I was just thinking that maybe if I knew how others in my shoes felt, I might be able to sort things out better than I did for ya.

The respondent's comments about both the subject matter under consideration and how one does or should formulate responses show that the respondent, in collaboration with the interviewer, activates diverse narrative resources as an integral part of exchanging questions and answers. Treating the interview as active allows the interviewer to encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and stocks of knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing - the possible answers - that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. The active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher's interest. He or she does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections - that is, suggests possible horizons of meaning and narrative linkages that coalesce into the emerging responses (Gubrium, 1993). The pertinence of what is discussed is partly defined by the research topic and partly by the substantive horizons of ongoing responses. While the active respondent may selectively exploit a vast range of narrative resources, it is the active interviewer's job to direct and harness the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand.

Implications for analysis

Compared to more conventional perspectives on interviewing, the active approach seems to invite unacceptable forms of bias. After all, far more is

going on that simply retrieving the information from respondents' repositories of knowledge. 'Contamination' is everywhere. This criticism only holds, however, if one takes a narrow view of interpretive practice and meaning construction. Bias is a meaningful concept only if the subject is a preformed, purely informational commodity that the interview process might somehow taint. But if interview responses are seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed, nor ever pure. Any interview situation – no matter how formalized, restricted or standardized – relies upon the interaction between participants. Because meaning construction is unavoidably collaborative (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks et al., 1974), it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be construed as contaminants. All participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making meaning.

While naturally occurring talk and interaction may appear to be more spontaneous, less 'staged' than an interview, this is true only in the sense that such interaction is staged by persons other than an interviewer. Resulting conversations are not necessarily more 'realistic' or 'authentic'. They simply take place in what have been recognized as indigenous settings. With the development of the interview society, and the increasing deprivatization of personal experience (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Gubrium et al., 1994), the interview is becoming more and more commonplace, also making it a 'naturally occurring' occasion for articulating experience.

Nevertheless, discussion of some topics, while being deeply significant, may none the less be relatively rare in the normal course of everyday life, even in the interview society. For example, as seemingly ubiquitous as is talk about family and domestic life, we have found it useful to study 'family discourse' in a relatively circumscribed range of settings, most of which intentionally provoke talk about family as an integral part of conducting routine business, such as in a family therapy agency, for example (see Gubrium, 1992; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). Active interviews can thus be used to gain purchase on interpretive practice relating to matters that may not be casually topical, yet which are socially relevant. By inciting narrative production, the interviewer may provoke interpretive developments that might emerge too rarely to be effectively captured 'in their natural habitat', so to speak.

Given the unconventional nature of active interviewing, how does one make sense of its data? Analysing data concerning interpretive practice is something of an 'artful' matter in its own right. This does not mean that analysis is any less rigorous than that applied to traditional interview data; on the contrary, active interview data require disciplined sensitivity to both process and substance.

Interviews are traditionally analysed as more or less accurate descriptions of experience, as reports or representations (literally, re-presentations) of reality. Analysis entails systematically coding, grouping or summarizing the descriptions, and providing a coherent organizing framework that

encapsulates and explains aspects of the social world that respondents portray. Respondents' interpretive activity is subordinated to the substance of what they report; the *whats* of experience overwhelm the *hows*.

In contrast, active interview data can be analysed to show the dynamic interrelatedness of the *whats* and the *hows*. Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled. Using sociologically oriented forms of narrative and discourse analysis, conversational records of interpretive practice are examined to reveal reality-constructing practices as well as the subjective meanings that are circumstantially conveyed (see DeVault, 1990; Gubrium and Holstein, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Propp, 1968; Riessman, 1993; Silverman, 1993). The goal is to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning-making process. The analytic objective is not merely to describe the situated production of talk, but to show how what is being said relates to the experiences and lives being studied.

Writing up findings from interview data is itself an analytically active enterprise. Rather than adhering to the ideal of letting the data 'speak for themselves', the active analyst empirically documents the meaning-making process. With ample illustration and reference to records of talk, the analyst describes the complex discursive activities through which respondents produce meaning. The goal is to explicate how meanings, their linkages and horizons, are constituted both in relation to, and within, the interview environment. The analyst's reports do not summarize and organize what interview participants have said, as much as they 'deconstruct' participants' talk to show the reader both the *hows* and the *whats* of the narrative dramas conveyed, which increasingly mirrors an interview society.

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