10 Talking Heads: The Interview

Every Sunday morning, *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation* vie for the most compelling one of these. For the past several seasons, CBS's *The Early Show* and Letterman's *Late Show* have been scheduling them with each player as they are voted off *Survivor*. And no self-respecting police show could get through an episode without going at one "in the box." What's the common ingredient that crosses so easily between the world of news and entertainment? The interview. Of all the data collection techniques available in our search for information, the interview strikes many as the single best device for promoting understanding and "getting at the truth."

In popular culture, the interview is the hallmark of a person's claim to fame. You know you've made it when Barbara Walters wants to interview you for her "most fascinating people of the year" special. An interview with Oprah tells us you have arrived. (Not too long ago David Letterman undertook a campaign to get Oprah to interview him!) Indeed, the interview may be the best sign of someone's "fifteen minutes of fame." While no longer hot commodities, interviews with Monica Lewinsky, Gary Condit, and OJ Simpson were highly desirable not too long ago.

The interview also has a prominent place in our everyday lives. The interview is a staple of many academic experiences: admission to programs or graduate schools and selection for scholarships or fellowships. Entry to the work realm often turns on the all-important "first" and hopefully subsequent interviews. (Tips on good interviewing strategies are standard entries in job-hunting advice web sites and manuals.) And if we turn a sociological eye to our dating rituals, we will quickly realize that the interview process is clearly part of the "getting to know you" phase of dating. Indeed, a new time-sensitive industry is emerging

around this interview part of dating: speed dating. In these intentionally short (seven minutes!) "dates," participants quickly exchange vital information about themselves. This time- and cost-efficient meeting puts the interview function of the first date "front and center." (See Box 10.1.)

The popularity of the interview isn't limited to the worlds of news and entertainment or work and dating – it is present in the world of research as well. Perhaps the positive reaction to interviews is due to the fact that interviews enjoy a much higher response rate than questionnaires. (A well-executed interview study can achieve response rates of 80–85 percent). Perhaps some researchers feel that interviews make more sense than questionnaires. Questionnaires can too often be dismissed as either superficial or tedious endeavors. (Critics of closed-ended questionnaires complain that they put words in respondents' mouths – they don't permit the researcher to collect in-depth, meaningful information. Critics of open-ended questionnaires complain that respondents aren't likely to invest the time required to write out answers to these probing yet "impersonal" surveys.) Perhaps too it is our social nature that makes interviews an attractive research option. No doubt, the appeal of the interview for many is its focus on the individual and its reliance on just plain talk. Many of us are flattered at the prospect that someone else is really interested in *talking* with us. With the interview, the researcher takes the time to contact the research subject, to build rapport with the research subject, and to listen to, interact with and "get to know" the research subject.

Conversational Exchange

In large part, the **interview** refers to a personal exchange of information between an interviewer and an interviewee. Good interviews strive to make the exchange a comfortable, conversational one. As in everyday conversations, participants should experience the interview as a pleasant social encounter. To a large extent, achieving this standard depends on the researcher's ability to establish "social harmony" or good **rapport** with the interviewee. The interviewer must be able to put respondents at ease, express interest in and be able to listen actively to respondents, and assure respondents that they will be supported throughout the entire process. The rapport issue demands that the interviewer's social skills must be sharp. It also alerts us to the fact that not all social researchers will be good at the interview process – some lack the social skills demanded by the interview process.

Box 10.1 Minute Mates: Speed Dating has flipped the matchmaking industry on its head, but can you really find lasting love in seven minutes?

By Dan Reines

Viewed from the right perspective, seven minutes is a pretty sizable chunk of time. In seven minutes, you can ... run a mile ... or you can cook up a three-minute egg – two of them, actually, with time to spare. In seven minutes you can listen to almost all of "Stairway to Heaven," and if you happen to be holding your breath, seven minutes is an eternity.

But can you meet and identify the love of your life? In seven minutes? Please. Most people can't do that in seven years ...

And yet, all over the country, lovelorn singles are trying to accomplish exactly that feat, every day. They're gathering in coffee shops ... and restaurants and nightclubs ... They're paying 20 bucks a pop to sit across from other lovelorn singles ... Then the sharp ding of a front-desk bell sounds through the hall, and the couples are ordered to Date! ... until someone rings that bell again seven minutes later, at which point they stand up, politely thank one another, and move on to the next "date." They're doing this all night, sometimes 10 or 15 times a night ...

Speed Dating has touched a nerve ... The program has spread to Canada, England and Australia, to Vienna and Tel Aviv and even Kiev. Meanwhile, here in Los Angeles, there are reportedly at least five Speed Dating marriages – and even a Speed Dating baby.

When (Jonathan) Tessler, then 35, discovered Speed Dating back in June 1999, the concept made perfect sense to him. "You get to go out with seven people with very little cash outlay," reasons the Malibu-raised mortgage banker. "You don't have to buy seven dinners. And if you ask the right questions, if you know what you're looking for, you can weed someone out very, very quickly. No matter how attractive they might be, if you ask them the right questions, you'll know if you're on totally different wavelengths, and you don't have to sit down to a four- or five-hour date to figure that out. To me, from a time standpoint, that was awesome."

Tessler definitely knew what he was looking for, and he arrived at Peet's Coffee in Beverly Hills armed with all the right questions. Raised in a wholly unobservant Jewish household, he had in recent years grown more religious, and was itching to settle down with someone who was engaged in the same spiritual journey. He peppered each of his dates with focused queries: What kind of relationship are you looking for? How

religious do you want to be? How many kids do you want to have? What qualities do you think are really important in a guy? "I'd dated so many materialistic women that I was trying to screen them out," Tessler says. "I didn't want someone who would say 'I want a big house, I want a BMW, I want ...' And I knew that if they were offended by my questions, that I didn't have to see them ever again."

Remarkably, Tessler's grilling paid dividends. Three women survived the interrogation ... and during the open mingling session, Tessler approached a fourth woman, Traci Newman, whom he'd met once before, though the two had never exchanged contact information. "I'm looking for a mate, not a date," he told the 27-year-old Newman, a sociology researcher at USC. Serendipitously, so was she.

Four nights after their Speed Dating meeting, the pair went to dinner near their Brentwood homes ... and five months later the two were engaged. In April 2000, less than a year after they met, Jonathan and Traci became Mr. and Mrs. Tessler.

While the interview strives to achieve a conversational exchange of information, it would be a mistake to equate interviews with everyday conversations. As you well know, ordinary conversations can be a series of meandering "talking points" that are meant to entertain more than to inform. The interview is a *purposeful* conversation wherein the interviewer has a set research agenda – i.e., key points or questions that must be addressed. To facilitate accomplishing this research goal, interviewers employ either an interview guide or an interview schedule. **Guides** are relatively unstructured tools that list the general topics or issues to be covered in an interview. Interview guides produce unstructured, qualitative interviews. They give respondents considerable latitude in determining the actual content and direction of the interview. Interview **schedules** are more structured than guides, listing the exact questions and, if the questions are closed-ended, the exact answers to be presented to all respondents. Structured schedules produce more standardized interviews and when using a forced-choice format, a more quantitative interview.

One's choice of interview style – unstructured or structured – depends upon the research goal. Unstructured interviewing is a good idea when one is pursuing an exploratory piece of research, when one is trying to paint a detailed descriptive picture of some phenomenon or some

process, or when one is trying to understand a respondent's unique experiences or perspective.

Unstructured interviewing can also be an effective strategy for countering memory failure or respondent resistance. Giving the respondent more control over the pace and direction of the interview can allow respondents to get to topics on their own terms, pace, and comfort levels. Following their own pace may also help respondents "stumble" onto memories that would not be so easily retrievable under more direct questioning. In their study of women's ways of knowing, Belenky and her associates (1986) clearly saw the value of unstructured interviewing:

> Each interview began with the question, "Looking back, what stands out for you over the past few years?" and proceeded gradually at the woman's own pace to questions concerning self-image, relationships of importance, education and learning, real-life decision-making and moral dilemmas, accounts of personal changes and growth, perceived catalysts for change and impediments to growth, and visions of the future. We tried to pose questions that were broad but understandable on many levels. (Belenky et al. 1986: 11)

On the other hand, structured interviewing may be more appropriate when the researcher wants to provide an overview of a research population with regard to their behaviors, attitudes, values, etc. Structured interviewing is also appropriate when the researcher is interested in quantifying information about the research population. Unless we ask the same questions of all, we won't be in a position to say what percent favor or oppose a certain social policy or what percent engage in certain behaviors. You may already be familiar with the General Social Survey. It is a prime example of a highly structured interview. Consider the following GSS questions on respondents' attitudes toward abortion:

➢ Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if ... READ EACH STATEMENT, AND CIRCLE ONE CODE FOR EACH[1]

A. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
B. If she is married and does not want any more children?
C. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?

1 Instructions for interviewer.

D. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
E. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
F. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
G. The woman wants it for any reason.

Each interviewee is asked to respond to each statement with the same set of response options: yes, no, don't know, or no answer. By sticking with this regimen, a quantitative profile of respondents can easily be generated. (For a percentage breakdown of answers through the years, you can visit the GSS homepage (http://www.icpsr.unich.edu/GSS/) and look under the subject heading of abortion.)

Developing an Unstructured Guide

While the unstructured guide may seem like an easy tool to develop, it really requires much careful thought and work. Lofland and Lofland (1995) offer a series of suggestions for preparing a guide. The first step is for the researcher to enter what they call the *puzzlement phase*. In this phase, the researcher works at articulating all the things about the research topic that are puzzling. Suppose you want to do a study on personal homepages. In thinking about the topic, the researcher might "puzzle" over the following: What's the function of a homepage? When does someone decide they "need" their own homepage? Are homepages "reality" or "fantasy" documents? etc. During this phase, which may go on for days or weeks, the researcher jots down all of his/her thoughts about the topic. (Lofland and Lofland recommend using a separate note card for each question or issue.) To get a full array of ideas/questions, the researcher should ask others what they find puzzling about the topic and/or consult articles/books on the topic.

Once the puzzlement phase is finished and the researcher has accumulated a stack of cards, the cards can be sorted into several internally consistent piles. A review of the piles should help the researcher assemble a general outline as well as a sequencing of questions for the guide. It is also a good idea to supplement the guide with well-placed probes. **Probes** are questions used to follow up on points mentioned or not mentioned by the respondent. Listing probes on the guide serves to remind the interviewer to pursue important lines of inquiry.

An interviewer's social skills are certainly called into play when conducting a qualitative interview. Since this style of interviewing is very

dependent on the respondent's willingness to talk in detail, the researcher must create a warm and supportive "talk" environment. To accomplish this, two strategies are most important: the interviewer must know how to be an "active" listener and the interviewer must know how to handle respondent silences.

Active listening

The idea of an active listener might strike some readers as an oxymoron – listening would seem to suggest a silent, passive role for the interviewer. In fact, good listening calls upon the researcher to actively attend to what the respondent is saying. In effect, the researcher must "hang on" every word out of the respondent's mouth. To let the respondent know that one is actively listening to them, the researcher should periodically supply a verbal mirror of what the respondent is saying. In providing a **verbal mirror**, the researcher paraphrases in a clear, concise, and non-evaluative way exactly what the respondent has communicated. Imagine a college student who has just described her first year at college as a nightmare – a series of failed courses. The interviewer might say "So what I'm hearing you say is that freshman year was an academic disaster." The verbal mirror shows the respondent that the researcher is indeed listening to everything. It also gives the respondent a chance to correct any misunderstandings by the interviewer. Most importantly, though, the verbal mirror provides the respondent with an opening to say more – to continue the dialogue and delve deeper into the topic.

Another essential ingredient of active listening is the previously mentioned probe. A probe is a follow-up technique that encourages the respondent to further elaborate or clarify a point of discussion. To encourage a respondent to say more, the interviewer might simply employ a quizzical look until the respondent starts talking again. The interviewer might also probe with a well placed "uh-huh" or "go on." At times, however, the probe needs to be stated more explicitly. Imagine a college student saying she wants to get her own apartment because home life is so stressful. The interviewer might ask the respondent to discuss in more detail what makes home so stressful and how apartment living would relieve these stresses. Knowing when and how to probe effectively are two critical interview skills. The following two excerpts illustrate these points. The first excerpt from John Kitsuse's research on the imputation of the status homosexual shows how probes can clarify respondent's answers. The second excerpt from Angrosino's research with the

mentally challenged shows how probes can help keep respondents focused.

Kitsuse's work (2002: 98):

I: What happened during your conversation?
R: He asked me if I went to college and I said I did. Then he asked me what I was studying. When I told him psychology he appeared very interested.
I: What do you mean "interested"?
R: Well, you know queers really go for this psychology stuff.
I: Then what happened?
R: Ah, let's see. I'm not exactly sure, but somehow we got into an argument about psychology and to prove my point I told him to pick an area of study. Well, he appeared to be very pensive and after a great thought he said, "Okay, let's take homosexuality."
I: What did you make of that?
R: Well, by now I figured the guy was queer so I got the hell outta there.

Angrosino's work (2001: 253):

I: Tell me about what you did at your uncle's café.
R: Yes Uncle John, He's a great guy. I really love him.
I: What did you do there?
R: He cooks all his own food. Even bakes. Bread, cakes.
I: Did you help him?
R: He opens every day for breakfast and then he stays open until really late. He never likes to turn people away.
I: Did you help him in the kitchen?
R: Oh, yeah. I like to help. He's just like my Pop. They always want to help people. That's why he bought the café when he retired. He wanted to help people. People always need good food, he says.

Silences

Active listening is important. However, the technique should never cause the interviewer to interrupt important respondent silences. Rather early in our training as social beings, we learn the value of friendly banter that can keep awkward silences at a minimum. (Think about your own

awkwardness when you hear a deafening silence on the other end of a phone conversation – if you're like most people you will rush in to fill the void.) The researcher, however, must put this convention aside during a qualitative interview. Moments of silence in an interview should be appreciated as instances of thoughtful punctuation. Frequently, there is something to be learned from the silence. If the researcher rushes in and prematurely breaks the silence, important data may be lost forever – the respondent may feel embarrassed and never return again to the issue that prompted the silence. A good interviewer will learn to respect silences. In doing so, the researcher is apt to discover how silences can be springboards into important topics of discussion.

The Interview Schedule

When the researcher is interested in standardizing the interview process (i.e., making the experience the same for all respondents), the interview guide of the qualitative interview is replaced by an interview schedule. The points addressed in the previous chapter on questionnaire construction can be applied to the development of the interview schedule: questions should have a singular focus and use neutral language – they should not lead the respondent. Response choices should be mutually exclusive and balanced. Perhaps the biggest challenge to conducting a structured interview is the fact that such interviews can have a rather artificial feel to them. This is especially a dilemma in the most structured of interviews – i.e., an interview where *both* questions and response options are standardized. In these scenarios, the respondent may come to believe that the researcher is less interested in hearing what's on the respondent's mind than in checking off boxes on the schedule. A highly structured schedule can be thought of as a script that is used by the interviewer to ensure that all respondents experience the same interview process. The schedule will typically contain the introductory comments to be made by the interviewer, a list of the exact questions (and response options) to be presented (in order and verbatim) in the interview, a list of the authorized probes and follow-ups for any open-ended questions, and a space for writing in the answers to open-ended questions.

This scripting, of course, can make the standardized interview feel unnatural to the respondent. The burden is on the interviewer to keep the whole process engaging and informative. Once again, then, we see the importance of the interviewer's social skills. The initial rapport established between the interviewer and the respondent will certainly help in

keeping the exchange natural. Active listening (even to closed-ended responses) is also an essential strategy.

Covering Sensitive Topics

While the personal touch of the interview is perhaps its greatest strength, it can be a distinct disadvantage under some circumstances. Covering sensitive or threatening topics can be quite challenging in personal interviews. Respondents may resist talking about matters they consider too private or personal: sexual behaviors, family finances, parental disciplinary practices, etc. Respondents might also be tempted to provide **normative responses** – i.e., answering questions in a socially desirable way. The first line of defense against these problems is good rapport. Having trust in the interviewer can help the respondents navigate their way through difficult topics. Discussion of sensitive topics can also be facilitated by carefully matching interviewers and interviewees: e.g., have men interview men, women interview women, age-mates interview age-mates, minorities interview minorities, etc. Matching has been shown to be particularly effective in combating normative responses. Finally, another effective strategy for covering sensitive topics is to change the format of the information exchange. When it comes time to cover threatening topics, the researcher can hand the respondent a self-administered form that contains all sensitive questions. The respondent can then answer the questions privately and return the form in a sealed envelope. This technique has been employed successfully in the GSS for questions on personal sexual behaviors (Smith 1992).

Phone Home

An extremely popular variation on the one-on-one personal interview is the next best thing to "being there" – the telephone interview. This technology dependent technique sees the interviewer questioning respondents by phone and recording their answers (often with the assistance of computers). Reliance on telephone interviewing has increased dramatically in the last few decades, especially in the areas of market, political, and public opinion research (Smith 1990).

There is much to recommend telephone interviews. Telephone interviewing is much more economical than personal interviews, costing anywhere from one-third to one-tenth the cost of an in-person interview.

Telephone interviews are a relatively fast research option. As shown by public opinion polling, telephone interviewing can give us almost instant feedback on the public's reactions to national or world events. Phone interviewing can be set up so that computers randomly generate phone numbers. In this way, respondents are able to provide answers under conditions of total anonymity. Computers can also assist in the verbatim recording of respondents' answers. Lastly, phone interviews can be less intrusive or threatening than in-person interviews. For respondents, letting someone "into" their home via the phone is easier and less risky than opening the front door to a stranger. Similarly, telephone interviewing holds a safety appeal for the *interviewer* as well. Conducting phone interviews in high crime areas is a safer option than going door to door for in-person interviews.

On the other hand, telephone interviewing has some clear weaknesses. While phones may make it easier for us to "reach out and touch" someone, contact is not as easy as it seems. Relying on telephone directories, for instance, will give us a rather biased sampling frame (list of members in our research population). Think about it a minute – what numbers will never make it into our samples? If we use telephone directories to generate samples, residences without phones and those with unlisted numbers will never make it into the sample.[2] Due to the limitations of telephone directories, many researchers will employ some form of computer generated random digit dialing (RDD) to select numbers for telephone interviews. RDD overcomes the problem of unlisted numbers in directories, but it also produces many unacceptable numbers – e.g., out of service and business numbers. For every five or six numbers dialed, the researcher may well find that only one connects with a residential target.

Reaching a working number does not guarantee connecting with the right party. Phone answering machines and busy lifestyles all but assure that interviewers must be prepared to make many call backs (up to 20) before they reach the targeted party. And of course, *reaching* the right party does not in itself guarantee an interview. Especially in these days of

2 A very famous example of the dangers of working with such restricted lists is the 1936 *Literary Digest* poll concerning the Roosevelt vs. Landon presidential election. The *Literary Digest* used telephone directories and automobile ownership lists to generate a sample of voters. The poll predicted that Landon would win the election in a landslide. In fact, Roosevelt had a landslide victory. How did the *Digest* get it so wrong? An upper-class bias was produced in their sampling technique – only the wealthiest Americans in 1936 owned phones and automobiles. Poor Americans were not included in the *Digest* poll and poor Americans were solidly behind Roosevelt and his New Deal.

aggressive telemarketing, people may be less inclined to cooperate with *any* unsolicited phone calls. Not surprisingly then, phone interviews have a lower response rate than in-person interviews.

Because of the limitations imposed by the less personal phone exchange, telephone interviews must be rather short and uncomplicated – getting answers to in-depth, open-ended questions is particularly challenging. It is harder for phone interviewers to maintain control over the interview process. During phone exchanges, other people or activities in the home environment can easily distract respondents. And at any point in a phone interview, the respondent might decide the interview has lasted long enough and simply terminate it by hanging up the phone. Finally, telephone interviews present a certain "coverage problem." While over 90% of American homes have phones, ownership nonetheless varies considerably by a number of factors – e.g., income level: only 75% of the lowest income households own phones while ownership rises to over 97% in the top income households (Smith 1990). Depending on the focus of the interview, these coverage differences could bias the results of phone surveys.

The More the Merrier: Focus Groups

You should now appreciate that there is a significant difference between questionnaires and interviews. The interview is a data collection technique that is dependent on *social interaction* – the give and take between the interviewer and interviewee. There is one special type of interview situation – the focus group – that fully recognizes the value of social interaction *per se* as an important source of data, insight, and understanding. **Focus groups** are guided group discussions of selected topics. With this technique, the researcher will assemble approximately six to twelve people for the specific purpose of discussing a common concern, issue, event, program, or policy. Advocates of focus groups maintain that the social interaction between group members will produce a dynamic and insightful exchange of information that would not be possible in any one-on-one interview situation. The give and take of the focus group exchange gives the researcher a chance to learn more about *what* people think of the topic at hand as well as to learn more about *why* they think as they do. The insight generated by focus groups makes them rather valuable tools for a variety of research purposes: market research, political analysis, and evaluation research.

While focus groups are decidedly different from the traditional one-on-one interview, both techniques are similar in their dependence on talk. Focus groups only work if respondents agree to talk. Indeed, it is the give and take, the point-counterpoint between group members that is critical to providing insight into the process of constructing viewpoints on various issues, attitudes, positions, etc. As is true for traditional interviews, certain social skills are required of the focus group moderator. Since the special contribution of focus groups is attributed to the dynamics of the group, the moderator has a special burden to facilitate group interaction. A particularly tricky dilemma faced by the moderator is to "run" the focus group without imposing his or her own viewpoint on the group. The moderator must guide discussion without overly directing it. In general, lower levels of moderator involvement are usually adopted in more exploratory focus groups. Higher levels of involvement are called for when seeking answers to specific questions or when testing specific research hypotheses.

In guiding focus group discussions, the moderator must be ready to play two roles: an expressive and an instrumental role. In the **expressive** role, the moderator will attend to the socio-emotional expressions of the group and closely attend to the content of the discussion – treating all participants as equals and keeping the tone of the discussion friendly and engaging. In the **instrumental** role, the moderator must make sure that the ground rules for the group are known and honored by all. The moderator, for instance, will inform the group that all opinions are valuable, that no one should dominate the discussion, that cross-talking or verbal put-downs will not be allowed. In fulfilling one's instrumental duties, the moderator will also take care to strategically place focus group members around the discussion table: dominants should be seated immediately next to the moderator while shy individuals should be seated where it is easiest to maintain a direct line of eye-contact with the moderator. (Decisions about dominant or shy group members are made during a period of planned small talk that should precede the start of the focus group session.) As part of the instrumental role, the moderator will also be sure that the research agenda is followed and that the group stays on schedule.

In his work *Talking Politics*, Gamson (1992) employed focus groups to better understand how working-class people come to form their opinions on political issues. His comments on running the groups are quite informative about focus groups in particular and about interviewing in general:

> To encourage conversation rather than a facilitator-centered group interview, the facilitator was instructed to break off eye contact with the speaker as early as politeness allowed and to look to others ... when someone finished a comment. We relied mainly on two facilitators, both women, matching their race with that of the participants ... If a discussion got off track, the facilitator moved it back on by going to the next question on the list. But we encouraged a conservative approach to what was considered off the track since, in negotiating meaning on any given issue, participants typically brought in other related issues ... Once most people had responded to a question and no one else sought the floor, the facilitator moved to the next question on the list. These follow-up questions also served as a reminder of the issue in the event that a discussion had rambled. (Gamson 1992: 17–18)

Karen Cerulo used focus groups as well in *Deciphering Violence: The Cognitive Structure of Right and Wrong* (1998). Her book examines media portrayals of violence and the varying effects such stories have on the reading and viewing public. Cerulo contends that focus groups are especially well suited to studies addressing culture and cognition.

> Focus Groups provide a unique research vehicle. The technique is designed to capture "minds at work" as participants evaluate particular stimulus materials ... focus group interactions encourage subjects to air, reflect, and reason their views aloud. Each session becomes a self-reflexive exercise that is unlikely to emerge from other data-gathering techniques. Further, focus groups are structured such that a study's participants interact *with each other* as opposed to interacting one-on-one with an investigator. In this way, researchers avoid the very real risk of channeling subject responses. The method places the greatest emphasis on the subjects' point of view. (Cerulo 1998: 112–13)

Training Issues

By now it should be clear to the reader that interviewing (one-on-one and group) requires special social skills. Researchers are well advised to select their interviewers carefully. Good interviewers must be motivated individuals who are willing to hit the pavement (or work the phones) in order to secure interviews. They must be flexible people who are willing to work around respondents' schedules. (This often translates to scheduling interviews for evenings or weekends.) Interviewers must come across as nonjudgmental individuals who can inspire the trust of respondents. Good interviewers must be able to think on their feet and quickly

determine the correct "tone" or style to adopt for any given interview. They must hone their sales skills in order to sell both the project and themselves to potential respondents. On this last point, interviewers must understand the importance of first impressions – good first impressions can be the difference between respondent cooperation and refusal.

Good social skills are essential but successful interviewing also requires specific training. Despite how simple it may look for hosts of late-night talk shows, a good interview does not just happen. Part of the reason that interviewing is the most expensive data collection technique is the fact that training good interviewers is time-consuming and costly. Talk, at least as a data collection tool, is not really cheap.

The interviewer should have a good understanding of the research project – its purpose and how the guide/schedule serves that purpose. For this reason, some might argue that those who are in charge of research projects (PIs – Principal Investigators) would make the best interviewers. In terms of commitment and knowledge of the project, the PI has an advantage. But there is a possible downside to using PIs as interviewers. PIs may lack the social skills that are key to a good interview. Furthermore, their intense involvement with the project could be a source of bias. PIs may be more prone than others with less of a "stake" in the research project to hear what they want or need to hear in the interview process. Even if the PI is up to the job, it is often a practical necessity, especially on large projects, to engage several people as interviewers. Consequently, research projects will frequently resort to working with hired interviewers who are specifically trained for the tasks at hand.

As part of the training process, it is a good idea to provide interviewers with a crash course in methods. They need to understand the basics of sampling and the importance of a random selection process. They need to understand the importance of an operational definition and measurement validity. This insight should help stave off any temptations to change or modify the interview guide. Trainees also need to appreciate how interviewers themselves can introduce bias into the measurement process via their reactions to and recordings of respondents' answers. In qualitative interviewing projects, interviewers must learn how to become active listeners. Trainees must learn when and how to use effective probes. They must learn how to rein in respondents who are wandering off the subject or pursuing irrelevant tangents.

For more standardized projects, interviewers must be trained in how to faithfully execute interview schedules while maintaining enthusiasm. For

both interview conditions, the interviewer must also master the social skills that will help them establish the necessary rapport with respondents. Interviewers must also pay attention to how they bring an interview to a close. They need to strike the right balance between abrupt endings and long good-byes. Interviewers should also learn the value of "debriefing" themselves. Once interviewers have left the actual location of the interview, they should write down any interesting thoughts or observations regarding the interview. Such notes can prove quite helpful in the analysis phase.

Training should always involve some practice sessions. Running through several mock interviews is an essential preparation step. These practice interviews will help interviewers get comfortable with the questions, identify potential trouble spots, and prepare acceptable clarifications. It is also a good idea for interviewers to commit to memory the opening portions of interview guides or schedules. With enough practice, the interviewer should be able to conduct a smooth-flowing, natural-sounding interview.

Tools of the Trade

Despite the clear importance of the human touch and social skills in conducting successful interviews, the interviewer is well advised to acknowledge the critical "supporting" role of technology in the interview process. No matter how diligent interviewers believe they can be in recording respondent's answers, they should always consider making audiotapes of interview sessions. This step merely acknowledges the importance of faithfully capturing the data without introducing any errors. Interviewers who rely exclusively on note taking during the interview run the risk of distorting information because of selective or faulty memories and/or poor recording skills. Furthermore, the attention and care the interviewer gives to recording duties may come at the expense of attentive listening. Interviewers who are worried about "getting it all down" may not be so ready to pursue strategic probes and follow-ups. Given these considerations, the best line of advice is to plan on taping interview sessions. That said, the final decision to tape or not to tape must rest with the respondent. If the respondent is not comfortable with taping, it should not be done. Taping under protest is unlikely to yield a productive interview exchange.

Regardless of whether or not interviews are taped, the interviewer should *always* take extensive notes during the session. The best advice

is to act as if no recorder is running. With this approach the researcher will always have a written record of the interview session. If an audiotape exists as well, it can be used to amend or supplement the notes taken during the interview. Written verbatim transcripts are particularly important in unstructured interviews since the respondent's exact answers constitute the data that the researcher will analyze. In short, written transcripts are our data sets. There is no justification for skipping this step of data preparation. Indeed, experienced interviewers know all too well that the presence of a transcript greatly facilitates the job of analysis. Transcripts can be read and re-read and compared and scrutinized in the service of thorough analysis.

The Final Word

As the preceding review indicates, talk is an important research tool. It is also a versatile one. With the selection of in-person interviews, phone interviews, and group interviews the researcher has the ability to custom-fit the element of talk to the research job at hand. Whether the research task is exploratory or explanatory, quantitative or qualitative, simple or complex, the interview may well be the right way to talk your self into a good study.

Expanding the Essentials

The Survey Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley offers a series of tips on telephone sampling at the following site: http://srcweb.berkeley.edu/res/tsamp.html.

Useful information on focus groups (i.e., planning, running, analyzing results, etc.) can be found in David Morgan's *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (1996) and in Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey's *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (2000).

No one who is seriously considering an interview project should proceed without reading John and Lyn Lofland's *Analyzing Social Settings* (1995).