

Part Two

Collecting Qualitative Data

Data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment. They can be concrete and measurable, as in class attendance, or invisible and difficult to measure, as in feelings. Whether or not a bit of information becomes data in a research study depends solely on the interest and perspective of the investigator. The way in which rainwater drains from the land may be data to a soil scientist, for example, but not even noticed by the homeowner. Likewise, activity patterns in a school cafeteria, while holding no interest to students, staff, or faculty, may be of great interest to someone studying students' behavior outside the classroom.

Data conveyed through words have been labeled *qualitative*, whereas data presented in number form are *quantitative*. Qualitative data consist of "direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" obtained through interviews; "detailed descriptions of people's activities, behaviors, actions" recorded in observations; and "excerpts, quotations, or entire passages" extracted from various types of documents (Patton, 1990, p. 10).

Part Two is about collecting data through interviews, observations, and documents, or in Wolcott's (1992) "common, everyday terms" (p. 19), data collection is about asking, watching, and reviewing. It should be kept in mind, however, that "the idea that we 'collect' data is a bit misleading. Data are not 'out there' waiting collection, like so many rubbish bags on the pavement. For a start,

they have to be noticed by the researcher, and treated as data for the purposes of his or her research. ‘Collecting’ data always involves selecting data, and the techniques of data collection . . . will affect what finally constitutes ‘data’ for the purposes of research” (Dey, 1993, p. 15). The data collection techniques used, as well as the specific information considered to be “data” in a study, are determined by the researcher’s theoretical orientation, by the problem and purpose of the study, and by the sample selected (see chapters in Part One for a discussion of these factors).

Interviewing is probably the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies in education. In numerous studies it is the only source of data. Chapter Four focuses on interviews: the different types of interviews, good interview questions, and how to record and evaluate interview data; considerations of the interviewer and respondent interaction are also discussed.

Conducting observations is the topic of Chapter Five. The different roles an observer can assume, what to observe when on-site, how to record observations, and the content of fieldnotes are topics discussed in this chapter.

The third technique covered in Part Two is mining data from documents. *Documents* is a term used broadly in this book to refer to printed and other materials relevant to a study, including public records, personal documents, and physical artifacts. A distinction is also made between the common reference to documents as materials existing naturally in the context of the study versus researcher-generated documents.

The final chapter in Part Two explores the use of all three data collection strategies in case study research. Examples are drawn from three case studies, each representing a different facet of educational practice.

Chapter Four

Conducting Effective Interviews

Throughout the process of conducting a qualitative study, investigators continually make decisions, choose among alternatives, and exercise judgment. Once the research problem has been identified, the researcher must decide what information will be needed to address the problem and how best to obtain that information. Interviewing is a common means of collecting qualitative data. I will discuss the types of interviews in this chapter. Other topics include asking good questions, beginning the interview, recording and evaluating interview data, and the nature of the interaction between interviewer and respondent.

Interview Data

In all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews. The most common form of interview is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another. Group or collective formats can also be used to obtain data, but group interviews need to account for group processes, a topic beyond the scope of this discussion (Fontana and Frey, 1994). However, both person-to-person and group interviews can be defined as a conversation—but a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 136). The main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information. The researcher wants to find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). As Patton explains:

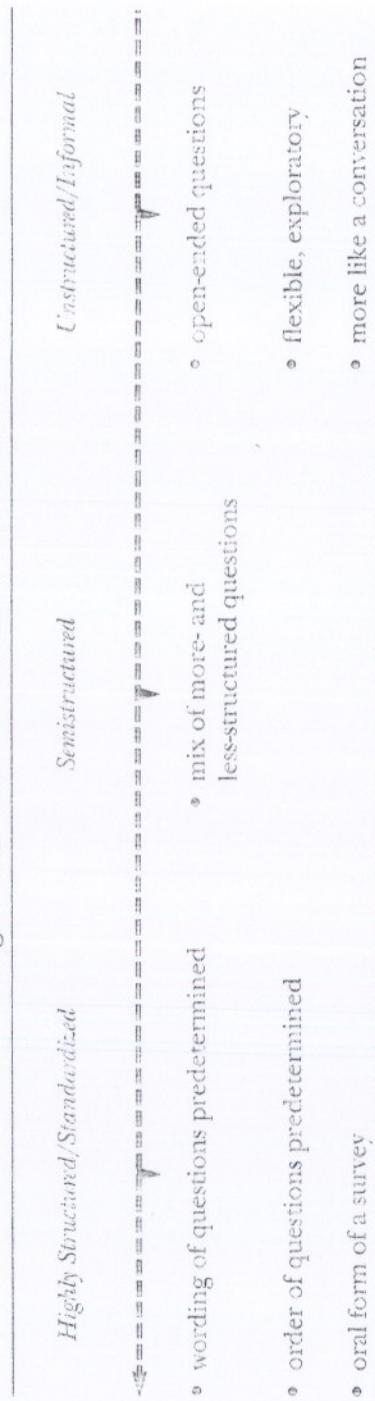
We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective [p. 196].

Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate. For example, school psychologists might be interested in the reaction of students who witnessed a teacher being attacked at school. Likewise, a catastrophic event such as a nuclear accident or natural disaster cannot be replicated, but its effects on a community might be the focus of a qualitative case study investigation. Interviewing is also the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals, as Bateson (1990) did in interviewing five women for her book, *Composing a Life*. Conversely, interviewing can be used to collect data from a large number of people representing a broad range of ideas. Rubin's study (1985) of friendship in which she interviewed three hundred men and women from diverse backgrounds is such an example. In short, the decision to use interviewing as the primary mode of data collection should be based on the kind of information needed and whether interviewing is the best way to get it. Dexter (1970) summarizes when to use interviewing. "Interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when . . . it will get *better* data or *more* data or data *at less cost* than other tactics!" (p. 11). I would add that interviewing is sometimes the *only* way to get data.

Types of Interviews

The most common way of deciding which type of interview to use is by determining the amount of structure desired. Figure 4.1 presents a continuum that is based on the amount of structure of an

Figure 4.1. Interview Structure Continuum.



interview. At one end of the continuum fall highly structured, questionnaire-driven interviews; at the other end are unstructured, open-ended, conversational formats. In highly structured interviews, sometimes called standardized interviews, questions and the order in which they are asked are determined ahead of time.

The most structured interview is actually an oral form of the written survey. The U.S. Census Bureau and marketing surveys are good examples of oral surveys. The problem with using a highly structured interview in qualitative research is that rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the world. Instead, you get reactions to the *investigator's* preconceived notions of the world. Such an interview is also based on the shaky assumptions that respondents share a common vocabulary and that the questions "are equally meaningful to every respondent" (Denzin, 1970, p. 123). The major use of this highly structured format in qualitative research is to gather common sociodemographic data from respondents. That is, you may want to know everyone's age, income, history of employment, marital status, level of formal education, and so on. You may also want everyone to respond to a particular statement or to define a particular concept or term.

For the most part, however, interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured. Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways. Your questions thus need to be more open-ended. A less structured alternative is the semistructured interview. As is illustrated in Figure 4.1, the semistructured interview is halfway between the ends of the continuum. In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.

At the other end of the continuum shown in Figure 4.1 are unstructured, informal interviews. These are particularly useful

when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions. Thus there is no predetermined set of questions, and the interview is essentially exploratory. One of the goals of the unstructured interview is, in fact, learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews. Thus the unstructured interview is often used in conjunction with participant observation in the early stages of a case study. It takes a skilled researcher to handle the great flexibility demanded by the unstructured interview. Insights and understanding can be obtained in this approach, but at the same time an interviewer may feel lost in a sea of divergent viewpoints and seemingly unconnected pieces of information. Totally unstructured interviewing is rarely used as the sole means of collecting data in qualitative research. In most studies the researcher can combine all three types of interviewing so that some standardized information is obtained, some of the same open-ended questions are asked of all participants, and some time is spent in an unstructured mode so that fresh insights and new information can emerge.

By way of illustrating the kinds of questions you might ask in each of the types of interviews—highly structured, semistructured, or unstructured—let us suppose you are studying the role of mentoring in the career development of master teachers. In a highly structured interview you might begin by giving each respondent a definition of mentoring and then asking the person to identify someone who is a mentor. In a semistructured interview you would be more likely to ask each teacher to describe his or her understanding of mentoring; or you might ask the teacher to think of someone who is a mentor. In an unstructured interview you might ask the respondent to share how he or she got to be a master teacher. More directly, but still rather unstructured, would be a question about the influences or factors that have helped to shape the respondent's career.

Asking Good Questions

The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions; asking good questions takes practice. Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions. Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, you also quickly learn which questions are

confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions, suggested by your respondents, you should have thought to include in the first place.

Different types of questions will yield different information. The questions you ask depend upon the focus of your study. Using the example of mentoring in the career development of master teachers, if you want to know the role mentoring played in career development, you would ask questions about teachers' personal experience with mentoring and probably get a descriptive history. Follow-up questions about how they *felt* about a certain mentoring experience would elicit more affective information. You might also want to know their opinion as to how much influence mentoring has generally in a teacher's career.

The way in which questions are worded is a crucial consideration in extracting the type of information desired. An obvious place to begin is by making certain that what is being asked is clear to the person being interviewed. Questions need to be understood in familiar language. "Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's world view, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, the answer may make no sense at all—or there may be no answer" (Patton, 1990, p. 312). Avoiding technical jargon and terms and concepts from your particular disciplinary orientation is a good place to begin. In a study of HIV-positive young adults, for example, participants were asked how they made sense of, or came to terms with, their diagnosis, not how they constructed meaning in the process of perspective transformation (the theoretical framework of the study) (Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves, forthcoming).

Good Questions and Questions to Avoid

An interviewer can ask several types of questions to stimulate responses from an informant. Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin (1981) offer a list of four major categories of questions: *hypothetical*, *devil's advocate*, *ideal position*, and *interpretive* questions. Each is defined in Table 4.1 and illustrated with examples from a case study of displaced workers participating in a Job Training and Partnership (JTPA) program.

Table 4.1. Four Types of Questions with Examples from a JTPA Training Program Case Study.

<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Example</i>
• Hypothetical Question: asks what the respondent might do or what it might be like in a particular situation; usually begins with "What if" or "Suppose"	"Suppose it is my first day in this training program. What would it be like?"
• Devil's Advocate Question: challenges the respondent to consider an opposing view	"Some people would say that employees who lose their job did something to bring it about. What would you say to them?"
• Ideal Position Question: asks the respondent to describe an ideal situation	"What do you think the ideal training program would be like?"
• Interpretive Question: advances tentative interpretation of what the respondent has been saying and asks for a reaction	"Would you say that returning to school as an adult is different from what you expected?"

Hypothetical questions ask respondents to speculate as to what something might be like or what someone might do in a particular situation. Hypothetical questions begin with "What if" or "Suppose." Responses are usually descriptions of the person's actual experience. In the JTPA study, for example, the hypothetical question, Suppose it is my first day in this training program. What would it be like? elicited descriptions of what it was actually like for the participants.

Devil's advocate questions are particularly good to use when the topic is controversial and you want respondents' opinions and feelings. This type of question also avoids embarrassing or antagonizing respondents if they happen to be sensitive about the issue. The wording begins, "Some people would say," which in effect depersonalizes the issue. The response, however, is almost always the respondent's personal opinion or feeling about the matter. In the

JTPA example, the question, Some people would say that employees who lose their job did something to bring it about. What would you say to them? usually revealed how the respondent came to be unemployed and thus involved in the training program.

Ideal position questions elicit both information and opinion; these can be used with virtually any phenomenon under study. They are good to use in evaluation studies because they reveal both the positives and the negatives or shortcomings of a program. Asking what the ideal training program would be like in the JTPA example revealed things participants liked and would not want changed, as well as things that could have made it a better program.

Interpretive questions provide a check on what you think you are understanding, as well as provide an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed. In the JTPA example, the interpretive question, Would you say that returning to school as an adult is different from what you expected? allowed the investigator to confirm the tentative interpretation of what had been said in the interview.

Some types of questions should be avoided in an interview. Table 4.2 outlines three types of questions to avoid and illustrates each from the JTPA study. First, avoid multiple questions—either one question that is actually a double question or a series of single questions that does not allow the respondent to answer one by one. An example of a double question is, How do you feel about the instructors and the classes in the JTPA training program? A series of questions might be, What's it like going back to school as an adult? How do instructors respond to you? What kind of assignments do you have? In both cases the respondent is likely to ask you to repeat the question(s), ask for clarification, or give a response covering only one part of the question—and that response may be uninterpretable. If, for example, an interviewee responded to the question, How do you feel about the instructors and the classes? with "They're OK—some I like, some I don't," you would not know whether instructors or classes were being referred to (in either part of the answer).

Leading questions should also be avoided. Leading questions reveal a bias or an assumption that the researcher is making, which

Table 4.2. Questions to Avoid.

<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Example</i>
• Multiple Questions	How do you feel about the instructors and the classes?
• Leading Questions	What emotional problems have you had since losing your job?
• Yes-or-No Questions	Do you like the program? Has returning to school been difficult?

may not be held by the participant. These set the respondent up to accept the researcher's point of view. The question, What emotional problems have you had since losing your job? reflects an assumption that anyone losing a job will have emotional problems.

Finally, all researchers warn against asking yes-or-no questions. Any question that *can* be answered with a simple yes or no may in fact be answered just that way. Yes-or-no responses give you almost no information. For the reluctant, shy, or less verbal respondent, they offer an easy way out; they can also shut down or at least slow the flow of information from the interviewee. In the JTPA example, questions phrased in a yes-or-no manner, while at their core seek good information, can yield nothing. Thus asking, Do you like the program? may be answered yes or no; rephrasing it to, What do you like about the program? necessitates more of a response. The same is true of the question, Has returning to school been difficult? Asking, How have you found the experience of returning to school? mandates a fuller response.

A ruthless review of your questions to weed out poor ones before you actually conduct an interview is highly recommended. Ask the questions of yourself, challenging yourself to answer as minimally as possible. Also note whether you would feel uncomfortable honestly answering any of the questions. This review followed by a pilot interview will go a long way to ensure that you are asking good questions.

Probes

Probes are also questions or comments that follow up something already asked. It is virtually impossible to specify these ahead of time because they are dependent on how the participant answers the lead question. This is where being the primary instrument of data collection has its advantages, especially if you are a highly sensitive instrument. You make adjustments in your interviewing as you go along. You sense that the respondent is on to something significant or that there is more to be learned. Probing can come in the form of asking for more details, for clarification, for examples. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out that “probes may take numerous forms; they range from silence, to sounds, to a single word, to complete sentences” (p. 85). Silence, “used judiciously . . . is a useful and easy probe—as is the bunched utterance, ‘uh huh, uh huh,’ sometimes combined with a nodding head. ‘Yes, yes’ is a good alternative; variety is useful” (p. 86, emphasis in original). As with all questions, not just probes, the interviewer should avoid pressing too hard and too fast. After all, the participant is being interviewed, not interrogated.

Following is a short excerpt (Weeks, n.d.) from an interview with a man in midlife who had been retained in grammar school. The investigator was interested in how being retained had affected the person’s life. Note the follow-up questions or probes used to garner a better understanding of his initial reaction to being retained.

Interviewer: How did you feel about yourself the second time you were in first grade?

Respondent: I really don’t remember, but I think I didn’t like it. It was probably embarrassing to me. I think I may have even had a hard time explaining it to my friends. I probably got teased. I was probably defensive about it. I may even have rebelled in some childlike way. I do know I got more aggressive at this point in my life. But I don’t know if being retained had anything to do with it.

Interviewer: How did you feel about your new first grade teacher?

Respondent: She was nice. I was very quiet for a while, until I got to know her.

Interviewer: How did you feel about yourself during this second year?

Respondent: I have to look at it as a follow-up to a period when I was not successful. Strictly speaking, I was not very successful in the first grade—the first time.

Interviewer: Your voice sometimes changes when you talk about that.

Respondent: Well, I guess I’m still a little angry.

Interviewer: Do you feel the retention was justified?

Respondent: (long pause) I don’t know how to answer that.

Interviewer: Do you want to think about it for a while?

Respondent: Well, I did NOT learn anything in the first grade the first time, but the lady was nice. She was my Mom’s best friend. So she didn’t teach me anything, and she made me repeat. I had to be retained, they said, because I did not learn the material, but (shaking his finger), I could have. I could have learned it well. I was smart. . . .

The best way to increase your skill at probing is to practice. The more you interview, especially on the same topic, the more relaxed you become and the better you can pursue potentially fruitful lines of inquiry. Another good strategy is to scrutinize a verbatim transcript of one of your interviews. Look for places where you could have followed up but did not, and compare them with places where you got a lot of good data. The difference will most likely be from having maximized an opportunity to gain more information through gentle probing.

The Interview Guide

The interview guide, or schedule as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than a list of questions you intend to ask in an interview. Depending on how structured the interview will be, the guide may contain dozens of very specific questions listed in a particular order (highly structured) or a few topical areas jotted down in no particular order (unstructured) or something in between. As I noted earlier, most interviews in qualitative research are semistructured; thus the interview guide will probably contain several specific questions

that you want to ask everyone, some more open-ended questions that could be followed up with probes, and perhaps a list of some areas, topics, and issues that you want to know more about but do not have enough information about at the outset of your study to form specific questions.

An investigator new to collecting data through interviews will feel more confident with a structured interview format where most, if not all, questions are written out ahead of time in the interview guide. Working from an interview schedule allows the new researcher to gain the experience and confidence needed to conduct more open-ended questioning. Most researchers find that they are highly dependent upon the interview guide for the first few interviews but that they soon can unhook themselves from constant reference to the questions and can go with the natural flow of the interview. At that point, an occasional check to see if all areas or topics are being covered may be all that is needed.

New researchers are often concerned about the order of questions in an interview. No rules determine what should go first and what should come later. Much depends upon the study's objectives, the time allotted for the interview, the person being interviewed, and how sensitive some of the questions are. Factual, sociodemographic-type questions can be asked to get the interview started, but if there are a lot of these, or if some of them are sensitive (for example, if they ask about income, age, or sexual orientation), it might be better to ask them at the end of the interview. By then the respondent has invested in the interview and is more likely to see it through by answering these questions.

Generally it is a good idea to ask for relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of an interview. Respondents can be asked to provide basic descriptive information about the phenomenon of interest, be it a program, activity, or experience, or to chronicle their history with the phenomenon of interest. This information lays the foundation for questions that access the interviewee's perceptions, opinions, values, emotions, and so on. Of course it is not always possible to separate factual information from more subjective, value-laden responses. And again, the best way to tell whether the order of your questions works or not is to try it out in a pilot interview.

In summary, then, questions are at the heart of interviewing, and to collect meaningful data a researcher must ask good ques-

tions. The interviewer can make use of hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions. Multiple questions, leading questions, and questions that can be answered yes or no are to be avoided. The skillful use of probes can yield additional information about a topic.

Beginning the Interview

Collecting data through interviews involves, first of all, determining whom to interview. That depends on what the investigator wants to know and from whose perspective the information is desired. Selecting respondents on the basis of what they can contribute to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study means engaging in purposive or theoretical sampling (discussed in Chapter Three). In a qualitative case study of a community school program, for example, a holistic picture of the program would involve the experiences and perceptions of people having different associations with the program—administrators, teachers, students, community residents. In Kline's (1981) case study of a back-to-industry program for postsecondary faculty, it was essential to interview both postsecondary faculty and industry officials. Unlike survey research in which the number and representativeness of the sample are major considerations, in this type of research the crucial factor is not the number of respondents but the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomenon.

How can such people be identified? One way is through initial on-site observation of the program, activity, or phenomenon under study. On-site observations often involve informal discussions with participants to discover those who should be interviewed in depth. A second means of locating contacts is to begin with a key person who is considered knowledgeable by others and then ask that person for referrals. Initial informants can be found through the investigator's own personal contacts, community and private organizations, advertisements in newspapers or public places, or random door-to-door or person-to-person contacts. Dexter (1970) warns against being misled by an eager but not particularly helpful informant. He suggests that the interviewer convey the idea that early interviews are part of a preliminary exploration that will lead to identifying key informants. This

process can be accelerated by interviewing someone thoroughly familiar with the situation or, conversely, someone who is new enough to the situation to see how it compares to other situations (Denzin, 1970).

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) list five issues that should be addressed at the outset of every interview:

1. The investigator's motives and intentions and the inquiry's purpose
2. The protection of respondents through the use of pseudonyms
3. Deciding who has final say over the study's content
4. Payment (if any)
5. Logistics with regard to time, place, and number of interviews to be scheduled [p. 87–88]

Besides being careful to word questions in language clear to the respondent, the interviewer must be aware of his or her stance toward the interviewee. Since the respondent has been selected by the investigator on purpose, it can be assumed that the participant has something to contribute, has had an experience worth talking about, and has an opinion of interest to the researcher. This stance will go a long way in making the respondent comfortable and forthcoming with what he or she has to offer.

An interviewer should also assume neutrality with regard to the respondent's knowledge; that is, regardless of how antithetical to the interviewer's beliefs or values the respondent's position might be, it is crucial for the success of the interview to avoid arguing, debating, or otherwise letting personal views be known. Patton (1990) distinguishes between neutrality and rapport. "At the same time that I am neutral with regard to the content of what is being said to me, I care very much that that person is willing to share with me what they are saying. *Rapport is a stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. Neutrality is a stance vis-à-vis the content of what that person says*" (p. 317, emphasis in original).

Taylor and Bogdan also suggest several ways of maximizing the time spent getting an informant to share information. A slow-starting interview, for example, can be moved along by asking respondents for basic descriptive information about themselves, the event, or the phenomenon under study. Interviews aimed at constructing

life-history case studies can be augmented by written narratives, personal documents, and daily activity logs that informants are asked to submit ahead of time. The value of an interview, of course, depends on the interviewer's knowing enough about the topic to ask meaningful questions in language easily understood by the informant.

Interviewer and Respondent Interaction

The interaction between interviewer and respondent can be looked at from the perspective of either party or from the interaction itself. Skilled interviewers can do much to effect positive interaction. Being respectful, nonjudgmental, and nonthreatening is a beginning. Obviously, becoming skilled takes practice; practice combined with feedback on performance is the best way to develop the needed skills. Role playing, peer critiquing, videotaping, and observing experienced interviewers at work are all ways novice researchers can improve their performance in this regard.

What makes a good respondent? Anthropologists and sociologists speak of a good respondent as an "informant"—one who understands the culture but is also able to reflect on it and articulate for the researcher what is going on. Key informants are able, to some extent, to adopt the stance of the investigator, thus becoming a valuable guide in unfamiliar territory. But not all good respondents can be considered key informants in the sense that anthropologists use the term. Good respondents are those who can express thoughts, feelings, opinions—that is offer a *perspective*—on the topic being studied. Participants usually enjoy sharing their expertise with an interested and sympathetic listener. For some, it is also an opportunity to clarify their own thoughts and experiences.

Dexter (1970) says there are three variables in every interview situation that determine the nature of the interaction: "(1) the personality and skill of the interviewer, (2) the attitudes and orientation of the interviewee, and (3) the definition of both (and often by significant others) of the situation" (p. 24). These factors also determine the type of information obtained from an interview. Let us suppose, for example, that two researchers are studying an innovative curriculum for first-year college students. One interviewer is predisposed to innovative practices in general, while the other favors traditional educational practices. One student informant is

assigned to the program, while another student requests the curriculum and is eager to be interviewed. The particular combination of interviewer and student that evolves will determine, to some extent, the type of data obtained.

There has been much attention in recent literature to the subjectivity and complexity inherent in the interview encounter. Fontana and Frey (1994) write that scholarship has focused on "some of the assumptions and moral problems present in interviewing and with the controlling role of the interviewer" (p. 363). They note that in addition to race and gender, there has been increased attention to "the voices and feelings of the respondents," and to the interviewer-interviewee relationship. Others have raised questions about the ethical dimensions involved in the relationship (see Chapter Ten for a discussion of ethics), or focused on the complexities of language, or explored the challenges involved in establishing a collaborative research relationship (Munro, 1993).

Some of this discussion is framed in terms of insider-outsider status, especially with regard to visible social identities, most notably gender, race, age, and socioeconomic class (Cotterill and Letherby, 1994; Stanfield II, 1994; Olesen, 1994; Stacey, 1994; Munro, 1993). Seidman (1991, p. 76) discusses how "our experience with issues of class, race, and gender . . . interact with the sense of power in our lives." And, in turn, "the interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power—who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits." Foster (1994), for example, explores the ambiguities and complexities of the interviewer-respondent relationship in her study of attitudes toward law and order among two generations. She analyzes her stance with regard to interactions with women versus men, the younger generation versus the older, the middle class versus the working class. Richman (1994), however, examines his relationships as a male sociologist studying a maternity ward.

Does a researcher need to be a member of the group being investigated to do a credible study? Is it preferable for women to interview women or for Hispanics to interview Hispanics? What about the intersection of race, gender, and class? Are people more likely to reveal information to insiders or outsiders? There are of course no right answers to any of these questions, only the pluses and minuses involved in any combination of interviewer and

respondent. Seidman (1991) suggests that while being highly sensitive to these issues and taking them into account throughout the study, "interviewing requires interviewers to have enough distance to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share, assumptions" (p. 77).

Thus the interviewer-respondent interaction is a complex phenomenon. Both parties bring biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that color the interaction and the data elicited. A skilled interviewer accounts for these factors in order to evaluate the data being obtained. Taking a stance that is nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful of the respondent is but a beginning point in the process.

Recording and Evaluating Interview Data

Of the three basic ways to record interview data, the most common by far is to tape record the interview. This practice ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis. The interviewer can also listen for ways to improve his or her questioning technique. Malfunctioning equipment and a respondent's uneasiness with being recorded are the drawbacks. Most researchers find, however, that after some initial wariness respondents tend to forget they are being taped. Occasionally interviews are videotaped. This practice allows for recording of nonverbal behavior, but it is also more cumbersome and intrusive than tape recording the interview.

A second way to record interview data is to take notes during the interview. Since not everything said can be recorded, and since at the outset of a study a researcher is not certain what is important enough to write down, this method is recommended only when mechanical recording is not feasible. Some investigators like to take written notes in addition to taping the session. The interviewer may want to record his or her reactions to something the informant says, to signal the informant of the importance of what is being said, or to pace the interview.

The third—and least desirable—way to record interview data is to write down as much as can be remembered as soon after the interview as possible. The problems with this method are obvious, but at times, writing or recording during an interview might be intrusive (when interviewing terminally ill patients, for example).

In any case, researchers must write their reflections immediately following the interview. These reflections might contain insights suggested by the interview, descriptive notes on the behavior, verbal and nonverbal, of the informant, parenthetical thoughts of the researcher, and so on. Postinterview notes allow the investigator to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the information itself.

Ideally, verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis. Be forewarned, however, that even with good keyboard skills, transcribing interviews is a tedious and time-consuming project. You can of course hire someone to transcribe tapes for you. This can be expensive, and there are trade-offs in doing it. You do not get the intimate familiarity with your data that doing your own transcribing affords. Also, a transcriber is likely to be unfamiliar with terminology and, not having conducted the interview, will not be able to fill in places where the tape is of poor quality. If someone else has transcribed your tape, it is a good idea to read through the interview while listening to it in order to correct errors and fill in blanks. However, hiring someone to transcribe allows you to spend time analyzing your data instead of transcribing. I recommend that new and experienced researchers transcribe at least the first few interviews of any study, if at all possible. Exhibit 4.1 presents excerpts from a transcribed interview that was conducted as part of a study of consortia of higher education that had failed.

An alternative to fully transcribing an interview is the *interview log*, which I developed as a result of supervising graduate students who often cannot afford the time or cost of transcribing all their interview tapes. The strategy should be used sparingly and only late in a study.

The researcher begins by identifying at the top of the page the name, date, and other necessary details of the interview. The interviewer-researcher then plays the tape and takes notes on important statements or ideas expressed by the informant. Words or phrases or entire sentences are quoted exactly. These notes are coded to the tape counter so the exact location of such words can be accessed quickly at a later time. Tape position is recorded to the left of the words or phrases the researcher deems important. In a column to the far right is space for the researcher to add comments about what was said. The data on the interview log can later be

Exhibit 4.1. Sample Interview from a Case Study of Failed Consortia of Higher Education.

- Interviewer (I): The first question I have is about the mission of [name of consortium]. My understanding is that it had three general areas in terms of mission: (1) the production of courses and materials for learning at a distance, (2) the promotion of external degree programs, and (3) the development of research on the adult learner and learning at a distance. Does that agree with your perceptions of [name of consortium]?
- Respondent (R): I think that was what they were trying to do. Now the extent to which they accomplished it is something else, but I do agree that that is what they were trying to do. It was an offshoot of some experiment in [state] but, in general, I would agree that that is what they were trying to do.
- I: From your perspective, what were the significant accomplishments of [name of consortium]?
- R: I think they did produce some very good programs. Very few, but what they did produce were top quality, and they did try to help the cooperating universities set up the programs in the states. For instance, we had a State Coordinator located at [another institution] and she represented both her institution and our own in setting up learning centers for the state. I suspect we never would have done that without the financial assistance of [the consortium] at the very beginning.
- I: What are the learning centers you referred to?
- R: Places where students could go to take examinations or view the television programs if they had missed them. These were primarily in [another institution's] extension facilities but there were expenses involved and [the consortium] provided funding for them. We still have them, and they never would have been started had it not been for [the consortium] so that is a real plus.
- I: So, in other words, if I am hearing you correctly, [the consortium] served as sort of a catalyst for certain activities that have continued since its demise?
- R: Yes.
- I: What were the shortcomings of [the consortium]?
- R: I think that their ideas were too grandiose. No real funding base that they could count on and the fact that their desire to develop good programs, and they were very good . . . they spent too much money! Now, presumably they couldn't have developed the good programs if they hadn't spent all this money. But I think so much money was

Exhibit 4.1. (continued)

spent on the programming that anything else they might have done just couldn't be done.

- I: So was the focus too much on . . .
- R: Production, yeah . . .
- I: Why do you think [the consortium] was ultimately terminated?
- R: Well, for one thing the leadership, but also the funding. I think when [name] tried to . . . the last straw was when he tried to turn it into a competing institution.
- I: The transition to [name of] University?
- R: Yeah, and people saw that as a possible threat.
- I: How did [the consortium] transform into [name of] University?
- R: I don't know, but I would suspect originally with [name]. Now I've not gone through these files that you have access to and there may be some indication there. I think that when [name] took over . . . well, before he took over, people weren't that hot on [the consortium] but they weren't unduly opposed to it. But he started changing it and it seemed to a lot of us anyway that he was trying to change it to something that was not what we were interested in.
- I: Are there any things about the leadership that you can tell me specifically that may have contributed to the termination of [the consortium]?
- R: I think if a person that is in charge of an organization does not realize, particularly when it's composed of a number of other organizations, if he does not realize we all have an equal say in it . . . if he thinks "I'm going to do something and I don't give a damn about what the member institutions want," it's going to fail because ultimately the leader, unless he or she has a complacent group of member institutions, can't do anything. And it may not be overt clashing; it may be foot-dragging. There are all sorts of ways to express your displeasure and because sometimes. . . . But [name] is a very interesting person. When he was at [institution] he tried to do some very interesting and innovative things, but somehow it didn't work. He's brilliant but that's not always enough. You have to know how to work with people. And if you have a really good idea, you'd better sell it to the people before you go outside and announce it.

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coded according to the emerging themes or categories from the data analysis phase of the study. (Strategies for analyzing qualitative data are covered in Chapters Seven and Eight.)

Exhibit 4.2 is a sample interview log using the same interview data found in Exhibit 4.1. Rather than transcribing the interview verbatim, however, the log captures the main points. Noting the tape position allows the researcher to access the original data quickly. One caveat with this alternative, however, is that the interview log is best used toward the end of a study when you are confirming tentative findings. If it is used too soon, important insights are easily overlooked; nor do you have the luxury of going back over the entire interview for instances of patterns you only recognized late in the study.

In addition to recording interview data for analysis, it is important to assess, as best you can, the quality of the data obtained. Several factors may influence an informant's responses, factors that may be difficult for the researcher to discern. The informant's health, mood at the time of interview, and so on may affect the quality of data obtained, as might an informant's ulterior motives for participating in the project (Whyte, 1982). Furthermore, all information obtained from an informant has been selected, either consciously or unconsciously, from all that he or she knows. What you get in an interview is simply the informant's perception.

While this personal perspective is, of course, what is sought in qualitative research, information may have been distorted or exaggerated. Such distortion can be detected by checking the plausibility of the account and the reliability of the informant (Whyte, 1982). "The major way to detect and correct distortion," according to Whyte, "is by *comparing an informant's account with accounts given by other informants*" (p. 116, emphasis in original). The researcher might also confirm the informant's account by checking documentary material or directly observing the situation (see Chapter Nine for a discussion of validity and reliability).

Summary

In qualitative research, interviewing is often the major source of the qualitative data needed for understanding the phenomenon under study. Interviews can range in structure from those in which

Exhibit 4.2. Sample Interview Log Using Interview in Exhibit 4.1.

Interviewee #8
 Name of Consortium
 Male, Dean of Continuing Education

<i>Tape Position</i>	<i>Respondent's Comments</i>	<i>Researcher's Notes</i>
074	Agrees tried to carry out three-part mission	_____
093	"Very few," but some top-quality programs; learning centers, persons, finances	Importance of people and financing in establishment of programs
109	Describes learning centers; "still have them"—"a real plus"	Some programs continue despite end of consortium
117	_____	Consortium as catalyst
125	Ideas "too grandiose," "spent too much money," "no real funding base"	Funding is a crucial problem
134	"Production" focus	_____
144	Funding as well as leadership reasons for termination; "he tried to turn it into a competing institution"	Leadership important—can't become "competing institution"
169	Change in focus created problem	Importance of individual administrator
179	Leadership problem: "you have to know how to work with people"; must consider member institutions	Leadership qualities needed in consortium

questions and the order in which they are asked are predetermined to totally unstructured interviews in which nothing is set ahead of time. Most common is the semistructured interview that is guided by a set of questions and issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of questions is predetermined.

Asking good questions is key to getting meaningful data. Hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions can be used to elicit good data, while multiple and leading questions, as well as questions yielding yes-and-no answers, should be avoided. Follow-up questions or probes are an important part of the process. An interview guide contains the questions the researcher intends to ask.

Considering how to begin the interview and accounting for some of the complexities in the interaction between interviewer and respondent will result in a more informed analysis of the interview data. This chapter addressed those issues, along with some of the mechanics of recording interview data.