C12-8

How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation

Michael Quinn Patton

Center for the Study of Evaluation
University of California, Los Angeles

SAGE PUBLICATIONS Newbury Park/Beverly Hills/London/New Delhi

18

The second edition of the *Program Evaluation Kit* was developed at the Center for the Study of Evaluation, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles.

The development of this second edition of the CSE *Program Evaluation Kit* was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Education, currently known as the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of that agency and no official endorsement should be inferred.

The second edition of the *Program Evaluation Kit* is published and distributed by Sage Publications, Inc., Newbury Park, California, under an exclusive agreement with The Regents of the University of California.

For information address:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2111 West Hillcrest Drive
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications Inc.
275 South Beverly Drive
Beverly Hills
California 90212

SAGE Publications Ltd.
28 Banner Street
London EC1Y 8QE
England

SAGE PUBLICATIONS India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Patton, Michael Quinn.
How to use qualitative methods in evaluation / Michael Quinn Patton.
p. cm. -- (Program evaluation kit (2nd ed.) ; 4)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8039-3129-8 (pbk.)
1. Social sciences—Methodology. 2. Evaluation research (Social action programs) I. Title. II. Series.
H62.P3216 1987
361.6'1'072--dc19 87-21772
CIP

SECOND PRINTING, 1988

19

Chapter 5
Depth Interviewing

Depth interviewing involves asking open-ended questions, listening to and recording the answers, and then following up with additional relevant questions. On the surface this appears to require no more than knowing how to talk and listen. Beneath the surface, however, interviewing becomes an art and science requiring skill, sensitivity, concentration, interpersonal understanding, insight, mental acuity, and discipline.

In ordinary conversations people ask questions and provide answers all the time. But analysis of ordinary conversations will show that there is little depth and much miscommunication. Questions lack clarity. Answers go unheard. The sequence of questions and answers lacks direction. The person asking the question frequently interrupts the person responding. Indeed, one of the greatest obstacles to overcome in learning to be a skilled qualitative interviewer is unlearning the bad habits practiced and reinforced daily in our ordinary conversations.

Depth interviewing is an important source of qualitative data in evaluation. But becoming a skilled interviewer will serve the evaluator well beyond fieldwork. Evaluators need interviewing skills to find out what stakeholders want from an evaluation, to gather information for use in designing a study, and to understand the context for an evaluation. Thus even evaluators who use only or primarily quantitative and experimental methods can benefit from improving their interviewing skills. In working with stakeholders the advice given by Zeno of Citium in 300 B.C. is still highly relevant: "The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less."

This chapter carries into interviewing the themes of depth, detail, and the search for perspective that are central to all forms of qualitative methods. Depth interviewing probes beneath the surface, soliciting detail and providing a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view.

Inner Perspective

Interviewing allows the evaluator to enter another person's world, to understand that person's perspective. The persons interviewed may be program participants, staff, administrators, community members, funders, or officials. In each case the evaluator as interviewer is seeking to find out how that person views the program under study.

Interviews add an inner perspective to outward behaviors. In this way interviews are a source of meaning and elaboration for program observations. We also interview to learn about things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. *The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective.*

It is the responsibility of the interviewer to provide a framework within which people can respond comfortably, accurately, and honestly to open-ended questions. The task undertaken by the interviewer is to make it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world. The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent upon the interviewer. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss ways of obtaining high-quality information by talking with people who have that information.

This chapter begins by discussing three different approaches to qualitative interviewing. Later sections consider the content of interviews: how to ask questions, what to ask questions about, and ways of phrasing depth interview questions. The chapter ends with a discussion of how to record and organize the responses obtained during interviews.

Three Approaches to Qualitative Interviewing

There are three basic approaches to collecting qualitative data through in-depth, open-ended interviews. The three approaches involve different types of preparation, conceptualization, and instrumentation. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and each serves a somewhat different purpose. The three choices are: (1) the informal conversational interview, (2) the general interview guide approach, and (3) the standardized open-ended interview.

The difference among these three approaches is the extent to which interview questions are determined and standardized *before* the interview occurs.

The Informal Conversational Interview

The informal conversational interview relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction, typically an interview that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork. During an informal conversational interview, the persons with whom the evaluator is talking may not even realize they are being interviewed. Most of the questions will flow from the immediate context. No predetermined set of questions is possible under such circumstances because the observer does not know beforehand precisely what is going to happen and so does not know what questions will be appropriate.

The data gathered from informal conversational interviews will be different for each person interviewed. In many cases, the same person may be interviewed on a number of different occasions using an informal, conversational approach. This approach is particularly useful where the evaluator can stay in the situation for some period of time, so that he or she is not dependent upon a single interview to collect all the information needed. Interview questions will change over time, and each interview builds on the preceding ones, expanding information that was picked up previously, moving in new directions, seeking elucidations and elaborations from various participants in their own terms. The interviewer must "go with the flow."

The strength of the informal conversational approach to interviewing is that it allows the interviewer to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be individualized to establish in-depth communication with the person being interviewed and to make use of the immediate surroundings and situation to increase the concreteness and immediacy of the interview questions and responses.

The weakness of the informal conversational interview is that it requires a great amount of time to get systematic information. It may take several conversations with different people before a similar set of questions has been posed to several respondents. The informal conversational interview is also more open to interviewer effects in that it depends upon the conversational skills of the interviewer to a greater extent than do more formal, standardized formats. The conversational interviewer must be able to interact easily with people in a variety of settings, must be able to generate rapid insights, to formulate questions quickly and smoothly, and to guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation by the structure of the questions. Data obtained from informal conversational interviews are also difficult to pull together and analyze. Because different questions will generate different responses, the interviewer has to spend a great deal of time sifting through responses to find patterns that have emerged at different points in different interviews with different people. By contrast, interviews that are more systematized and standardized facilitate analysis but are less responsive to individual and situational differences.

The Interview Guide

An interview guide is a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared to make sure that essentially the same information is obtained from a number of people by covering the same material. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas about which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. The issues in the outline need not be taken in any particular order and the actual working of questions to elicit responses about those issues is not determined in advance. The interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered. The interviewer is thus required to adapt both the wording and sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview. The interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style— but with the focus on a particular predetermined subject.

The advantage of an interview guide is that it makes sure the interviewer has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation. The interview guide helps make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be discussed in the interview. The interview guide approach is especially useful in conducting group interviews. A guide keeps the interaction focused, but allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge.

Interview guides can be developed in more or less detail, depending on the extent to which the evaluator is able to specify important issues in advance and the extent to which it is important to ask questions in the same order to all respondents. What follows is an example of an interview guide used with participants in a manpower training program.

Interview Guide for
Manpower Program Evaluation

What has the trainee done in the program—activities? interactions? products? work performed?

What are the trainee's current work skills? What things can the trainee do that are marketable?

How has the trainee been affected by the program in areas other than job skills—feelings about self? attitudes toward work? aspirations? interpersonal skills? spinoffs?

What are the trainee's plans for the future—work plans? income expectations? life-style expectations/plans?

What does the trainee think of the program—strengths? weaknesses? things liked? things disliked? best components? poor components? things that should be changed? (Patton, 1980b, p. 201)

This interview guide provides a framework within which the interviewer would develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. The interviewer would normally not be expected to go into totally new subjects that are not covered within the framework of the interview guide. The interviewer does not ask questions, for example, about previous employment or education, how the person got into the program, how this program compares with other programs the trainee has experienced, and the trainee's health.

The flexibility permitted by the interview guide approach will become clearer after reviewing the third strategy of qualitative interviewing.

The Standardized Open-Ended Interview

The *standardized open-ended interview* consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged for the purpose of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words. Flexibility in probing is more or less limited, depending on the nature of the interview and the skills of interviewers. The standardized, open-ended interview is used when it is

important to minimize variation in the questions posed to interviewees. This reduces the bias that can occur from having different interviews for different people, including the problem of obtaining a great deal of data from certain persons while getting less systematic information from others.

A standardized open-ended interview may be particularly appropriate when several people are to conduct interviews and the evaluator wishes to reduce the variation in responses due purely to the fact that, left to themselves, different interviewers will ask questions on the same topic in different ways. By controlling and standardizing the open-ended interview the investigator obtains data that are systematic and thorough for each respondent, but flexibility and spontaneity are considerably reduced.

In many evaluations it is only possible to interview participants for a very limited period of time. Sometimes it is only possible to interview each participant once. At other times it is possible and desirable to interview participants before they enter an experience, when they leave the experience, and again after some period of time (e.g., six months) has elapsed since they completed the experience. Because of limited time, and because it is desirable to have the same information from each person interviewed, a standardized open-ended format may be used. The interview questions are written in advance *exactly* the way they are to be asked during the interview. Careful consideration is given to the wording of each question before the interview. Any clarifications or elaborations that are to be used are written into the interview itself. Probing questions are placed in the interview at appropriate places.

The basic purpose of the standardized open-ended interview is to minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent. Because the interview is systematic, interviewer judgment during the interview is reduced. The standardized open-ended interview also makes data analysis easier because it is possible to locate each respondent's answer to the same question rather quickly, and to organize questions and answers that are similar. In addition, by generating a standardized form, other evaluators can more easily replicate a study in new programs, using the same interview instrument with different subjects. Future researchers will then know exactly what was, and was not, previously asked.

The standardized open-ended interview also reduces variation among interviewers. Some studies use volunteers to do interviewing; in other instances interviewers may be novices, students, or others who are not professional social scientists. When a number of different interviewers are used, variations in data created by differences among interviewers will become particularly apparent if an informal conversational approach to data-gathering is used or even if each interviewer uses a basic guide. The best way to guard against variations among interviewers is to word questions carefully in advance and train the interviewers to stick with the interview. The data collected are still open-ended in the sense that the respondent supplies his or her own words, thoughts, and insights in answering the questions, but the precise wording of the questions is predetermined.

The weakness of this approach is that it restricts the pursuit of topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview was written. Constraints are also placed on the use of different lines of questioning with different people based on their unique experiences. Therefore, a standardized open-ended interview approach will reduce the extent to which individual differences and circumstances can be taken into account.

Style Combinations

It is possible to combine an informal conversational approach with an interview guide approach. It is also possible to combine an interview guide approach with a standardized open-ended approach. For example, a number of basic questions may be worded quite precisely in a predetermined fashion, while permitting the interviewer more flexibility in probing and considerable freedom in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to undertake whole new areas of inquiry that were not originally included in the interview instrument. It is even possible to have a standardized open-ended interview format for the early part of an interview and then to leave the interviewer free to pursue any subjects of interest during the latter parts of the interview. Another combination would include using the informal conversational interview early in the evaluation followed midway by an interview guide and then closing the study with a standardized open-ended interview to provide systematic information from a sample of subjects at the end of the experience or when conducting follow-up of participants.

Summary of Interviewing Strategies

The common characteristic of all three qualitative approaches to depth interviewing is that the persons being interviewed respond in their own

words to express their own personal perspectives. While there are variations in strategy concerning the extent to which the wording and sequencing of questions ought to be predetermined, there is no variation in the principle that the response format should be open-ended. The interviewer never supplies and predetermines the phrases or categories that must be used by respondents to express themselves. The purpose of qualitative interviewing in evaluation is to understand how people in a program view the program, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences. This is what distinguishes qualitative interviewing from the closed interview, questionnaire, or test typically used in quantitative research. Such closed instruments force respondents to fit their knowledge, experiences, and feelings into the evaluator's categories. *The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.* Table 5.1 summarizes the basic variations in evaluation research interview instrumentation. In reviewing this summary table it is important to keep in mind that these are presented as pure types. In practice any particular study may employ several of these strategies or combinations of approaches.

The Content of Interviews: What Questions to Ask

A number of decisions must be made in conceptualizing an interview, whether the interview takes place spontaneously in the field or is carefully prepared as a standardized open-ended instrument. The evaluator must decide what questions to ask, how to sequence questions, how much detail to solicit, how long to make the interview, and how to word the actual questions. These are all measurement questions that will affect the quality of interview responses.

There are basically six kinds of questions that can be asked of people. It is possible to ask any of these questions on any given topic.

Experience/Behavior Questions

These are questions about what a person does or has done. These questions are aimed at eliciting descriptions of experiences, behaviors, actions, and activities that would have been observable had the observer been present. "If I had been in the program with you, what would I have seen you doing?" "If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing, what experiences would I observe you having?"

TABLE 5.1
Variations in Evaluation Research Interview Instrumentation

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

Opinion/Belief Questions

These are questions aimed at understanding the cognitive and interpretive processes of people. Answers to these questions tell us what people *think* about the world or about a specific setting. They tell us about people's goals, intentions, desires, and values. These questions typically carry an implication of respondent rationality and decision making. "What do you believe?" "What do you think?" "What would you like to see happen?" "What is your opinion of ____________?"

Feeling Questions

These are questions aimed at understanding the emotional responses of people to their experiences and thoughts. There is an implicit assumption of spontaneity about the origin of emotional responses. Feelings occur inside people. They are their natural, emotional responses to what happens around them or to them. Feelings tap the affective dimension of human life. In asking feeling questions, the interviewer is looking for "adjective responses" (e.g., feeling anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, confident).

Opinions and feelings are often confused. It is critical that interviewers understand the distinction between the two, in order to know when they have the kind of answer they want to the question they are asking. Suppose an interviewer asks, "How do you feel about that?" The response is "I think it's probably the best that we can do under the circumstances." The question about *feelings* has not really been answered. Analytical, interpretive, and opinion statements are not answers to questions about feelings.

This confusion sometimes occurs because interviewers give the wrong cues when asking questions, for example, by asking opinion questions using the format "How do you feel about that?" instead of "What is your opinion about that" or "What do you think about it?" When you want to understand the respondent's emotional reactions it is appropriate to ask about feelings. When you want to understand what they think about something, the question should explicitly ask about opinions, beliefs, and considered judgments—not about feelings.

Knowledge Questions

Knowledge questions are aimed at finding out what factual information the respondent has. The assumption here is that certain things are considered to be *known*. These things are not opinions, they are not

feelings, but rather they are the things that one *knows*. They are the facts of the case. Knowledge about a social program may consist of reporting on what services are available, who is eligible, the characteristics of clients, who the program serves, how long people spend in the program, what the rules and regulations of the program are, how one enrolls in the program, and so on. While from a philosophical point of view it is possible to argue that all knowledge is merely a set of beliefs rather than facts, the issue here is to find out what the person being interviewed considers to be factual. It is the respondent's knowledge about the program and the world that is being elicited.

Sensory Questions

These are questions about what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. The purpose of these questions is to allow the interviewer to enter into the sensory apparatus of the respondent. "When you walk through the doors of your mother's house, what do you see? Describe to me what I would see if I walked into your mother's house." Or again, "What does the counselor ask you when you meet with him? What does he actually say?" Sensory questions attempt to have the interviewee describe the stimuli to which he or she is subject.

Background/Demographic Questions

These questions concern the identifying characteristics of the person being interviewed. Answers to these questions help you locate the respondent in relation to other people. Age, education, occupation, residence, income, time in program, and the like are standard topics for background questions. They are distinguishable from knowledge questions primarily by their routine nature.

Questions about behaviors, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensations, or demographics: These are the kinds of questions that it is possible to ask in an interview. Any kind of question one might want to ask can be subsumed in one of these categories. Keeping these types of questions in mind can be particularly helpful when it comes to planning the comprehensiveness of the interview and ordering the questions in some sequence.

The Time Frame of Questions

Any of the questions described above can be asked in the present tense, past tense, or future tense. For example, it is possible to ask a person what they are doing now, what they have done in the past, and what they plan to do in the future. Likewise, one might be interested in present attitudes, past attitudes, or future attitudes. By combining the time frame of questions with the different types of questions it is possible to construct a matrix which generates eighteen different types of questions. Table 5.2 shows that matrix.

Asking all eighteen questions about any particular situation, event, or programmatic activity may become somewhat tedious, especially if the sequence is repeated over and over throughout the interview for different subjects. The matrix constitutes a set of options from which one can select the pieces of information that are most important to obtain.

Sequencing the Questions

There are no fixed rules of sequence in organizing an interview. Informal conversational interviewing is flexible and responsive so that a fixed sequence is seldom possible. However, standardized open-ended interviews must establish a fixed sequence of questions due to their structured format. I offer, then, some suggestions about sequencing.

I prefer to begin the interview with questions about noncontroversial present behaviors, activities, and experiences. Such questions ask for relatively straightforward descriptions; they require minimal recall and interpretation. Such questions are therefore fairly easy to answer. They encourage the respondent to talk descriptively. Probes should focus on eliciting greater detail, filling out the descriptive picture.

Once some experience or activity has been described it is appropriate to ask about interpretations, opinions, and feelings about the behaviors and actions described. Opinions and feelings are likely to be more accurate at this point in the interview because the respondent has just verbally relived the experience. Thus a context is established for expressing feelings and opinions.

Knowledge and skill questions also typically need a context. These questions can be quite threatening. It is helpful to ask them in conjunction with specific questions about program activities and experiences that have a bearing on knowledge and skills. Finding out from people what they know and what skills they possess works best once some rapport and trust have been established in the interview. Relating knowledge and skills to descriptions of program activity can help provide a concrete context for these kinds of questions.

25

TABLE 5.2
A Matrix of Question Options

	Past	*Present*	*Future*
Behavior/experience questions			
Opinion/value questions			
Feeling questions			
Knowledge questions			
Sensory questions			
Demographic/background questions			

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

Background and demographic questions are basically boring; they epitomize what people do not like about interviews. They can also be somewhat uncomfortable for the respondent, depending on how personal they are. I keep such questions to an absolute minimum and prefer to space them strategically and unobtrusively throughout the interview. I advise never beginning an interview with a long list of routine demographic questions. In qualitative interviewing the interviewee needs to become actively involved in providing descriptive information as soon as possible instead of becoming conditioned to providing short-answer, routine responses to uninteresting categorical questions. Some background information may be necessary at the beginning to make sense out of the rest of the interview, but such questions should be tied to descriptive information about present program experience as much as possible. Otherwise, save the sociological-demographic inquiries (age, socioeconomic status, birth order, and the like) for the end.

The Wording of Questions

An interview question is a stimulus that is aimed at creating or generating a response from the person being interviewed. The way a question is worded is one of the most important elements in determining how the interviewee will respond. As Stanley L. Payne (1951) put it, asking questions is an art. For purposes of qualitative evaluation, good questions should, at a minimum, be open-ended, neutral, sensitive, and clear. Each of these criteria will be discussed below.

Asking Truly Open-Ended Questions

The basic thrust of qualitative interviewing is to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data. When using qualitative interviewing strategies for data collection it is critical that questions be asked in a truly open-ended fashion. This means that the question should permit the person being interviewed to respond in his or her own terms.

The standard questionnaire item in quantitative measurement provides the respondent with a categorical list of response possibilities.

> How do you feel about the program? Would you say that you are (a) very satisfied, (b) somewhat satisfied, (c) not too satisfied, (d) not at all satisfied.

It is clear in this instance that the question is closed and that the respondent has been provided with a limited and predetermined set of alternatives. The response possibilities are clearly stated and made *explicit* in the way in which the question is asked. Many interviewers think that the way to make a question open-ended is simply to leave out the structured response categories. Such an approach does *not,* however, make a question truly open-ended. It merely makes the predetermined response categories implicit and disguised. Consider the following "open-ended" question:

> How satisfied are you with this program?

On the surface this appears to be an open-ended question. On close inspection, however, it is clear that the dimension along which the respondent can answer the question has already been identified. The respondent is being asked for some degree of satisfaction. It is true that

the interviewee can use a variety of modifiers for the word satisfaction, such as "pretty satisfied," "kind of satisfied," "mostly satisfied." But in effect the response set has been narrowly limited by the wording of the question. The desired dimension of response is identified in the wording of the question such that the typical answers are only slightly different from those that would have been obtained had the categories been standardized and closed.

The truly open-ended question does not presuppose which dimensions of feeling, analysis, or thought will be salient for the interviewee. The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses. Indeed, in qualitative interviewing one of the things the evaluator is trying to determine is what dimensions, themes, and images or words people use among themselves to describe their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Truly open-ended questions would follow this format:

> How do you feel about the program?
> What is your opinion of the program?
> What do you think about the program?

The truly open-ended question permits the persons being interviewed to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want.

Asking Clear Questions

It is the responsibility of the interviewer to make it clear to the interviewee what is being asked. Asking questions that are understandable is an important part of establishing rapport. Unclear questions can make the person being interviewed feel uncomfortable, ignorant, confused, or hostile. Asking focused questions helps a great deal to make things clear. There are a number of other factors which contribute to clarity.

In preparing to do an interview, find out what language the people you are interviewing use in talking about the program being studied. Use language that is understandable and part of the frame of reference of the person being interviewed. During the interview pay attention to what language the respondent uses to describe the setting, program participants, special activities, or whatever else is reported. The interviewer then uses the language provided by the interviewee in the rest of the interview. Questions which use the respondent's own language are questions which are most likely to be *clear* to the respondent.

Being clear about what you are asking contributes to the process of establishing and maintaining rapport during an interview. Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that are sensitive to the respondent's context and world view, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview.

Asking Singular Questions

It is widely understood that questionnaire items should be clear, specific, and singular. Yet, when doing depth interviews many people think there is no longer any reason for precision. Interviewers often throw several questions together and ask them all at once, usually because they are not clear about what they want to ask. This is confusing and places an unnecessary and unfair burden of interpretation on the interviewee. Consider this question:

> In order to help the staff improve the program, we'd like to ask you to talk about your opinion of the program. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What do you like? What don't you like? What do you think could be improved or should stay the same?

27

This sequence asks far too much. Reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of a program is not the same as reporting on what one likes and dislikes. Likewise, recommendations for change may not be directly linked in the mind of the respondent to specific strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes.

It can be helpful to alert the interviewee to a series of related questions, but then each should be asked in order.

> Now I'd like to ask you to reflect on the program's strengths and weaknesses, then to suggest possible improvements and changes. First, then, what do you consider the program's strengths?
>
> [Interviewee responds.]
>
> OK, what about weaknesses?
>
> [Interviewee responds.]
>
> What changes would you recommend to improve the program?
>
> [Interviewee responds.]

In summary, ask clear and precise, yet genuinely open-ended questions. Know what you want to find out and ask one question at a time.

Probes and Follow-Up Questions

Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired. The word "probe" itself is usually best avoided in interviews. "Let me probe that further" may sound like you are about to perform surgery on the respondent or are conducting an investigation of something illicit or illegal. Quite simply, a probe is an interview technique used to go deeper into the interview responses. As such, probes should be conversational, offered in a natural style and voice, and used to follow-up initial responses.

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

> When did that happen?
> Who else was involved?
> Where were you during that time?
> What was your involvement in that situation?
> How did that come about?
> Where did that happen?

These *detail-oriented* probes are the basic "who," "where," "what," "when," and "how" questions that are used to get a complete and detailed picture of some activity or experience. There are times, as in the probes suggested above, when *particular* details are elicited through follow-up questions. At other times an interviewer wants to keep a respondent talking more about a subject. In such cases *elaboration* probes are used. Elaboration probes encompass a variety of ways to cue the person being interviewed that you'd like them to keep talking.

There are times when you want the interviewee to say more because you have not fully understood an answer. If something has been said that is unclear, ambiguous, or an apparent non sequitur, a *clarification* probe may be useful. Clarification probes tell the interviewee that you need more information, or a restatement of the answer, or more context. A clarification probe should be used quite naturally and gently. It is best for the interviewer to convey the notion that the failure to understand is the "fault" of the interviewer and not a failure by the person being interviewed. The interviewer does not want to make the respondent feel inarticulate, stupid, or muddled. After one or two attempts at achieving clarification, it is sometimes best to leave the particular topic that is causing the confusion and move on to other questions, perhaps returning to that topic at a later point.

A major characteristic that separates probes from general interview questions is that probes are seldom written out in an interview. Probing is an art and skill that comes from knowing what you are looking for in the interview, listening carefully to what is and is not said, and being sensitive to the feedback needs of the person being interviewed. Probes are always a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues. Silence at the end of a response can indicate as effectively as anything else that you would like the person to continue. Probes are used to communicate with the interviewee about what you, the interviewer, want—more detail? elaboration? more clarity? Probes, then, provide guidance to the person being interviewed. They also provide the interviewer with a way to maintain control of the flow of the interview, a subject discussed in more detail in a later section.

28

Support and Recognition Responses

Effective interviewing feels to both the interviewer and the interviewee like genuine two-way communication. Interviews should not be interrogations where the interviewer intensively pursues a set of questions and the respondent provides the answers. The interviewer has a responsibility to communicate clearly about what information is desired, why that information is important, and to let the interviewee know how the interview is progressing. These things constitute the interviewer's communication to the person being interviewed.

Previous sections have emphasized wording questions for clarity and probing for detailed responses. The purpose of the overall interview and the relationship of particular questions to that overall purpose are important pieces of information that go beyond the simple asking of questions. While the reason for asking a particular question may be absolutely clear to the interviewer, it may not be clear to the respondent. The interviewer communicates respect for people being interviewed by giving them the courtesy of explaining why questions are being asked. Understanding the purpose of the interview will increase the interviewee's motivation to respond openly and in detail.

The other part of this process of maintaining communication with the interviewee is giving out clues about how the interview is going. One of the most common mistakes in interviewing is a failure to provide reinforcement and feedback to the person being interviewed about how

the interviewer perceives the interview progressing. This means that it is necessary, from time to time, to let the interviewee know that the purpose of the interview is being fulfilled. Words of thanks, support, and praise will help make the interviewee feel that the interview process is worthwhile. Here are some examples:

> It's really helpful to get such a clear statement of what this community is like. That's just the kind of thing we're trying to get at.
>
> We are about half-way through the interview now and I think a lot of really important things are coming out of what you're saying.
>
> I really appreciate your willingness to express your feelings about that. That's very helpful.

The point here is that the interview is an interaction. The interviewer provides stimuli to generate a reaction. That reaction from the interviewee, however, is also a stimulus to which the interviewer responds. The flow of communication back and forth occurs in the context of the whole interaction. The interviewer must maintain awareness of how the interview is flowing, how the interviewee is reacting to questions, and what kinds of feedback are appropriate and helpful to maintain the flow of the interview.

Neutrality and Rapport

As an interviewer I want to establish rapport with the person I am questioning, but establishing that rapport must not undermine my neutrality concerning what the person tells me. Neutrality means that the interviewer listens without passing judgment. I can be told anything without reacting with either favor or disfavor to the content of what I am told. I cannot be shocked; I cannot be angered; I cannot be embarrassed; I cannot be saddened; indeed, nothing people tell me will make me think more or less of them. In short, I am neutral about the content of their responses.

However, while I am neutral with regard to the *content* of what I am told, I care very much that this person is willing to share with me what she or he is saying. *Rapport is a stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. Neutrality is a stance vis-à-vis the content of what that person says.* Rapport means that I respect the person being interviewed, so what that person says is terribly important because of who is saying it. I want to convey that the respondent's knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings are important. Yet the content of what I am told will not be subject to my judgment one way or the other.

Questions to Communicate Neutrality

One kind of question wording that can help establish neutrality is the *illustrative examples* format. When phrasing questions in this way I want to let the person I am interviewing know that I have pretty much heard it all. I've heard the bad things and I've heard the good things and so I'm not interested in something that's particularly sensational, particularly negative, or especially positive. I am really only interested in what that person's experience has really been like. An example of the illustrative examples format is provided by a question taken from interviews we conducted with juvenile delinquents who has been placed in foster group homes. One section of the interview was aimed at finding out how the juveniles were treated by group home parents.

> OK, now I'd like to ask you to tell me how you were treated in the group home by the parents. Some kids have told us that they felt they were treated like one of the family in the group home; some kids have told us that they got knocked around and beat up by the group home parents; some kids have told us about sexual things that were done to them; some of the kids have told us about recreation and hobby kinds of things; some of the kids have felt they were treated really well and some kids have felt they were treated really bad. When you think about how *you* were treated in the group home, what kinds of things come to mind?

A closely related kind of format is the *illustrative extremes* format. With this format I attempt to let the interviewee know that I've heard it all by giving examples only of extreme kinds of responses.

> How much dope did you use while you were in the group home? Some kids have told me they were doped up the whole time they were in the home, they smoked or dropped stuff every day and every night, while other kids have said that they decided to stay completely straight while they were in the home. How about you?

In both the illustrative examples format and the illustrative extremes format it is critical to avoid asking a *leading* question. Leading questions are the opposite of neutral questions. Leading questions give the interviewee hints about what would be a desirable or appropriate kind of answer. Leading questions "lead" the respondent in a certain direction. This is an example of a typical leading question that might be asked of juveniles:

> We know that most kids use a lot of dope because that's part of what it means to be young, so we figure you use it too—right? So what do you think about everybody using dope?

29

This question has a built-in response bias that communicates the interviewer's belief that drug use among the young is legitimate and universal. The question is "leading" because the interviewee is led into acquiescence with the interviewer's point of view.

It is important in giving examples during an interview that the examples cover several dimensions and are balanced between what might be construed as positive and negative kinds of responses. My own preference is to use these illustrative formats only as clarifying questions after having begun with a simple, straightforward, and truly open-ended question where the response was not constrained or influenced by any kinds of examples: "What has been your experience with the use of drugs in the group home?"

Sensitivity

It is the interviewer's responsibility to be sensitive to how the interviewee may be affected by different questions and various question formats. It is not possible here to review all possible variations on how to ask questions. A few examples of sensitive question formats are provided here to illustrate the point that *how* the question is worded can make a great deal of difference in the quality of the response received.

One stylistic technique that shows sensitivity to the interviewee is providing a context for a question. This can have the effect of making a particularly probing question less personal and intrusive. Consider the two questions below:

> How do inmates sneak dope into the prison?
>
> [versus]
>
> Suppose someone you trusted asked you how inmates sneak dope into the prison, what would you tell him?

The first question comes across like an interrogation or inquisition. The second question is softened, and has more of an informal and sensitive tone to it. Despite the fact that content is the same for both questions, the second question has the psychological effect on the interviewee of permitting the interviewer to be dissociated from the question. While this technique can be overused and can come across as a phony or trick question if the intonation with which it is asked is hesitating or implies awkwardness, used sparingly and with subtlety this format can ease the asking of difficult questions and can permit the interviewer to obtain high-quality information.

Simulation questions provide context in a different way. The simulation question asks the person being interviewed to imagine himself or herself in some situation about which the interviewer is interested.

> Suppose I was present with you during one of your group therapy sessions. What would I see happening? What would be going on? Describe to me what one of those sessions is like.

In effect, these kinds of questions ask the interviewee to become an observer. The observer is asked to simulate for the interviewer some situation that has been experienced. In most cases, a response to this question will require the interviewee to visualize in his or her head the situation to be described. When the interviewee is able to move fully into an experience of the simulated situation through a visualization, the interviewer may observe that the person being interviewed takes on a faraway expression as if they are someplace else. They are. That's the point of the question. Do not try to bring them back, but rather encourage them to describe to you what is happening in the simulation. I frequently find that the richest and most detailed descriptions come from a series of questions that ask a respondent to re-experience and/or simulate some experience.

Maintaining Control of the Interview

Time is precious in an interview. Long-winded responses, irrelevant remarks, and getting sidetracked in the interview will reduce the amount of time available for focusing on critical questions. This means that the interviewer must maintain control of the interview. Control is maintained by (1) knowing what it is you want to find out, (2) asking the right questions to get the information you need, and (3) giving appropriate verbal and nonverbal feedback.

Knowing what information you need means being able to recognize and distinguish appropriate from inappropriate responses. It is not enough just to ask the right questions. The interviewer must listen carefully to make sure that the responses received provide answers to the questions that are asked. Consider the following exchange:

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

In this interaction the interviewer is asking descriptive, behavioral questions. The responses, however, are about beliefs and hopes. The responses do not actually describe what happened. Rather, the responses describe what the interviewee thinks ought to happen. Since the interviewer wants descriptive data, it is necessary to first recognize that the responses are not providing the kind of data desired, and then to ask appropriate questions that will lead to behavioral responses.

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

It is the interviewer's responsibility to work with the person being interviewed to facilitate the desired responses. At times it may be necessary to give more direct feedback about the kind of information that has been received and the kind of information that is desired.

> Interviewer: I think I understand now what it is you try to do during an interview training session. You've explained to me what you hope to accomplish and stimulate, now I'd like you to describe to me what you actually do, not what you expect, but what I would actually see happening if I was present at the session.

It is not enough to simply ask the right initial question. Neither is it enough to have a well-planned interview with good, on-target basic questions. The interviewer must listen carefully to the kinds of responses supplied to make sure that the interview is working according to plan. I've seen many well-written interviews that have resulted in largely useless data because the interviewer did not listen carefully to the responses being received and did not recognize that the responses were not providing the kind of information needed. The first responsibility, then, in maintaining control of the interview is knowing what kind of data one is looking for and directing the interview in order to collect that data.

Giving appropriate feedback to the interviewee is essential in pacing an interview and maintaining control of the interview process. Head nodding, taking notes, "uh-huhs," and silent probes (remaining quiet when a person stops talking) are all signals about how the interview is progressing. On the other hand, it is often necessary to stop a highly verbal respondent who gets off the track. The first step in stopping the long-winded respondent is to cease giving the usual cues mentioned above that encourage talking: Stop nodding the head; interject a new question as soon as the respondent pauses for breath; stop taking notes, or call attention to the fact that you've stopped taking notes by flipping the page of the writing pad and sitting back, waiting. When these nonverbal cues do not work, it becomes necessary to interrupt the long-winded respondent.

> Let me stop you here, for a moment. I want to make sure I fully understand something you said earlier. (Then ask a question aimed at getting the more targeted response.)
>
> [or]
>
> Let me ask you to stop for a moment because some of what you're talking about now I want to get later in the interview. First I need to find out from you . . .

Interviewers are sometimes concerned that it is impolite to interrupt an interviewee. It certainly can be awkward, but when done with respect and sensitivity, the interruption can actually help the interview. It is both patronizing and disrespectful to let the respondent run on when no attention is being paid to what he or she is saying. It is respectful of both the person being interviewed and the interviewer to make good use of the short time available to talk. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to help the interviewee understand what kind of information is being requested and to establish a framework and context that makes it possible to collect the right kind of information.

One example of how this can be done is to tell the interviewee quite explicitly that you, as the interviewer, may have to interrupt a response to keep the interview moving along so that all questions are covered in the time available. This announcement about the interviewer's role will help legitimate subsequent interruptions. Thus I might say something like the following:

> Excuse me a moment here. Let me interrupt at this point to be sure I'm following you. I find myself feeling very conscious of how many questions I still need to ask you, and how quickly interview time can pass. What I'd like to do is move on through the next sections of the interview, and then come back to fill in more detail if we have time at the end. I'm anxious to get your responses to all the questions, so I hope you'll forgive me if I interrupt some of your more detailed responses and hold those for later. Okay, the next question I'd like to ask is . . .

Asking focused questions in an appropriate style to get relevant answers that are useful in understanding the interviewee's world is what interviewing is all about. Yet maintaining focus on information that is useful, relevant, and appropriate requires concentration, practice, and the ability to separate that which is foolish from that which is important. In his classic *Don Quixote* Cervantes describes a scene in which Sancho is rebuked by Don Quixote for trying to impress his cousin by repeating deeply philosophical questions and answers that he has heard from other people, all the while trying to make the cousin think that these philosophical discourses were Sancho's own insights.

> "That question and answer," said Don Quixote, "are not yours, Sancho. You have heard them from someone else." "Whist, sir," answered Sancho, "if I start questioning and answering, I shan't be done til tomorrow morning. Yes, for if it's just a matter of asking idiotic questions and giving silly replies, I needn't go begging help from the neighbors." "You have said more than you know, Sancho," said Don Quixote, "for there are some people who tire themselves out learning and proving things that, once learned and proved, don't matter a straw as far as the mind or memory is concerned." (Cervantes, 1964, p. 682)

Regardless of which interview strategy is used—the informal conversational interview, the interview guide approach, or a standardized open-ended interview—the wording of questions will affect the nature and quality of responses received. Constant attention to the purpose of specific interviews and to the ways in which questions can be worded to achieve that evaluation purpose will reduce the extent to which, in Cervantes's words, evaluators "tire themselves out learning and proving things that, once learned and proved, don't matter a straw as far as the mind or memory is concerned."

The One-Shot Question

Informal, conversational interviewing typically takes place as a natural part of fieldwork. It is opportunistic and often unscheduled. An opportunity presents itself to talk with someone and the interview is underway. More structured and scheduled interviewing takes place as part of formal evaluation site visits. Staff and program participants know that the interview is to take place. Appointments are made and a specific place is set aside for the interview. Yet the best laid plans for scheduled interviews can go awry. The evaluator arrives at the appointed time and place only to find that the person to be interviewed is unwilling to cooperate or needs to run off to take care of some unexpected problem. When faced with such a situation it is helpful to have a single, one-shot question in mind to salvage at least something. This is the question you ask if you are only going to get one shot at the interviewee.

In evaluating an agricultural extension program I was interviewing farmers 150 miles north of the capital city. The farmers in the area were economically distressed and many felt alienated from politicians and professionals. I arrived at a farm for a scheduled interview but the farmer refused to cooperate. At first he refused to even come out of the barn to call off the dogs surrounding my truck. Finally, he appeared and said,

> I don't want to talk to you tonight. I know I said I would, but we've got a family problem and I'm tired and upset. I've always helped with your government surveys. I fill out all the forms the government sends. But I'm tired of it. No more. I don't walk to talk.

I had driven a long way to get this interview. The fieldwork was tightly scheduled, and I knew that I would not get another shot at this farmer, even if he later had a change of heart. To try and salvage the situation, I asked my one-shot question, a question stimulated by his demeanor and overt hostility.

> I'm sorry I caught you at a bad time. But as long as I'm here let me ask you just one quick question. Is there anything you want to tell the bastards in St. Paul?

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

I told him I understood and thanked him for the conversation. My scheduled, structured interview had become an informal, conversational interview developed from a last ditch, one-shot question.

32

Focus Group Interviews

A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to eight people who participate in the interview for one-half to two hours.

Focus group interviewing was developed in recognition that many of the consumer decisions that people make are made in a social context, often growing out of discussions with other people. Thus market researchers began using focus groups in the 1950s as a way of simulating the consumer group process of decision making in order to gather more accurate information about consumer product preferences. The classic work on focus group interviews, *The Focused Interview*, was written by Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall in 1956.

The focus group interview is indeed an *interview*. It is not a discussion. It is not a problem-solving session. It is not a decision-making group. It is an *interview*.

The participants are typically a relatively homogeneous group of people who are asked to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer. Participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. It is not necessary for the group to reach any kind of consensus. Nor is it necessary for people to disagree. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others.

Focus group interviews have several advantages when used for program evaluation purposes. It is a highly efficient qualitative data collection technique. In one hour the evaluator can gather information from eight people instead of only one person. Thus the sample size can be increased significantly in an evaluation using qualitative methods through focus group interviewing. Focus group interviews also provide some quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other which weed out false or extreme views. The group dynamics typically contribute to focusing on the most important topics and issues in the program, and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view of the program among participants. Finally, focus groups tend to be highly enjoyable to participants.

There are also some weaknesses of focus groups. Since the amount of response time to any given question is increased considerably by having a number of people respond, the number of questions that can be asked is limited. With eight people in an hour, it is typically possible to ask no more than ten major questions. Facilitating and conducting a focus group interview requires considerable group process skill. It is important to know how to manage the interview so that it is not dominated by one or two people, and so that those participants who tend not to be highly verbal are able to share their views.

It can be difficult to take notes during a focus group interview while also facilitating the discussion, so many groups are conducted by pairs of interviewers with one person focusing on taking notes and the other focusing on facilitation. Good notes help in sorting out who said what when the tape recording is transcribed later.

It is always possible that unexpected diversions will occur in a focus group, particularly in an evaluation setting where participants know each other. Conflicts may arise; power struggles may be played out; and status differences may become a factor. In market research, focus groups are typically conducted with people who do not know each other. Of course, when program participants in a focus group do know each other, it is not possible to guarantee confidentiality.

Focus group interviews can be used at any point in the evaluation process. Focus groups can be conducted as part of a needs assessment process with both potential client groups and professionals who know the needs of client groups. Focus groups can be conducted with client groups during a program to identify strengths, weaknesses, and needed improvements. Focus groups can be used at the end of a program, or even months after program completion, to gather perceptions about outcomes and impacts. Key community people can be interviewed in groups when their views of a program may be of interest for evaluation purposes. Focus group interviews can also be used with staff to identify key elements in a program's implementation and treatment. In short, focus groups can be used for a full range of evaluation purposes.

Focus groups are now widely used in market research with quite credible and useful results. This technique is only beginning to be used in evaluation. Focus group interviews, when conducted carefully and used appropriately, promise to provide a rich, new way of gathering qualitative evaluation information.

Recording the Data

The primary data of in-depth, open-ended interviews are quotations. What people say, what they think, how they feel, what they have done,

and what they know—these are the things one can learn from talking to people, from interviewing them. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to understand the perspectives and experiences of the people being interviewed. But no matter what style of interviewing is used, and no matter how carefully one words interview questions, it all comes to naught if the interviewer fails to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed. The raw data of interviews are the actual words spoken by interviewees. There is no substitute for these data.

Tape Recording Interviews

A tape recorder is part of the indispensable equipment of evaluators using qualitative methods. Tape recorders do not tune out of conversations, change what has been said because of interpretation (either conscious or unconscious), or record more slowly than what is being said. (Tape recorders do, however, break down and malfunction.) In addition to increasing the accuracy of data collection, the use of a tape recorder permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee. The interviewer who is trying to write down everything that is said as it is said will have a difficult time responding appropriately to interviewee needs and cues. The pace of the interview can become decidedly nonconversational. In brief, the interactive nature of in-depth interviewing is seriously affected by the attempt to take verbatim notes during the interview.

This is the major justification for using a tape recorder:

> I'd like to tape record what you have to say so that I don't miss any of it. I don't want to take the chance of relying on my notes and thereby miss something that you say or inadvertently change your words somehow. So, if you don't mind, I'd very much like to use the recorder. If at any time during the interview you would like to turn the tape recorder off, all you have to do is press this button on the microphone, and the recorder will stop.

The use of a tape recorder does not eliminate the need for taking notes. Taking notes can serve at least two purposes: (1) Notes taken during the interview can help the interviewer formulate new questions as the interview moves along, particularly where it may be appropriate to check out something that was said earlier; and (2) taking notes about what is said will facilitate later analysis, including locating important quotations from the tape itself.

The use of a tape recorder does *not* mean that the interviewer can become less attentive to what is being said. This is important regardless of whether a standardized open-ended interview format is being used or the more informal, conversational approach.

> One's full attention must be focused on the interview. One must be thinking about probing for further explication or clarification of what he is now saying; formulating probes; linking up current talk with what he has already said; thinking ahead to putting in a *new* question that has now arisen and was not taken account of in the standing guide (plus making a note at that moment so one will not forget the question); and attending to the interviewee in a manner that communicates to him that you are indeed listening. All of this is hard enough simply in itself. Add to that the problem of writing it down—even if one takes shorthand in an expert fashion—and one can see that the process of note-taking in the interview decreases one's interviewing capacity. Therefore, if conceivably possible, *tape record;* then one can interview. (Lofland, 1971, p. 89)

Transcribing Interviews

Since the raw data of interviews are quotations, the most desirable kind of data to obtain would be a full transcription of interviews. Although transcribing is expensive, transcripts can be enormously useful in data analysis, or later, in replications or independent analyses of the data.

Where resources are not sufficient to permit full transcriptions, the interviewer can work back and forth between interview notes and sections of the tape; only those quotations particularly important to the data analysis and report need be transcribed. In any case, it is critical that the tape recording be of high quality technically. Few things are more distressing in collecting qualitative data than to find that the tape is blank or that background noise is so severe that the tape is virtually worthless. In the first large-scale interviewing project with which I was involved, *nearly 20% of the data was lost because of poor quality recordings.*

Note-Taking During Interviews

When a tape recorder is being used during the interview, notes will consist primarily of key phrases, lists of major points made by the respondent, and key terms or words shown in quotation marks that capture the interviewee's own language. While most interviewers will not know how to take technical shorthand, it is useful to develop some system of abbreviations and informal shorthand to facilitate note-taking. Some important conventions along this line include the

following: (1) Only use quotation marks during note-taking to indicate full and actual quotations; (2) develop some mechanism for indicating interpretations, thoughts, or ideas that occur to you during the interview, for example, the use of brackets to set off your own ideas from those of the interviewee; and (3) keep track of what questions you ask.

When it is not possible to use a tape recorder because of some sensitive situation, interviewee request, or tape recorder malfunction, it is necessary for note-taking to become much more thorough and comprehensive. Again, it is critical to gather actual quotations, as much as possible. This may mean that from time to time, when the interviewee has said something that strikes you as particularly important or insightful, it may be necessary to say, "I'm afraid I need to stop you at this point so that I can get down exactly what you said, because I don't want to lose that particular quotation. Let me read back to you what I have and make sure it is exactly what you said."

With practice and training, an interviewer can learn to use notes for later expansion into more comprehensive detail of what was said in the interview. To do this with accuracy and reliability means reviewing interview notes *immediately following the interview.*

After the Interview

The period after the interview is critical to the rigor and validity o qualitative methods. This is a time for guaranteeing the quality of th data. The first thing to be done after a tape recorded interview is to chec the tape to make sure it was recorded properly. If for some reason malfunction occurred the interviewer should immediately make exten sive notes of everything that he or she can remember. Even if the tap functioned properly, the interviewer should go over the interview note to make certain that what was written makes sense, to identify areas c ambiguity or uncertainty, and to review the quality of informatio received from the respondent. Did you find out what you really wante to find out in the interview? If not, what was the problem? Poorl worded questions? Wrong topics? Poor rapport? Do you need to follo up with this person?

It is at this point, immediately following the interview, that observa tions are written down about the interview itself. *Every good interview also an observation.* The skilled interviewer listens *and* observe Nonverbal data are still data. Observational data include where tl interview occurred, who was present, how the interviewee reacted to tl interview, and any additional information that would help establish a context for interpreting and making sense out of the interview. It is also worth recording observations about yourself as an interviewer. How did your style and approach affect the interview?

This period after the interview is a critical time of reflection and elaboration. *It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable, and valid.* If it is not possible to review the interview immediately afterward, then such a review should occur as soon as practical. Do not rely on your memory. Over time different interviews flow together and who said what becomes muddled.

On occasion this process of immediately reviewing the interview will reveal areas of ambiguity or of uncertainty, where you are not really sure what the person said or meant. As soon as these areas of vagueness turn up the interviewer should check back with the respondent to clarify what was meant. This can often be done over the telephone as a simple way of affirming the accuracy of the interview. In my experience respondents appreciate such follow-up because it indicates the seriousness of the evaluation effort. Guessing at what the person said is absolutely unacceptable. If there is no way of following up the comments with the respondent, then those areas of vagueness and uncertainty simply become missing data.

This period after an interview requires great discipline. Interviewing can be exhausting. It is easy to forego this time of reflection and elaboration, put it off, or neglect it altogether. To do so is to undermine seriously the rigor of qualitative methods. Interviews and observations should be scheduled so that sufficient time is available for data clarification, elaboration, and evaluation.

Examining an interview after it is completed can also be the beginning of analysis. While the situation and data are fresh, insights can occur that might otherwise have been lost. Thus ideas and interpretations that emerge following an interview or observation should be written down and clearly marked as such.

The Personal Side of Interviewing

Interviewing people can be invigorating and stimulating. It is a chance for a short period of time to peer into another person's world. A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experiences not only to the interviewer but also to the person answering the questions. The process of being taken through a directed, reflective process affects

the person being interviewed. It is not unusual for an interviewee to say, "You know, I hadn't thought of that for a long time." As respondents think about questions they may surprise themselves with fresh insights, previously unarticulated concerns, and new ideas.

I am personally convinced that to be a good interviewer you must like doing it. This means that you are interested in what people have to say. You must yourself believe that the thoughts and experiences of the people being interviewed are worth knowing. In short, you must have the utmost respect for people who are willing to share with you some of their time to help you understand their program experiences and their world.

Researchers have studied the problems that can emerge in attempting to get valid and reliable data from interviewees (e.g., Richardson, Dohrenwend, Snell, & Klein, 1965). Certainly there are uncooperative respondents, people who seem overly sensitive and easily embarrassed, aggressive and hostile interviewees, timid people, and the endlessly verbose who go on at great length about very little. When an interview is going badly it is easy to call forth one of these stereotypes to explain how the interviewee is ruining the interview. Such "blaming of the victim" (the interviewee), however, does little to improve the quality of the data. Nor does it improve interviewing skills.

A different approach is to believe that there is a way to unlock the internal perspectives of every interviewee. It is the task and responsibility of the interviewer to find that interviewing style and that question format which will work with a particular respondent. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to establish an interview climate that facilitates open responses.

When an interview goes well, the interviewer has a right to feel good. When the interview goes badly, it just may be the fault of the person asking the questions. Thus the period of review after an interview can also be a chance to reflect on one's own interviewing skills and to learn from the interviewing experience.

Summary Guidelines for Interviewing

There is no one right way of interviewing, no single correct format that is appropriate for all situations, and no single way of wording questions that will always work. The particular evaluation situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique situation for each interview. Therein lie the challenges of depth interviewing: situational responsiveness and sensitivity to get the best data possible.

There is no recipe for effective interviewing, but this chapter has offered some guidelines. These guidelines are summarized below.

(1) Throughout all phases of interviewing, from planning through data collection to analysis, keep centered on the purpose of the evaluation. Let that purpose guide the interviewing process.

(2) The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.

(3) Understand the strengths and weaknesses of different types of interviews: the informal conversational interview; the interview guide approach; and the standardized open-ended interview.

(4) Select the type of interview (or combination of types) that is most appropriate to the purposes of the evaluation.

(5) Understand the different kinds of information one can collect through interviews: behavioral data; opinions; feelings; knowledge; sensory data; and background information.

(6) Think about and plan how these different kinds of questions can be most appropriately sequenced for each interview topic, including past, present, and future questions.

(7) Ask truly open-ended questions.

(8) Ask clear questions, using understandable and appropriate language.

(9) Ask one question at a time.

(10) Use probes and follow-up questions to solicit depth and detail.

(11) Communicate clearly what information is desired, why that information is important, and let the interviewee know how the interview is progressing.

(12) Listen attentively and respond appropriately to let the person know he or she is being heard.

(13) Avoid leading questions.

(14) Understand the difference between a depth interview and an interrogation. Qualitative evaluators conduct depth interviews; police investigators and tax auditors conduct interrogations.

(15) Establish personal rapport and a sense of mutual interest.

(16) Maintain neutrality toward the specific content of responses. You are there to collect information not to make judgments about that person.

(17) Observe while interviewing. Be aware of and sensitive to how the person is affected by and responds to different questions.

(18) Maintain control of the interview.

(19) Tape record whenever possible to capture full and exact quotations for analysis and reporting.

(20) Take notes to capture and highlight major points as the interview progresses.

(21) As soon as possible after the interview check the recording for malfunctions; review notes for clarity; elaborate where necessary; and record observations.

(22) Take whatever steps are appropriate and necessary to gather valid and reliable information.

(23) Treat the person being interviewed with respect. Keep in mind that it is a privilege *and* responsibility to peer into another person's experience.

(24) Practice interviewing. Develop your skills.

(25) Enjoy interviewing. Take the time along the way to stop and *hear* the roses.

For Further Reading

Hedges, A. (1985). Group interviewing. In R. Walker (Ed.), *Applied qualitative research.* Brookfield, VT: Gower.

Jones, S. (1985). Depth interviewing. In R. Walker (Ed.), *Applied qualitative research.* Brookfield, VT: Gower.

Lofland, J. (1971). *Analyzing social settings.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Werner, O., & Schoepfle, M. (1987). *Systematic fieldwork* (Vols. 1-2). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.