In-Depth Interviewing in Family Medicine Research

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The purpose of this chapter is to discuss in-depth interviewing in social science and to show how in-depth interviewing can be used in family medicine research.

In-depth interviewing is a face-to-face conversation that is designed to gather information. By emphasizing the face-to-face nature of in-depth interviewing, I am excluding from my definition all questionnaires (no matter how open-ended the items) and all telecommunications (i.e., phone and computer interviews). By noting the conversational aspect of in-depth interviewing, I am distinguishing it from standardized interviewing in which respondents are asked a predetermined set of multiple-choice questions. In-depth interviewing, like most conversations, is less directive than standardized interviewing and consequently more likely to include a number of unanticipated questions and raise a variety of unforeseen issues. By asserting that in-depth interviewing is a data-gathering strategy, I am highlighting the fact that in-depth interviewing is a unique kind of conversation. To get the information they need, in-depth interviewers routinely do things that they would not do if they simply were talking with someone. They will, for instance, appear to be ignorant about a topic, even when they are not, and will avoid focusing on themselves unless they feel that doing so will increase the informant's willingness to divulge information. Finally, by making in-depth interviewing a form of qualitative research, I am establishing that verbal rather than numerical data are what primarily interest the in-depth interviewer.

First, I will discuss the rationale behind in-depth interviewing, explaining why someone would choose in-depth interviewing in addition to or instead of other methodologic strategies. Second, I will describe the techniques and steps involved in in-depth interviewing. Although my focus here will be on the interview situation, some attention will be given to sampling and data storage. Third, I will cover the kinds of skills that in-depth interviewers should have, the equipment needed to do the job right, and the expenses involved in carrying out an in-depth interview study. Last, I will talk about the major ethical dilemmas that are likely to arise.

**RATIONALE BEHIND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING**

In-depth interviewing is one of the oldest and most venerable data collection strategies in social science. Frederick LePlay—who may very well have been the first social scientist (Périer, 1970)—used the method in his 19th-century study of working-class families (LePlay, 1855). And the well-known Chicago school of sociology, spawned in this century, owes a great deal to the in-depth interview studies (often called life history studies) carried out under its name (Cavan, 1983).

The relationship between the Chicago school and in-depth interviewing as a research strategy is especially important, since it is the symbolic interactionist perspective of the
Chicago school that provides the rationale for in-depth interview research (Spradley, 1979, pp. 6–7). Symbolic interactionism, the brainchild of the philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), is a favorite of many family researchers (Hays, 1977) and has been extensively reviewed and critiqued (e.g., Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Hutter, 1985; Stryker, 1959). The summary statement penned by Herbert Blumer (1969), a former student of Mead and the individual who coined the term “symbolic interactionism,” is in my opinion one of the best. Besides clearly and concisely capturing the main tenets of a symbolic interactionist perspective, it also helps us to see how someone who considered her or himself a symbolic interactionist would favor in-depth interview research.

According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism rests on three premises:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. . . .
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. . . .
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by a person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

The “things” to which Blumer refers can be physical or social; hence not only do trees or chairs qualify as things, but so do people, categories of people, elements of culture, institutions, activities, and situations. By saying that meanings arise out of social interaction, Blumer is contending that meanings are socially constructed realities. And by insisting that when people attribute meaning to things they do so through an interpretative process, Blumer is maintaining that there is an improvisational element to social life. Thus, people are role-making as well as role-taking when they act as parents, children, spouses, and so forth (Turner, 1962).

In keeping with the first premise, in-depth interviewing is a methodologic strategy that gives considerable weight to people’s thoughts and feelings (i.e., meanings). Of course, you could rightly argue that all self-report measures, and especially all attitude scales, give considerable weight to people’s thoughts and feelings, and that one does not necessarily have to conduct in-depth interview studies to be able to call oneself a symbolic interactionist. The difference is a matter of degree. In-depth interviewing, by only minimally structuring how informants report their thoughts and feelings, is a strategy that is more likely than survey interviewing to uncover meanings that, for whatever reason, the researcher failed to anticipate, and thus it is more likely to uncover the different ways that people cognitively organize the things around them.

As for the second premise, a good in-depth interviewer will constantly strive to tie meanings to interaction—directly, by asking the people who are being interviewed how they see their attitudes tied to their behavior, and indirectly, by inferring attitude–behavior connections from the interview transcripts (e.g., two sentences that at the time of the interviews seemed unrelated may later on be analyzed in conjunction with one another). A symbolic interactionist study is not complete until the investigator has linked meanings and interactions (Denzin, 1978, p. 9). The same can be said of the in-depth interview study—indeed, of any study that claims to be operating within the symbolic interactionist tradition, which brings us again to a comparison between survey research and in-depth interview research. Although you could argue that an attitude scale is designed to measure meanings, if you failed to include any measures of interaction in your interview schedule, you would be violating the second of Blumer’s premises.

The third premise—that meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpre-
tative process—is the most controversial of the three. Symbolic interactionists do not even agree among themselves on this point. Those symbolic interactionists who place a lot of stock in this axiom (e.g., phenomenologists) tend to emphasize the emergent qualities of social life (and perhaps are guilty of presenting an undersocialized view of human behavior), whereas those symbolic interactionists who place less stock in this axiom (e.g., functionally oriented role theorists) tend to emphasize social life's deterministic qualities (and perhaps are guilty of presenting an oversocialized view of human behavior) (Wrong, 1961; Yoels & Karp, 1976). This last premise is probably also the axiom that separates symbolic interactionists who prefer in-depth interviewing (and other qualitative methodologies) from those who prefer survey interviewing (and other quantitative methodologies).2

Up to now I may have given the impression that in-depth interviewing is in competition with other research strategies, and that qualitative and quantitative research are incompatible. This is not the case, however. Although there have been numerous philosophic discussions about the conflicts between qualitative and quantitative research, when the studies carried out by the two camps are examined, it is difficult to discern significant epistemologic differences. In other words, it is not unusual to find qualitative elements in a largely quantitative study (e.g., "juicy quotes" to make the numerical analysis more interesting) or quantitative elements in a largely qualitative study (e.g., statements like "'Most' of the people with whom I talked . . .") (Bryman, 1984). Yet, despite the fact that both qualitative and quantitative analysis seem to be appreciated (if only subconsciously) by all social researchers, whatever their avowed methodologic persuasion, investigators, at least in the family field, generally seem unwilling to carry out studies that give equal weight to qualitative and quantitative research. A content analysis of articles published in the Journal of Marriage and the Family from 1965 to 1983 revealed that in this journal combined studies are extremely rare: Of the 633 research articles surveyed, only 7 were based on studies that gave equal weight to qualitative and quantitative research (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985). What is especially disappointing about this trend is that it violates both the spirit and the letter of family social science as it was conceived and practiced by such luminaries as Robert Angell, Ernest W. Burgess, Ruth Cavan, Leonard Cottrell, E. Franklin Frazier, Ernest Mower, and Katherine Howland Rank. In other words, the men and women who during the 1920s and 1930s were principally responsible for making family studies a scientific enterprise almost always relied on both qualitative and quantitative methods in their own work (Howard, 1981), and would probably be disheartened to learn that family scholars today do not appear to be making much of an effort to combine the two.

I believe that family studies has suffered because of the infatuation family scholars seem to have with quantitative methods (in the study just cited, 84% of the research articles were based on studies that were exclusively quantitative in design [LaRossa & Wolf, 1985]), and unless we begin soon to strike a better balance between qualitative and quantitative research, the field of family studies will become stagnant. Given my views about family studies in general, it should come as no surprise that I also believe that family medicine research, in order to remain viable, must include both qualitative and quantitative elements. Thus, as far as the rationale behind in-depth interviewing in family medicine research is concerned, let me simply say that whenever it appears that the three premises of symbolic interactionism can be brought to bear on an issue in family medicine, then in-depth interviewing is a methodologic strategy worth considering.

Putting it this way makes it understandable why, in my opinion, in-depth interviewing should be included in any family medicine researcher's "tool kit," for there are a host of issues in family medicine research that are amenable to a symbolic interactionist analysis. The meanings that families associate with pregnancy, birth, aging, and death are central to
family medicine, as are the family interactional and interpretative processes that are constituent parts of a variety of illnesses, physiologic and otherwise. Although standardized instruments can shed some light on these cognitions and processes, they are not sufficient to capture the complex connections between the family system and the body’s major networks. In short, in-depth interviewing cannot help but be viewed as an indispensable tool in family medicine research.

TECHNIQUES AND STEPS INVOLVED IN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

Selecting Informants

SAMPLING

In-depth interview studies typically are based on somewhere between 20 and 50 interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 62). Perhaps the major reason that so few interviews are used is that verbal data are more cumbersome to analyze than numerical data. Each hour of interview time will yield approximately 20 pages of single-spaced transcript material. Thus, if you were to do 50 90-minute interviews, you would have 2,500 pages of transcripts to analyze. Working with other researchers would allow you to distribute the interviewing load, but when it came to making sense of the data, all members of the research team would still have to immerse themselves in the material. No matter how sophisticated and flexible your filing system is, there is no substitute for reading the interview transcripts over and over again.

In-depth interview studies also typically are based on nonprobability samples. Nonprobability samples include accidental samples (wherein one takes the cases that are available), quota samples, and purposive samples (Sellitiz, Wrightsman, & Cook, 1976, pp. 517–521). There are two reasons that, more often than not, nonprobability samples are used. One is that the topic under investigation may be so sensitive that the only kind of sample possible is a nonprobability sample (Gelles, 1978). Bear in mind that the more in-depth a study is, the more likely prospective informants are to assume that they will be asked sensitive questions. Thus, it is generally more difficult to persuade people to participate in an in-depth interview study than in a survey study. The second reason that nonprobability samples are common in in-depth interview research has to do with hypothesis generation versus hypothesis testing. Nonprobability samples, especially purposive (theoretical) samples, which emerge during data collection, are especially suited for hypothesis-generating research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since the quasi-inductive elements of qualitative research also make it well suited for hypothesis generation (Filstead, 1970), one can understand why qualitative researchers would tend to rely on nonprobability samples. Nonprobability samples are typically less expensive and easier to assemble. Unfortunately, they may not be representative, making it impossible to generalize beyond the specific individuals being studied. If, however, your goal is to generate rather than test hypotheses, generalizability is less of an issue. The bottom line, as always, is that “The choice of sampling methods depends on the purpose of the research being conducted” (Kitson et al., 1982, p. 968; emphasis in original).

CHOOSING GOOD INFORMANTS

It is important in an in-depth interview study to find people from whom you will learn something, that is, people whose transcripts will have a lot of useful information (“useful”
being determined by your conceptual framework). How can you tell good informants from bad informants? Essentially, there are three criteria (Spradley, 1979, pp. 45–54). First, good informants are people who are thoroughly familiar with a group or situation because of their involvement with that group or situation. Bluebond-Langner (1978), for example, realized that if she wanted to understand how terminally ill children learn that they are dying, she would have to interview the children themselves. Second, good informants are people who are willing to be interviewed at length. It takes time for informants to feel comfortable with the idea of being scrutinized, and it takes time to gather information when you are deliberately trying not to structure your informants’ responses. Thus, informants must sometimes commit themselves to not one but a series of interviews, each of which may last 2 to 3 hours. If someone can only “give” you half an hour, or if throughout the interviews he feels he is “wasting” his time, then that individual is not a good informant.

In my own studies of pregnancy and the transition to parenthood (LaRossa, 1977; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981), I dealt with this problem by telling the couples that in order for me to understand how parenthood changed their lives, I would have to gather longitudinal data. Hence, the “logic” of the studies (the taken-for-granted assumption that the second half of pregnancy is different from the first, and that being a parent of a 9-month-old child is different from being a parent of a newborn) made it easier for the couples to accept a multiple-interview design. Finally, good informants generally are people who do not look at themselves as they believe the interviewer does; in other words, they do not constantly analyze their responses, as an outsider would. Here again is why Bluebond-Langner’s (1978) decision to interview children proved to be so fruitful. As sensitive as the children were to death, they were not sophisticated enough to try to outguess why an anthropologist would want to study them.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS CONJOINT INTERVIEWS
In the process of selecting your informants you must decide whether you are going to conduct individual or conjoint interviews or some combination of the two. Family therapists long ago recognized the value of conjoint interviewing; they realized that a systemic conceptual approach to family groups demanded a systemic empirical approach, one that acknowledged the importance of studying not only all the elements in a system but also the interaction among those elements (e.g., Satir, 1964). Family researchers have been more reluctant to rely on conjoint interviewing, but they are beginning to recognize the value of this approach (see Allan, 1980; Bennett & McAavity, 1985).

I am a staunch advocate of conjoint interviewing in qualitative family research, if for no reason other than my feeling that conjoint interviewing is one of the best ways to collect data on mutually understood meanings in a family (i.e., a family’s culture) and on family interaction (admittedly influenced by the presence of the interviewer) (LaRossa, 1977, p. 25; LaRossa, 1978).

The Interview Itself

HOW MUCH STRUCTURE?
The difference between survey interviewing and in-depth interviewing, as I mentioned earlier, is a matter of degree: What distinguishes the two is the amount of structure imposed by the interviewer. There are as many interviewing strategies as there are points on a continuum. At one pole of the continuum is the totally directive interview, in which all questions have been decided in advance and in which the responses of informants are
forced into one choice or another. An example of a totally directed interview is a multiple-choice survey that includes no probes and no open-ended questions. At the other end of the continuum is the totally nondirective interview in which no questions have been decided beforehand and in which the informants, and only the informants, choose what to discuss. Perhaps the closest thing to a totally nondirective interview is Carl Rogers’s client-centered therapeutic approach (Rogers, 1951).

In-depth interviewing is sometimes considered the same as nondirective interviewing—in fact. Rogers himself argues that his nondirective method can be used for research as well as therapeutic purposes (Rogers, 1945)—but the truth is that no interview conducted for research purposes can be totally without structure (Whyte, 1960). This does not mean that there will not be times during a particular interview when the informant will appear to be in charge, but generally in-depth, research-oriented interviews are controlled by the interviewer.

Whyte (1960), following Dohrenwend and Richardson (1956), has devised a six-point scale to conceptualize the different degrees of interviewer direction that may be present at any time in an in-depth interview. Basically, the scale lists the various ways that an in-depth interviewer can respond to what an informant is saying.

(1) "Uh-huh," a nod of the head, or "That's interesting." Such responses simply encourage the informant to continue and do not exert any overt influence on the direction of his conversation.

(2) Reflection. Let us say the informant concludes his statement with these words: "So I didn't feel too good about the job." The interviewer then says: "You didn't feel too good about the job?"—repeating the last phrase or sentence with a rising inflection. This adds a bit more direction than response 1, since it implies that the informant should continue discussing the thought that has just been reflected.

(3) Probe on the last remark by the informant. Here, as in response 2, attention is directed to the last idea expressed, but the informant's statement is not simply reflected back to him. The interviewer raises some question about this last remark or makes a statement about it.

(4) Probe of an idea preceding the last remark by the informant but still within the scope of a single informant statement. In one uninterrupted statement an informant may go over half a dozen ideas. If the interviewer probes on the last idea expressed, he follows the informant's lead. In turning to an earlier remark, the interviewer is assuming a higher degree of control over the interview.

(5) Probe on an idea expressed by informant or interviewer in an earlier part of the interview (that is, not in the block of talking that immediately preceded the interviewer's probe). By going further back in the interview to pick up a topic, the interviewer has a much broader choice, and consequently exercises more control than is the case if he simply limits his choice to immediately preceding remarks. It seems logical to distinguish between probes on ideas earlier expressed by the informant and those by the interviewer. However, in practice this is a difficult discrimination to make because most probes of this type can be related back to remarks made both by the informant, and by the interviewer.


Skilled in-depth interviewers use all six responses. In other words, it is not a good idea to "sit" on a response and "ride it" throughout an interview.

Should you decide to take a strong nondirective tack, relying exclusively on the first
and second responses, you are basically leaving to chance whether your informants will discuss the topics that you consider important, and making it difficult for yourself later on when you will want to compare one informant with another. Moreover, free-flowing interviews can make people uneasy. Bott (1971), for example, found that she had to introduce more structure into her interviews because, with the nondirective approach she was using in the beginning of her study, her interviewers were "confusing at least three largely incompatible and partly inappropriate roles, those of friend, research worker, and therapist." Her informants also were anxious about the fact that "they did not know what [Bott and her colleagues] found significant or what they [the informants] were revealing about themselves" (Bott, 1971, pp. 20–21).

Too much structure is not a good idea, either. In-depth interviews that rely exclusively on the sixth response may yield information that can more easily be subjected to numerical analysis, but the information obtained probably lacks the necessary intensity to be subjected to case analysis. More important, interviews that are too structured—especially those where sixth-level questions are asked in quick succession—may "become like a formal interrogation" and destroy whatever rapport may have been established with an informant (Spradley, 1979, p. 58).

In my opinion, qualitative family researchers tend to make the mistake of sacrificing depth for breadth rather than vice versa, with the result that much of what passes for in-depth family research does not have much "depth" to it at all. I suspect that family researchers gravitate toward the upper end of Whyte's scale in part because of the survey mentality that permeates family social science. It is not uncommon to find researchers who decide to do an in-depth interview study and who then, paradoxically, put together an elaborate interview guide of some 75 questions—all of which they expect to ask in the span of an hour and a half. These researchers are not conducting in-depth interviews; they are conducting surveys. What they apparently do not realize is that their refusal to abandon the security of a structured guide increases the probability that their study will ultimately be invalid. Too structured to qualify as a good in-depth project and too unstructured to qualify as a good survey, their study will end up satisfying no one.

PHENOMENAL IDENTITY VERSUS CONCEPTUAL EQUIVALENCE

Although there are certainly similarities between survey interviewing and in-depth interviewing—both are self-report measures, for example—the differences between the two should not be minimized. Survey interview research is almost always based on the assumption that informants must be presented with phenomenally identical questions; in other words, it is assumed that informants must be asked the same questions in the same order, with the same tone of voice, and so on. In-depth interview research, on the other hand, operates on the assumption that phenomenal identity is subordinate to conceptual equivalence; in other words, it is assumed that asking each informant phenomenally identical questions is not as important as collecting conceptually equivalent data. Sometimes, of course, phenomenally identical questions yield conceptually equivalent data. But sometimes they do not. We know, for example, that when it comes to doing cross-national research, an insistence on phenomenal identity can mean a loss of conceptual equivalence. Straus, for example, argues that the "use of the identical procedures in different societies for eliciting and quantifying data ("phenomenal identity") does not necessarily result in the measurement of the same variable ("conceptual equivalence") since the stimuli (questions, tasks, items) used to elicit data may have different meanings in different societies" (1969, p. 233). If we substitute the words "informants" or "families" for "societies," Straus's
statement can be used to justify the kind of flexible interviewing that characterizes in-depth interviewing (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981, p. 240). (See Straus, 1969, for other methods of handling the problem of conceptual equivalence.) In-depth interviewers approach each interview with a concept of the kind of information that they want to gather. They then proceed to ask questions that allow them to capture that concept. If that means asking in the beginning of an interview a question that in another interview was asked at the end, so be it. If that means probing with one informant more than was done with another, that is all right, too.

Data Storage

TO TAPE OR NOT TO TAPE?

Before tape recorders were invented, qualitatively oriented symbolic interactionists would preserve their informants' stories by asking them to write their autobiographies (Plummer, 1983, p. 94). For example, W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918–1920)—the study that was instrumental to the development of symbolic interactionism and qualitative methods (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985)—included a 312-page life history. Today, however, tape recorders are commonplace, and their availability has transformed life history research. Whereas written autobiographies can go through several drafts, with each draft perhaps presenting an increasingly artificial picture, whatever is said during a tape-recorded interview can only be clarified or expanded; deletions are not possible (unless, of course, the interviewer gives the informant final-cut rights on the interview transcript) (Matthews, 1983). Hence, everything that is said is stored, from the off-the-cuff remark to the convoluted rationalization.

Some interviewers prefer not to use a tape recorder because they feel that doing so "constrains interactions already made somewhat unnatural by [their] presence" (Cottle, 1977, p. 190). Others believe that a tape recorder is "imperative" because it allows interviewers to focus their full attention on the informant and at the same time chronicle what is being said (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, pp. 60–61).

No doubt there are interview situations where informants might find a tape recorder threatening, and many of these situations are likely to arise in family medicine research. Featherstone (1980), for example, reported that, in her studies of families with a disabled child, the fact that she did not use a tape recorder during the parent group meetings not only increased the validity of her data but also preserved the privacy of the group. As one woman told her, the parent group "was the one place where [she] could be completely honest," which was something she "really needed" at the time (Featherstone, 1980, p. 246). And Hannam (1975), who used a tape recorder in his study of parents with a retarded child, discovered that the fathers and mothers spoke more eagerly once he turned off the recorder at the end of the interview session.

I personally think that whenever possible a tape recorder should be used in in-depth interview research. As indicated, there are situations where a tape recorder would make informants uneasy, but typically people grow accustomed to its presence. The problem is that you simply cannot rely on your memory or shorthand skills to reproduce faithfully the transcript of an interview, and there really is no substitute for a transcript when you are trying to analyze meanings, interactions, and interpretative processes.

TRANSCRIPTS

Some researchers require a verbatim transcript—one that includes every stutter and every interruption—because they are interested in analyzing grammar, syntax, and form as well
as interview content. Ethnomethodologists, for example, typically demand meticulously produced transcripts (see Mehan & Wood, 1975). Other researchers are happy to work with transcripts that basically capture the essence of what was said and are not concerned if a word or sentence is left out or if repetitions are deleted.

The kind of analysis that I typically do requires a transcript that, though not perfect, is reasonably detailed. Syntax and grammar are not important to me, but other cues, such as hesitancy, timing, verbosity, and logic, are. I also tend to favor conjoint over individual interviews and case analysis over a ‘‘juicy quote’’ approach, so it is important that I preserve the subtleties of a family’s give-and-take and biographic reconstruction.

Analysis

One of the most difficult and least understood aspects of an in-depth interview study is the data analysis. First of all, as a form of qualitative research, an in-depth interview study is subject to the same rules that apply to qualitative studies in general. For example, whereas in a quantitative study data collection and data analysis are temporally segregated, in a qualitative study the two overlap (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 132). Also, as I mentioned earlier, a qualitative study is more likely than a quantitative study to have hypothesis generation as its principal goal (Filstead, 1970; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The fact that qualitative analysis is nowhere near as standardized as quantitative analysis means that subsuming in-depth interviewing under qualitative research goes only so far in reducing the uncertainty involved in analyzing in-depth interview materials. Some people believe that qualitative analysis is as much an art as a science and that, consequently, qualitative research will never achieve the level of standardization characteristic of quantitative research. Others argue that, unless qualitative researchers move to make their procedures more systematic, qualitative research will never be taken seriously in scientific circles.

I believe that both qualitative and quantitative research entail some measure of artistry, and that trying to remove intuition and personal style from qualitative research is not only impossible but also detrimental to the scientific process. On the other hand, I do feel that too often qualitative researchers use the ‘‘more-art-than-science’’ rationale as an excuse not to publicize their procedures. Since science is a communal enterprise, not describing how one got from point A (in this case, the interview transcripts) to point B (the finished book or journal article) is unacceptable.

So, how do you get from point A to point B when you are doing in-depth interview research? As indicated, there is no single, generally accepted path. However, here is how one researcher, Bob Blauner, goes about analyzing his data. I present his approach because I suspect that others follow a similar, though probably not identical, route. I know I do.

I begin—and this first, preparatory phase is extremely critical—by consulting my ‘‘field notes,’’ listening to the tapes, and reading one or more times the transcripts. . . . My impulse is to begin writing immediately, and I have to check such impatience in order to first listen to the tapes in a loose way, to be open and receptive almost as one listens to music. My purpose in this stage is to get an intuitive feel for the ‘‘whole person’’ and his or her story. . . . The second step is to read the transcript in a more focused way, alert for details as well as general impressions. I’m looking now for those sociologically relevant issues that I will want to bring out. I underline passages that strike me as interesting, those that I sense I will want to include. I take note also of material that seems tedious or extraneous or highly repetitive, pencilling the word ‘‘out’’ in the margins where I find this, since I’m going to have to boil down an average of 50 transcript pages [per informant] into no more than 10 to 15. . . . Now I’m
ready to get to my typewriter, to write an introduction and to begin actually lifting material from the original transcript to my first rough draft. . . . I may do five or six pages and see that it's not flowing, not hanging together. I start again, usually at a different point in the interview, with a different topic, and sometimes go through two or three false starts before I like what I've got. . . . In each interview I look for the person's unique story, the special focus or issues which set that person off, add something new to the unfolding "cast of characters" who make up the book as a whole. . . . It's the story line above all that organizes "raw data." Through unearthing or imposing a central theme or story line, the editor becomes an active creator or interpreter of the materials. (Reprinted by permission from "Problems of Editing 'First Person' Sociology" by B. Blauner, 1987, Qualitative Sociology, Vol. 10, pp. 53–54. Copyright 1987 by Human Sciences Press.)

Blauner (1987) says that analyzing his transcripts involves unearthing or imposing a "story line." Davis (1974, p. 311) thinks it is "essential" to try to find "some kind of story which will give you an opening, a beginning working stratagem with respect to the data." Lofland and Lofland (1984, p. 135) talk about finding "general designs," analytic structures that give coherence to your materials. All of them seem to be saying basically the same thing, namely that the research process involves a cycle between ideas and data. Or to put it another, perhaps more familiar way: The data do not speak for themselves.

In the course of writing for publication, the in-depth intervie wer will also have to deal with the following dilemmas: How much of a balance should there be between the informant's voice and the researcher's voice? When transcripts are reproduced, should the interviewer's questions and comments be included or deleted? How much of the informant's grammar and sentence structure should be preserved? Should repetitions be deleted? Should one present full-length case studies and/or brief, typically out-of-context excerpts? If case studies are to be presented, who will be selected for case analysis? How does one deal with contradictions within a single interview and between periodic interviews? How does one decipher evasions, deceptions, and lies? (For help in answering these questions, see Plummer, 1983; Spradley, 1979.)

PERSONNEL AND EQUIPMENT

Personnel

Whereas survey interviewers need only an overview of the theoretic issues that have spawned their interview schedule, in-depth interviewers must be thoroughly familiar with the conceptual issues that motivated their project, and must have enough acumen to know how to use their questions and probes to explore uncharted theoretic terrain. Also, whereas survey interviewers must be able to establish and maintain rapport with their respondents, the interpersonal skills required of in-depth interviewers are more stringent. What Young (1952) said over 30 years ago is still true today:

The competent [in-depth/life history] interviewer must possess keen perceptive faculties and an accurate memory. Not only should he hear correctly what is said to him, but he will be alert to the overtones of the informant's verbal and overt reactions, noting changes in voice, indications of feeling-emotional states from facial or other gestures, and any other possible clues to inner states which may subsequently be exposed. And, while he must know how to direct the session with skillful and revealing inquires, he must also possess the capacity for sympathetic listening. (Young, 1952, p. 308)
All of which means that, if you are going to assemble a team of in-depth interviewers, you should (1) anticipate having to draw from a fairly educated pool of candidates; (2) set up a fairly extensive training program, one that continues throughout the data collection phase at least (you probably will want your interviewers to join in the analysis, too); and (3) be prepared to pay wages that are competitive enough to attract qualified people.

You will also need a good transcriber, someone who not only can type well but also has the ear, foot, and hand coordination to work a transcribing machine and a keyboard simultaneously, and who is compulsive about wanting to get an accurate and neat transcription. Skilled, conscientious transcribers are in demand, so expect to pay top dollar. Furthermore, if you "farm out" the job to a free-lance transcriber, I recommend that you pay by the page rather than by the hour. This not only will make your expectations clearer, but also will serve as an incentive for the transcriber not to leave anything out.

Equipment

Portable cassette recorders can cost anywhere from $30 to $300. Invest in a high-quality model. Also, even if your recorder has a built-in microphone, use an extension microphone or possibly several lapel microphones to ensure that everyone is heard clearly. (Miniature microphones are an especially good idea if you intend to conduct conjoint or group interviews.)

Cassette tapes also vary in price. Buy cartridges that can be taken apart and put back together again so you can splice tapes that break. Also, tapes that you plan to transcribe will be subjected to a lot of stop–start abuse, so avoid brittle or excessively thin tapes.

Transcribing machines cost between $250 and $400. The more expensive models have indexing and cueing features. If your budget allows, buy the best.

Up to now, a qualitative researcher's analytic equipment basically consisted of a lot of paper and a bunch of file folders (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). With the advent of personal computers (PCs), however, electronically assisted text analysis has become more popular. If your budget allows for a PC, I strongly recommend that you consider using one of the text-search software programs currently available when the time comes to analyze your data (see Bermant, 1987; Conrad & Reinharz, 1984).

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The social-scientific study of family medicine can take a toll on both researcher and subjects. It is not easy to observe families trying to deal with cancer, diabetes, prematurity, or senility; and it certainly is not easy to be scrutinized when these tragedies strike.

Typically, researchers can do little to change the physical reality with which their subjects are trying to cope. They cannot wish away the cancer, nor can they reverse the aging process. But they can and should be sensitive to the ethical dilemmas associated with studying these issues.

One ethical dilemma that in-depth interviewers should be prepared to face is that in-depth interviewing tends to magnify the uneasiness that researchers and subjects may encounter in family medicine research. It is not unusual, for example, for informants to cry or show emotion in other ways during in-depth interview sessions. After all, you are asking them to review in depth their thoughts and feelings about things like being the parent of a child with spina bifida or being the child of a parent with cancer (see Darling, 1979, p.
It is also not unusual for informants to find the in-depth interview sessions therapeutic and, in fact, to look upon the interviewer as a therapist. Who can blame them? Caught in "a medical system that often is too busy caring for the illness to notice the emotional needs of the victim and his grief-stricken loved ones" (Speedling, 1982, p. 8), families sometimes feel that you are the only person willing to listen to them. Finally, it is not unusual for informants to view the in-depth interviewer as a close friend simply because you are there, no matter what they say (Bluebond-Langner, 1978, p. 247).

Being a shoulder to cry on, a therapist, or a friend is not, in and of itself, a bad thing, but adopting these roles can pose serious ethical dilemmas if you (1) are unprepared to deal with these responsibilities (e.g., you are taken by surprise or are not qualified to handle them) or (2) deliberately exploit the role ambiguity for personal ends (LaRossa, Bennett, & Gelles, 1981).

I have less of a problem with the first of these two possibilities because I think that interviewers can be trained to anticipate being thrust into one role or another, and to know when people should be referred to a therapist or agency.

The second possibility—that of exploiting the informant—is, to my mind, the more serious. Family medicine research, like all medical research, places subjects in an unfavorable power-dependency relationship (Kelman, 1972). Relying on an in-depth interviewer for emotional nourishment can mean that informants may divulge more about themselves than they had planned to when they signed the informed-consent forms, or, worse, may feel compelled to continue on a project, against their better judgment, because they feel they owe the interviewer something.

Although guidelines for dealing with ethical dilemmas in research do exist (the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, and American Sociological Association all have codes of ethics), these guidelines rarely address the distinctive ethical dilemmas associated with in-depth interview family medicine research, or with qualitative family research in general. More often than not, researchers must deal with each situation on an ad hoc basis and hope for the best (LaRossa, Bennett, & Gelles, 1981).

CONCLUSION

The object of this chapter has been to discuss the whys and hows of in-depth interviewing in family medicine research. The major strengths of an in-depth interview design are its compatibility with a symbolic-interactionist approach—an approach that cannot be ignored by family medicine researchers—and its capacity to generate hypotheses for further study. The major weaknesses are that typically one must rely on small, nonprobability samples and be satisfied with analytic procedures that, for the present, are less reliable than those used in quantitative research.

I do not think that these pros and cons can be weighed against each other to compute some kind of net value of in-depth interview research. In other words, I do not think it makes much sense to decide, for example, that the costs outweigh the rewards and, therefore, in-depth interview research is not worth doing. Family medicine researchers have no choice but to encourage in-depth interview research—the nature of family medicine requires it. Thus, the question is not whether we should do in-depth interview family medicine research, but how we can do good in-depth interview family medicine research.

Right now, there is no simple answer to this question. My hope is that the increased interest in qualitative family research (see Hill, 1981; Sprey, 1982) will result in more
public and private funding for qualitative work, and that a stronger financial base will not only support more representative samples but also serve as an incentive to develop more standardized procedures for analyzing qualitative data. If this happens, in-depth interview research will become more common and be of higher quality. And the better able we are to do in-depth interview research, the healthier the field of family medicine will be.

Notes

1. The “Chicago school” does not refer to any sociology carried out at the University of Chicago. Rather, it denotes “a particular worldview and fieldwork research method preferred by many, but by no means all Chicago analysts in the 1920s and 1930s” (Thomas, 1983, p. 387).

2. Some theorists would disagree with the implication that phenomenology and role theory are opposite poles of a symbolic interactionist continuum because they would say that phenomenology, role theory, and symbolic interactionism are qualitatively different (see, e.g., Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1977, pp. 1–31). In my opinion, however, the difference is a matter of degree, not kind—specifically, the degree to which these cognitive sociologies emphasize either the emergent or the deterministic aspects of social life (cf. Burr et al., 1979, p. 311).

References

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