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FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

Although the interview is common to both qualitative and quantitative research traditions, the way it “looks” in a given research setting can vary considerably. How the interaction is formulated, the logic that guides how respondents are sampled, how the process is administered, and the sorts of objectives that characterize it all vary depending on the

researcher's research objectives, theoretical interests, and epistemological stance.

HIGHER RATES OF PARTICIPATION Many of the disadvantages of questionnaires are handled admirably by the interview. Participation rates among people approached for a face-to-face interview are often around 80 percent or even 90 percent; this is comparable to some self- and group-administered questionnaires and considerably better than mail-out questionnaires. Thus, volunteer bias is generally less of a problem with interviews.

BENEFITS OF CONTACT The interaction of interviewer and respondent also offers benefits that can enhance the quality of the data gathered. The interviewer can ensure that the appropriate person completes the interview, can clarify immediately any confusion about particular questions, and can encourage verbally stingy respondents to embellish further. Also, since the interviewer asks questions and writes down responses, the respondent needn't be literate. And although some participants may feel less anonymity in the personalized interview setting than with the impersonal questionnaire, skilled interviewers can often build sufficient rapport to alleviate such misgivings. Finally, the rapport that's built may have longer-term benefits for researchers engaging in longitudinal research, since respondents may be more willing to participate in **panel studies** involving repeated interviews.

TIME AND COST The biggest disadvantages of face-to-face interviews are their cost and the time required to complete a large-scale interview study. While it wouldn't be unusual for a questionnaire study to cost \$4 or \$5 per participant or for a telephone interview study to cost \$20 to \$25 per participant, conducting the same study by face-to-face interview might well cost \$50 or even \$100 or more per participant. But comparing these estimates may be deceptive, since they reflect alternatives that aren't equally likely to occur. As quantitative researchers seeking large data sets have

leaned more and more toward using telephone surveys, the realm of the face-to-face interview has, for the most part, been vacated to more qualitatively oriented researchers, who are more likely to do the interviewing themselves than to hire teams of research assistants to amass huge sets of aggregate data.

WHERE THE ACTION IS This very shift tells us something about how the process of face-to-face interviewing is conceived differently from questionnaires or telephone surveys. Large-scale quantitative researchers place great emphasis on the design phase of survey questionnaires; the "highest priced talent" *designs* the survey instrument, while the survey's actual *execution* is often relegated to the "lowest priced talent," that is, part-time assistants who often have little commitment to the data and may not even know who's sponsoring the study or what its purpose is (beyond what can be determined from the superficial content). In contrast, more qualitatively oriented researchers typically value the process of data gathering as much as the design of the research instrument itself. As a result, both the study's design and its execution are undertaken by the "highest priced talent."

Embedded here are two very different views of the data-gathering process. Recall that among quantitative researchers, the role of the researcher-expert is to determine what is important to ask; after that, *anyone* can gather data, as long as he or she is properly trained to be neutral, aloof, and standardized in delivery. Qualitative researchers view the data-gathering process itself as informative, maintaining that one must be open to any new directions that may emerge in the context of the interview because of the unique perspective of the participant(s). Doing so effectively requires people who are familiar with the participants and with the phenomenon under study, and who clearly understand the research objectives so that they can make responsible decisions about what to do in the unique situations that emerge with every interview.

Because of other preferences held by those who engage in qualitative study (e.g., a phenomenological

perspective, an inductive approach, an emphasis on case study analysis in context), face-to-face interviews look very different from telephone surveys or mail-out surveys simply because the qualitative researcher is much less likely to be trying to amass huge sets of standardized data for nomothetic analysis. Face-to-face interviews tend to be longer and more detailed, tend to seek greater depth of response, and tend to be more open-ended in their construction to allow for phenomenological input from respondents. They're also more likely to be situated in some context (e.g., an organization, a group, a limited geographical setting such as a neighbourhood) that plays an important role in the analysis.

HUMANIZING THE PROCESS This more intimate connection between the researcher and respondent may have many benefits associated with it, such as greater likelihood of developing rapport, but the interview's interactive nature also means that one must be more careful about *reactive* bias. Interviewees can be very attentive to cues that the interviewer emits, since they want to know whether they are “doing well” as participants. Thus, what you choose to write down out of their verbal responses and even your supportive and encouraging “uh-huhs” or nods of the head may be taken as cues about what the interviewee “should” be talking about. One must avoid leading the interviewee.

Finally, although a sensitive interviewer may reassure the respondent about confidentiality, interviews clearly generate less of a feeling of anonymity than do impersonal questionnaires. Considerable effort must therefore be made to ensure that rapport is created and that the interviewee legitimately believes there is no reason to feel threatened. We say “legitimately” here on the assumption that that is true. Obviously, where possibilities for repercussions exist—whether to the individual or to his or her group—because of the results of the study, ethical practice requires that respondents be informed of that possibility and that researchers build in safeguards to the extent possible.

DEALING WITH THE DATA Lastly, the interviewer must make some choices about how to retain

responses, and each choice has its advantages and disadvantages. If the choice is to write down verbatim responses to questions, the process can become quite tedious and may well interrupt the flow of the interview while the respondent waits for the interviewer to finish writing down each response. The researcher may therefore choose to write down only summaries or major points from the response, but then distortion may occur, or matters that are subsequently found to be important may be left out.

Another possibility is to tape (using audio or video recording) the interview. This approach frees the interviewer to pay attention to the interviewee, although some would advise that the interviewer should occasionally jot down notes in any event, because doing so helps the interviewer retain the flow of the interview, because most respondents expect you to write something down every so often, and because notes give you some backup in case a technical foul-up renders the tape useless and you must regenerate the content of the interview from memory. On the other hand, transcribing tape responses is expensive, and the permanence and unforgiving accuracy of tape may inhibit candour.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

The focus group interview is essentially a group version of the face-to-face interview. Focus groups have an extensive history in marketing research, but have only more recently been discovered by the broader social scientific community (D. L. Morgan 1988; Morgan & Spanish 1984). Such groups normally involve a *target sample* or *purposive sample* of informants brought together to discuss the phenomenon in which the researcher is interested. As Fontana and Frey (1994) note, “The group interview is not meant to replace individual interviewing, but it is an option that deserves consideration because it can provide another level of data gathering or a perspective on the research problem not available through individual interviews” (364).

In marketing, a group of typical consumers might be brought together to discuss their preferences, what they value in an existing product, or what they might like to see in a developing product. General

Motors, for example, might be interested in designing a new truck and might hire a research agency to bring together a group of truck owners to discuss what features they believe should be included in the design. Marketing researchers also have used focus groups to assess other products and their packaging, such as politicians.

In the social sciences, however, the “product” the researcher wants to develop may be a questionnaire or a completed study. The participants would be invited because of their relevance to the phenomenon of interest to the researcher. An early example of this (cited by D. L. Morgan 1988) would be Merton and Kendall’s (1946) effort to evaluate the persuasiveness of wartime propaganda; more recently, Morgan and Spanish (1985) created focus groups to generate discussions concerning perceptions of risk factors involved in heart attacks, and D. L. Morgan (1986) brought together focus groups of widows as part of his investigation into bereavement. One can envision innumerable other uses, including government administrators discussing organizational processes or policy objectives, film directors discussing how they reconcile their own beliefs with the market-oriented pressures of funding agencies, and groups of parents discussing education policies in relation to their children’s schools.

UNIQUE ADVANTAGES Such groups may serve several purposes for researchers. D. L. Morgan (1988) explains that focus groups can be used productively when

orienting oneself to a new field; generating hypotheses based on informants’ insights; evaluating different research sites or study populations; developing interview schedules and questionnaires; [and] getting participants’ interpretations of results from earlier studies. (11)

Focus groups also may provide provocative and/or insightful information to the exploratory researcher who is looking for unanticipated consequences to organizational interventions; is interested in determining issues of importance to those in the research setting or in acquiring new insights about

the phenomenon from those who have experienced it; and/or is trying to develop research instruments (e.g., questionnaires, interview schedules, sampling strategies) that have integrity with respect to the phenomenology of those under study.

But the usefulness of focus groups is not limited to exploratory research. After a piece of research is completed, for example, and the researcher has analyzed and interpreted the data, this information might be imparted to additional focus groups for discussion. Such discussions may help the researcher gather alternative interpretations for further consideration and generate additional hypotheses and/or research questions on which to focus subsequent research. Indeed, it was for exactly this purpose that Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) originally coined the term “focus group” (see Fontana & Frey 1994).

Although focus groups have much in common with the traditional in-person interview, D. L. Morgan (1988) argues that their inherent social dynamic gives them at least two unique advantages. First, instead of simply taking an inventory of opinion through individual interviews, the focus group setting places opinions “on the table” where differences between perspectives can be highlighted and negotiated. This process allows participants to embellish on positions, discuss related dynamics, and articulate the rationale(s) underlying their perspective. Blumer (1969) advocates identifying a small number of informed participants who are acute observers in any social setting of interest, and then states that “a small number of such individuals brought together as a discussion and resource group is more valuable many times over than any representative sample” (41). D. L. Morgan (1988) adds that a second major advantage of focus groups is the opportunity to “witness” (as opposed to “influence”) extensive interaction on a topic within a relatively limited time frame.

AND UNIQUE COMPLICATIONS, TOO While some advantages accrue from the social composition of focus groups, this characteristic can also pose problems. Some people will be less comfortable than others in expressing their opinions publicly; people with more extreme or unique views may be reluctant

to expose them to possible ridicule; and people will undoubtedly be more concerned about maintaining their image in a public setting than in a one-to-one interview. Fontana and Frey (1994) reaffirm Merton and colleagues' (1956) view that three skills are particularly important in the group interviewer's repertoire:

First, the interviewer must keep one person or a small coalition of persons from dominating the group; second, he or she must encourage recalcitrant respondents to participate; and third, he or she must obtain responses from the entire group to ensure the fullest possible coverage of the topic. (365)

Thus, focus groups may be seen as a useful vehicle for encouraging the embellishment and negotiation of public opinion, while the traditional single-person interview or questionnaire acts as a complementary expression of privately held opinions or "secret ballots."

The focus group also accords a less central but no less important role to the researcher. In an interview involving one researcher and one participant, the respondent can look only to the researcher for direction. The researcher in the focus group setting generally plays a more facilitative and less directive role. Although the researcher can set up a structured situation, he or she typically acts only to initiate, prompt, and referee the discussion. Accordingly, one might infer that the results will be influenced more by the group than by the researcher.

In sum, focus group interviews are compatible with an array of research objectives, and while they possess their own limitations, they also offer unique strengths. They thus seem a currently under-utilized addition to the social science researcher's procedural repertoire.

ORAL HISTORIES

There are two types of oral history, only one of which will be considered in detail here. Be sure you understand the difference between them. The one that receives only passing attention in this book is

the type of oral history remembered and practised by Aboriginal peoples in North America.

ABORIGINAL ORAL HISTORIES Until relatively recently, most North American Aboriginal cultures were primarily oral cultures. Consistent with this emphasis, Aboriginal peoples made extensive use of oral history, where the role of particular individuals would be to remember certain stories about their people's history, rather like walking archives.

These memories weren't merely the recollection of stories, as might have happened when your parents told you a story when you were a child, but were in fact "lived memorizations" and verbatim accounts that would be repeated in the same manner 50 years from now as they would be today. Indeed, contemporary oral histories are often found to be identical to those recorded by anthropologists at the turn of the 20th century (e.g., see Mills 1994). Part of their integrity came from the fact that one of the "jobs" of each new generation required accurately learning and remembering the stories handed down by previous generations.

Another part of their integrity came through their having survived the rigorous process of ongoing challenges to their accuracy. Among the Aboriginal peoples of the northwest coast, for example, this process occurred in the context of the feast (potlatch) system. On appropriate occasions, each speaker recounted, in this most public of settings, the history of his or her clan, the boundaries of the clan's territories, and the way its crests and songs had been acquired. Anyone at the feast could challenge this oral history; the lack of challenge signalled acceptance that the account was valid (e.g., see Gisday Wa & Delgam Uukw 1992; Mills 1994).

We make these points for two main reasons. First, we want to encourage respect for the oral histories of Aboriginal peoples. Because of Europeans' and other non-Aboriginal peoples' reliance on written documentation and reverence for materials in written archives, many Europeans and non-Aboriginals have ethnocentrically assumed that no documentary history meant "no history" (e.g., see Wolf 1982), and that oral histories are little more than

some sort of quaint, ever-changing cultural fairy tale. This is far from the truth. Yet such views have been used by colonial powers to dismiss Aboriginal histories and thereby deny Aboriginal rights.¹ Second, we've made this point to put the oral histories we'll deal with in this chapter into perspective.

ORAL HISTORY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE Broadly defined, “history” is everything that happened before you read this sentence. And now even that sentence has receded into history. We can never know *everything* about history, but that hasn't stopped historians and the rest of us who are interested in history from trying to understand it. In trying to do so, we realize one of the challenges of understanding history: it isn't here anymore. We thus cannot study history directly, but must do so by looking at those pieces and remnants of history that remain.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX? Now, let's imagine that the history we *can* study is all contained in a huge box. Of all that happened in that huge period of time we know as “history,” the only things we can base our study of history on are the things inside that box, because those are the only things that remain. And while many things get inside the box, many things do not. For example, last weekend, Ted's son Felix pitched an absolutely great game against the best team in his Little League; it was the only game that team lost all year. Felix was extremely happy about it, and Ted was glad he was there to see Felix play. It was an enjoyable moment for both of them as father and son.

But 100 years from now, when some historian sits down to write something about early 21st century humanity—even if he or she is writing about “father–son relationships in the early 21st century”—there isn't a chance in the world that this future historian will write about the day Ted's son pitched such a great game and Ted was there to watch. Why? Because that bit of human history, while as real as the fact that Ottawa is the capital of Canada, will never make it into the box of human events out of which future historians will manufacture history.

Or will it? Ironically, our describing that experience here makes it possible that some historian in 2107 actually *will* see some dilapidated old copy of this book and discover the fact about Felix and his dad and Felix's great day of pitching. Because we've put it in writing, a fact that would otherwise be recalled by no one besides Felix and his dad (neither of whom will be around by then) is now part of the contents of the box of study-able human history. It's actually a very interesting example of **selective deposit**, a phenomenon we'll discuss in more detail in Chapter 8. This term reflects the recognition that some things have a higher likelihood of being put into the box than others, and that some people and groups have better access to the box than others do. It's interesting, for example, that, in Ted's role as dad, he has very little likelihood of accessing the box. No one outside his immediate family will probably ever have any sense of him as a parent. But in his roles as university professor and author, he has somewhat more access to the box, as evidenced by this book, which is now part of the written historical record.

One of the tragedies of history is that so much that would be interesting to know will remain forever beyond our grasp because it was never placed inside the box. It's interesting to consider what sorts of biases have entered into that process. What people or groups have been systematically *less* likely to have had a chance to put something in the box? And what people or groups have had much *better* access to the box, allowing them to influence our sense of history by placing their experiences into the box?

Clearly, some people have had better access to the box than others. Governments, the rich, the powerful, the upper classes, and the educated have all had better access to the box than individual citizens, the poor, the vulnerable, the lower classes, and the illiterate. Similarly, because of the history of patriarchy in many non-Aboriginal traditions,² it is also the case that men—because until relatively recent times, it was primarily they who formed the governments, controlled the property and wealth, and had better access to education—have had better access to the box than women. When historians open the box

to try to understand history, the “facts” they look at are therefore not *all* the facts, or even a representative sample of facts, but only the facts placed there by those who had access to the box. So when we try to look at what life was like in, say, 17th-century England or 15th-century Spain, we’re relying most typically on the views of the rich, the powerful, and the educated and on the views of men. Even when we find material about others whose experience we also would like to understand—the daily life of the average 15th-century Spanish peasant, say—it’s rarely through *their* eyes that we see the world around them, but rather through the eyes of non-peasants who had access to the box.

RECTIFYING THE IMBALANCE OF WRITTEN HISTORY Oral history is partly a way of trying to deal with the problems of access just outlined. It recognizes and to some extent shares the general European bias in favour of written documentation, and therefore tries to get material into the box that wouldn’t otherwise be there. Oral history is consequently seen by many as “an interview technique with a mission.” Fontana and Frey (1994), for example, note that “oral history does not differ from the unstructured interview methodologically, but in purpose” (368), where the purpose is to take material that otherwise might have been forgotten and make it part of the written record. Reinhartz (1992) adds that “oral history ... is useful for getting at *people* less likely to be engaged in creating written records and for creating historical accounts of *phenomena* less likely to have produced archival material” (131; emphasis in original). By interviewing people about their past, we “recover” parts of history that might otherwise have been lost; by interviewing people about their present, we help ensure that their record is available for future generations.

Although examples of collected oral history narratives go back to antiquity, “its modern formal organization can be traced to 1948, when Allan Nevins began the Oral History Project at Columbia University” (Starr 1984: 4, cited by Fontana & Frey 1994: 368). That quotation, of course, has a certain delicious irony, since it’s another example of how

people with access to the box of history (like academics at prestigious universities) are the ones whose contributions we remember and can cite because they’re part of the written record.

Because of the nature of the mission associated with oral history, you shouldn’t be surprised to discover that the technique has been particularly popular among people who are on the margins of society—minorities, the poor, street people, and women, for example—and/or among those who are interested in engaging in research with such people. Oral history narratives exist *en masse* for many of the “common people” of history whose experience would otherwise be ignored or forgotten. Examples include collections in which people talk about their working lives (e.g., Terkel 1975), as well as more specific projects that focus on Pennsylvania steelworkers and their families, women working in Baltimore canneries (e.g., Olson & Shopes 1991), the experience of Blacks in the Vietnam War (Terry 1984), Palestinian women engaged in resistance activities (e.g., Gluck 1991), or on a staggering array of other groups. No doubt many others haven’t yet seen the light of day; as Fontana and Frey (1994) note, “often, oral history transcripts are not published but may be found in libraries, silent memoirs awaiting someone to rummage through them and bring their testimony to life” (368).

Recently, oral history methods have found particular favour among many feminist researchers, who see oral history methods as a way to rectify the gender imbalance in the largely male-dominated documentary archives of history. Gluck and Patai (1991) note that

The first major body of literature on women’s oral history appeared in late 1977 in a special issue of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*. This ground-breaking issue served as the key reference on women’s oral history for many years, and the suggested outlines for women’s oral history interviews that appeared at the back of the journal were xeroxed, dittoed, and mimeographed by women in communities and classrooms around the country. (4)

Emphasizing the gathering of women's oral histories is thus a way to include women's voices in history: "Refusing to be rendered historically voiceless any longer, women are creating a new history—using our own voices and experiences" (Gluck 1984: 222). Reinharz (1992) suggests that women's oral history actually serves a threefold function: drawing women out of obscurity, repairing the historical record, and providing stories of people with whom women readers and authors can identify.

QUESTIONS ABOUT RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

While feminist engagement in oral history is thus rewarding in its own right, involvement in this massive oral history project has also prompted feminists to lead the way in contemporary reconsiderations of oral history in particular, interviewing in general, and, even more broadly, the whole set of relations between respondents and researchers. The concern is not only that men's voices dominate history, since this imbalance could be addressed simply by using techniques like oral history to rectify it, but also that the methods available to us now, since they were conceived in a traditionally male-dominated social science, are often particularly "male" in the way they're conceived, designed, and executed. Many feminist researchers who took the plunge into oral history research found that straight application of the methods they'd been taught in graduate school needed reconsideration.

Minister (1991), for example, observes that

the male subcommunication subculture is assumed to be the norm for social science interviewing ... If women aspire to become approved oral historians, they must learn to control topic selection with questions, must make certain that one person talks at a time, and must encourage narrators to "take the floor" with referential language that keeps within the boundaries of selected topics. (31)

Minister clearly doesn't intend to encourage women to aspire to those essentials. Instead, she argues that women must carve out their own version of oral his-

tory, a version that's more sensitive to, and a better reflection of, women's ways of communicating.

We will not hear what women deem essential to their lives unless we legitimate a female socio-communication context for the oral history situation. As Sue Armitage says, "We will learn what we want to know only by listening to people who are not accustomed to talking." (31–32)

Anderson and Jack (1991) agree that more female-reflective approaches are required. They believe, for example, that men tend to look at the interview purely as an information-gathering session, so that designing an interview study becomes a strategic question of how best to order and compile questions and answers. In contrast, they believe women are more attuned to relationships and process and that woman-to-woman interviews must reflect that difference:

Realizing the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint. (23)

A major problem crops up when interviewing women, according to Anderson and Jack (1991). Because men's experience has defined much of contemporary existence, women have become used to talking in dual narratives: using concepts that reflect men's cultural domination, but focusing on their own experience, which may or may not be adequately captured by those schemas. Feminist oral history researchers must therefore be particularly sensitive to reading between the lines:

We need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn't. We need to interpret their pauses and, when it happens, their unwillingness or inability to respond. We need to consider carefully whether our interviews create a context in which women feel comfortable

exploring the subjective feelings that give meaning to actions, things, and events, whether they allow women to explore “unwomanly” feelings and behaviours, and whether they encourage women to explain what they mean in their own terms. (17)

This process is clearly an interpretive one. However understandable the position, it’s also fraught with complexity and paradox. At issue here is the question of “voice” and, especially, whose voice (if either) dominates the final look of the text that’s produced from the interview. An excellent self-critical analysis by Borland (1991) of an oral history interview she did with her grandmother highlights the dilemma well. The article focuses on an experience for which Borland’s interpretations of “what was *really* going on” and “what was *really* being said” were completely different from her grandmother’s. Rejection of the interpretation by her grandmother after reading the first draft led to further discussion, further revising, and some movement on the parts of both women as they tried to reach jointly satisfactory resolution of the meaning of the original episode.

One of the central tenets of feminist research is that women must be able to say things in their own voice and that voice must be heard. Male-dominated science is seen as an inappropriate model to the extent that it embodies hierarchical relations between the researcher and those researched, where an “expert” researcher “extracts” data from “subjects” and then reinterprets it according to a “culturally sanitized” (i.e., male-dominated) “spin.” Instead of treating each other like researcher and respondent, many feminists aim to do research in the same egalitarian and respectful manner in which one might interview one’s friend or grandmother. Anderson and Jack’s (1991) assertions seem to question that sort of face-value acceptance, seeing the task as one of reading between the lines and finding what the women being interviewed are “really” saying and what they “really” mean by it.

Many feminist researchers (including Borland 1991, as noted) have wrestled with these issues. Their analyses can make us all aware of how our pro-

fessional zeal may lead us to usurp others’ voices and to take for granted some things that perhaps shouldn’t be accepted. Black feminists, for example, argue that sisterhood has its limits if it means homogenizing women’s experience in a way that doesn’t do justice to the equally meaningful and simultaneously marginalizing experience of race (e.g., see Collins 1991; Etter-Lewis 1991; Fine 1994; Olesen 1994), while others make the same point regarding Latina (e.g., see Benmayor 1991), Aboriginal (e.g., see Greschner 1992; Monture-Okanee 1993; Petersen 1994), and Third World women (e.g., see Hale 1991; Patai 1991; Salazar 1991). All call for research considerations that acknowledge and respect cultural differences

Computer-Assisted Social Research (CASR)

The Internet is expanding at an unprecedented rate; its growth has eclipsed all other technologies preceding it (Dahlen 2002). Between 1994 and 1998 50 million people logged on to the Internet worldwide; it took 38 years for radio and 13 years for television to acquire the same user base (United Nations 2004). It is clear that the Internet is the fastest growing information and communications medium to date, and it will not be long before it is as common as the television or the telephone (Dahlen 2002). At present, Internet traffic doubles every 100 days; in December 2005 one billion people worldwide were online (United Nations, 2004).

Prior to the popularization of the Internet, Kiesler and Sproull (1986) provided a roadmap for using networked computers to conduct social science research. While they were optimistic about the potential of computer technology, they felt that “until such time as computers and networks spread throughout society, the electronic survey will probably be infeasible” (p. 403). The available statistics on the growth of computer technologies such as the Internet provide ample evidence that the technological revolution that we have witnessed over the past 20 years makes it impossible to ignore the

research possibilities envisioned by Kiesler and Sproull.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS AND BURDENS

CASR brings with it a number of practical benefits and burdens. One of the most cited is the effect that implementing a computer-assisted design has on the speed and duration of the research process; CASR can be much faster than comparable traditional designs. In network environments the footwork of the design and administration process is done by network connections. Research teams can create, edit, and finalize the research instrument without the burden of scheduling and attending physical meetings, and the research team can administer the design without having to physically connect with the participant.

Once in motion, CASR allows researchers to move from observation to analysis much more quickly than conventional research designs. Finally, when research is conducted over wide area networks such as the Internet, observations can be made and data collected 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This being said, in some cases the initial design and administration of the research can be prohibitively time-consuming. When the research team is inexperienced with the use of technology or the technological infrastructure for the research is not already in place, extra training and the installation and testing of hardware and software may be necessary. Furthermore, researchers who are new to the technology are more likely to make errors during the administration and observation stages that can result in even greater time delays in the research.

When it comes to the cost of materials and labour there are several distinct differences between CASR and conventional research methods. The hardware, software, and scripting that is required for the observation and data collection portion of a CASR project can cost researchers thousands of dollars. However, researchers can offset the software and scripting costs by using freely available open-source software and scripts instead of high-priced commercial applications. Furthermore, while equipment and design costs can be high, these costs are generally recouped

through savings on paper, postage, transcription, mileage, lodging, the renting of research venues, and repeated research. While it is uncommon to find hard-to-estimate human labour costs factored into discussions of many traditional data collection methods, the introduction of computer programmers and graphic and web designers into the CASR design process has made many social science researchers begin to account for the cost of labour. The hourly rate that most programmers and designers charge can reach as high as \$120. The result is that in some situations CASR can be quite a cost-effective solution for the North American researcher. This advantage does however depend on researchers having enough experience with technology that they can implement solutions that require specialized user and programming skills.

It is important to recognize that there can be considerable start-up material and personnel costs associated with CASR, but repeated research is less costly since much of the investment is saddled by the first project and the cost of upgrading vital research materials is much less than first-time creation expenditures. Moreover, researchers should keep in mind that some research designs are more cost-effective than others. For example, the simple e-mail-based questionnaire, where questions are placed in the body of the e-mail, costs almost nothing to administer, while complex computer-assisted experimental and quasi-experimental designs that require special hardware and software can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

In addition to considerations of time and money, many CASR designs also dramatically alter the physical research environment. Research such as experimental, focus group, personal interview, or ethnography that would normally require a physical space can be conducted in a networked environment (Birnbaum & Wakcher 2002; Buchanan & Smith 1999; Evans et al. 2003; Karr 2000). Additionally, with the increasing availability and affordability of handheld and laptop computers and wireless networks, researchers are not confined to any one physical locale in order to collect and analyze data. However, problems associated with powering the

computer can limit how long a researcher can stay out in the field. This is particularly challenging for researchers conducting research in remote settings. Moreover, while the introduction of computer technology into the research setting has enhanced our ability to use highly controlled experimental designs that can be reproduced with ease and precision (Karr 2000), the inability for the researcher to be physically present in some virtual experimental settings can be quite prohibitive.

For research designs that are not dependent upon the physical presence of a researcher, network-based CASR facilitates the solicitation and recruitment of large, geographically and demographically diverse samples (Fox et al. 2003; Gosling et al. 2004). These larger samples make it possible to amass large amounts of data in a relatively short time.

The benefits of bypassing physical and geographic limitations extend beyond the acquisition of research participants to the coordination of the research process itself. Team meetings and research coordination are much more efficient as investigators are able to conduct virtual as opposed to physical project meetings where they can communicate their progress and observations or make changes to the research design without introducing confounding variables to the procedure.

BOURGEONING POSSIBILITIES

Although using computers and network technology to collect data and make observations is clearly not appropriate for all social science research situations, there are many examples of situations where implementing technology is a viable methodological option. In primary data collection the goal is to collect original information from an identifiable population; techniques used include self-administered questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, panel studies, and focus group designs. All of these conventional approaches to the collection of primary social science data can be adapted to CASR designs. In fact, many of these methodological approaches have been adapted by social researchers.

The computer-assisted self-administered questionnaire (CASQ) comes in three main varieties—disk-based, e-mail, and web-based (Truell et al. 2002). Like its traditional counterpart, this mode of data collection is perhaps the most widely used within the social science research community. The oldest and most basic form of CASQ is disk-based administration. With this technique participants are given a floppy disk, CD, or portable drive that contains a questionnaire that can be completed on a personal computer (PC). Responses are either stored back on the disk or they are sent automatically across a network. With the increased availability of the World Wide Web (WWW) and e-mail, this mode of CASQ is not used as often; however, some researchers have found it a useful option for targeted populations (Hampton & Wellman 1999).

E-mail is one of the simplest and most used network information and communication components. Eighty-nine percent of networked communications are accomplished via e-mail (Jackson & De Cormier 1999). As a result, e-mail is seen by many as the most effective mode of CASQ (Hessler et al. 2003; Sheehan & Hoy 1999). E-mail questionnaires can be divided into three distinct types: simple e-mail messages with questions in the body of the e-mail text (either plain or XHTML formatted text), separate documents that are attached to an e-mail, and embedded URLs in the body of an e-mail message that direct the user to a web-based CASQ (Bradley 1999). In all of these variants of the self-administered questionnaire, responses are either sent directly back to the researcher via e-mail in text form or attached in a separate file, or they are received via a web-based interface.

The massive expansion of access to and use of the WWW in public (Internet) and private (intranet) networked environments over the past 10 years, accompanied by improvements in user interface and scripting support, has made web-based CASQs a very popular format for the collection of social science data (Dahlen 2002; Gosling et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2003). Web-based CASQs generally come in three varieties: an open website where no control is

placed over who can visit the site or complete the questionnaire, a closed website where visitation and participation is controlled by an access restriction protocol (e.g., password or identity check), and hidden surveys that appear on websites after some form of scripted trigger mechanism is enacted (Bradley 1999). All of these options involve user responses being sent via a web browser directly to a research server where the information is compiled in either text form or in databases.

Many researchers wishing to implement a more direct-contact or open-ended observation and data-collection technique have opted to use computers and network technology to conduct interviews, panel studies, and focus groups. Computer-assisted interviewing (CAI) allows an interviewer or participant to use a computer program to guide them through the interview process. In most cases the computer provides a series of structured questions to the interviewer or respondent and answers are recorded directly into a program or database (Peiris, Gregor, & Alm 2000). This form of interviewing is rapidly becoming the most dominant mode of data collection for interviewer-administered structured surveys (Couper 2000; Gravlee 2002). Several variants of CAI have been used by social science researchers, including interactive voice response (IVR; Corkrey & Parkinson 2002), computer-assisted personal interviewing and mobile computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI/MCAPI; Gravlee 2002; Hampton & Wellman 1999), computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI; Barrett & Barrett 2001, Cooleya et al. 2001), and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI; Corkrey & Parkinson 2002). In research settings where the researcher is interested in collecting observations from a panel of participants (Crawford et al. 2001; MacElroy 1999) or a focus group (Ozer 1999; Sweet 2001; Tse 1999) computer-administered designs have also been found to be quite useful.

The introduction of computers and network technology as a medium for data collection and observation allows us to move social research design into the 21st century. While the approaches to data

collection and observation listed above are excellent examples of how computer technology may be adapted to traditional observation and data collection instruments, they have not begun to tap into the potential that new technology offers.



is qualitatively different from traditional research environments. As a result, research participants have not had the opportunity to get used to changes in the appearance of the data collection instrument or response formats. This can be particularly problematic for novice computer users and aged participants. In experimental designs, problems with the research instrument can negatively affect the internal validity of the research results. In questionnaires or interviews, problems with the interface can result in higher levels of item non-response or sample attrition.

Conversely, computer-administered observation and data collection instruments also serve to enhance usability in three major ways: design, control, and accessibility. Researchers can take advantage of the graphic power that computers have to offer through design programs such as Macromedia Flash and scripting languages such as XML, Java, JavaScript, and ColdFusion to create attractive, interesting, and compelling research instruments (Fricker & Rand 2002; Petit 2002; Schmidt 2002). Doing so makes a whole new way of asking questions possible through the integration of audio and video media into the research instrument. For example, researchers can include a short multimedia clip in a structured interview or questionnaire and ask questions related to that clip. In addition, researchers can make response formats much more intuitive for participants. For example, instead of asking participants to rate their level of happiness using a nondescript numeric rating scale, it is possible to provide a series of detailed animations that change as the participant moves a slider up or down the scale.

Computerized observation and data collection instruments also afford the researcher an unprecedented amount of control over format and layout. CASR can facilitate more complex data collection designs. It aids in the measurement of ancillary information such as the time it takes for a participant to respond to particular items (Barrett & Barrett 2001). It is also possible to randomize the question order and precisely control the timing of questions or events in a structured interview, self-administered

Asking Questions in a Virtual Environment

Despite the promising future that computer-assisted social research (CASR) may hold for social science observation and data collection, results from the empirical literature draw our attention to a number of problems and prospects related to instrument format and design, the use of technology in the research setting, and control over research data that must be addressed.

INSTRUMENT FORMAT AND LAYOUT

“Usability” is a term employed by graphic and web designers to refer to the importance of understanding the user interface instead of the system upon which the interface is run (Couper 2000; Fricker & Rand 2002). While computer-assisted instruments afford researchers greater latitude in how they ask questions, there has been little research into the effects of computerized question formats on participant response. In other words, we know very little about the usability of computer-assisted data collection instruments. The networked environment

questionnaire, or experiment (Barrett & Barrett 2001; Schmidt 2001). Flexible ordering options can be implemented to reduce, or at least control for, order effects. Additionally, the strategic use of interface design and scripting allows researchers to incorporate adaptive questioning into the research instrument in a manner that is neither obvious nor disturbing to the research participant. With adaptive questioning, answers to specific questions help influence which subsequent questions will be asked (Bauman et al. 1998; Liu et al. 2001). The obvious advantages of this design feature are that individual respondents answer fewer questions that are irrelevant to them, and the complexity of the overall instrument is reduced for respondents since they no longer need to read and follow skip patterns and instruction sets.

In addition to enhancing the complexity of the data collection design, a well-constructed computerized instrument can help ensure that questions are completed and completed accurately (i.e., helps reduce invalid responses, item non-response bias, and interviewer error; Liu et al. 2001). Unlike a human interviewer who may forget to ask a specific question, with CAPI or CASI all questions are asked because the computer always follows the programmed routine (Peiris et al. 2000). In less structured interview and observation instruments, researchers can script in pop-up dialogue boxes that automatically request that the interviewer probe further if a certain number of keystrokes are not present in a particular answer or if the respondent has not given a very detailed response. Finally, in CASQs it is quite common for researchers to build in programmed checks of the responses provided to ensure that all required questions have been answered and that the information provided corresponds to the expected format.

Perhaps one of the most promising possibilities that computerized instruments offer in the way of format and design comes in the form of improved access. Multi-modal participant input devices can be created to facilitate the participation of people who have physical disabilities, limited reading or computer skills (Black & Ponirakis 2000), and atten-

tion deficits. Additionally, instruments can be customized to adapt to language and cultural differences. For instance, CASQ participants can be allowed to fill out forms presented in a number of different languages or the digital voice that is used in a CAI may be changed to one that the participant is more culturally familiar with (Black & Ponirakis 2000). It is also possible to build in instructions or construct elaborate help or frequently asked questions (FAQ) sections that can be made available to a research participant at the click of a mouse (Karr 2000). Finally, the instrument can also be set up to provide feedback or instructions to the respondent when he or she has problems navigating the instrument, filling out questions, or submitting responses (Bauman et al. 1998; Woong, Yun, & Trumbo 2000).

TECHNOLOGY AND THE RESEARCH SETTING

At present, the most significant technological limitations facing researchers wishing to use computers and network technology in the field are that handheld computers do not have sufficient disk-drive space and memory, secure wireless network access is sporadic, and the range of mobile research-related software applications is limited (Greene 2001; Woong, Yun, & Trumbo 2000). Experimental researchers have found that differences among computers in graphic display (Horswill & Coster 2001; MacInnes & Taylor 2001; Schmidt 2001), data processing speed and hardware timing (Eichstaedt 2001; Finney 2001), and keyboard and mouse performance (Eichstaedt 2001) hinder the experimental data collection process. They have also found that networked environments where participants do not interact directly with the researcher introduce many more uncontrollable environmental variables, thereby reducing the internal validity of the research (Ross et al. 2003; Wolfe & Reyna 2002). Some field researchers have expressed similar concerns that the use of technology in field research may influence a respondent's reactions, with a negative effect on data quality (Gravlee 2002).

A few researchers have found that the lack of physical presence in the research setting leaves them

with less control over interactions with the participants or the setting (Epstein & Klinkenberg 2001; Petit 2002). When conducting network-administered focus groups, differences among participants may be magnified and variations in the setting may be overlooked. It is generally not possible for the researcher or participant to pick up on audio or visual cues that emerge during the interview or observational process (Black & Ponirakis 2000). Because there is no visual contact the researcher is not privy to facial expressions and body language. Nor is the researcher able to pick up on voice tonality (Tse 1999). Furthermore, it is much more difficult to develop personal rapport in interview or focus group settings (Black & Ponirakis 2000). Not being able to have physical connect with the participant or pick up on context effects significantly limits the type and range of data that are available to researchers.

While there are certainly problems associated with implementing technology in the research setting, there are also some unique general and method-specific advantages. The provisional nature of digital research instruments makes it relatively easy to make changes or modifications on the fly without disrupting the flow of the research (Petit 2002). Additionally, some researchers have found that the speed (Gravlee 2002) and the privacy and flexibility (Black & Ponirakis 2000) of observation and data collection in computer-assisted settings increase respondent's willingness to participate in the process. In anonymous CASR environments participants are more likely to self-disclose (Epstein et al. 2001; Gravlee 2002) and are thus more likely to take part in studies of reactive, socially taboo, or highly sensitive topics. Several researchers have found that the social-desirability effects are lower in anonymous computerized environments (Evans et al. 2003; Fox et al. 2003; Gravlee 2002). Furthermore, in interview and observational designs the visual separation between the participant and the researcher can help to reduce potentially biasing interviewer effects. (Epstein & Klinkenberg 2001).

Some virtual environments have also been found to enhance existing face-to-face settings and activi-

ties. Virtual environments force researchers to rethink the nature of the field setting and our approach to selecting and studying such sites. The interactions that can be captured in the networked field setting are becoming more complex (Best et al. 2001; Ruhleder 2000). Networked field environments can be asynchronous or synchronous and they can contain an array of virtual social artifacts such as pictures, animations, movies, audio recordings, and documents.

HANDLING INFORMATION AND OBSERVATIONS

Technical problems can seriously interfere with the recording and storing of research data. They arise from many different sources, including network failures, software failures, and scripting errors. An unstable server or network connection often results in data loss or corruption (Bauman et al. 1998; Bosnjak & Tuten 2001; Campbell, Campbell, & Maglio 1999). Different versions of software have been found to create confusion among researchers and participants (Bradley 1999; Epstein & Klinkenberg 2001; Sheehan & Hoy 1999) that resulted in missing or incomplete observations and sample attrition. Finally, errors in scripting often lead to problems with the data. Instead of relying on trained researchers to record observations CASR relies on potentially "buggy" script. The former scenario is usually more readily detectable; the latter can be more difficult, if not impossible, to detect. Extensive pre-testing is costly and time consuming, but vital. Finally, problems with networks, servers, software, and scripting can also result when respondents intentionally or unintentionally bias research results by changing their answers, submitting answers on multiple occasions, or participating in portions of the research that are not applicable to them (Bauman et al. 1998; Sheehan & Hoy 1999; Woong, Yun, & Trumbo 2000).

Concerns are often expressed about respondents biasing research results by submitting answers on multiple occasions or without being part of the population of interest. Although this can be a very real problem, researchers have a number of methodological, scripting, and database options at their disposal

to ensure that it is less likely to occur. For example, by using a combination of client and server-side scripting, secure relational participant and response databases, and randomly assigned numeric passwords it is possible to exercise complete control over the processing of questionnaire responses.

STRATEGY AND PROCESS

The most frequent situation in survey and interview research involves a researcher's approaching a respondent that he or she may never have (and in all likelihood hasn't) met before. Respondents know nothing about you or your study's purpose other than what you tell them, and their participation is a fragile gift that can be withdrawn at any time.

So far, we've concentrated on the discrete elements of questionnaires and interview schedules: choosing content, considering different ways to word and structure individual questions. Now it's time to consider the research instrument as a whole. How do you put a sizable number of these individual questions together in a way that will make the experience of completing the survey or interview as enjoyable and free of frustration as possible for respondents, while ensuring that your own objectives as a researcher—to maximize response rates, minimize error, and obtain candid responses—are also met?

General Organizational Issues

For the most part, general matters of organization are similar in the preparation of both questionnaires and interviews, but some elements are also clearly unique. For the questionnaire, because respondents must complete the document on their own, aesthetic concerns like the questionnaire's "look" and apparent ease of completion play an important role. For the interview, because the interviewer is present and there's a constant interchange back and forth between the interviewer and respondent, the choices the interviewer makes—whether and when to probe, how to rephrase a question, when to hold back and when to go ahead with a more intimate question—

will have a big impact. In the discussion below, we will deal with general questions of organization that are applicable for both interviews and questionnaires but will also occasionally pursue matters that are applicable only to one or the other.

AESTHETIC APPEAL

Many texts, particularly those that deal with more quantitatively oriented survey research, emphasize the creation of a questionnaire that is aesthetically inviting and easy to follow (e.g., see Gray & Guppy 1994). The general impression given by this literature is that if a questionnaire looks pretty and professional, is well laid out and easy to follow, doesn't include too many open-ended questions, and doesn't seem too big, you'll increase the likelihood of snagging a respondent. This view may be overly simplistic, but certainly if the converse is true—if your questionnaire is *not* well laid out, seems difficult to follow, has too many open-ended questions, and is big enough that it looks like it will take a sizable chunk of time to complete—only the most motivated of respondents will complete the questionnaire, and your response rates will suffer.

ANTICIPATING A CONVERSATION

Beyond the first impression, authors of survey texts suggest that your next challenge is to organize the questionnaire or interview and its constituent parts so that it follows a logical sequence and, ideally, reflects and anticipates a social conversation. Numerous principles can be used to guide the sequencing of questions. If a chronological sequence is involved in the phenomenon being addressed (e.g., the way information is processed in an organization, the development of a romantic relationship from first date to some state of mutual commitment, questions on child rearing that ask about the different stages of child development), the questionnaire's sections can merely follow that chronology. Alternatively, questions can be arranged by topic, grouping together the ones that are thematically related, from general to specific, from most important to least important, and/or from least threatening to most threatening (Gray & Guppy 1994).

The big trick with creating a questionnaire is to try to organize it in a way that mirrors a conversation you might have with a respondent. The same is true of the interview, of course, but the very nature of the interview means that you can adapt somewhat to the unique social dynamic that arises with each respondent; in contrast, once the questionnaire is photocopied, you're stuck with the standardized setup you've created. Preliminary exploratory work, through exploratory interviews, focus group discussions, and/or participant observation, can play a crucial role in helping us know how best to organize our research instruments.

THE RESPONDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

It is that actual or imaginary *conversation*, preferably with an emphasis on the way the *respondent* would probably organize things, that should guide the structure of the interview or questionnaire, and *not* your anticipated analysis. Variables can always be reorganized when you start analyzing the data. Too many novice researchers let *their* perspective and interests dominate the interview or questionnaire, instead of putting their own structures "on hold" and letting the respondent's schema organize the show. Of course, you'll want to ensure that all the questions that are important to you are addressed. But the order in which they are addressed should be governed by the respondent's convenience, not yours.

SOCIAL CIVILITY: UNWRITTEN RULES

Perhaps the place to begin is by discussing briefly some of the unwritten "rules" of conversation, so that we can then consider how they'd apply to the questionnaire or interview setting. Imagine that you're at a party or some other social gathering. Somewhere between the chip dip and the *petits fours* you find yourself standing next to someone you've never met, and the two of you begin a conversation. Such conversations never begin with requests for intimate details. ("Hi. Did you ever consider suicide during your adolescence?") Instead, they usually start with an exchange of pleasantries and chitchat that does little more than serve as a warm-up and

allow time to determine whether you'll pursue the conversation further. These beginning portions of the conversation typically deal with basic, superficial details of our lives that we're prepared to share with anyone. ("So what do you do?" or "So are you here because you know the host or the hostess?") As long as the person you're chatting with isn't completely weird (in which case the exit/escape sequence is enacted), these initial moments often involve a search for common interests that can provide the basis for further conversation.

COMMON GROUND

Once the first "real" basis of conversation is tacitly agreed on (e.g., you find that you both like outdoor activities such as hiking and camping), the two of you will typically "go with it" for a while, perhaps comparing notes on favoured hiking trails or outfitters and/or trading stories. This sort of conversation can consume the whole evening if you find an intense compatibility of interest. More often, though, the first topic soon becomes exhausted; the conversation then either terminates or moves into another phase.

Phase 2 may simply be another topic, related to the first (e.g., you move on to canoeing) or not (e.g., you find that you also have a common interest in impressionist painters). But now that you've "checked each other out" and decided that you share some things in common and that you each seem like a reasonable human being, the exchange often moves to a more intimate level. Rather than dealing only with activities and interests, you start to ask about and share more in the way of feelings and opinions. Two people who hadn't met half an hour earlier are suddenly trading information about some frustrating aspect of child rearing, comparing their fears about having vasectomies, or talking about what dipsticks men (or women) can sometimes be.

OVERSTEPPING BOUNDARIES

Of course, few conversations ever go completely smoothly. At times, one person may feel comfortable enough to stretch the bounds to a more intimate topic or level: "So, I hear you and Kim separated

recently; how's that going for you?" If such an attempt is made prematurely, the other person is caught off guard. Perhaps you've touched a nerve. Perhaps your motives are unclear: are you asking to be caring, because you want to ask the other person for a date, or because you're about to disclose your own experiences (which the other person isn't yet ready to hear)? Whatever the reason, an avoidance ritual begins. Sensitive listeners notice these things—the slight blush, the superficial response, the subtle change of topic—and, respecting that they've crossed an inappropriate boundary, back off a bit. Later, when the other person understands our motives better or simply feels more comfortable with us, we or the other person may return to that issue, and this time the conversation will continue to flow. But for now, the matter is put on hold and another topic is addressed.

WITHDRAWAL

When conversations turn intense, we rarely terminate them abruptly. Instead, a “shutdown” sequence is often enacted: we withdraw gradually, often by returning to a more superficial level of conversation that reconnects us with what's happening around us. (“Oh ... I see some people are starting to dance; do you like to dance?") Sometimes this process marks the beginning of a new friendship or romance. Other times we merely go our separate ways and, despite having enjoyed the interaction, may never see the other person again.

Additional Considerations Unique to Research

A FORMAL INTRODUCTION

Many of these same “rules” are followed in organizing a questionnaire. Your first task in a questionnaire or interview should always be to introduce yourself with a brief statement about who you are and the purpose of your study. Any promises you're prepared to make, for example, that a brief summary of results will be sent to participants following completion of the study if they're interested, should also

be made here. In the case of a questionnaire, respondents should be told whether they should write their names down or complete it anonymously; for interviews, or when respondents' names are obtained on a questionnaire, you should clearly specify what steps you will take to safeguard their confidentiality. This can all be accomplished in a few sentences or a short paragraph, for example,

My name is Pat Wallace, and I'm a graduate student in sociology at Provincial University. This questionnaire is part of my master's thesis, which deals with how different parents teach “appropriate behaviour” to their children, so it includes a number of questions that ask about your parenting practices. The whole thing should take no more than about 20 minutes to complete. I hope you'll answer all the questions, but feel free to leave out any that you feel uncomfortable about. Finally, please note that responses to this questionnaire are intended to be anonymous. If you'd like to receive a brief summary of the results of the study after it is completed, please fill out the small card at the end of the questionnaire and submit it separately from your completed questionnaire. Thank you very much for agreeing to participate.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

After the basic introduction, the first topic that's asked about is often relatively trite and superficial, devoted to acquiring preliminary information, for example, to ensure that the respondent is an eligible participant in the study and perhaps to ask about a few demographic details (although one generally avoids such “threatening” demographics as income and education at this point). Because respondents are often looking for cues, we give them signposts that tell them what we are doing (e.g., “First I need to ask just a few general questions so that we have a record of how many kids you have and how long you've been a parent”). The first section also sets the pace for the interview or questionnaire, establishing a rhythm of query and response, query and response.

TRANSITIONS

After passing this “getting to know you” phase, the interview or questionnaire bridges to the first set of questions about the main phenomenon of interest. Again, some sort of signpost is often given, both to keep the respondent informed and to provide a bit of a mental break before digging into the next section. For example, a transition might be “Okay, that completes the first section regarding some of your early experiences as a parent; now I’d like to ask a few questions on how you handle different kinds of situations that can arise with young children.”

If only one set of questions deals with the main phenomenon of interest, the questions in the set would normally be ordered from least to most threatening; if there are several *sets* of questions, then the *sets* would also be ordered from least to most threatening. Each time there’s a change of theme, another signpost should be offered to help make the transition.

LOOSE ENDS AND THE FINAL WORD

The final section of the interview or questionnaire should tie up loose ends and leave some positive resolution. For example, a final section often includes some “basic” demographic items that will help you describe the sample and perhaps engage in subgroup analyses. An additional benefit of including such items is that when dealing with populations with known characteristics, one can use responses to these questions to assess the sample’s representativeness. In any event, the final section should leave respondents with a good taste in their mouths. Conclude with a thank-you, asking respondents (in interviews) whether they have any questions they’d like to ask and (for both interview and questionnaire respondents) whether they have anything they wish to add or further comments to make.

Perspectives on the Research Interview

Although the above discussion pretty much covers the “general organization” issues that pertain to the more structured survey methods, interview researchers, particularly those who engage in semi-structured or unstructured interviews, have gone

much further in analyzing the process of interaction in the interview setting. Some apparently hope merely to make prospective interviewers aware of the various cues respondents can give (e.g., nonverbal cues) as to whether they’re feeling comfortable, becoming defensive, or whatever (e.g., Gorden 1980; Gray & Guppy 1994). Other texts are written more along the lines of a strategic manual, where the name of the game is to control the setting in such a way that the respondent tells all and feels comfortable about doing so.

A DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Berg (2001), for example, offers what he refers to as a “dramaturgical analysis of the interview,” analyzing in detail the different roles that interviewer and respondent occupy and the expectations that each commonly has of the other. He also discusses how the researcher can get maximal information with minimal defensiveness through sensitive attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues. Resistance in the respondent is thus a challenge to be overcome. For example, Berg spends considerable time discussing the “evasion tactics” enacted when we step over the line and ask about things that are too personal or painful.

Such evasion tactics may involve a word, phrase, or gesture that expresses to another participant that no further discussion of a particular issue (or in a particular area) is desired. Conversely, people also usually acquire the ability to recognize these evasion tactics and, in a natural conversational exchange, to respect them. (84)

But the interview isn’t a “natural” encounter, and deferring to people’s evasion tactics all the time would mean that much data of interest would be lost. Berg makes no bones about the mission:

This sort of deference [ceremony] simply cannot be permitted during the course of a research interview. In fact, the emergence of evasion tactics during the course of an interview is among the most serious obstacles to overcome—but overcome them you must! ... The interviewer must

maneuver around a subject's avoidance rituals in a manner that neither overtly violates social norms associated with communication exchanges nor causes the subject to lie. (84)

For Berg (2001), the interviewer's role is a complex one; he argues that besides being an actor in the setting, the interviewer must also serve as director and choreographer. With respect to evasion tactics, for example, Berg advises that the interviewer must recognize them as they occur and should respond to them with deference, but must also look for a chance to return to that sensitive area. The strategy being advocated thus mixes sensitivity with persistence. By deferring to the evasion tactic, the interviewer shows that he or she is not insensitive to the respondent's feelings, earning "rapport points" by doing so. Berg suggests that the respondent will now be more likely to reply because the interviewer has shown that he or she knows when to back off.

FEMINIST VIEWS: A MORE EGALITARIAN EXCHANGE?

Such analyses, however insightful they may be about the subtle dynamics that pervade the interview setting, can also sound incredibly manipulative and exploitative. Particularly lamentable are the sorts of "strategic" analyses that treat the prospective respondent as a fish to be reeled in or a conquest to be mounted. Many feminist researchers have been particularly assertive about this issue, pointing out how often relations between interviewer and respondent are construed in a way that merely re-creates the inequity, hierarchy, manipulation, and exploitation that exist in the world (e.g., see Fonow & Cook 1991; Reinhartz 1992). Thus, although the interview is seen as a very appropriate research tool—and, some would argue, a particularly *female* type of research tool because of the value it attaches to sensitivity, empathy, good listening skills, and the ability to deal with and talk about feelings (e.g., see Gluck & Patai 1991; Reinhartz 1992)—the belief is that the whole interaction needs to be reconstrued.

Many feminist methodologists concur that the interview should be a more egalitarian exchange,

guided by principles of mutual respect and collaboration. But feminist researchers differ considerably in how far they'd go in asserting that principle. Oakley (1981), for example, maintains that feminist interviewing should be characterized by openness, engagement, intimacy, self-disclosure, and the potential for developing a long-lasting relationship. Making friends with everybody would seem a formidable task, though, and could also limit the range of research one could conduct.

Others assert that an egalitarian exchange does not require promises of friendship or mutual self-disclosure as either conditions or preconditions for conducting a mutually respectful, mutually beneficial interview. Indeed, many argue that one reason people open up and "tell their stories" is precisely because they *are* strangers and *won't* be seen again. Zimmerman (1977) makes this point in her interview study of women who had undergone abortions:

The interviewer was a stranger—not a part of the woman's world and someone she would not likely see again. The interviewer was also a professional who would not discuss the interview with anyone else. For these reasons, the women may have felt they could talk about their most private lives and feelings relatively freely. (210)

After summarizing some of the diverse opinions that exist on this issue, Reinhartz (1992) concludes that "clearly, there is no single feminist perspective on researcher–interviewee relations and self-disclosure" (34). Yet the fact that such questions are being posed at all must be seen as a most healthy sign for social science. As Reinhartz notes, these "ethical questions are heightened in feminist interview research because feminists try hard to avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women" (27). If only researchers of all theoretical persuasions were so concerned.