CHAPTER

1 LISTENING, HEARING, AND SHARING

IN THIS CHAPTER:

❖ INTRODUCTION

As we go through our daily lives, we routinely gather information. We want to learn who among our friends is ill, how the new health-care legislation will affect us, or whether a particular movie is worth seeing. We get this information from the news and from talking to friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers. Though sufficient for most of what we need, such informal and sometimes sketchy learning is limited by the knowledge of those we talk to and by the news media's decisions about what to cover. At times, we need more accuracy, depth, and reach than informal learning provides.

If we are curious about why neighboring states like New Mexico and Arizona have such different attitudes toward their Chicano/a residents or what it is like to be an executive in a Fortune 500 company, these informal information channels probably won't help us. If we want to know why doctors sometimes seem to be the advertising agents for expensive medicines or why college roommates think it is okay to secretly record and broadcast a gay sexual encounter, our friends and neighbors are not likely to have the answers.

Many policy and academic questions require answers beyond daily experience. Why do so few people in this country vote, compared with many other countries? To what extent does big business control government through campaign contributions? Under what circumstances do people help strangers? To acquire such information, social scientists have worked out systematic research procedures for learning about people and organizations as well as social, political, and cultural processes.

Much of social science research involves quantification—that is, counting something and then statistically analyzing the findings. Survey researchers ask thousands of people identical questions—how strongly they support or oppose gun control or whether they have been the victims of crime in the past year—tabulate the responses, then look for differences between categories of people, such as old and young, or working and unemployed. Demographers use statistical techniques to look for changes in income, ethnic composition, birth rates, educational attainment, or longevity. Other quantitative social researchers experiment—that is, watch how an intentionally introduced change affects selected outcomes. For example, how does a change in class size influence test scores? Quantitative tools are appropriate in many research projects.

Not all social scientists count, though. Some researchers rely on qualitative techniques and explore a topic with a small number of individuals who have relevant experience, asking questions, listening to the answers, and then asking more questions. Other qualitative researchers observe individuals in social settings or examine the content of documents, while many combine in their research a variety of observational, documentary, and interviewing tools. Qualitative researchers focus on depth rather than breadth; they care less about finding averages and more about understanding specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments in time that are important or revealing.

Different assumptions guide these contrasting approaches to research. Underlying the quantitative orientation is a set of ideas and values termed ***positivism***. Positivists search for what they consider to be objective, universal truths using standardized data-gathering techniques.

Positivists assume that there is one correct version of reality and that it can be discovered using quantitative measurement tools. Many qualitative researchers follow a ***naturalistic approach,*** often guided by a ***social construction approach*** that focuses on how people perceive their worlds and how they interpret their experiences. These researchers argue that people construct their own realities based on their experiences and interpretations.

Social researchers sometimes have strong opinions about which approach is better. Positivists often dismiss naturalistic research, claiming it is subjective, while constructionists argue that the statistical average of what people report on a standardized survey is less important than how people interpret what they have experienced.

Fortunately, you need not choose between approaches; you need only pick the appropriate techniques for the problem you want to study. If you want to know which candidate is likely to win an election, asking people for whom they are planning to vote and counting the results makes sense. But if you want to put together the story of a political campaign, you ask the candidates and their staffs what happened and combine their narratives. When context and richness are important, when you need to know what something feels like or how it works from the inside, when you are looking at something unusual or unique, naturalistic research tools are more appropriate.

At times, you might want to combine quantitative and qualitative tools in one project. You can count income in dollars to measure the amount of poverty, but to understand the impact of low income on people, the stresses they feel and the adaptations they make, you need descriptive, qualitative information. Such information gives meaning to the numbers.

STRENGTHS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

When using ***in-depth qualitative interviewing***, one of the key naturalistic research methods, researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest. Through such interviews, researchers explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own. They learn what it is like to lose a lifelong partner or to be a librarian, a senator, or a prostitute. By listening carefully to others, researchers can extend their intellectual and emotional reach across a variety of barriers. Middle-class professors study debutante balls and homeless people; political scientists research political Islam and failed governments around the world; middle-aged anthropologists interview the elderly in retirement communities and talk to children in hospitals. Women study men's Saturday night poker games, and men research women's health clubs. There is nothing to stop couch potatoes from studying football teams.

Qualitative interviewing helps reconstruct events the researchers have never experienced, from illegal border crossings to becoming a paid assassin. By putting together descriptions from separate interviewees, researchers create portraits of complicated processes. For example, they can interview family members on the details of family life and then, combining these interviews, describe how husbands and wives balance work and family responsibilities, divide up tasks, and manage to discipline their children.

Sometimes talking to those involved in a process or program can challenge long-held assumptions and help recast ineffective public policies.

For example, based on interviews with schizophrenic patients, Larry Davidson concluded that these individuals often recover sufficiently to function independently in a community, contravening prior understandings (Davidson, 2003). A study of how gay men contracted AIDS found that transmission resulted not from drugs or lack of knowledge, but from trusting the wrong person, requiring a new look at ways to reduce incidence of the disease (Aguinaldo et al., 2009).

In-depth interviewing helps portray ongoing social processes. For example, one interviewing study followed new mothers during the first year after their children were born, to see how they became mothers, both emotionally and intellectually (Miller, 2007). Other studies have included processes varying from the hiring of day laborers to the search for online sex partners (Couch & Liamuttong, 2008; Purser, 2009).

Qualitative interviewing studies can make older people more understandable to the younger. Studs Terkel's in-depth interviews of those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II provide moving accounts of how ordinary people responded to traumatic times (Terkel, 1970; Terkel, 1984). Oral histories describe the extermination of Jews and Roma by Germany in World War II, portray the mass killings in Cambodia, or narrate the revolution in Iran when religious fundamentalists took over the state. Such research helps explain the traumas that shaped a generation. Oral histories not only can make history real for children and grandchildren, but they also can fill in the gaps in formal histories based on written records.

In-depth interviewing captures change through retrospective interviews as well as through repeated interviews across time. A multiyear interviewing study of the interaction between police and gangs in the Mexican American community made clear how gang relationships with authorities evolved (Durán, 2009). A project on violence in Ireland looked at how people responded to the violence when it first began and then examined its impact a generation later (Dillenburger, Fargas, & Akhonzada, 2008).

Another way of getting at the past is through life history interviews, in which individuals discuss their childhood, education, jobs, marriages and divorces, children, illnesses, crises, and good times. By comparing life histories of people born at different times, researchers answer such questions as the changes in women's lives after women's liberation and their wholesale entry into the labor force, or the effect of civil rights legislation on the lives of African Americans.

In-depth interviewing allows the researcher to explore complex, contradictory, or counterintuitive matters. For example, one interviewing study examined how some members of violent gangs are able to avoid fights (Garot, 2009). Another study showed how, contrary to expectations, male gang members were able to move into the economic mainstream (MacLeod, 1995/2004).

As naturalistic researchers, qualitative interviewers examine the complexity of the real world by exploring multiple perspectives toward an issue. This approach to data gathering allows one to see life in the round, from all angles. Interviewing those involved in contending sides of a dispute or listening to differing versions of the same incident leads to more thoughtful and nuanced conclusions.

In-depth interviewing is the tool of choice for exploring personal and sensitive issues or morally ambiguous choices people have made. How does one decide whether to discontinue life support for a parent? When is it okay to cheat on an exam? The qualitative interview may be the only way to explore incest, abortion, child abandonment, or domestic violence, and it is a useful tool

for examining any behavior that is illegal or that people may want to hide.

Qualitative interviewing projects are especially important when the processes being studied are nearly invisible. For instance, an interviewing project investigated bullying among nurses in some hospitals, a phenomenon known only to the victims and perpetrators and thus hard for anyone else to see, let alone count or measure (Hutchinson, Vickers, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2009). Another interviewing project explored the ways in which a company prevented employees from protesting against inappropriate demands placed on them (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009); qualitative interviews allowed researchers to study and explain what did not take place and hence could not be seen.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING COMPARED TO ORDINARY CONVERSATIONS

In-depth interviewing studies are common in many academic fields, such as education, nursing, business, marketing, communications, criminal justice, organization theory, medicine and health, aging, ethnic studies, sociology, urban studies, public administration, political science, and comparative politics. Even policy analysts, who have long been wed to quantitative approaches, have added qualitative tools to their repertory. Insurance investigators, community organizers, police and private detectives, doctors and nurses, journalists, and accident investigators use qualitative interviews in their work.

As we describe in Chapter 3, there are a variety of closely related approaches for doing in-depth qualitative interviews. In this book, we emphasize one approach that we call *responsive interviewing*, although much of our advice holds no matter which approach to in-depth interviewing you follow. The essence of responsive interviewing is picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide.

The techniques for conducting responsive interviews build on some of the skills of ordinary conversations but go beyond them in specific ways. Interviews are more one sided than ordinary conversations; the interviewer asks most of the questions, and the interviewee provides most of the answers. Rather than just listening, the interviewer keeps a record of the conversation. Responsive interviews usually focus on a single topic and explore it thoroughly rather than skipping around from one matter to another. At least early on in a research project, interviews are often between strangers.

Focus and Depth

In contrast to ordinary conversations, interviews are likely to focus on a ***research question*** and pursue it in great depth. An ordinary conversation often has an explicit purpose but rarely regarding what a social scientist would consider a research question. A research question asks why something happened, what it means, or how a process or event unfolded, not who won the ball game.

Research questions can be about understanding important *concepts*—that is, learning about the ideas that define a culture or how people understand their world. Researchers might ask what people mean when they call someone *sexist* or inquire how people define *success* or *failure* or what a *bug* means in computing. What

do young people mean when they call someone a *loser,* how does one get that designation, and what are the consequences of being so labeled? In ordinary conversations, people rarely spend much time, much less hold multiple conversations, to ascertain how people understand a particular concept.

Other research questions focus on events or processes in an effort to reconstruct and understand what happened. In ordinary conversations, people do discuss events, such as dates or ball games, but they do so with friends and acquaintances rather than selecting and talking with a variety of people who are chosen for their different information or different perspectives. In ordinary conversations, people mostly focus on the immediate outcome—how was the date, who won the game. Qualitative researchers are more likely to look at events as they unfold over time, looking at chains of causes and consequences and searching for patterns—not just what happened at the last city council meeting but how council members make decisions or how citizens become engaged in public issues.

In qualitative interviews, researchers seek more depth but on a narrower range of issues than people do in normal conversations. Researchers plan interview questions in advance, organizing them so they are linked to one another to obtain the information needed to complete a whole picture. Instead of chatting on this and that, a researcher has to encourage the interviewee to answer thoughtfully, openly, and in detail on the topic at hand.

If a researcher heard that a community group had held a meeting, he or she would want to know who was there, what was said, and what decisions, if any, were made. He or she would want to know the history of the issues, the controversies, and something about the decision makers—who they were, their concerns, their disagreements. The researcher might want to know about the tone of the meeting, whether anyone got angry and stomped out, or whether people laughed and generally seemed to be having a good time. This depth, detail, and richness is what Clifford Geertz (1973) called *thick description*.

To get such depth and detail, responsive interviewers structure an interview around three types of linked questions: ***main questions, probes,*** and ***follow-up questions.*** Main questions assure that each of the separate parts of a research question are answered. Probes are standard expressions that encourage interviewees to keep talking on the subject, providing examples and details. Follow-up questions ask interviewees to elaborate on key concepts, themes, ideas, or events that they have mentioned to provide the researcher with more depth.

Overall, qualitative interviewing requires intense listening, a respect for and curiosity about people's experiences and perspectives, and the ability to ask about what is not yet understood. *Qualitative interviewers listen to hear the meaning of what interviewees tell them.* When they cannot figure out that meaning, they ask follow-up questions to gain clarity and precision.

Conversations With Strangers

Unlike most ordinary conversations, interviews usually occur between relative strangers. Yet success in responsive interviewing requires developing a trusting personal relationship between the researcher and the interviewee that encourages open, honest, and detailed replies, often on matters of an intensely personal nature. Since conversations are often recorded, trust is

required that the researcher will not make public what could be embarrassing or harmful to the interviewee.

In building an open and trusting relationship, researcher and interviewee work toward forming what we term a ***conversational partnership***. This term conveys the respect the researcher has for the interviewee's experience and insights and emphasizes that interviewing is a joint process of discovery. The term ***conversational partner*** also conveys the idea that each interviewee is an individual with distinct experience, knowledge, and perspective, not interchangeable with anyone else. In conversational partnerships, both interviewee and researcher play an active role in shaping the discussion, leading to a congenial and cooperative experience in which the interviewee comes to feel understood, accepted, and trusted as a source of reliable information.

Though we call this relationship a partnership, it is not completely balanced. The researcher determines the research problem and asks most of the questions, while the conversational partner provides most of the answers. However, what the conversational partner says shapes what the researcher subsequently asks; and in responsive interviewing, the researcher customizes questions for each interviewee, accommodating both to what the person knows and to the topics that the conversational partner is most comfortable discussing.

In a conversational partnership, much information of a personal nature may be shared over a period of months or even years. Over time, the relationship can become a friendship. Whether or not it develops into an enduring friendship, the relationship between the interviewer and his or her conversational partners is real and imposes ethical obligations on the researcher.

THE AUTHORS AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE RESPONSIVE INTERVIEWING MODEL

Responsive interviewing is a specific variety of qualitative interviewing. It emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning. Responsive interviewing accepts and adjusts to the personalities of both conversational partners. The model assumes that what people have experienced is true for them and that by sharing these experiences, the researcher can enter the interviewee's world. The researcher's role is to gather narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from an array of conversational partners and put them together in a reasoned way that re-creates a culture or describes a process or set of events in a way that participants would recognize as real.

Responsive interviewing brings out new information, often of startling candor, and often suggests unanticipated interpretations. The freshness and depth of the interviews makes them exciting to do and, later on, to read. Responsive interviewing is relatively easy to learn, adapts to a variety of interviewing situations, and combines well with other qualitative research tools, especially participant observation. Responsive interviewing is generally gentle and cooperative, feels respectful, and is ethical. After decades of interviewing, we have settled in with this model because it works for us.

Over the course of our careers, we have interviewed a wide variety of individuals on many different topics, using several different interviewing techniques. We have had formal interviews

with high-level officials in the national government, discussing how their agencies adapted to budget reductions. We have had conversations with Southeast Asian farmers about projects to raise ducks on flooded rice fields, and interviewed local Thai officials about village councils and local democracy. We have done informal interviews in retirement homes on how people cope with what they see as the last step on a long journey. We have talked to city officials about budget reforms and about contracting out, and talked to young families about the pluses and minuses of living in cooperative housing. We have done oral history interviews in a small college, and life history interviews with parents and other relatives. We have interviewed across cultures with a translator and interviewed in a foreign language.

Many of our interviews have been on sensitive topics. We have interviewed about corruption and illegal deficits, about phony governmental statistics and embarrassing tactics that occurred during the change from one presidential administration to the next. We have had conversations about local insurgencies and murdered Peace Corps volunteers. While some people may have lied to us or distorted their role in events, most of the interviews have been remarkably open, and most of our conversational partners have been eager to share what they know.

We have had to remain flexible, arranging what we do around the interviewees' availability and need for privacy. Herb has interviewed on the back of a motorcycle, in moving buses, and on street corners in inner-city neighborhoods, while Irene has interviewed in restaurants (she advises to watch out for the french fries; the grease will make your notes unreadable later), in parking lots, and walking along public streets. Herb has done interviews in makeshift and sometimes bullet-hole-riddled offices in poverty-stricken neighborhoods and in fancy downtown buildings with views overlooking the financial district. We've interviewed in peasant shacks in Thailand, in vans on highways in China, and in upscale U.S. suburban homes.

Some interviews have taken unexpected twists. The most bizarre event occurred years ago, when we were studying rural economic development. We arrived at our appointment and found the interviewee sitting in the middle of the room with a shotgun in his lap. We had planned to ask about a project to improve irrigation but asked instead why he was sitting in the middle of the room with a shotgun. Such unpredictability adds to the excitement and challenge of interviewing.

When interviewees felt information was too sensitive to share in their place of work, we found that moving from an office to an informal setting worked. Irene interviewed a city manager at home, with a drink in his hand, to discuss how his city got into deficit, a violation of state law. Herb was having ethical qualms asking one of his interviewees about a fight the interviewee, a housing advocate, had with a legislator who was the interviewee's friend. One day, Herb bumped into his interviewee in the street; the person struck up a conversation and volunteered the information detailing the fight with the legislator—sparing Herb the need to ask this stressful question. Being around when someone is ready to talk is sometimes what is needed for a successful interview.

In many of our projects, we have combined in-depth interviewing with participant observation and documentary analysis and, at times, even combined our qualitative studies with surveys and census data. In observational work to prepare for interviews, we have watched city council meetings and council workshops, attended breakfast meetings run by corporations for high-level officials, and accompanied officials

on their daily rounds (Herb once learned how to vaccinate a water buffalo by following a veterinarian around). Although we have relied on many sources of information, our richest, subtlest, and most insightful data have come from the in-depth interviews.

Today, we consider ourselves naturalistic researchers whose primary tool for gathering information is in-depth interviewing. But we came to develop and use this model only over time. Our graduate training reflected the positivist models dominant at the time we were in school. Herb, with a background in mathematics, did graduate work in a department that was best known for its quantitative training. Irene's schooling was at a university that, though historically famous for urban ethnography, at that time emphasized quantitative approaches in demography, network analysis, and survey research.

We both have conducted conventional surveys. Background surveys of Thai farmers were part of Herb's initial project on rural economic development, and he complemented his in-depth interviewing studies of economic development practitioners with a national mail survey. Irene has done surveys of water rates to see who was subsidized and who paid more for a gallon of water, an unobtrusive measure of political culture and values. Both of us have used census data to help document how widespread problems are.

We recognize that many topics are best researched through quantitative techniques, especially when the underlying data are inherently numeric, as are votes, dollars spent, or changes in population composition or income levels. But over the years, it became clear to us that counting what could be reasonably counted was not going to answer the kinds of questions we wanted answered. Quantitative methods assume that researchers already know both the key problems and the answer categories; these types of questions were not very useful for exploring new territory or creating new theory and often missed turning points, subtleties, and cross pressures.

We also found that sometimes the numeric data are flawed, yet researchers continue to use the information as if it were accurate and true. For example, Irene discovered that cities were required to self-report their financial situation to the census, but some of them failed to do so when they began to run deficits, and they reused old data; as the Census Bureau itself fell on hard times, it had fewer dollars to check the data it received. The more we learned about how numeric data were collected or what this information meant, the more skeptical we became of studies based on flawed data.

Our move toward the responsive interviewing model, however, was less because of problems with quantitative models and more because of increasing understanding of the strengths of in-depth interviewing. We appreciated how easy it was to change interviewing style to accommodate the interviewee, as well as the variety in interviewing situations. Interviewing a Thai peasant involved slow questioning, usually while sipping a hot drink or chewing fermented tea leaves. Interviewing a busy ranking bureaucrat required fast-paced and focused questions, showing respect for the senior official's limited time. Some of our conversational partners expected direct questions but did not like give-and-take, while others relished that same kind of exchange. Some liked a series of questions, written out and examined in advance, while others were comfortable spending full time answering one or two questions and then talking about related issues that occurred to them, with minimal intervention on our parts. Since preferences were so marked, we learned to go with the flow and to not try to impose a single pattern.

We also learned over time when and how to ask sensitive questions and how to retreat when asking questions that turned out to be more sensitive or controversial than we anticipated. The model was forgiving of our mistakes, and that, too, we appreciated.

As we gained experiencing in hearing data, it became clearer to us that people had different interpretations of the same event or what had initially seemed to us to be the same cultural rules, and that one version was not necessarily or automatically privileged over the others. Most important, we learned not to assume that our analysis alone was right or the only possible answer to the research question. The truth, we discovered, often was multiple, each person having his or her own version that was true to him or her. We felt that it was better to acknowledge and learn to work with people's perceptions, and better to recognize our own filters and biases than try to appear neutral. Responsive interviewers do not need to claim they have found truth, only that they have learned to see the world from the perspective of the interviewees.

Sometimes the varying understandings we heard overlapped, complementing one another, but at other times the answers were contradictory. We learned to carefully sift through our transcripts to find those responses that seemed more reliable and to lean more heavily on those, but we also began to realize that we could include in our analysis multiple interpretations from distinct points of view, treating these differences as part of what we were trying to understand. Once one grants the legitimacy of a multiplicity of overlapping versions, it is nearly impossible to go back to believing in one single, external truth. Doing so feels like cutting off a piece of a fine portrait in order to fit the canvas into a frame rather than building a right-sized frame to accommodate the artist's entire vision.

We confess that as we learned to interview, we often made mistakes. We discovered quickly that our initial ideas of what we had to find out were often wrong, so the questions we had planned in advance would miss the mark. We had to learn to be flexible, to adjust our questions so they followed where our conversational partners were pointing; as a result, we were rewarded with new material and new interpretations, explanations, and mechanisms we knew nothing about. We got caught up in the process of discovery, finding it exciting and absorbing.

Over time, we formalized our approach into the *responsive interviewing model*. In this model, both interviewer and interviewee are treated as people, with feelings, opinions, and experiences. Rather than emphasizing detachment, responsive interviewing encourages building a relationship between researchers and conversational partners. This model encourages the researcher to adapt to new information and change directions if necessary to get greater depth on unanticipated insights. Responsive interviewing assumes that people interpret events and construct their own understanding of what happened, and that the researcher's job is to listen, balance, and analyze these constructions in order to understand how people see their worlds.

In this text, we describe the techniques that guide qualitative in-depth interviewing, emphasizing the responsive interviewing model. We have laced the text with illustrations of problems we have run into—and usually managed to get out of—underscoring the unpredictability and flexibility of in-depth qualitative interviewing. Responsive interviewing allows you to make mistakes and, for the most part, recover from them.

The examples in the book are from our own research, from the experiences of our colleagues, and from published literature, especially research published since the last edition. Our colleague,

Jim Thomas, a criminologist, was particularly generous in giving us examples of his experiences with less accessible populations, such as people in prison and computer hackers.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In Chapters 2 and 3, we contrast the intellectual frameworks that undergird qualitative and quantitative research methods, introduce the idea of style, and then compare different approaches to in-depth interviewing, emphasizing the responsive interviewing model. Though in-depth qualitative interviewing design is flexible, it is not haphazard. Chapters 4 and 5 describe how qualitative interviewing projects are initially designed and later redesigned to assure quality.

Chapter 6 examines what is involved in a conversational partnership, emphasizing the ethical obligations imposed by this relationship. The chapter contrasts this larger set of ethical obligations with the formal requirements of institutional review boards (IRBs), formally designated committees set up to protect research subjects. Since IRBs often have to approve research proposals, we offer some suggestions of how qualitative researchers can manage this process.

The next five chapters describe the steps involved in working out interview questions. Chapter 7 explores how the relationship between the conversational partners impacts the interview. Chapter 8 examines how the three forms of questions—main questions, probes, and follow-up questions—complement one another. Chapter 9 explains how main questions structure an interview, suggests ways of wording, and describes a variety of probes that keep the interview on topic and signal the interviewee about the level of depth and detail the interviewer is looking for. Which incidents, topics, concepts and themes to follow up, and when, why, and with whom are covered in Chapter 10. The material in these four chapters is sufficient for carrying out most in-depth interviews. Still, there are situations—interviewing more than person, foreign-language interviews, talking with experts, or dealing with special populations—that require adjustment to the model. Chapter 11 suggests how to tweak the responsive interviewing model to accommodate these special situations.

Chapter 12 outlines ways of analyzing your data. An appendix describes software packages currently in use for analyzing qualitative data and examines what they can do and what you should probably not allow them to do for you. Chapter 13 shows how to present the research results in richly descriptive, nuanced reports and then how to get these reports published. In Chapter 14, we describe how in-depth interviewing has influenced us both as researchers and as people and suggest that it might do the same for you.