The Active Interviewer

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The Active Interviewer

Even survey research methodology holds that interviewers must be active, but within fairly strict limits. Interviewers are instructed to skillfully solicit answers, but to preformulated questions, under constraints designed to keep them from contaminating that which lies within the passive respondent's vessel of answers. Indeed, restraint may be the byword of standardized interviewing, as interviewers are typically admonished to follow guidelines like the following:

> Read the questions exactly as worded.
> If the respondent's answer to the initial question is not a complete and adequate answer, probe for clarification and elaboration in a way that does not influence the content of the answers that result.
> Answers should be recorded without interviewer discretion; the answers recorded should reflect what the respondent says, and they should only reflect what the respondent says.
> The interviewer communicates a neutral, nonjudgmental stance with respect to the substance of the answers. The interviewer should not provide any personal information that might imply any particular values or preference with respect to topics covered in the interview, nor should the interviewer provide any feedback to respondents, positive or negative, with respect to the specific content of the answers they provide. (Fowler & Mangione, 1990, p. 33)

This image of the interviewer as a disinterested catalyst seems at odds with interviewing practice. Although interviewers are told to “merely soak up information like a sponge, without giving any back” (Backstrom & Hursh, 1963, p. 135), Converse and Schuman (1974) also tell us that interviewers face the “continuing cross pressures” of conducting neutral inquiry within the context of a conversation (pp. 22-36). Attempts to remain uninvolved typically fail. Indeed, research suggests that as much as 50% of everything interviewers say after a survey interview begins is something other than a designed question or a neutral probe (Cannell, Fisher, & Marquis, 1968). The conversation is not merely incidental “chatter,” but involves talk that is central to doing the research. Rapport and comfort

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Activating Narrative Production

If interviewers are as deeply implicated in the production of responses as this suggests, we need to consider an alternative conceptualization of the interviewer's role. Although the respondent actively constructs and assembles answers, he or she does not simply “break out” talking, so to speak. Neither elaborate narratives nor one-word replies leap from the respondent without provocation. The active interviewer is responsible for inciting respondents' answers. But the active interviewer does far more than dispassionate questioning; he or she *activates narrative production.* Where the standardized approach attempts to strip the interview of all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli, the consciously active interviewer intentionally, concertedly provokes

responses by indicating—even suggesting—narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents for the respondent to engage in addressing the research questions under consideration.

The active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher's interest. He or she does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections, pertinence being partly defined by the research topic and partly by the substantive horizons of ongoing responses. The active respondent may selectively exploit a vast range of narrative resources, but it is the active interviewer's job to direct and harness the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand.

Incitement and Narrative Precedence

Preformulated questions may serve as catalysts for respondents' answers, but myriad other interactional and discursive gestures also provoke and shape responses. The mere invitation to participate in an interview, for example, is sometimes more than sufficient incitement for some respondents. Consider how little it took to provoke an extended, detailed life story during a study of elderly residents of adult congregate-living facilities, for example. In this case, the interviewer (I) introduced himself to the respondent, briefly explained the purpose of the interview, then launched his inquiry with the briefest of requests. The respondent (R) replied enthusiastically.

I:
Tell me about your life.

R:
Well, because of this older brother, I had such empathy for him that it really handicapped my life briefly. He was not invited to parties and I was and because of him, I wouldn't go and so this colored my life as I grew up… .

Thirty minutes later, the respondent was still in the midst of the story. Finally, following the respondent's comment about his “punchiness,” the interviewer asked his first question:

R:
… I feel like a prize fighter who's been in the ring too long, and I'm a little punchy right now.

I:
If you were to write the story of your life, let's say, what would the chapters be about?

With the exception of some minor displays of attentiveness, and a few brief requests for clarification, the interviewer had not intervened in a half-hour narrative, a story comprising accounts of life, love, hardship, work, occupation, family, and other unanticipatable concerns of the moment. The respondent needed little prompting to activate his narrative proclivities. It seemed that the “interview” was hardly necessary.

Still, our preceding descriptions of the interview situation tended to gloss over what proved to be several important ways that the interviewer provided narrative incitement and precedence for the emerging life history. We noted above, for example, that “the interviewer introduced himself to the respondent, briefly explained the purpose of the interview, then launched his inquiry with the briefest of requests,” mentioning this merely “in passing,” as if it were incidental to the information-gathering process. But we neglected to show how important this “preliminary” work is for evoking the respondent's story.

From the active perspective, all aspects of interviewer-respondent interaction can provide precedents for how to proceed. Starting with the very introduction of the interviewer and the study itself, the interviewer offers resources and points of reference for the conversation to come. In the example above, respondents were told that a researcher from the university would like to talk to them about their lives and experiences, right up to the present. Each interview began the same way: “Everyone has a life story. Tell me about your life, in about 20 minutes or so if you can. Begin with whatever you'd like.” Regardless of how brief or innocuous, this introduction of the study topic and the initial invitation to speak served to inform respondents that important “researchers” were interested in respondents' stories. Moreover, the introduction focused on the respondent's life *as a whole* in relation to current circumstances, no matter how trivial or mundane the respondent might think that experience was. The emerging life story then provided an emerging empirical basis for inviting respondents to talk further about aspects of their past, present, and future that might be relevant to the study.

Even the mere identity of the researcher primed respondent's stories, positioning respondents in relation to how they might respond. Simply having the opportunity to have a college professor or an “expert in the field” ask for one's opinion was incentive enough for many respondents to construct marvelously detailed life histories. By the same token, some respondents are inhibited by the “importance” of authority figures. Similarly, an older female respondent might orient to a younger interviewer “as a mother” if the interviewer did not encourage an alternate understanding of their relationship. Or a respondent might assume the role of “the expert” if the interviewer was able to present him- or herself as ignorant or curious about the subject at hand, not an expert in his or her own right. The point is not that particular identity framings are preferable for establishing good rapport or maintaining an unbiased atmosphere. Rather, it is that the presentation of *any* identity is an activity that must be considered and can, to a degree, be actively manipulated to facilitate talk about relevant subject matters. This is not something to be eliminated or standardized; it is something to be actively used to productively engage respondents in the research task.

Conditioning Stories

Like interviewer identity, talk that is conventionally seen to *merely* introduce a study, smooth out conversation, or cultivate rapport can also be viewed as an active, consequential part of the interviewing process. In the standard model, such talk is considered incidental to the collection of information, done only to facilitate communication. Understood in this way, introductory remarks and statements made to ease transitions from one question to another are designed with an eye toward their neutrality. But in the active interview, we can

see how such talk clearly provides precedence and direction.

The introduction to an interview is something of a signpost to guide active respondents through the open terrain of their experience. It can suggest relevant ways of thinking about and linking experience, bringing alternate resources into play, conditioning the stories that emerge. Consider how the following three introductions to standardized interview studies provide distinctive precedence for respondent participation.

Introduction A

> Hello! I'm_____ from the National Opinion Research Center. We're conducting a national survey about how people are feeling in general about the kinds of activities people do in their leisure time—that is, their spare time when they are not working. There are questions about your moods, and about the time you spend watching television or going to sports events, about your social activities, and some about your use of alcoholic drinks. (Sudman & Bradburn, 1983, p. 216)

Introduction B

> In the past few years there has been a lot of discussion about what policies and activities of our state colleges and universities should be. Some of the questions being asked here at Washington State University (WSU) include these: is WSU meeting the needs and desires of the state's residents?… We are conducting this study because we feel that the residents of Washington, all of whom support WSU through the taxes they pay, should have their opinions heard on these important matters. (Dillman, 1978, p. 168)

Introduction C

> As a former student, your school is interested in how well the vocational and non-vocational programs met your needs to make a living. (Dillman, 1978, p. 168)

Designed merely to introduce a standardized interview study, tell what the study was about, and convince the respondent of the study's utility, none of these was seriously considered for the extent to which it conditioned the interview process. In its own way, however, each opening gambit significantly positions the respondent in relation to the questions that are about to be asked. Introduction A, for example, prepares the respondent to engage the interview on a very “ordinary” basis. It seeks the opinion of a respondent who is cast a one of “the people” who have feelings about a number of mundane issues. The introduction stresses how it is “your” opinions, moods, and activities that are important. In contrast, Introduction B positions the respondent as a taxpaying resident of the state who has a right to voice an opinion on how revenues are spent. Introduction C is even more specific in asking for opinions of “former students.” Each of these introductions actively designates a distinctive perspective from which the respondent is to respond. Intentional or not, the respondent is placed at a particular vantage point, implicitly, if not expressly, suggesting orientations to the interview topic and the questions to follow.

An activated interviewer can more explicitly take account of such positioning opportunities by specifically and

strategically suggesting standpoints. For example, consider what was accomplished during an interview study of interorganizational relations and the coordinating function of a community-based cancer control agency, Community Cancer Control (CCC). The loosely structured interview study was introduced to "key informants" by asking them to discuss and evaluate how well CCC had been able to coordinate the diverse activities of other cancer control organizations in the area. The introduction explicitly told respondents that they "were selected to speak for your organization in evaluating CCC." Responding from this perspective, an executive of a university-based cancer center offered the following response: "CCC can't be thought of in terms of effective coordination…. It wasn't coordinated when they walked into an organization right after we did…. Sometimes we got in each other's way, competed for the same things." Later, near the end of the interview, the interviewer intentionally asked the executive to reposition herself: "If you think of CCC from the point of view of the Oncology Organizations Coordinating Group [a coalition of top-level executives], how would you evaluate its coordination?" The executive replied, "As much as I saw us duplicating services, I have to admit that getting us together on a regular basis certainly helped us clarify our respective roles, clear our calendars, let us know what we were all thinking, and the like."

The person's personal opinion was different from their institutional one

E.g., Goffman's animator, author, principal

The active interviewer thus provoked evaluations using situationally variable criteria, leading to strikingly different assessments. From the vessel-of-answers approach, one would certainly question the reliability of this interview, given the two distinctly different—hence "unreliable"—answers given to ostensibly the same question. But viewing this in terms of active interviewing, by repositioning the respondent, the interviewer was able to elicit two equally legitimate and authoritative evaluations, each reflecting an organizationally circumscribed orientation to different, yet vital, aspects of the situation in question.

Nearly every aspect of the interview conversation can condition responses. In standardized interviewing, for example, transition statements are viewed as conversational bridges between questions. They are considered necessary interactional devices, largely incidental to the production of actual answers. But these devices can also invite consequential shifts in orientation that influence respondents' interpretive focus. Consider how the following internal transition between specific survey interview questions urges the respondent to assume a unique interpretive position, a process similar to that seen in the previously discussed introductions.

> Even though it may be very unlikely, think for a moment about how various areas of your life might be different if you were separated (from your spouse). For each of the following areas, how do you think things would change? (Institute for Survey Research, 1987)

Note how the transition maneuvers the respondent into a position from which to answer ensuing questions. Indeed, the statement is a virtual set of instructions, telling the respondent how to think about what to say.

Other "orienting" statements may suggest diverse interpretive resources, even though they intend to legitimize a particular range of responses. The following transition and introduction to a survey question, for example, offers specific alternatives for how a respondent might feel about "the government in Washington," implicitly discouraging other alternatives.

> Some people are afraid the government in Washington is getting too powerful for the good of the country and the individual person. Others feel that the government in Washington is not getting too strong. Do you have an opinion on this or not? (Center for Political Studies, 1992)

Here, the interviewer explicitly provides exemplars of particular opinions, suggesting an appropriate way that the respondent might frame the topic under consideration.

The point is not to criticize these standardized forms for their inadvertent contamination of the respondents' perspectives. Rather, these examples illustrate how active even the most ostensibly passive interview must inevitably be. Recognizing that interpretation is always context dependent, active interviewing can be more explicit in the ways that it manipulates frames of reference for narrative production.

Using Background Knowledge

Sensitivity to context underscores the need for interviewers to be at least minimally aware of the cultural and "ethnographic background" within which interviews are embedded. Interviewers are often cautioned that they must "know the local setting" to ask good questions and interpret the meaning of answers (see Briggs, 1986; Cicourel, 1964). By drawing on background knowledge, active interviewers can make their research more productive, incorporating indigenous interpretive resources, perspectives, and landmarks into their inquiries. This is, of course, an implicit argument in favor of combining ethnographic observation with interviewing, not only to heighten rapport with, and understanding of, informants but to take advantage of, and reveal, the local *whats* of experience.

The interviewer's background knowledge can sometimes be an invaluable resource for assisting respondents to explore and describe their circumstances, actions, and feelings. Indeed, citing shared experience is often a useful way of providing concrete referents on which inquiries and answers can focus. For example, during a study of involuntary commitment proceedings leading to the hospitalization of persons who allegedly were mentally ill (see Holstein, 1993), the researcher conducted several interviews with representatives of the District Attorney's office (DAs), looking for insight into DAs' case management and argumentation strategies. Although informative, most of these interviews yielded responses that portrayed DAs' actions as strictly "by the book." That is, the DAs described what they did and how they handled cases in terms of the ideal model of how involuntary commitment cases should be conducted, offering few details of how daily practice might relate to the model.

Having observed dozens of cases for this study, the researcher became progressively more familiar with everyday courtroom events, and, in the course of one interview with a DA, eventually began to refer to cases he had witnessed over the past few weeks. Instead of asking a rather abstract question like "How do you convince the judge that candidate patients can't function in their daily lives?" the researcher was able to ask, "Yesterday, you got that guy to say several things that seemed to strike everyone as real signs of trouble. How did that happen?" Prompted by several additional questions about specific aspects of the case in question, the

DA proceeded to explain in great detail how he worked through the interrogation of this particular candidate patient, at the same time generalizing about his typical interrogation practices in relation to this specific case. Eventually, he concluded by saying, “I was just letting him hang himself,” furnishing a colorful vernacular label for one of the practices that became an analytic focus for subsequent analyses of the commitment process (Holstein, 1988, 1993).

The experience of interviewing itself can provide useful background knowledge. The information and sentiments that particular respondents present can serve as the basis for concretely relating to the experience of other respondents. Whereas the standardized interview would try to limit informational “spillage” from one interview to another, active interviewing takes advantage of the growing stockpile of background knowledge that the interviewer collects in prior interviews to pose concrete questions and explore facets of respondents' circumstances that would not otherwise be probed.

Prior experience can thus be used as a resource by both interviewers and respondents. As the interviewer becomes aware of the circumstances of respondents' activities and circumstances, he or she can refer to those circumstances as a way of linking the respondent's experiential location to the researcher's more conceptual issues and questions. Respondents have something to which they might concretely attach their narratives. And both can make sense of the conversation because of their familiarity with the circumstances in question. DeVault (1990) argues that sensitive feminist interviewing requires competent asking and listening grounded in background knowledge of women's experience. We want to generalize her message: Background knowledge in any research circumstance, involving *all types* of interviewers and respondents, provides direction and precedent, connecting the researcher's interest to the respondent's experience, bridging the concrete and abstract.

Narrative Guidance and Constraint

Active interviewing is not confined to asking questions and recording answers. Like other instances of ordinary conversation, trouble-free exchanges rely on mutual attentiveness, monitoring, and responsiveness (Sacks et al., 1974). Rather than tightly restricting interviewer participation as the standardized model prescribes, active interviewers may judiciously engage the respondent, working interactionally to establish the discursive bases from which the respondent can articulate his or her relevant experiences. This involves a certain amount of give-and-take that is anathema to standardized procedures. Not only does the interviewer “keep the conversation going,” so to speak, but he or she also provides the respondent with a measure of narrative guidance that maintains the necessary research focus.

Consider, for example, the way that interviewers in different “life course” interviews helped formulate and sustain the parameters of emerging life stories, guiding narrative construction in the process. In one study concerned with the quality of life for nursing home residents in relation to life as a whole (see Gubrium, 1993), the research design called for a set of loosely formulated questions intended to elicit a free-flowing story of life events and occurrences that proved important to the elderly subjects. The study emphasized the subjective

construction of significant patterns and interpretations of one's life, especially in relation to present concerns. One interview produced the following exchange between the interviewer (I) and an 83-year-old widow (R).

I:
A lot of people think of their lives as having had a particular course, as having gone up and down. Some people think it hasn't gone down. Some people see it as having gone in a circle. How do you see your life? Which way has it gone?

R:
My life has been a tangle, but with all my troubles, I've had a pretty good life. Been able to take care of myself and [pause] until now [the respondent had recently broken her hip].

I:
How has your life been a tangle, would you say?

R:
Well, getting there [getting married for the first time] and then separating, and God gave me one good marriage. He was so good to me and so loving! Both of us were up in age.

I:
You think that made a difference, that you were up in age?

R:
Yeah, I think I would have gotten along better. We didn't have enough money and I was working from 6:00 in the morning to 2:30, maybe longer, and put in extra hours and make all the money I could to help take care of the home.

I:
What were you doing?

R:
Working in a cafe…. I made pretty good money, even back then. You could buy more with a dime back then than you can with a dollar now. Gosh it's terrible now. But I still go on. I still have fun, just going around talking to these people here…. I don't like sitting. This wheelchair got my butt paralyzed [R laughs]. But I do get up and walk down with the banisters and walk behind the wheelchair.

I:
If you could draw your life on paper?

R:
It would be such a tangle you couldn't read it and I couldn't either. I tell you, I've always been happy. I don't know why. Until my son died and my husband died. He died in '73. He was 73 years old and died in '73.

I:

Are there any particular things that happened in your life that changed the shape of it, the course of it? The main things, what would you say they were?

R:

Well, my oldest son, he was in the army….

The respondent proceeded to elaborate a detailed life story linking mundane family matters, her concerns for her son while he was in the military overseas, her home, her beloved second husband, her career as a waitress, and myriad other details of a life that emerged as a veritable experiential labyrinth, the meaning of which was thoroughly linked to the complicated, meandering pattern established in the story.

Note in this instance how the interviewer offered precedent for thinking of life in terms of a "course" with many possible shapes. In doing so, he staked out loose narrative parameters for the life story he was soliciting, parameters that he gently reasserted at several junctures in the ensuing conversation. At first, he actively guided the respondent in the direction of the "tangle" that she offered as a metaphor for her life, and later edged her story back "on course," that is, refocused the story on the life course by asking her once again to picture "the main things." Although never intrusive, the interviewer nonetheless guided and constrained the respondent's narrative so that it continued to address the general research agenda as the respondent formulated her own story.

Compare this to the life stories elicited in interviews by Douglas Kimmel (1974). Kimmel organized his inquiries around a developmental model of the life course in which life course variation could be traced to "turning points" or "milestones" that alter what might otherwise be fairly predictable patterns of aging. Note the difference in the life story that Kimmel (K) elicited by urging his 27-year-old male respondent (G) to employ the milestone imagery.

K:

As you look back over your life, what are some of the milestones that stand out?

G:

In terms of just profession, in terms of personal life? Do you want specifics?

K:

Yes.

G:

What made me choose my profession?

K:

Was that a milestone?

G:

It certainly was….

K:

And that was the turning point for you?

G:

I look back and that's what I remember, so that's a milestone for me, what one would have to call a milestone…. Anyway, other milestones. Oh, I'm sure I have some. Oh! Telling my folks I was gay was a milestone….

K:

What about more recent milestones? Like coming to New York?

G:

Well, coming to New York wasn't really a milestone for me because that was so planned, so matter-of-fact that I was going to do it that it wasn't really a milestone….

K:

… What about crisis points? Have there been any crisis points that stand out?

G:

Yes, I've had a lot of crises. Do you want some of them?

K:

Yes…. Have there been any crisis points in your relationship with your family?

G:

Not really. Some childish things. Nothing really recently. I've never run away from my family or anything like that as a child.

K:

You said at one point when we didn't have the recorder on that your mother was in the hospital.

G:

Yeah, she is.

K:

Is this a serious matter?

G:

It's not, now, as it's turned out, thank goodness. Oh, I see what you mean, a crisis in those terms. (Kimmel, 1974, pp. 116-120)

Here, the interviewer repeatedly offered the language of milestones, turning points, and crises as a resource

for characterizing the respondent's life. Not “putting words in the respondent's mouth” but, rather, making a specific vocabulary salient, and repeatedly asserting its descriptive utility, by the end of this extract, the interviewer had virtually trained the respondent to think and speak of his life in the terms relevant to the research at hand.

Although standardized approaches would focus on the ways that the two interviewers above were apparently contaminating the data that ostensibly resided within their subjects' repositories of knowledge, the active alternative urges us to understand the interviewers contribution quite differently. If one rejects the model of the passive vessel of answers, the notion of contamination is not so compelling. Instead, by conceiving of interviews as ineluctably collaborative, we can recognize how the interviewers shaped these conversations without rejecting the final products as somehow defiled or tainted. These life narratives may be taken to reflect interpretive practice—both the situated interpretive demands placed on the respondents and the resources and orientations that were relevant and available. The respondents' past experience was, of course, crucial to their present formulations, but how it was narratively assembled was a local matter.

From the researcher's standpoint, these interviews represent concerted efforts to collect actively assembled interpretations of experience that address particular research agendas. In the first interview situation, for example, the respondent was asked if she would articulate significant events of her past into some sort of continuous course, convoluted as it might be. The interviewer suggested general ways of orienting to the narrative task at hand, inviting narrative associations between mundane and momentous occasions to capture a more or less continuous, if tangled, flow of life. In the second interview project, the vocabulary of *milestones, turning points*, and *crises* provoked narratives consisting of momentous events, necessarily demanding that they be portrayed as something other than mundane.

The two interviews are not comparable in the sense that they fail to provide standardized, neutral catalysts for the respondents' stories. But the crucial analytic point is that the interviewers guided and constrained the conversation so as to produce narratives that were appropriate to their projects *without* dictating how the respondents' lives might be portrayed within the operative interpretive framework and language. There is always an operative interpretive framework, not the least of which is the “neutral” frame touted in standardized interviewing. Although the respective interviewers certainly contributed to alternative forms of storytelling, the stories told were no less authentic, no less reflective of subjects' “actual” experience than they would have been if the respondents had been incited by ostensibly more neutral questions and probes. We might think of the interviewers' participation as keeping the respondents' speech “on narrative course,” asking the respondents to interrogate their own experiences in particular ways and pointing respondents in fruitful interpretive directions.

As life stories, the key to analyzing these data is to treat them as a form of *biographical work* conducted jointly by interviewer and respondent within the context of the interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; Gubrium et al., 1994). The interviewer, in a sense, challenges the respondent to produce a coherent life narrative out of a designated, limited stock of mutually relevant resources. The result is the respondent's artful but culturally grounded construction, assembled, in practice, out of the interpretive materials and orientations at hand. Like

all interview data, life stories do not simply await discovery and articulation, but are constituted within the interactional context of the interview, drawing on both situationally relevant and long-standing resources.

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