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Animating Interview Narratives

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the implications of viewing the interview as an actively constructed conversation through which narrative data are produced. It explores the ramifications of framing the interview and resulting data as by-products of interpretive practice – the *whats* and *hows* of an animated process involving active subjects behind interview participants. Matters of reliability, validity, bias, and rigor are considered.

Keywords:

active interview, participant agency, animating the interview, interview narratives, interview interaction, bias, rigor.

Interviewing is more popular than ever as a means of generating information for both scholarly and professional purposes. In our 'interview society' (see Gubrium and Holstein 2002a; Silverman 1993), the mass media, human service providers, employers, and researchers increasingly conduct interviews. When done well, the interview may be viewed as a dispassionate, passive instrument for obtaining information. Interviewers ask unbiased questions. Respondents provide pertinent answers. The interview process is merely a neutral conduit between the two. The standard version of the interview keeps the interviewer's involvement to a minimum. The interviewer should be disinterested and inconspicuous, like the proverbial fly on the wall. The cooperative and open respondent provides pertinent information.

This chapter presents a contrasting perspective that highlights the interview process as interactionally active. We argue that *all* interviews are active, regardless of how neutral the interviewers and how cooperative the respondents. No matter how hard interviewers try to restrain their presence in the interview exchange and no matter how forthright interviewees are in offering their views, these are interactional accomplishments rather than neutral communicative grounds. It takes work to accomplish the passivity and ostensible forthrightness of interview participation. Accordingly, we refer to the *active interview* to distinguish this perspective from the more conventional model. The term does not apply to a distinctive type of interview, differentiating it from, say, the standardized survey interview or the minimally directive life story interview. Instead, we use the term to highlight the inherent interpretive activity of the process as a hallmark of all interviews. This chapter stresses how this recognition leads to an animated analytic view of interview narratives.

From Distortion to Interpretive Practice

It has been estimated that 90 percent of all social science investigations involve interviews (Briggs 1986). Interviewing spans academic disciplines as well as myriad professions, providing so-called 'windows on the world' (Gubrium and Holstein 2002a). As an information-gathering form of conversation, interviews vary from highly structured, standardized, quantitatively oriented survey interviews, to semi-formal guided conversations, to free-flowing informational exchanges. Being international across the variety, they collaboratively produce narratives of people's lives and circumstances. These narratives may be as truncated as forced-choice survey answers or as elaborate as oral life histories, but they are all conversations incited and shaped by the interview process.

While most researchers acknowledge the interactional bases of interviewing (see Conrad and Schober 2008; Warren and Karner 2005), the technical literature stresses the need to keep conversational 'bias' in check. Guides to interviewing – especially those oriented to standardized surveys – are primarily concerned with maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows (Fowler and Mangione 1990; Gorden 1987). If the interview conversation is framed as a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding, or misdirection, it is a persistent set of problems that must be minimized. The corrective is simple: if the interviewer asks questions properly and the interview situation is propitious, the respondent will convey undistorted information. In this view, the interview conversation is a pipeline for transporting truthful knowledge.

Recently, a heightened sensitivity to everyday representational matters (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2002a, 2002b) – characteristic of poststructuralist, postmodernist, constructionist, and ethnomethodological inquiry – has raised questions about the

very possibility of collecting knowledge within the traditional model. Attention has focused on the in situ activeness of interviews (e.g., Hootkoop-Steenstra 2000; Kvale 1996). These perspectives suggest that all meaning is socially constituted; all knowledge is created from the actions undertaken to obtain it (see Cicourel 1964, 1974; Garfinkel 1967). Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively formed and produced implies that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, interpretive practice (see Warren and Karner 2005).

Anthropologist Charles Briggs (1986) argues that the social circumstances of interviews are more than obstacles to respondents' articulation of particular truths. Interviews fundamentally, not incidentally, shape the form and content of what is said. As he and Clara Mantini-Briggs (2003) note, interviews result in stories – some very short, some very long – that offer accounts of opinion, persons, events, and the world at large. Indeed, with considerable foresight, decades earlier Aaron Cicourel (1974) maintained that interviews imposed particular ways of understanding reality upon subjects' responses. The general point is that interview participants are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within the experiences under consideration. Meaning is not merely directly elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is assembled in the interview encounter. Participants are not so much elicitors and repositories of experiential knowledge, as they are constructors of experiential information.

Technical attempts to strip interviews of their interactional constituents will be futile (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000; Maynard et al. 2002). Instead of refining the long list of methodological constraints under which standardized interviews should be conducted, we have suggested that researchers embrace the view that the interview is a process of experiential animation and capitalize upon interviewers' and respondents' constitutive contributions to the production of interview data. This entails conscientiously attending to the interview process as a form of interpretive practice that not only produces results, but also points to the constructive work and auspices operating in varied interview encounters (Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

This means that researchers need to pay explicit attention to both the practical *hows* and the substantive *whats* of interviewing, taking care to give them equal status in both the research process and in reporting results (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2009). Understanding *how* the narrative process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively said. The *whats* always reflect the circumstances and practices conditioning the interview. A dual interest in the *hows* and *whats* of interview narratives makes visible the animated parameters of the interview process.

This appreciation derives from ethnomethodologically informed, social constructionist sensibilities (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967; Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1967; Holstein and Gubrium 2008). The approach also resonates with methodological

critiques and formulations offered by feminist scholars (see DeVault 1990; Harding 1987; Smith 1987).

Ethnomethodology, constructionism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and some versions of feminism all are attuned to subjectivity, complexity, perspective, and meaning construction. In one way or another, all cast an analytic eye on interpretive practice. If their concerns and debates have often related to the epistemological status of interview data, they do not lose sight of the everyday facets of experience. At the same time, while the perspective we describe here has postmodern sensibilities, it does not abide the view that interviews are just another realm of swirling signifiers. Rather, animated as they might be, interview narratives reflect both socially grounded interpretive practices and subject matter with which the practices are concerned.

Key Points

- A common view of the ideal interview is that of a neutral conduit for conveying undistorted knowledge.
- A growing number of researchers has come to recognize the interview as a meaning-making conversation – a site of interpretive practice.
- Interviewing is unavoidably interactional and constructive. In a word, the interview is *actively* productive of its results.

Viewing the Subjects behind Interview Participants

Conventional or otherwise, every vision of the interview is built upon images of the subjects behind interview participants (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). These images provide the basis for theorizing the interview process, as well as for arguing that all interviews are active from start to finish. The images confer varying degrees of epistemological agency upon interview participants, which bears on researchers' understanding of the relative validity of the information that is reported. For example, in conventional approaches, respondents are basically conceived as passive *vessels of answers* to whom interviewers direct their questions. They are repositories of facts, reflections, opinions, and other traces of experience. While we limit most of our comments to the respondent's subjectivity, the purported passivity of the interviewer also comes into question.

Our view extends to interviews conducted for other than research purposes. Studs Terkel, the consummate journalistic interviewer, held to a version of the

image. He reports that he simply turned on his tape recorder and asked people to talk. Writing of the interviews he did for his bestselling book titled *Working*, Terkel (1972, p. xxv) notes:

There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature ... the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you ... In short, it was a conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were open.

As plain-spoken as this may be, Terkel's view of the subject behind the respondent is that of a wellspring of information and emotion.

Interviewing is likened to 'prospecting' for the true facts and feelings residing within the respondent (cf. Kvale 1996). The image of the researcher/prospector casts the interview as a search-and-discovery mission, with the interviewer intent on detecting what is already there inside variably cooperative respondents, undertaken for scientific reasons. The challenge lies in extracting information as directly as possible, without contaminating it. Highly refined interview techniques streamline, systematize, and sanitize the process. Occasionally, researchers acknowledge that it may be difficult to obtain accurate information, but the information is still viewed, in principle, as held undistorted in the subject's vessel of answers. The trick is to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open communication between the interviewer and the respondent. Much of the methodological literature on interviewing deals with the nuances of these procedural matters.

In the vessel-of-answers approach, the image of the subject is passive; this subject is not engaged in the production of knowledge. If the interviewing process goes 'by the book' and is non-directive and unbiased, respondents will validly speak of whatever is presumed to reside within – the unadulterated facts of experience. Contamination creeps in from the interview setting, its participants, and their interaction; in principle, the subject is pristinely communicative and, under ideal conditions, his or her respondent serves up authentic reports when beckoned.

What happens, however, if we animate the image of the subject behind the respondent? An animated subject behind the respondent not only holds the facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms them into artefacts of the occasion. The respondent can hardly 'spoil' what he or she is, in effect, subjectively shaping. Because interviews are always dialogical, they are inevitably performances aimed at particular audiences. This alone necessarily animates the *whats* of the matter.

In the conventional view, the objectivity or truth of interview responses is commonly assessed in terms of reliability and validity (Kirk and Miller 1986), criteria which elide performativity. When the interview is viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion, however, different criteria apply. The focus is equally on the way narratives are constructed, the circumstances of construction, and the meaningful

linkages that are assembled for the occasion. While interest in the content of answers persists, research coverage extends to both how and what the subjectively animated respondent, in collaboration with an equally subjectively animated interviewer, produces and conveys in the interview process.

Assuming an animated subject, a different sense of the value of interview data applies. With the proper adjustments, this can be put in terms of reliability and validity. As far as reliability is concerned, one cannot expect answers on one occasion to necessarily replicate those on another, because they may emerge from different circumstances of production. Of course, to the extent occasions are similar, we would expect greater reliability. As such, good interview material should be viewed as 'reliable enough,' *under the circumstances*. Similarly, the validity of answers derives not from their one-to-one correspondence to meanings held within the respondent, but from the respondent's ability to convey communicated experiences in terms that are locally comprehensible. (See Gubrium and Holstein (2009) for parallel criteria applicable in relation to the everyday value of stories and storytelling.)

The animated image of the interview comes into full relief when concretely contrasted with approaches undergirded by passive images of participant subjectivity. One widely applied approach – standardized survey interviewing – orients to the rational, factual value of what is communicated. It focuses on the substantive statements, explanations, and reasons with which the respondent articulates experience. Jean Converse and Howard Schuman's (1974) candid book *Conversations at Random* offers a superb vision of the imagined survey respondent.

As Converse and Schuman discuss standardized survey interviewing techniques, they suggest that good interview data are there to be extracted from the repository of knowledge represented by the basically passive subject behind the survey respondent. Respondents harbor information, but they do not construct it, even if they can do a better or worse job of conveying it. While Converse and Schuman grant that survey interviewing involves experiencing the 'pleasure of persons,' they urge interviewers to conform to their clearly designated roles and the rules of standardized interviewing to effectively gain access to the vessel of answers behind the respondent. Their book is replete with anecdotal reminders of what interviewers must learn in order to keep that vessel of answers in view and the respondent on target.

In part, this is a matter of controlling oneself as an interviewer so that one does not interfere with what the passive subject is willing to put forth. The interviewer must shake off self-consciousness, suppress personal opinion, and avoid stereotyping the respondent. Learning the interviewer role is a matter of controlling the interview situation to facilitate the candid expression of opinions and sentiments. The seasoned interviewer learns that the so-called pull of conversation must be managed so that the 'push of inquiry' (Converse and Schuman 1974: 26) is kept in focus.

Another, less known approach – creative interviewing – orients to the purportedly deeper and more authentic domain of the subject's feelings. It emphasizes sentiment and emotion, the ostensible core of human experience. If Jack Douglas's book *Creative Interviewing* (1985) provides a vivid illustration, the approach's romanticist sentiments are longstanding and now increasingly inform qualitative interviewing especially. Despite the numerous contrasts with Converse and Schuman's view of survey interviewing, we see remarkable similarity in their respective images of the subjectivity of interview participants. For Douglas, the term 'creative' applies primarily to the interviewer, not the respondent. He notes that in his many empirical studies, he repeatedly discovered that standard recommendations for interviewing were inadequate for his research purposes. Canons of rational neutrality, such as those Converse and Schuman espouse, failed to capture what Douglas calls his respondents' 'emotional wellsprings.' In response to this shortcoming, Douglas calls for a methodology of deep disclosure.

Douglas's difficulties relate as much to his image of the passive subject as they do to the shortcomings of standardized interviewing technique. Like the image of the subject behind the survey respondent, Douglas imagines his subjects to be repositories of answers, but in his case, they are viewed as well-guarded vessels of feelings. They are 'there,' to be sure; the trick is how to elicit them. His model is of a respondent who authentically communicates from an emotional wellspring, at the behest of an interviewer who knows that mere words or words carefully chosen cannot draw out or convey what experience ultimately is about. Standard survey questions and answers touch only the surface of experience, according to Douglas. He aims deeper by intimately 'getting to know' the real subject behind the respondent.

Creative interviewing is a set of techniques for deeper discovery. To achieve this, the interviewer must establish a climate for mutual disclosure. The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer's willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own intimate thoughts and feelings. The interviewer's deep disclosure both occasions and legitimizes the respondent's reciprocal revelations. This, Douglas suggests, is thoroughly suppressed by the cultivated neutrality of the standard survey interview.

The wellsprings tapped by creative interviewing are said to be emotional, in distinct contrast to the preferred 'factual' emphasis that permeates Converse and Schuman's book. The subject behind Douglas's respondent nevertheless remains an essentially passive, if expressively emotional, fount of experience, not unlike the respondent who 'opens up' and gushes forth while having a friendly drink with Studs Terkel. Located deeper within the respondent than the subject behind the survey respondent, the subject behind Douglas's image of the respondent remains a relatively static, inert vessel, in this case, of emotional data.

Key Points

- All approaches to interviewing rest on images of the subjects behind the interview participant.
- Conventional approaches envision the subject behind participants as essentially passive. Interview guidelines actively cultivate a passive subjectivity.
- Images of subjects behind interview participants have important implications for how the interview process is conducted and interview data are construed.

Animating the Interview

Animating interview subjectivity is part of a broader vision of reality as an ongoing, interpretive accomplishment. From this perspective, interview participants constantly work to discern and designate the recognizable, meaningful, and orderly features of experience. But meaning-making is not merely artful (Garfinkel 1967); meaning is not built out of nothing on each interpretive occasion. Rather, interpretation orients to, and is conditioned by, the substantive resources and local contingencies of interaction. In other words, meaningful reality is constituted at the nexus of the *hows* and the *whats* of the process, by way of 'interpretive practice' – the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize, and represent everyday life (Holstein 1993; Holstein and Gubrium 2011; Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2009).

As short or as long as they may be, the responses produced in interviews are actively assembled using the interpretive resources at hand, in light of the situated contingencies of the moment. Meaning is not constantly formulated anew, but reflects relatively enduring and recognizable forms of meaning (Foucault 1979), such as the research topics presented by interviewers, participants' biographical particulars, locally accepted ways of orienting to those topics, institutionalized means of understanding and talking about things, and larger discourses deploying 'what everyone knows' (Gubrium 1988, 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 2000, Holstein and Gubrium 2011). Those resources are astutely and adroitly adapted to the demands of the occasion, so that meaning is neither predetermined nor absolutely unique.

An image of animated subjectivity transforms one's orientation to all kinds of interviewing. The respondent is far from a repository of experiences or a wellspring of emotions, but a productive source of opinions and feelings. The subject behind the interviewer is similarly animated. From the time one identifies a research topic, to respondent selection, questioning, and answering, and, finally, to the interpretation of responses, interviewing itself is a knowledge construction project. In this

context, the respondent as much assembles narratives of experience as he or she answers interview questions.

Whats and Hows of the Interview

Some time ago, we distinguished two sets of communicative contingencies that shape the interview's meaning-making activity. One kind involves the *whats* of the interview (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997). The substantive focus and circumstances of the research project provide interpretive signposts and resources for developing interview narratives. The eventual narrative is always already told in the kind of story prompted by the research project through the interviewer. For example, a project might deal with the quality of care and quality of life of nursing home residents (see Gubrium 1993). This might be part of a study related to a national debate about the proper organization of home and institutional care. If active, animated interviewing practices are deployed, participants draw out the substantiality of these topics, narratively linking the topics to biographical particulars in the interview process, producing a subject who responds to, or is affected by, the matters under consideration.

A second communicative contingency of animated interviews centers on the *hows* of the process. The standpoint from which information is offered is continually developed within ongoing interview interaction. In speaking of the quality of care, for example, nursing home residents, as interview respondents, not only offer substantive thoughts and feelings pertinent to the topic in view, but simultaneously and continuously monitor who they are in relation to the person questioning them. Respondents continually work up their roles, from whose narrative standpoints answers are provided. We cannot take for granted, for instance, that 'the' formally selected nursing home resident takes this narrative standpoint throughout an interview, but rather might usefully monitor the *hows* of the matter. How and where respondents experientially locate themselves in the interview helps reveal what they mean by what they choose to say.

Concertedly Putting Whats and Hows to Work

Interviews are useful tools for systematic social inquiry because of their special capacity to incite the production of narratives that address issues relating to particular research concerns. Animated interviews concertedly put the *whats* and *hows* of interpretive practice to work. In standardized interviewing, the allegedly passive subject actively engages in a 'minimalist' version of interpretive practice – participants concertedly perceive, inquire about, and report experience in the formulaic terms allowed. In contrast, expressly animating the interview strategically invests the subject with

a substantial repertoire of interpretive methods and an extensive stock of experiential materials.

On one side, the animated interview eschews the image of the vessel of answers waiting to be tapped in favor of the notion that the respondent's narrative agency is activated, stimulated, and cultivated in relation to an ever-shifting and reflexive stock of knowledge. The interview also is a commonly recognized occasion for systematically prompting the respondent to formulate and talk about experience, opinions, and emotions in particular ways, implicating the interviewer, on the other side. Active interviewers do not coax interviewees into preferred responses to their questions. Rather, they converse with respondents in such a way that emergent forms of response come into play. Interviewers may suggest orientations to, and linkages between, diverse aspects of respondents' experience, hinting at – even inviting – interpretations that make use of specific resources, connections, and outlooks. Interviewers may explore incompletely articulated aspects of experience, encouraging respondents to develop topics in ways relevant to their own experience (DeVault 1990). The objective is not to dictate an interpretive frame, as a minimalist standardized survey approach would do, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of narratives that might develop.

If the respondent actively constructs and assembles interview narratives, he or she does not simply 'break out' talking. Neither elaborate stories nor one-word replies emerge without incitement. The animated interviewer's role is to stimulate respondents' answers, working up responses to interview questions or comments in the process. Standardized approaches to interviewing attempt to strip the interview of all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli. An animated sense of interviewing turns us to the narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents that engage the process for all participants.

Consider, for example, how diverse aspects of a respondent's knowledge, perspectives, roles, and orientations are implicated in an interview with an adult daughter who is caring for her demented mother at home. The daughter is employed part-time, and shares the household with her employed husband and their two adult sons, one a part-time college student and the other a full-time security guard. The following extract begins when the interviewer (I) asks the daughter (R) to describe her feelings about having to juggle so many needs and schedules. This relates to a discussion of the so-called 'sandwich generation,' which is said to be caught between raising children and caring for frail elderly parents. Note how, after the interviewer asks the respondent what she means by saying that she has mixed feelings, the respondent makes explicit reference to various ways of thinking about the matter, as if to suggest that there is more than one plot to the story. The respondent displays considerable narrative agency; she not only references possible *whats* of caregiving and family life, but, in the process, informs the interviewer of *how* she could possibly construct her answer, further adding to the meaning of the *whats* in

question. Of course, not all interviews present *hows* so vividly; the extract is instructive precisely because it does.

- I: We were talking about, you said you were a member of the, what did you call it?
- R: They say that I'm in the sandwich generation. You know, like we're sandwiched between having to care for my mother...and my grown kids and my husband. People are living longer now and you've got different generations at home and, I tell ya, it's a mixed blessing.
- I: How do you feel about it in your situation?
- R: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm being a bit selfish because I gripe about having to keep an eye on Mother all the time. If you let down your guard, she wanders off into the back yard or goes out the door and down the street. That's no fun when your hubby wants your attention too. Norm works the second shift and he's home during the day a lot. I manage to get in a few hours of work, but he doesn't like it. I have pretty mixed feelings about it.
- I: What do you mean?
- R: Well, I'd say that as a daughter, I feel pretty guilty about how I feel sometimes. It can get pretty bad, like wishing that Mother were just gone, you know what I mean? She's been a wonderful mother and I love her very much, but if you ask me how I feel as a wife and mother, that's another matter. I feel like she's [the mother], well, intruding on our lives and just making hell out of raising a family. Sometimes I put myself in my husband's shoes and I just know how he feels. He doesn't say much, but I know that he misses my company, and I miss his of course. [Pause] So how do you answer that?

The interviewer goes on to explain that the respondent should answer in the way she believes best represents her thoughts and feelings. But as the exchange unfolds, it's clear that 'best' misrepresents the nonlinear complexity of the respondent's experience. In the next portion of the interview, notice how the respondent struggles to sort her narrative to accord with categorically distinct identities, which in the context of an agent who recognizes diverse narrative standpoints can produce distinct, even contradictory, accounts. At one point, the respondent explains that she now knows how a wife could and should feel because she gathered from the way her husband and sons acted that 'men don't feel things in the same way.' This response suggests that her own thoughts and feelings are drawn from gendered standpoints. Note, too, how the interviewer actively collaborates with the respondent to define her working identity as a respondent.

- R: I try to put myself in their [husband and sons'] shoes, try to look at it from their point of view, you know, from a man's way of thinking. I ask myself how it feels to have a part-time wife and mama. I ask myself how I'd feel. Believe me, I know he [husband] feels pretty rotten about it. Men get that way; they want what they want and the rest of the time, well, they're quiet, like nothing's the matter. I used to think I was going crazy with all the stuff on my mind and having to think about everything all at once and not being able to finish with one thing and get on to the other. You know how it gets – doing one thing and feeling bad about how you did something else and wanting to redo what you did or what you said. The way a woman does, I guess. I think I've learned that about myself. I don't know. It's pretty complicated thinking about it. [Pause] Let's see, how do I really feel?
- I: Well, I was just wondering, you mentioned being sandwiched earlier and what a woman feels?
- R: Yeah, I guess I wasn't all that sure what women like me feel until I figured out how Norm and the boys felt. I figured pretty quick that men are pretty good at sorting things out and that, well, I just couldn't do it, 'cause, well, men don't feel things the same way. I just wouldn't want to do that way anyway. Wouldn't feel right about it as a woman, you know what I mean? So, like they say, live and let live, I guess.
- I: But as a daughter?
- R: Yeah, that too. So if you ask me how I feel having Mother under foot all the time, I'd say that I remember not so far back that I was under foot a lot when I was a little girl and Mother never complained, and she'd help Dad out in the store, too. So I guess I could tell you that I'm glad I'm healthy and around to take care of her and, honestly, I'd do it all over again if I had to. I don't know. You've talked to other women about it. What do they say?
- I: Well, uh
- R: Naw, I don't want to put you on the spot. I was just thinking that maybe if I knew how others in my shoes felt, I might be able to sort things out better than I did for ya.

The respondent's comments about both the subject matter under consideration and how one formulates responses show that the respondent, jointly with the interviewer, mobilizes diverse communicative resources as an integral part of exchanging questions and answers. Viewing the interview as animated, we can acknowledge and appreciate how the interviewer participates with the respondent in shifting positions in the interview so as to explore alternative perspectives and narrative possibilities. The analytic presumption is that narrative reality emerges out of the interplay of narrativity, not simply from within the respondent.

A methodological matter that we will mention but not develop here is the question of procedural guidelines for treating the interview as a thoroughly animated encounter. Just as there are virtual rule books for conducting good standardized interviews, potentially there are sophisticated guidelines for how to conduct and analyze interviews that are treated as animated. Granted, such guidelines do exist, but mostly in the form of unsystematic, seat-of-the-pants advice on how to encourage narrative expansiveness, on how to elicit 'rich' data. In a word, the textbook for animated interviewing has yet to be written, but the idea, if not the realization, does follow from the application of animated subjectivity.

Key Points

- Animated interview participants concertedly engage the work of meaning-making.
- The versions of meaningful experience that emerge from interviews are constituted in the interplay of the *hows* and the *whats* of the process.
- Because all interviews involve the co-construction of experiential reality, the conventional model of the respondent as a passive vessel-of-answers and the interviewer as a neutral interrogator shortchanges how possible responses may be analyzed.
- There is both an analytic and empirical warrant for thinking of responses as narratives, sets of themes, and plotlines. Interview guidelines in this case would provide methods for activating an animated subjectivity.

Animation, Bias, and Rigor

An emphasis on the animated quality of interviewing might suggest that active interviewing merely invites unacceptable bias into the information-gathering process. 'Contamination' seems to lurk everywhere and understandably needs to be controlled. But this criticism only holds if one's point of departure is an image of passive participant subjectivity. Bias is a meaningful concept only if the respondent is viewed as a preformed, purely information-producing commodity that the interview process might somehow distort or defile.

If the substance of responses is seen as a narrative product of the animated *hows* and *whats* of interviewing, they are neither preformed, nor ever pristinely communicated. Any interview situation – no matter how formalized, restricted, or standardized – relies upon interaction between participants who are constantly engaged in interpretive practice. Because interviewing is unavoidably collaborative, it is virtually impossible to free interaction from factors that could be construed as contaminants.

Participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making-meaning, even if that sometimes takes a highly constricted form.

While naturally occurring talk and interaction may appear to be more spontaneous than what transpires in an interview, this is true only in the sense that such interaction is staged by persons other than an interviewer. Seemingly spontaneous conversations are not necessarily more authentic, bias free, or unstructured. They simply take place in what have been conventionally recognized as non-interview settings. But these settings, too, play a definite role in the production of experiential knowledge – just like interview situations. Still, with the development of the interview society, and the related increasing deprivatization of personal experience (see Gubrium and Holstein 1995), the interview has become more and more commonplace, increasingly making it a naturally occurring occasion in its own right.

Given an orientation to the animated interview, how can one make sense of interview data? Once we acknowledge that all interactional and discursive data are products of interpretive practice, analysis begins to center on the interplay of the *hows* and *whats* of interviewing. This stands in contrast to more traditional naturalistic research, which focuses mainly on the *whats* of the social worlds described in interviews (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, chapter 2). These interviews are typically analyzed as more or less accurate descriptions of experience, as reports or re-presentations of reality, depending on how postmodern the author's sensibilities. Analysis takes the form of systematically grouping and summarizing the descriptions, and providing a coherent organizing framework that encapsulates and offers an understanding of the social world varied members portray. Respondents' interpretive activity is subordinated to the substance of what they report; the *whats* of experience take precedence over the *hows*.

When researchers consider the constructive activity operating in the interview process, data extend to the *hows* of the matter as they reflexively relate to the *whats*. Respondents' comments are not seen as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways they narratively construct experiential reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly *process* as on what is assembled and conveyed.

Interactionally and contextually sensitive forms of narrative and discourse analysis can reveal reality-constructing practices as well as the subjective meanings that are circumstantially in tow (see Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Potter and Hepburn 2008). The goal is to document how interview narratives are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that mediate the narrative process. The analytic objective is not merely to describe situated narrative construction, but to describe what is being said in relation to the experiences and lives being represented in the circumstances at hand. Viewing the interview as animated means analysis must be every bit as rigorous as the analysis of conventionally construed interview data. Analyzing such interview data requires disciplined, methodical procedures and sensitivity to both process and substance (see Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

Key Points

- The concept of the animated interview casts interview 'bias' in a new light. All participants in an interview are implicated in the construction of narrative reality. They are involved in narrative production, not contamination.
- The guiding question should not be whether interview procedures contaminate data, but how the interview generates the information it does.
- Because interview data are products of interpretive practice, data analysis demands a rigorous sensitivity to both the *hows* and *whats* of the interview process.

Summary and Future Prospects

In conclusion, let us highlight the chapter's key points. First, the active interview is not a particular type of interview, to be distinguished from other forms of interviewing. Rather, we use the term 'active' to underscore the notion that all interviews are unavoidably active communicative enterprises. Active is an ontological reference to the enterprise. Even the standardized survey interview is active, because standardization procedures actively structure the interviewer's input and restrict the respondent's range of responses.

Second, by specifying the vision of an active, animated interview, we are not offering an oblique criticism of standardized interviewing methods. Rather, by calling attention to the constitutive activity inherent in all forms of interviewing, we are pointing to alternative models of the interview, abrogating the perspective that there is a foundational sense of the interview and, equally important, eclipsing the idea that there is a gold standard for interviewing.

Third, at the same time, by animating interview narratives, we are not saying that 'anything goes.' Put into place, every image of the subjectivity of interviews spawns its own operating rules. The concept of the animated interview derives from an ontologically warranted basis for construing the production, collection, and analysis of information in a particular way, and demands its own set of procedural and analytic guidelines.

The view of the narratively animated interview broadens the analytic purview of interview research to consider a wider array of questions than are the bailiwick of more standardized or naturalistic approaches. In the future, researchers will no longer be content simply to catalog what was said in an interview. The challenge of viewing the interview as a thoroughly animated narrative process is to carefully consider what is said in relation to how, where, when, and by whom narratives are conveyed, and to what end. Construing the interview as animated, then, provides

us with a much wider, more richly variegated field of inquiry than ever before. This will require the continued development of contextually sensitive forms of narrative analysis (e.g., Baker 2002; DeVault and McCoy 2002; Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Potter and Hepburn 2008) that capture the complexities of narrative realities produced through interviews.

Questions

- 1 What does the idea of an interview society suggest we consider in doing research on inner lives and social worlds?
- 2 What view of participant agency does animating interview narratives put into place?
- 3 Distinguish between the *hows* and *whats* of interpretive practice and how this can be applied to the interview.

Recommended Reading

The Active Interview by James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (1995) describes the active interview in greater depth. It provides extensive illustration of the interactional, interpretive activity that is part and parcel of all interviewing.

InterViews by Steinar Kvale (1996) is an introduction to qualitative research interviewing. The book frames the issues in terms of the active view presented here.

The *Handbook of Interview Research* edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (2002b) is both a thematic and encyclopedic collection of state-of-the-art descriptions of different approaches to interviewing. The handbook covers theoretical, technical, analytic, and representation issues relating to interview research.

Analyzing Narrative Reality by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (2009) offers an approach to analyzing actively constructed narratives, including those produced by interviewing.

Internet Links

The Active Interview, Google Books:

http://books.google.com/books?id=LgR3TjzCxf8C&dq=the+active+interview&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=iK16S5aAEeP08Qbh2Zm0Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBUQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=&f=false

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Handbook of Interview Research, Google Books:

http://books.google.com/books?id=uQMUMQJZU4gC&dq=handbook+of+interview+research+context+%26+method&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=ubZ6S4XGOsLT8QaGtOnzCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBoQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography:

<http://jce.sagepub.com/>

Qualitative Inquiry:

<http://qix.sag.com/>

Qualitative Inquiry, 'The Shaping Effects of the Conversational Interview:

<http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/7/1265>'

Qualitative Research:

<http://qrj.sagepub.com/>

Qualitative Sociology Review:

www.qualitativesociologyreview.org

The New Language of Qualitative Method:

www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Sociology/TheoryMethods/?view=usa&ci=9780195099942

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