LEARNING FROM STRANGERS

THE ART AND METHOD OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES

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PREFACE

I conducted my first qualitative interviews while a graduate student at the University of Michigan. I had recently transferred into sociology from a master's program in mathematical statistics and was employed part time by the university's survey research center at the usual marginally adequate student salary. At the next desk sat another graduate student, who augmented her income on evenings and weekends by conducting qualitative interviews for a commercial firm, Ernest Dichter, Inc. I was intrigued not only by her success in income augmentation but also by the firsthand contact with respondents afforded by her method of doing so. My survey center assignment, analyzing sociometric data, brought with it no such firsthand contact. I asked whether the Dichter firm could use another interviewer, learned that it could, and started in.

Ernest Dichter, a Viennese refugee, was retained by American manufacturers and advertisers to tell them why people bought or failed to buy particular products. He called his data-gathering approach "depth interviewing," probably to suggest that it dredged up its findings from respondents' unconscious, where their buying decisions were made unbeknownst to themselves. One of Dichter's more widely reported observations was that people saw prunes as representations of old age. He advised prune packers to put their products in a "sunshine jar" and, in their advertising, to link prunes with children.[1]

I didn't conduct interviews for the prune study, but I did for studies of fiberglass curtains, brands of scotch, and a correspondence school that promised its students it would turn them into artists. Once I received my graduate degree, I ended my work with the Dichter firm to concentrate on what was then my full-time employment, the collection and analysis of survey data. However, I continued to use qualitative interviewing for pilot

studies and other small-scale studies. Gradually, I became convinced that the qualitative approach, while quite different from that of survey research, was preferable for some problems. I was particularly struck by the density of information provided by qualitative interview studies and by their usefulness for understanding the complexities of respondents' experiences.

Over the years I learned more about how to do qualitative interview research from many friends, colleagues, and teachers: Carol Kaye, Arlene Daniels, Ira Glick, Peter Marris, Lisa Peattie, Lee Rainwater, Martin Rein, and, through his publications as well as personal contact, Anselm Strauss. Most important for me was Everett Hughes, who brought with him to the Brandeis department of sociology, of which I was then a member, the Chicago School's commitment to firsthand learning about people and their lives. I was the beneficiary of a long tutorial with him under the guise of acting as his co-instructor. I have also had the good fortune to work as a junior colleague with Margaret Mead and David Riesman: with the former on only a few occasions, with the latter for many years.

Despite all this instruction, much of what I have learned about qualitative interview studies has been a product of experience, of trial and error—rather a lot of error—and trial again. Each of the qualitative interview studies I have done—and at this point there have been many, including studies of marital separation, single parenting, bereavement, and the management of work stress—has been an exploration of method as well as of substance.

I have on several occasions been responsible for teaching others to interview or to conduct interview studies. With Everett Hughes I helped establish the field training program in the Brandeis sociology department; more recently, I offered a qualitative interviewing course at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. I have also demonstrated the approach for colleagues with whom I have worked, and I have supervised Ph.D. theses based on qualitative interviews.

This book came about partly as a consequence of my offering workshops on qualitative interview studies at two annual conferences of the American Sociological Association. Those workshops convinced me that a guide to the method would be useful to people in my field and, very likely, in other fields as well.

In this book I try to take the reader from conceptualization of a research project using qualitative interviewing as its method to production of its

report. I try to be candid about the problems of this kind of research, but I hope my openness does not obscure my belief in the method's importance for the social sciences. Some issues can be investigated in no other way. I also believe that every investigator in the social sciences should know how to conduct a qualitative interview, just as he or she should be able to interpret a statistical table. Qualitative interviewing is a fundamental method for learning about the experience of others.

Many people have helped me with this book. I want to thank Lisa Peattie for many clarifying discussions of qualitative interview studies, Mark Kramer for his insights into the principles of nonfiction study and writing, and the other friends and colleagues who contributed ideas, observations, and suggestions: Deborah Belle, Arlene Daniels, Uta Gerhardt, David Jacobson, Marie Killilea, Gina Prenowitz, Martin Rein, and Shulamit Reinharz. Erwin Glikes, who was the book's editor and publisher, died not long after the book's publication. His enthusiasm encouraged me to write the book and his editorial skill helped shape it. I remain grateful to him. Mary Coffey and John Drabik, fellow members of the University of Massachusetts Work and Family Research Unit, contributed to the book's production and cheered it on. My greatest indebtedness, as always, is to my wife, Joan Hill Weiss.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

WHY WE INTERVIEW

Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through interviewing we can learn about places we have not been and could not go and about settings in which we have not lived. If we have the right informants, we can learn about the quality of neighborhoods or what happens in families or how organizations set their goals. Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they lead their lives.

We can learn also, through interviewing, about people's interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition.

Interviewing gives us a window on the past. We may become aware of a riot or a flood only after the event, but by interviewing the people who were there we can picture what happened. We can also, by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us: foreign societies, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of couples and families.

Interviewing rescues events that would otherwise be lost. The celebrations and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no record except in their memories. And there are, of course, no observers of the internal events of thought and feeling except those to whom they occur. Most of the significant events of people's lives can become known to others only through interview.

SURVEY INTERVIEWING AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

Interviews can be as prepackaged as the polling or survey interview in which questions are fixed and answers limited: "Do you consider yourself to be a Republican, a Democrat, or something else?" There is a high art to developing such items and analyzing them, and for years this has been a respected way to collect interview information.

The great attraction of fixed-item, precategorized-response survey interviews is that because they ask the same questions of every respondent, with the same limited options for response, they can report the proportion of respondents who choose each option: 40% Democrat, 38% Republican, 15% Independent, 7% Other or Don't Know. Furthermore, the standardization of question and response permits comparisons among subgroups, so that, for example, the responses of men can be compared with those of women. Categorized responses to fixed-item interviews can also serve as the raw material for statistical models of social dynamics.

Studies whose ultimate aim is to report how many people are in particular categories or what the relationship is between being in one category and another are justly called *quantitative.* They are quantitative not because they collect numbers as information, although they may (for example, in response to the question "How many years have you lived at this address?"), but, rather, because their results can be presented as a table of numbers (for example, in a table entitled Proportions of People in the Labor Force, Grouped by Age, Who Have at Least Some Self-Employment Income).

Quantitative studies pay a price for their standardized precision. Because they ask the same questions in the same order of every respondent, they do not obtain full reports. Instead, the information they obtain from any one person is fragmentary, made up of bits and pieces of attitudes and observations and appraisals.

If we want more from respondents than a choice among categories or

brief answers to open-ended items, we would do well to drop the requirement that the questions asked of all respondents be exactly the same. For example, if we are free to tailor questions to respondents in a study of working mothers, we can ask a working mother who has a special-needs child about the quality of the school program she has found, and we can ask a working mother whose children are not yet school age about the worries of leaving her children in day care. And we can make clear to each respondent when we need further examples or explanations or discussions. Furthermore, we can establish an understanding with the respondents that it is their full story we want and not simply answers to standardized questions.

Interviews that sacrifice uniformity of questioning to achieve fuller development of information are properly called *qualitative* interviews, and a study based on such interviews, a qualitative interview study. Because each respondent is expected to provide a great deal of information, the qualitative interview study is likely to rely on a sample very much smaller than the samples interviewed by a reasonably ambitious survey study. And because the fuller responses obtained by the qualitative study cannot be easily categorized, their analysis will rely less on counting and correlating and more on interpretation, summary, and integration. The findings of the qualitative study will be supported more by quotations and case descriptions than by tables or statistical measures.

In general, if statistical analysis is our goal, we would do better to use a survey approach. The survey approach is preferable if we want to compare some specific aspect of different groups: to compare, for example, the job satisfaction of workers in different firms. It is also preferable if we hope to use statistical analysis to identify linkages among phenomena, especially where the phenomena are unlikely to be recognized by respondents as linked. An example would the contribution of parental loss in childhood to vulnerability to depression in adult life.

On the other hand, if we depart from the survey approach in the direction of tailoring our interview to each respondent, we gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides.[1] We permit ourselves to be informed as we cannot be by brief answers to survey items. The report we ultimately write can provide readers with a fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents.

We need not restrict ourselves to just the one approach. Standardized items can be appended to qualitative interviews. And usually we can produce numerical data from qualitative interview studies that have explored the same area with different respondents, although we may have to

engage in a time-consuming and cumbersome coding procedure and tolerate lots of missing data.

The following excerpt, from an interview conducted for a study of adjustment to retirement, provides an example of the material that can be obtained in qualitative interviews. The respondent is a woman of 66, formerly a department head in a firm in the creative arts, retired for almost 2 years at the time of the interview. This is the third interview in which she was a respondent. The first had been held before her retirement, the second a few months after it.

The interview took place in one of the research project's offices. In this excerpt the interviewer and respondent have just taken a few minutes to recall the project's aims, and now the respondent is describing her current situation:

> RESPONDENT: My life is—the euphemism I guess today is "couch potato." I stay home. I try to go out as infrequently as I can. When I say "out," I mean, like shopping . . . um, going any place. I listen to a lot of music. I read a great deal. And I watch television a great deal. I don't see anyone. I do speak to my daughter; I speak to her on the phone. That's it! All the things that I thought I would do, if I weren't in a working situation . . . I'd be writing, I'd create, I'd start a business. I had so many ideas while I was still working. I sort of—now maybe this is fanciful thinking—but I sort of pride myself on being a person who comes up with ideas fairly easily. When I say "ideas," I mean practical, good ideas and creative ideas. But I have no opportunity to . . . Oh, my only hobby is crossword puzzles. [*chuckles*] Which is more of the same, just sitting there in isolation.
>
> I'm not unhappy with my situation. But just that I feel like that the past year . . . wasn't unpleasant—none of it is unpleasant—but it really didn't matter whether I . . . had been alive last year or not. Except in terms of what I can offer to my daughter, who's in Syracuse. I haven't been to visit my daughter and her husband in almost a year. Well, partly it's because of health. I'm afraid to drive a full six and a half hours. Because I do get very, very dizzy and have to pull up to the side of the road. So, you know, it's difficult. But, you know, if I really wanted to open my door, I could take a plane. I could take a taxi over to the airport, and I could fly there. I mean, I could be doing things. I could find alternative ways. But I just don't want to. I don't know if you remember, but I've sort of let myself go. I'm all gray now, practically. Which is okay. If you decide to be. I'm going around in sneakers. I don't have a pair of shoes anymore. It's not a sloppiness. It's just like I'm wearing house slippers all the time, you know, except that it's acceptable in the street. It's like nothing really matters that much. I was

going to put on shoes—I mean, you know, real pumps, I mean, the kind that I used to wear—when I came here. And I . . . it was like I was torn between pride in my appearance and the fact that it doesn't really matter. As long as I can be comfortable.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. It's like you've gone through a metamorphosis?

RESPONDENT: Yeah. But the problem . . . I can understand my reacting this way for a brief time. Hey, I'm going to have the luxury of sloth. And no demands. I'm going to do whatever I want to. If I want to sleep late, I'll sleep late. If I want to stay up 'til two or three in the morning, which I do . . . [*chuckles*] I could understand that as a reaction. The fact that it's extended like almost two years just doesn't worry me. Because if it worried me I'd do something about it. I just don't think about it. It's just that I don't see any changes coming into my life, unless someone knocks on that door for me. And that's not going to happen.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Is this a way to capture what you're feeling about it: that it doesn't worry you, exactly, but it perplexes you?

RESPONDENT: Yeah, I just don't understand it.

INTERVIEWER: Is that right?

RESPONDENT: Yeah. I really don't understand why I've become a nothing person. Even just talking to you, now, I'm rambling. I'm not sure I even know how to talk to people anymore, in terms of conversation. I used to be pretty good at it. You know, I would go to all kinds of functions at work. I thought I handled myself fairly well. And now I don't. If I were invited to a party now, I wouldn't go. My nephew's getting married. I just got an invitation last night in the mail. And my first reaction—I have to be honest with you here; I would never say this to anyone else—wasn't joy for him. That was my second reaction. My first was fear. He wanting me to come to Iowa for the wedding, to meet people, to be with my family, friends, and so on. I'm not going to go. I don't want to be seen this way. I don't want to be with people. I had a call from my college roommate about a year ago. And I haven't called her back. I don't call anyone back. I've severed all my phone friendships, even. She's retired . . . just, I mean, at that time she had just retired, and she was sending away for Chamber of Commerce "What's On," and "What's to Do." And I admired her. And I was able to enter into the conversation with her, you know, how exciting it sounded. And once I hung up, that was the end of it. And she's not going to do anything either.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you say that, that she's not going to do anything?

RESPONDENT: Because the first thought that you have is, "Here's an opportunity for a new life." But I think it takes either tremendous confidence

in yourself to start a new life on your own without any support or you have to be a certain kind of person who's always been a doer and you keep doing. I think most people don't know how to start a new life. School's told us what to do, bosses've told us what to do, husbands've told us what to do. It's very difficult to tell yourself what to do.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Suppose somebody suggested to you, say, volunteer work. What would that mean to you?

RESPONDENT: [*short pause*] My daughter said that to me yesterday. Which is very funny. She despairs, not so much of me, but in terms of my attitude. Which is a non-attitude. Again, I've always hated limits, and here I'm asking for them. Isn't that odd? Freedom, total freedom, is what I've always espoused. But if you were to say to me, "There's a need for some more people to take care of this hospice or to work in this hospital and so on. Could you help out next Tuesday?" Hey, of course. But when I've looked at the volunteer lists—and there's so much need—it's two things. I don't know where to go. Because I don't know anyone. And second, part of it goes back to not wanting to open that door to be among people. I feel that I've gotten so heavy, so gray, I don't even want people to look at me.

INTERVIEWER: Could you walk me through that conversation with your daughter where she made the suggestion to volunteer?

RESPONDENT: We were talking about my mother, who died a couple of years ago. And we used to visit Ma, who lived in an apartment complex for the elderly. And there were all kinds of activities on the premises. You know, they had classes and they had socials and they had dances and so on. And we would try to coerce her into joining. You know: "Don't sit by yourself all day in your apartment. Take a class in ceramics. Do this, do that." And . . . and "There's a Thanksgiving Dance; go down and join them." And she wouldn't want to do that. And we felt it would be so much better for her if she were more active, if she did meet other people and did participate. And I said that I . . . I suddenly understood how Ma felt. And that we were wrong in imposing our values, just because *we* needed people and we needed activity, on her. And I said, "Now, for the first time, I can really understand why she would prefer reading a book to going to a card game." And my daughter said, "There has to be some way in which you can use your mind and feel that you still make a difference. And why don't you volunteer?" I like the thought of helping others. But I don't know now that I'm as capable of giving as I once was. When I was feeling good, I wanted to share that feeling good. I'm not feeling empty. I still care about my daughter. I still care about the sick person. I still care about what's going on. I still . . . even on my pension, I still make charitable kinds of

contributions. Because I do care what's happening in this world. It's just that I don't know whether I can give anything.

INTERVIEWER: What did your daughter say?

RESPONDENT: Well, she feels that I ought to try. She feels that I ought to go . . . someplace. If I find it unpleasant, I can always stop. It isn't like taking a job. But it's that tremendous inertia. It looks like I'd have to climb a mountain to take the first step out. I think once I made that step I could do it. It's climbing a psychological mountain. [pause] Maybe it's just the fact that I feel so alone. You know, maybe there's a difference when a person is retiring and has someone—or some ones—there to help.

The excerpt displays the depth and development achievable in qualitative interviewing. It also suggests the contribution qualitative interviewing can make to understanding a situation. Although we would need corroboration from interviews with others among the retired to have confidence in generalization, we see in this interview a process by which retirement makes it easy for those who live alone to slide into isolation.

The process begins with the removal, following retirement from work, of the obligation to participate in social activity. To be sure, the newly retired person may for a time find solitude rewarding after the stresses and demands of work life. Solitude can then be a welcome opportunity for reading and lazing and puttering around the house. But as social withdrawal becomes more established, the prospect of having to mobilize energy to interact with others may bring increasing discomfort to the person who is alone. The person may, like the woman in the interview excerpt, be uncertain of having anything to give and so of being worthy of respect, and may think, "Why subject myself to discomfort when it is possible just to stay home?" Withdrawal thus becomes self-reinforcing.

What we have gained from this qualitative interview is an observer's report of one possible impact of retirement. The report could have been provided only by the respondent herself; only she was in a position to make its observations. And the report could have been developed only in an interview that encouraged the respondent to provide a full account.

Qualitative interviews can have different emphases. In this interview excerpt the respondent provided information about her internal state: her mental and emotional functioning, her thoughts, and her feelings. If the interview had been collected in a study with a different focus, the re-

spondent might have given more emphasis to external events, for example, the functioning of the retirement program provided by her company. Qualitative interviews may focus on the internal or the external; what is common to them all is that they ask the respondent to provide an observer's report on the topic under study.

The style of the qualitative interview may appear conversational, but what happens in the interview is very different from what happens in an ordinary conversation. In an ordinary conversation each participant voices observations, thoughts, feelings. Either participant can set a new topic, either can ask questions. In the qualitative interview the respondent provides information while the interviewer, as a representative of the study, is responsible for directing the respondent to the topics that matter to the study. Note that the interviewer in the excerpt asked, about the college roommate, not what her work had been or where she was now living, but why the respondent believed that she too would fail to achieve the active postretirement life she was planning. The interviewer was also responsible for judging when the respondent's report was adequate and when it needed elaboration, and, should elaboration have seemed desirable, for helping the respondent expand her responses without constraining the information she might provide. As would be the case with any interviewer in an interview that was going well, the interviewer here said much less than the respondent. The interviewer at no point engaged the respondent in the small exchanges of ordinary conversation by, for example, matching one of the respondent's observations with an observation of his own. Nor did he at any point introduce his own experiences, not even to note, by saying something like "Yeah, I know what you mean," that he had had experiences similar to the respondent's. It was the respondent's account that was important.

The interviewer was often encouraging. If you were to listen to the tape of this excerpt, you would hear an occasional murmured "Yeah" and "Uh-huh," by which the interviewer not only indicated that he understood but also affirmed that, yes, this is the right sort of material. The interviewer's voice was mostly serious, respectful, interested. The respondent's voice was mostly relaxed, unhurried, reflective, and inward. If you had watched the interview, you would have seen the interviewer smile when the respondent reported an incident she believed comic and become more sober as she described her withdrawal. But mostly the interviewer expressed a desire to understand whatever it was the respondent was saying.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN UNDERTAKING A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

REASONS TO CONDUCT A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY

Research aims should dictate research method. Here are research aims that could make the qualitative interview study the method of choice:

1. *Developing detailed descriptions.* We may want to learn as much as we can about an event or development that we weren't there to see. For example, we may want the fullest report possible of how it happened that someone began drug use, of what the daily round is like for someone who is retired, or of the events of a prison rebellion. We may well want to interview more than one informant and integrate their reports, but we will in any event want from our informants the fullest, most detailed description possible.
2. *Integrating multiple perspectives.* We may want to describe an organization, development, or event that no single person could have observed in its totality. We may want, for example, to describe the structure and functioning of a federal agency or the impact on a community of a flood. Although interviews are necessary, standardized questions won't work, because every respondent will have different observations to contribute. Historians, biographers, and journalists deal regularly with problems of this sort and regularly do qualitative interview studies.
3. *Describing process.* We may want to know, about some human enterprise, how events occur or what an event produces. Economists assume that retailers set prices to maximize profit. But is this in fact the basis for price setting, and if it is, just how do merchants go about deciding how to maximize their profits? Qualitative interviews with merchants can make evident the processes they use.[2] Or we read in the newspapers about "deadbeat dads" and assume that divorced fathers who withhold child support must be indifferent to the welfare of their children. But is this the case? What leads some fathers who no longer live with their children to fail to contribute to the children's support? Again, qualitative interviews can elicit the processes antecedent

to an outcome of interest. Each of the questions in these examples is a particular expression of the more general question "What are the processes by which an event occurs?" We might also be interested in the consequences of events; for example, how do husbands and wives go about resolving marital quarrels?

4. *Developing holistic description.* By putting together process reports from people whose behaviors interrelate—putting together the reports of retailers and customers or of institutional psychiatrists and institutionalized patients—we can learn about systems. Qualitative interview study may well be the method of choice if our aim is to describe how a system works or fails to work. Thus, we might rely on qualitative interviewing of members of a family to understand the nature of their family life, and qualitative interviewing of members of an organization to understand how the organization works, how it moves toward goals or is paralyzed by internal friction. In general, the dense information obtained in qualitative interviewing permits description of the many sectors of a complex entity and how they go together.
5. *Learning how events are interpreted.* We might want to learn not so much about an event as about how it is interpreted by participants and onlookers. For example, we might be interested in studying responses to a film. Here we already know the "event" but want to learn the reactions of those who were its audience.[3] We might want to know how they thought about what happened in the film, what sorts of causes they identified, and what sorts of consequences they worried about. Qualitative interviewing enables us to learn about perceptions and reactions known only to those to whom they occurred.[4]
6. *Bridging intersubjectivities.* We might want to produce a report that makes it possible for readers to grasp a situation from the inside, as a participant might. Qualitative interview studies can approach the "you are there" vividness of a documentary. They can foster the kind of understanding that might be expressed as "Had I been in that situation, I'd have acted that way too." Quotations from interview material can help the reader identify with the respondent, if only briefly, by presenting events as the respondent experienced them, in the respondent's words, with the respondent's imagery.[5]
7. *Identifying variables and framing hypotheses for quantitative*

> *research.* Qualitative interview studies can provide preparation for quantitative research. Those who do quantitative research require variables to measure, issues about which to frame questions, and hypotheses to test. Variables, issues, and hypotheses can come from prior research, be inferred from theory, or be proposed on grounds of common sense, but where none of these does well enough, qualitative interviewing often is asked to fill the gap. The descriptions of process and system that are likely to emerge from a qualitative interview study can inform quantitative investigators about what matters in their intended topic.[6]

Young investigators are sometimes discouraged from undertaking qualitative research studies because of the time they require and their purportedly limited scientific utility. Let us consider each of these issues.

TIME

Qualitative interview studies have the reputation of being labor intensive. Indeed, if undertaken as a Ph.D. thesis, where there are likely to be large ambitions and limited resources, a qualitative interview study can stretch on and on. Several months may be required for the interviewing, and the analysis of the interviews can take even longer.

But journalists, working against deadlines, find any number of shortcuts available for the completion of qualitative interview studies: They can limit their interviewing to those whom they can reach quickly, and they can do much of their interviewing by telephone. They can not only analyze as they go—most people who do qualitative interview studies do this—but also work out their story in their minds. Once their interviewing is done, they may need to devote only a bit more time to thinking about the meanings of their material before they move to writing about it. A qualitative interviewing study can be enormously time consuming, but it need not be.

It should also be noted that the time required by qualitative interview studies tends to be well invested. Most of it goes into an effort to understand the issues of the research. It is entirely possible for investigators who do quantitative work to end a study knowing more about the statistical packages they have used for computer analysis than about the topic of their study. By contrast, those who do qualitative interview studies invariably wind up knowing a lot about the topic of their study.[7]

VALUE AS CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

As I noted earlier in this chapter, a qualitative interview study is poorly suited to the production of statistics or the numerical raw materials for statistical models. In consequence, economists and others committed to the development of statistical models sometimes disparage the reports produced by qualitative interview studies. They may characterize these results as anecdotal, because they rely on accounts provided by a relatively small sample of respondents, or as impressionistic, implying not only that they are imprecise but also that they are more a product of art than of objective scientific method.[8]

The disparagement is unwarranted. Much of the important work in the social sciences, work that has contributed in fundamental ways to our understanding of our society and ourselves, has been based on qualitative interview studies. Qualitative interview studies have provided descriptions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way, including the human consequences of a disastrous flood[9] and the experiences of participants in the women's movement.[10] What we know about the effects of crises in personal lives comes largely from such studies,[11] as does much of what we know about the dynamics of post-traumatic stress disorder.[12] Nor should qualitative interview studies be thought of as only exploratory and ground-breaking, preliminary to other more structured approaches. While it can be valuable for the results of qualitative interview studies to be verified by other methods, it can also be valuable for the results of studies done by other methods to be illuminated by qualitative interview studies.

A COMPROMISE? FIXED QUESTION, OPEN RESPONSE

Investigators who are attracted to the richness of the materials produced by qualitative interview studies but concerned about what may seem to be their looseness sometimes conclude that fixed-question–open-response interviewing provides a desirable compromise. Here respondents are asked carefully crafted questions but are free to answer them in their own words rather than required simply to choose one or another predetermined alternative.

The hope of those who elect the fixed-question–open-response approach is that it will systematize the collection of qualitative material and facilitate the quantitative treatment of the material. In this approach qual-

itative information (albeit more in the form of summary statements than developed stories) will be collected, but because everyone will have been asked the same questions, the responses to each question can be categorized and worked with statistically. This approach makes it possible to report proportions and correlations as well as experiences and meanings.

Unfortunately, the fixed-question–open-response approach to data collection turns out to sacrifice as much in quality of information as it gains in systematization. The interviewer is not actually free to encourage a respondent to develop any response at length. A very long response, just like a shorter one, will have to be fitted into code categories, and interviewers, aware of this, tend to limit the length of respondents' answers.

Furthermore, the very style of question asking weighs against full response. Not only must interviewers ask every question of every respondent for whom it is appropriate, but they must also follow the same ordering of the questions. The interview is directed by the schedule rather than by the respondent's associations. The result is that the respondent, rather than being free to tell the story of what happened, is forced into a stance of answering a question, waiting for the next question, answering the next question, and so on.

Consider how the respondent in the excerpt given earlier in this chapter would have been dealt with in an interview using the fixed-question–open-response format. The respondent might have been asked, "Could you tell me whether your retirement is satisfactory or unsatisfactory?" Suppose the respondent replied, as she did to a similar question in the qualitative interview, "My life is—the euphemism I guess today is 'couch potato.' I stay home." The fixed-question interviewer would very likely then have asked, "Well, is that satisfactory or unsatisfactory?" On being told it was all right, the interviewer might have gone on to the next question. Suppose, however, that instead of going on to the next question, the interviewer had used the standard probe "Why do you say that?" to obtain further material. Now the respondent might have said, as she did in the qualitative interview, "I'm not unhappy with my situation." Almost surely that would have been the end of the discussion of the couch potato issue. The fixed question–open-response approach would have succeeded in getting a headline but would have missed the story.

The material obtained in fixed-question–open-response interviews has another defect: it tends to be generalized rather than concrete. In our example of the retiree we probably would not have been told the significant detail of the respondent's having traded her pumps for sneakers but

would instead learn only that she would "just rather stay at home." Indeed, because the study directors of a fixed-question–open-response survey want a brief response that covers a lot of ground, they write their questions to elicit generalizations. Thus, a typical question would be "Taking it all together, what has been the most important determinant of the way you feel these days?"

Even though fixed-question–open-response interviewing may at first appear to be a systematic approach to qualitative interviewing, it is not. It is a different approach entirely. While studies using this approach may avoid some of the vulnerabilities of qualitative interviewing studies, they also lack their strengths.

THE PHASES OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING RESEARCH

Qualitative interview studies generally begin with decisions regarding the sample to interview, move on to data collection, and conclude with analysis. But more so than is the case in quantitative research, the phases of work in qualitative research overlap and are intermeshed. Analysis of early data contributes to new emphases in interviewing, and the new data collected by the modified interviewing then produces new analyses. The investigator may draft brief reports early in a study, instead of waiting until its report-writing phase, and interviewing can continue even through the report-writing phase. Nevertheless, the focus of the research effort necessarily shifts as the study progresses from its early stages, when recruitment of respondents is likely to be a major issue, to its concluding stages, during which the investigator is primarily concerned with how best to interpret and report the data.

The chapters that follow trace the likely sequence of the investigator's concerns in a qualitative interview study: sampling, preparing for interviewing, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, and, finally, writing the report.

CHAPTER 2

RESPONDENTS: CHOOSING THEM AND RECRUITING THEM

AIMS AND SUBSTANTIVE FRAME OF THE STUDY

Any research project hopes to make something known that was previously uncertain: to answer a specific question, such as how patients react to a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness; or to illuminate an area, as by showing how the family life of single parents is different from the family life of married parents. In pursuit of its aims, the research project will almost surely have to explore several related topics. To investigate how patients react to a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness, a project might explore how the patient was told, by whom, and within what context, what the patient's anticipations were, how the patient interpreted the news, and how those close to the patient dealt with the news. The set of topics the study explores, taken together, might be said to constitute the *substantive frame* of the study.

The initial step in a study is to decide, provisionally, what its aims will be and what topics will be included in its substantive frame. Once these are decided, who should be talked with, and about what, can be worked out. As the investigator learns more about the area of the study, the study's aims and frame may well be modified. One good reason for doing pilot interviews is to clarify the aims and frame of the study before interviewing its primary respondents. Even with pilot interviewing, how-