Section I. Obtaining discourse to analyze
Chapter 1. Interviewing

Why interview?

I am an advocate of interviewing as a source of information about cultural understandings. Since this is sometimes controversial in cultural anthropology, before I get to the “how” of interviewing, I should explain why. Here are some common objections to interviews as a method of learning about cultural understandings, and responses cultural models researchers have given. Readers who have already decided on the merits of interviewing may be impatient with this section, but it is important, because it bears on what interviews should not be expected to show and how to conduct them to avoid problems.

Interviews are elicited, not “natural.” What does this mean exactly? In some societies interviewing is not a common speech event. This raises different issues than interviewing in societies in which most people are familiar with interviews of different sorts: as a prerequisite to jobs or college admissions, marketing focus groups, journalists’ interviews with celebrities or with the “man in the street,” for counseling, and so on. I will assume that most readers of this book are planning interviews in societies of the latter sort. If not, it is a good idea to consult others who are familiar with the society you are planning to study for advice about what sort of approach would be most appropriate. (See also Briggs, 1986.) Do not rule out the possibility of interviews even in such societies however. Even if interviews are not a common speech event where you are
working, they might still be an appropriate way to gather information for your project. It depends on your research questions.

What is meant when a complaint is made about the “unnaturalness” of social science interviews in a society in which other sorts of one-on-one or group interviews are fairly common, such as the United States? It could be that the particular topic that is the focus of your investigation is not usually discussed in an interview but with friends, co-workers, classmates, or in a bar. You should not conclude, for example, that the way your interviewee discusses politics in the privacy of a one-on-one interview is the same way that he would discuss it with his co-workers. That is an important point to keep in mind: People will change what they emphasize, depending on the context.

In this respect, however, interviews are no different from any other kind of discourse. Deborah Tannen (1986:64) gives the example of a woman who highlights the positive aspects of living in a big city and being a graduate student when speaking to her relatives and her parents’ friends but the loss of free time and her cramped apartment when talking with high school friends who are bored with their lives. Ideally you would observe the same person talking about the topic in a variety of contexts. The problem is that the topics you are interested in as a researcher may not come up naturally in the course of conversation very often, and the chances of it coming up while you happen to be around are even more remote. You can attend meetings of people concerned about such-and-such, but that limits your sample to the concerned, who are usually an unrepresentative minority of the population you are interested in.

_Distortion to please the interviewer._ In other words, do people simply express the opinions they think we want to hear? Unless your interviewee is someone who knows
you well, they are not likely to know what you want to hear. They can guess, based on any stereotypes they have about people like you, but whether they will bother depends on the nature of your relationship to them and how you conduct the interview. If you conduct it in a nonjudgmental way, they are less likely to be concerned; if you have no significant on-going relationship, they are not likely to be concerned either. I have been surprised at the extent to which interviewees express views that I disagree with quite a bit. A few years ago I conducted interviews with 27 North Carolinians regarding their ideas of distributive justice. Only one or two stated views that were close to mine. I have to remind myself that they see their views as the right way to think, just as I think mine are, so why should they be embarrassed to express what they take to be the truth? Sometimes I will play devil’s advocate to see if they will consider a different point of view. The result has been quite surprising if you think interviewees readily change what they say to please you: Almost always they stick to their guns.

Furthermore, as Quinn (in press) points out, very often we are more interested in the implicit cognitive frameworks that underlie explicit opinions—frameworks that interviewees are not even aware they hold and could not distort if they tried.

On the other hand, while I do not find that interviewees try to please me, they frequently manifest awareness of what I call the “cultural standing” (see Strauss 2004 and chapter __ below) of their views. If they are aware that their views are controversial in some larger opinion community,¹ they may try to soften their statements, avoid stating

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¹ An opinion community is “any social group, of any size, in which opinions are discussed (or… in which assumptions are shared). It could be a face-to-face group like a family, social clique, or local community or a far-flung one in which various media—electronic chat rooms, newspapers, music, movies, and television—mediate the discussion. Opinion communities are formed by prior discussion of a topic, and familiarity with this prior discussion is part of the expected competence of members of that community” (Strauss 2004:170).
their views until they have gotten to know you, or even censor them completely. These
attempts tell you a great deal. I would add that if someone is censoring a view in
spontaneous speech (as opposed to writing, which they can edit), clues often remain to
what was left unsaid. This is one of the advantages of interviews.

*Distortion for self or group enhancement.* There is also a difference between
interviewees trying to please you and trying to make themselves look good. The latter
happens all the time. Someone will say they never do such and such, but you find out
that they do. This is a good part of the reason why anthropologists distrust interviews.

The response is that the usefulness of interviews depends upon what you are trying to
learn from them. I agree with Peacock and Holland (1993) that you have to be very
careful about using them as a transparent window to practices. If you want to know what
people do, if at all possible, you should try to observe them over a long period of time.
But these concerns do not apply to the frameworks they use to think and talk about their
practices. If you want to learn those, interviews are often an excellent source of data.

Sometimes you can even learn in the course of one or more interviews about the way
they have slanted the facts. One man I interviewed, for example, said at the beginning of
his first interview said that he and his brother had learned good values. By contrast, he
devoted a good part of his second interview to explaining that his brother had terrible
values. Another interviewee proudly proclaimed in the first five minutes of his interview
that he had never sought any form of social assistance. Two hours later I learned that he
was in the process of trying to obtain Social Security disability payments. The longer
you can talk with someone, the more such contradictions will emerge. This is a good
reason, in any serious interview-based project, to plan on long interviews, or a series of interviews.

**Unconscious omission of what goes without saying.** The late, great social theorist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that cultural informants “leave unsaid all that goes without saying” (1977:18), i.e., what is so taken for granted, either in thought or practice, that people are not even aware there is anything to discuss. I agree. My response, however, is that it is not necessary that interviewees be conscious of what they take for granted. If it is implied in their speech, then we have methods for getting at these implicit understandings: That is what much of the rest of this book is devoted to showing. If it is implicit in their actions, then we need to observe those.

**On-the-spot theorization that does not reflect actual practice.** This issue was again raised by Pierre Bourdieu (1977:18), who pointed out that certain cultural practices are often followed without much thought or discussion. The anthropologist who then asks for a systematic description or theory might be offered something made up on the spot. This highlights again the distinction between using interviews as a transparent window, in which you naively believe what you are told (problematic) and seeing interviews as reflecting the discourses and thought patterns that are the sources of what people say (what my colleagues and I stress instead).

**Interviews are “co-constructed” by the interviewer and interviewee.** The most sophisticated current approach to these issues is not to complain of “bias” or “distortion,” which implies that it is possible to conduct social science research in a completely objective way. Instead, it is acknowledged that the presence of the observer always has an effect on the situation. Since that is inevitable, we have to attend to how it happens. I
agree, and chapter ___ below will consider this issue further. In this chapter, I will address, in particular, the effect of the interviewer’s choice of questions.

So far I have listed several criticisms that have been made of interviewing, and why they are not necessarily a concern, depending on your research question. There are also trends in current anthropology that favor interviewing. Anthropologists recognize the importance of giving voice to average people, people without a great deal of power. As an interviewer, you are creating a forum for people who are not celebrities or leaders or creators of public cultural productions, and your in-depth interviews, if reproduced in large chunks, present an opportunity for them to be heard in their own words.

**What kind of interview: Structured, Semistructured, Unstructured?**

Some social science disciplines (e.g., sociology, political science) favor *structured* interviews for qualitative research. Anthropologists almost always use *semistructured* or even *unstructured* interviews instead. All of my interviews for the last 20 years have been semistructured, and since that is my expertise, it is what I will focus on in this chapter. What is the difference?

Russell Bernard (2002) presents a useful explanation of each type. In *structured* interviews, “people are asked to respond to as nearly identical a set of stimuli as possible” (ibid:205). *Semistructured* interviews are “based on the use of an interview guide...a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered,” but the topics may be broached in different ways, so questions are not completely standardized (ibid: 205). Finally, *unstructured* interviews are conversations clearly marked as interviews on a certain topic, but with few predetermined questions and only a “minimum of control over
people’s responses” (ibid:205). Unstructured interviews are not the same informal interviewing, in which you are chatting with people, often in the course of some other activity, and take notes afterwards, so that the event is not structured as an interview (ibid:204).

These three main types of interviews have subtypes. For example, structured interviews can rely on “open-ended” questions, in which the interviewee is free to say whatever she chooses, or “closed-ended” questions, in which she chooses from a fixed list of answers (Briggs 1986: 20). Bernard defines semistructured interviews as ones with a written list of questions and topics that are supposed to be covered in a fixed order (2002:205). Most researchers who use this method, however, feel free to change the order as appropriate, depending on the interviewee’s responses. We also give interviewees considerable control, following their lead as they bring up other topics that are of interest to them. “Semistructured interviews,” as my colleagues and I use the term, are like jazz performances, which have an underlying structure but freedom for individual improvisation.

For the purposes of some of the methods to be described in later chapters in this book, either unstructured or semistructured interviews are necessary; a structured interview simply will not work. For example, keyword analysis requires following the flow of a person’s thought as they segue from one topic to another. A structured interview that breaks up the interviewee’s stream-of-consciousness rambling will not let you see how they connect topics in their own minds; instead, it forces them to follow the order that made sense to you. Furthermore, structured interviews tend to have a large number of preset questions, reducing the time available for interviewees to bring up personal stories.
or material that may seem tangential at first but that you will later discover contain the clue to their framework of interpretation.

On the other hand, there are some benefits to the use of a few standardized questions. Your word choice can evoke different schemas. If you want to compare interviewees’ responses (Do the men answer differently than the women? The low-income interviewees differently than the high-income?), but you are comparing questions asked with different wordings, you will not know if the differences you found are due to the wording of your question or the way they think. If you are looking for shared themes that emerge in discussing a particular topic, then standardized wording is less important. The approach I have developed is to have a small number of standardized questions. The rest of the interview covers topics I bring up in a less standardized way, along with any topics that occur to them in the course of discussing these.

**Interviewing ethics**

As someone doing research with human subjects, you are bound by rules of research ethics that have been developed in each of the social science disciplines, federal review boards, and institutional review boards, if you are working in an institutional context such as a college. The overarching rule is to cause no harm to participants in your research, where harm can be emotional as well as physical. This means that you will not reveal interviewees’ names or identifying information without their express consent. You will explain to them how the research will be used, and not violate that agreement without contacting them. This rules out, for example, playing the tape of an interview with a friend for the benefit of a class, if they did not know that their interview would be used
that way. If you are tape recording an interview, and they discuss illegal activities in
which they have engaged, you will offer to turn off the recorder for that segment of the
interview. (You do not want to be subpoenaed someday for your tapes.) In general you
will not tape without their consent. I once gave my class the assignment to tape examples
of men speaking to other men, and women speaking to other women. One female student
asked a male friend to hide a tape recorder in the men’s bathroom of their dormitory! I
hope it is obvious that this is unacceptable. Ethical ways to obtain natural speech are in
public situations, in which it is obvious that anyone could overhear a conversation, or to
let people talk for a while and become accustomed to the presence of the recorder. I find
that in the United States, at least, this usually happens quickly, particularly if you are
talking about engrossing subjects. If there is any question about whether video or audio
taping might be acceptable, err on the side of asking permission from someone in charge.

Here is one ethical issue that comes up: Are you bound to tell interviewees exactly
why you are interested in a topic? The generally accepted answer is no, you are not. You
should accurately represent the overall topics of discussion and what you plan to do with
the research (class project, senior thesis, dissertation, book) but you do not have to
explain in detail exactly what you will be covering or why you are interested in that.

Before you begin a formal interview, you should give your interviewee a consent
form to read and sign. Make two copies: one for them to keep with information about the
project, and the other, with their signature, for you. Here is a sample consent form a
student might use; a professional researcher would need to adapt this.
CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH ON ______________

Investigator: (your name)
Student, (name of college)

I am conducting research on the topic of ______________. If you agree, I will interview you about this topic. The interview will take about (fill in approx. how long). The interview will be tape recorded, transcribed, and used as a basis for a paper in (fill in name of course) at (fill in name of college). At any time you may request that I turn off the tape recorder for a specific portion of the interview. Your name will not appear in the transcript of the interview, and I will change your name and identifying information in my paper. If you have any questions about this study you can contact me at (fill in your phone number or box number if you do not want to give out your phone number) or call Professor (fill in professor’s name) at (professor’s office phone number).

If you agree to participate, please sign below.

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Preparation for the interview: Developing an interview guide

The most important part of your preparation is developing your interview guide, unless you plan to hold an unstructured interview, in which case you only need to come up with a good initial question. Naomi Quinn’s interviews on the topic of marriage with the wives and husbands in 11 couples simply started with the question, “How did you two meet?” From that starting point, she followed up what they said, as any good conversationalist would. If you plan, instead, on a semistructured interview, here are some rules of thumb for developing your interview guide.

*Start with a question that should be easy to answer. If you are interviewing a stranger, you could start, as I do, by asking them to tell you a little about themselves, so you have some context for their discussion. (If you are interviewing a friend, relative, or acquaintance, by contrast, this is not necessary, and would seem odd.) Another obvious first question would be to ask them to say what some of their thoughts are about whatever
topic you have told them the interview is about, for example, “As you know, this
interview is about immigration. Do you have any thoughts about that topic?” Since you
had told them previously that is what you would be discussing, they should be ready to
say something about it.

*Keep in mind that your initial questions will set the tone for the interview. If you
want to encourage them to speak at length, then your initial questions should not be ones
to which you expect short answers—with the possible exception of demographic
background questions and the like.

*Do not have too many questions! It is typical of inexperienced interviewers to
worry about having enough to talk about, so they develop a lengthy list of questions.
This leads to a stiff, choppy interview. Instead, think of a small number of questions that
are likely to evoke lengthy responses, and draw them out in response to each. The goal is
a discussion that feels like a natural conversation.

* In devising questions use wording that is natural in your interviewees’ speech
community rather than academese.

*Try to think about how they are likely to mentally organize the topics you want to
cover, not how you do, and adapt your questions to their frame of reference, so your
questions do not seem odd. Of course, you probably do not know their frame of
reference exactly; after all, the whole point of these interviews is to try to learn how they
think. That is why it is useful to pretest your questions in practice interviews, and change
your interview guide after you learn what works and what does not.

*Give them a chance to approach the topic from different perspectives. It is common
for people to have multiple schemas about a given topic and for those schemas to be quite
different. Often, however, people are not aware of the contradictions because the schemas are normally evoked in different contexts. You want to be sure to provide cues that might evoke conflicting schemas. For example, at one point in the interview you could ask for their general point of view (let’s say, about immigration); later on, you could ask about immigrants in their family, or other immigrants they know. This could bring out stories that will have a completely different emotional tone, images, and semantic associations. Even two successive questions can evoke different schemas. For example, in the last set of interviews I conducted I asked, “What things keep people from getting ahead in the world?” followed by, “Is the system fair? Does everyone have an equal chance to get ahead?” Somewhat to my surprise I found that those two questions tended to evoke very different schemas. In retrospect, I can see why. “What things keep people from getting ahead in the world?” brings up images of individuals, and thus is more likely to lead to individualistic answers (“Themselves. If they work hard enough, they can get ahead”), while “Is the system fair?” shifts the focus to social factors. Some interviewees who gave an individualistic answer to the first question gave one focusing on social factors in response to the second; others denied social factors, but at least considered them.

* You can also have some activities that rely on prepared materials: You can ask them to read a paragraph or look at a picture and react to it; draw the image they have in mind; or read a statement written on a card, say whether they agree, and why.

*Think about the order of your questions. Interviews have a rhythm. At first, there may be an awkwardness as you are getting to know each other. Even if you do know each other, you both need to settle in to the formal interview. During that initial awkward
phase, your questions should be ones that will get them to open up and speak easily.\(^2\)

This is not the time to ask questions that require them to bare their souls or think too deeply. Save those for the middle of the interview, when you and they are more comfortable. Do not, however, put them off to that looking-at-their-watch moment near the end, when they expect you to be wrapping things up.

*You should also know something about rules of speaking in your interviewees’ speech community. Are there topics it is appropriate to ask about, and others it is not—or at least, not right away?

Preparation for the interview: Nuts and bolts

I have not yet addressed how to find your interviewees or how many you need. For better or worse, anthropologists are not usually greatly concerned with this question. Often we are looking for cultural understandings that we expect to be widely shared, so we feel that we need not expend much effort in drawing a large representative sample, since almost anyone will do. This leads to “convenience sampling,” which, as Bernard (2002) explains, “is a glorified term for grabbing whoever will stand still long enough to answer your questions” (Bernard 2002:184).

It is possible to defend small convenience samples. More rigorously minded anthropologists have calculated that if the topic is such that the average cultural consultant will agree with at least 70% of the statements representing the modal view, then six cultural consultants will be sufficient for a high level of confidence on a high

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\(^2\) With some interviewees you may have the feeling that they have been waiting all their lives for someone to give them the opportunity to expound their views, and some people are emotional exhibitionists who will open up readily, but this is not common.
proportion of questions (Romney et al 1986: 326). But what if there is *not* such a high level of agreement? And can you know in advance whether there will be or not? It is prudent to try to determine (by asking people who are knowledgeable, or conducting a few informal interviews) what sorts of people are likely to diverge in their views on your topic and either include several members from each of these different groups or focus on one particular group, acknowledging that your conclusions may not hold for the groups you excluded. (For a detailed discussion of sampling, see Bernard 2002.)

Whether the interview is casually arranged between friends, or formally initiated with a letter to a stranger, you need to let your interviewee know approximately how long you expect it to take. Explaining that the interview usually lasts an hour or hour and a half, for example, signals your interest in thoughtful, detailed answers rather than hasty, superficial ones. If you make an appointment to meet at a future time, do not be surprised if they forget and you have to reschedule. This interview is much more important to you than it is to them, so slipups are to be expected and you should suppress your feelings of irritation if you show up at the prearranged site and they are not there. Just try again and do not set up your interviewing timetable based on unrealistic assumptions.

Ideally, the interviews will be held someplace where your interviewee feels comfortable, it is quiet, and you are not likely to be interrupted. In practice, you may have to compromise. For example, to compensate them for their time you might want to conduct the interview over dinner in a restaurant and pay the bill. Try to pick a quiet restaurant, but if that is not possible, just position the microphone near their mouth (a tie-clip microphone is useful for this) and hope for the best. Young parents may need to be

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3 These calculations are based on the use of fixed-choice instruments for eliciting cultural information.
at home with their children, and you just need to be understanding about interruptions for childcare. In some cultural settings, it is much more natural for people to stay at home, with others around, then to remove themselves for a private interview. When I have interviewed men, their wives or partners have sometimes dropped in occasionally--possibly to check up on us. At that point, I have always included them in the interview, and it has been interesting to see the interaction between the two of them and compare their responses. For your safety, you should think twice about conducting an interview in a stranger’s house and consult your intuitions about whether that would be safe. If you do go to a stranger’s house, let someone else know where you will be.

Interviews can be fun for the interviewees. How often do people get a chance to express their own ideas at length to a nonjudgmental, interested listener? Still, in addition to what you hope will be the intrinsic rewards of participating in your research, you should compensate your interviewee if the interview is lengthy, and the compensation should be specified in advance. In a college setting, food is often used as payment. In my research I have always paid my interviewees for their time. A short interview, of course, does not require any compensation.

A final bit of advice about pre-interview preparation: Check your equipment! If you are using a battery-operated tape recorder, test the batteries. If you use tapes, have extras ready. Since I do not completely trust batteries, I usually bring an extension cord with me and try to plug in my tape recorder. There is nothing more frustrating than coming away from a fascinating conversation and discovering that your tape recorder was not working or you forgot to turn on the microphone. This happens more often than you
would think; my equipment has failed me more often than my interviewees have. As a backup, take notes. (More on this below.)

**Conducting the interview**

Your preparation is finished, your interviewee is there at the appointed time, and you are ready to begin. Do you take out your interview guide, turn on the tape recorder, and start? No, of course not. As in most such formal occasions, you chat a little first before you get down to business. This breaks the ice, sets the tone for a relaxed pace, and lets them mentally reorient from whatever they were doing before you arrived. Most importantly, in the case of interviews with strangers or acquaintances whom you do not know well, it starts building a relationship of trust. Lengthy interviews are different from surveys. In an open-ended interview, your interviewee needs to feel comfortable enough with you to open up and really talk. Above all, you do not want to create the feeling that you are trying to get this over with as quickly as possible.

After the initial chitchat, you should explain again your expectations regarding the interview (e.g., how long it is going to take, that you are interested in whatever they have to say, they should feel free to bring up other topics that occur to them in the course of the discussion, and they can ask you to turn off the tape recorder for some segment of the interview). You can do this in the course of reviewing the consent form. You should not turn on the tape recorder until they have signed the consent form, and you should let them know that you have turned it on.

If you have a good set of questions, the basic format of the interview will be your introducing a topic, letting them talk about it, then following up on what they have to say
as any interested listener would (“You said that it would be the worst case scenario—how come?” “That word means different things to different people—what does it mean to you?” “Did a specific image come to your mind?” “Did that ever happen to you?”). You can also employ standard conversational tricks: repeating the last few words of what they said to encourage them to explain more, just nodding and, with your silence, encouraging them to go on, and in general being very interested in what they have to say and supportive. If you do this well, the transcript of the interview will look like this:


I cautioned above against taking out your interview guide right away. In fact, I have found it best if your interview guide is not visible. I discovered early on that when my interview guide was visible, my interviewees would say, “Does that answer that question? What is your next question?” The interview did not flow like a natural conversation. Instead, memorize at least your initial several questions. After a while you can take out the guide from under your notepad and check to make sure you have been covering everything you wanted to cover.
Why is a notepad necessary if you have a tape recorder? Even if the tape recorder works perfectly, background noise or a mumbling interviewee may make it hard for you to understand when you play back the interview. In my last research project, for almost every one of my 27 interviewees there came a point when some part of the tape was hard to hear, and I had to turn to my notes for clarification. I like to maintain eye contact during the discussion, so I take notes without looking at my pad. The result is not completely legible, but it does the trick. And should your recording equipment fail completely, you will have some record of the conversation.

Another good reason to take notes is to remind yourself of points to bring up later. Generally speaking, it is not a good idea to interrupt your interviewee. Sometimes you need to, for clarification. But unless the conversation is seriously off track and you are under time pressure, you want to let them talk at length with as little interruption from you as possible. I had an interviewee who on one occasion talked uninterrupted for an hour. Granted, he was an extreme case, but I learned a lot (in his case, how his feelings about gender roles were related to the place of the “little guy” in society, to being misunderstood just as early explorers were, and so on until we got to his theory that there was a massive cover-up regarding the truth about extraterrestrial beings).

One issue about which there is a difference of opinion currently is whether the interviewer should talk about him or herself. Some people have argued that one-sided questioning, in which the interviewer asks the interviewee to be self-disclosing but does not self-disclose in turn, is inegalitarian. I disagree. I have found that what is pleasurable for interviewees is the opportunity to hold the floor at length with a listener who is interested and nonjudgmental, without having to reciprocate. If they want to ask me
questions, I will answer. But I avoid hogging conversation time. This is their moment, and for most people it is rare opportunity.

One form of interruption that can build rapport is what sociolinguists call “cooperative overlaps.” These are short interruptions that support the speaker and do not preempt their conversational turn or derail their train of thought. Some speakers are accustomed to what Tannen (1990:196) calls a “high involvement” style of conversation, in which cooperative overlaps are common. This style is usually accompanied by a rapid speaking pace, varied intonation, and hand gestures. Others are accustomed to what she terms a “high considerateness” style in which listeners are not supposed to interrupt, even supportively. This style usually goes with a slower pace, less varied intonation, and fewer hand gestures. Determine your interviewee’s conversational style, and if necessary, modify your style somewhat to bring it closer to theirs, lest they think you unbearably rude (at the high involvement end) or uninterested (at the high considerateness end).

Once your interviewee has had his say, then you can go back to points he raised earlier and you would like to follow up. You can also play devil’s advocate (“You said so-and-so. Now some people would say instead that such-and-such. What do you think about that?”). There is nothing wrong with introducing other points of view so long as you signal that you respect your interviewees and are interested in whatever they have to say, no matter how much it might differ from your ideas.

Be alert, in particular, to little things they say that suggest their views are more complex than you had realized. For example, one interviewee, when asked the “What things keep people from getting ahead in the world” question, replied, “Themselves and
um, other people not wanting to help.” She continued on the “other people not wanting
to help” theme at length, delivering a scathing critique of the way the deck is stacked
against poor people. When she was done, I said, “The FIRST thing you said, when I said,
‘What keeps people from getting ahead in the world?’ you said ‘themselves.’ What do
you mean by that?” At that point she explained that poor people should show more
initiative and strive to do more for themselves. This is typical: People’s views are usually
complex and will not fit into ready-made ideological boxes. Your job as an interviewer is
to give them a chance to express fully this complexity.

This relates, in a deeper way, to the way people acquire and cognitively represent
information. Most people do not spend a great deal of time pondering everything they
have heard or experienced on subjects such as the things that keep people from getting
ahead in the world. Instead, ideas they heard in one context will be represented in one
schema, ideas heard in a separate context may be represented in another schema, and
their own experiences in a third. For a great many topics, there is no practical need to try
to resolve any contradictions among these. Thus, their first comments on a topic might
replicate recently heard, or frequently heard, utterances of others they trust. As you talk
about it further, however, they might start explicitly or implicitly shifting to other views.
Do not be embarrassed to ask questions that seem similar, and do not try to anticipate
their answer. I have been guilty of this. I would assume I knew how someone would
answer my next question, based on her response to the previous one, so I would preface
my question by saying something like, “I think I know what you’re going to say here, but
I need to ask anyway.” Often my guess was wrong, and I should have dropped the
prefatory apologies.
After the interview

When the formal interview is over, you should engage in some further pleasantries for a few minutes. If it has been a lengthy, revealing interview, you have developed something of a relationship. Do not leave the moment it is over, as if all you cared about was obtaining this interview and you are eager to escape as soon as possible afterwards. (There are obvious parallels here to other kinds of encounters—I think you know what I mean.) Sometimes the post-interview discussion is so interesting that I ask if I can turn on the recorder again. Of course, if they are in a hurry, do not overstay your welcome. After you leave, take notes on the setting, their manner, and other nonverbal aspects of the situation and context not represented on tape. It is also legitimate to take notes on comments they made that were not captured on tape, so long as you use them only for your own background understanding, or at least, do not use them without permission.

Do you have any obligations to your interviewees after you have paid them and left? If you have promised to share the results of your research, you should do so. Beyond that, you are not obligated to do more, but it can be a good idea. If you plan to publish your research, you should try to re-contact your interviewees and show them what you plan to say. This will give them a chance to comment on your interpretation, which can be valuable feedback. And it is a chance to renew your acquaintance and learn about new developments in their lives.
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