

# The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed

Joseph C. Hermanowicz<sup>1</sup>

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*Interviewing is among the most central methods in social science research. While common as a method, there are identifiable characteristics that distinguish good interviews from outstanding ones. Great interviewing is deceptively difficult, partly because it is an acquired ability that takes time to develop, partly because people often remain bound to conventional norms of behavior while interviewing that precludes open access to the people interviewed. While several texts are available on interviewing, few of them venture to draw the explicit distinction among characteristics that separate ordinary from outstanding interviews. Consequently, a concise and accessible guidepost that directs people to the essentials of outstanding interviewing is difficult to find. Based on interviews with a range of people about varied subjects, the author offers 25 directions that will, when followed in combination, point the interviewer along the road from the good (or not-so-good) interview to the great interview.*

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## SLEEPING AROUND

Erving Goffman—gone now for two decades but whose sociological vision is ever-piercing—was known to periodically feel compelled to comment that you don't really know people until you've slept with them. He felt this need, no doubt, from observing practices around him in which fellow students of society seemed only to scratch the surface of the people they studied. The wit of his remark, like that of his work, is legendary. It also, however, represents an invitation, if not an insistence, to be more brazen and daring in our pursuits, shedding sociological

<sup>1</sup>Correspondence should be directed to Joseph C. Hermanowicz, Department of Sociology, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602; e-mail: jch1@arches.uga.edu.

niceties and naivete for afternoons and evenings, here and there, of jumping people's bones.

This is, of course, not to say that we forego our ethics and manners in dealing with people—we have a long and growing list of items to check in studying “human subjects.” And there are, to be sure, manners we must observe even while in bed, for if we don't, as some of us know, we are sent home. The point is that we must bed our subjects more often—that we should be more forward, direct, candid, and adventuresome in ways that show the flesh of the people behind all of the garments they wear in everyday social life.

In what follows, I focus on the interview as a method of research and outline 25 ways of making interviews—and the bodies of work they reveal—better than they might be otherwise. I focus on the interview—and in particular the semi-structured interview—because it is among the most basic and fundamental of methods, and one which, if executed well, brings us arguably closer than many other methods to an intimate understanding of people and their social worlds. The impetus for this discussion is straightforward: Goffman's admonition remains all too relevant, many of us remain all too chaste. The people who are perhaps in the best position to follow these strategies are those who are not as yet wedded to given techniques—mainly, but not confined to, up-and-coming students. I therefore speak with this audience primarily in mind.

One might argue that any one of these strategies requires more discussion than I will offer. Many textbooks and research manuals present steps to follow, some consistent with, others contradicting one another. And, of course, we devote entire courses to the subject which I will limit to a relatively few number of pages. But I take these textbooks and courses as my point of departure. There will be times when multiple books cannot be utilized (or read as fully and critically as necessary), or when a methods course cannot be taken in preparation for the interviewing one needs to do.

In addition, many such existing tools likely produce the kind of timidity that so disappointed Goffman and others who have shared in his lament. At one end, textbooks and manuals can be big on policies and procedures, selling the art short of the science. They risk squelching intellectual playfulness, making a method overly procedural and a researcher too shy, too polite. At the other (albeit less populated) end are handbooks that equivocate to the extent that they sell the science short of the art. They risk making a method procedure-less and a researcher unsure and unconfident.

More significantly, though, existing work on interviewing has been relatively reticent about drawing distinctions in the characteristics that differentiate interviews by quality. Most work has typically taken an agnostic approach in describing interviewing as a method, as opposed to “cutting to the chase” and identifying “tricks of the trade” essentials that set outstanding interviews apart from ordinary ones.

I make an explicit distinction between good and great interviews (along with the people who conduct more or less of either type). At the most basic level, good and great interviews and interviewers have some shared attributes. They each have an objective, motivated by a research question and study design. They each involve the posing of questions, usually with follow-up probes, to a respondent. And they each yield data that can be used in better understanding the organization and processes of social-behavioral life.

Fundamentally, however, they differ on one score, which will flash insistently throughout my discussion: the *depth of detail* from respondents that each kind of interview is able to reveal. Good interviews capture basic, and occasionally deep, levels of meaning from the details supplied by the people interviewed. But the interviewer typically comes away from the good interview sensing that much more on the topic in question could have been gathered from the respondent. In good interviews, there is little, if any, sense of having come close, let alone having touched, someone's "essence" or inner core—the stuff that makes them tick.

By contrast, great interviews are richly detailed. Even though in a great interview one may also conclude by sensing there is more to know about the respondent—since something about someone always runs a good chance of being unshared—the interviewer nevertheless walks away with the realization that someone's essence or inner core—the stuff that makes them tick—has been tapped and bled to show several of the constitutional elements of the respondent and his or her social world.

Getting to the core of people, much like that of a nut, is not easy. Each has a protective shell. But several steps can be taken together to help make them "crack" and thereby show their inner workings. The 25 strategies I will describe, while perhaps not exhaustive of the steps interviewers can take to ensure great results, are, I argue, comprehensive of the major, essential conditions on which great interviews are achieved. Discussed in the context of other selected work on interviewing, these strategies, when followed in tandem, will more often than not lead to great interviews, great results, and, as it usually turns out, a great time talking to people about themselves and their place in the social world.

The strategies apply to numerous types of social settings and respondent profiles. They have arisen for the author based upon reflection from the field of interviewing diverse people about varied subjects: middle and high school students about their educational and occupational aspirations; college students about "dropping out"; freshmen about college adjustment; scientists about their unfolding careers; public school teachers about life in the classroom; young professionals about work and family; Americans about their sexual habits. Like the panorama that these studies paint, the expectation is that these strategies will enhance the interviewing that we need to do in all of society's quarters.

I proceed with the understanding that the person you are about to bed is not merely a casual encounter to be carelessly used and abused—who wants to be

treated this way? Rather, this is a person you want to get to know, so much in fact that you have prepared in advance both how you will go about handling yourself and the fanciful encounter that awaits you. Moreover, this person has agreed to see and talk *to you*, and has thus been responsive to your overtures. In these circumstances, both parties have a committed interest in seeing things go greatly.

The sexual metaphor, arising throughout the discussion, signifies the most essential objective of great interviewing: a revelation of intimacies, thoughts, and personal perspectives (on a given topic or range of topics) held by someone who is moved to disclose them on the basis of feeling they are part of a romantic union. And, certainly, one feels part of a romantic union only when the situation has been defined that way—a delicate task requiring thought and care on the part of even the most expert of interviewers.

We realize that, with almost all people, we can't immediately jump into bed with them, even with those who might in the longer run be willing to frolic with you or me. Some of us also know, and many more can surmise, that when simply "jumping into bed," we in fact get to know our bedmate very little, if at all; the purpose is pure self-gratification and not acquired understanding of the other.

Consequently, the sexual metaphor assumes several senses in helping to explain the characteristics of great interviewing. Great interviewing is not pure sex; it's a romantic-like dialogue that progressively moves through stages (of revelation) and enacted rituals (greetings and introductions, questioning, explanation) culminating in the most intimate of exchanges ("intercourse"), even if all done within an hour's time. Therefore, the interviewer's respondent can be understood not as a pawn, mark, or "easy thrill," but as a cherished "date" that must be understood as well as protected (mostly through anonymity) from injuries that can occur from self-disclosure. What interviewers do with their dates—how they talk to them; what they ask them; ways they treat and handle them—determines all that is ultimately at stake: the most personal stage of the encounter when protected details and knowledge are undraped.

The fruits of the union have the potential to last a lifetime; at the barest minimum they will deliver a memorable experience about the world in which we live. These, then, are the essential terms on which your adventure begins.

## WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR DATE

**1. Converse.** The number one characteristic of a great interview, above and beyond all else, is that it is like a conversation. Great conversations, like great interviews, are rare. But when they happen, you come away having learned something beneath the surface of the person with whom you are talking. There is an absence of superficiality; there is flow. Great conversation is the quality that should guide one's approach to interviewing. Conversely, a not-so-good interview is not a conversation—it is, rather, mechanistic. The interviewer asks question number 1;

the respondent answers it. The interviewer asks question number 2; the respondent answers it—a lockstep approach that is excessively rule-bound and rigid in style and format. Your date will not open up following this kind of format.

An ancillary characteristic of the conversation is that the interview questions are a guide to help move the interview along, but they are not an inflexible list that the interviewer follows rigidly. In a great interview, as in a great conversation, the interviewer asks sub-questions, asks for clarification, asks the respondent to expand on what he or she just said. Responses are used to guide the sub-questions (which may not appear at all on the interview guide). The bottom line is to follow carefully what your date says, which leads to the second strategy of great interviewing.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Listen.** Great interviewers are able to “hear” data. By this it is meant that they have an “ear” for what respondents are saying; they follow and concentrate on what is said (and *not* said) and they pick out clues for what other questions to ask. Respondents will often brush over topics; they will often allude to events or experiences—and they will not go into detail unless pressed.

While this principle holds for interviews on all kinds of subjects, it is especially salient when discussing difficult topics. For example, “hearing” data played a key part in my interviews with college students who had left school before receiving their degree—people who are often negatively stigmatized as college “drop-outs.” The studies required that I ask students why they left and draw a map

<sup>2</sup>The emphasis on conversation points to contemporary epistemological distinctions in how to conceive the interview process. Two major conceptual approaches animate ongoing discussion. One sees the interview in which the interviewer, playing a mostly neutral role, taps a respondent’s “vessel of knowledge or feelings” with questions and probes (see, for example, Converse and Schuman 1974). According to this view, the better trained the interviewer, the more productively the interview will go by having employed the skills to most fully “tap” the respondent’s vessel of knowledge. The respondent is seen to have a finite body of knowledge that is disclosed in greater or lesser volumes by the effectiveness of the interviewer.

The other major approach, exemplified by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), casts the interview in more active terms. The interviewer and respondent are both understood as constitutive forces in the meaning-making exercise of the interview. The success of the interview depends not on how effectively the interviewer taps a pre-existing, predetermined vessel of knowledge, but on how effectively the interviewer engages with the respondent in “interpretive practice” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, pp. 16–18). The respondent is seen not to have a finite body of knowledge, but an infinite body of meaning-making capacity, disclosed in greater or lesser volumes by the effectiveness of the interviewer.

In both interview “formats” meaning-making plays a central role, albeit in a more explicit, acknowledged, and encouraged fashion in the “active” format. More fundamentally, though, the success of an interview, as argued here, does not depend on whether we see respondents as finite vessels or infinite meaning-making reservoirs. Either view of the interview ultimately requires *skill* to effectively perform the interviewer role, skills that are embodied in the 25 strategies described herein. In this sense, the interviewer plays an active, indeed vital, function to the success of the interview in ways consistent with the ideas articulated by Holstein and Gubrium. Following Fontana and Frey, “. . . interviewers must be aware of respondent differences and must be flexible enough to make proper adjustments for unanticipated developments” (Fontana and Frey 1994, p. 364). But despite the merits found in the active epistemology of interviewing, we still need concrete notions of how to *actually conduct such an interview*—how to “pull it off.” Active conversation is the first and foremost principle; I suggest 24 others.

of their thinking and rationale for deciding to leave, ultimately with the goal of trying to offset undergraduate attrition in the large numbers in which it presently occurs.

As it turns out, undergraduates leave college for a wide range of reasons. But several of those reasons cluster into two main categories which can be problematic for students to discuss openly: troubles in academic performance and financial difficulties. When asked why they left school, students would typically allude to or brush over these factors, sometimes so obliquely that only one or two words were used to reference the reasons, such as “money” or “grades” or “I didn’t like one of my courses.” But those words, along with the practice of reluctantly furnishing them, are crucial bits of data that must be “heard.” Having heard these data, the objective turned to asking about them in explicit detail. Among the findings was a departure process in which students having such difficulties almost never consult (and, conversely, are never reached by) the people on campus who are there to help address them. The college departure process is a mostly silent one, occurring most frequently in social isolation, despite the capacity on most college campuses to ameliorate student departure.

You know what it is like to be on a date and not have your date actually listen to what you say: the conversation is mechanical and truncated. Not listening makes your date feel that he or she is unimportant, “not worth listening to.” Consequently your date will close up, become more protective, and end the date sooner than you wished, perhaps even on a sour note—all of which results in not getting the detailed data you need for good social science.

We have to listen for data—we also have to watch for data. What are the facial expressions and other body movements, in addition to that which is actually spoken, that suggest that the topic discussed is worth exploring in more detail?<sup>3</sup> This the third strategy.

**3. Find all that your date finds important.** A great interview explores *meaning*. What meaning do your respondents assign to what they are saying? How is it important or unimportant to them? The search for meaning is the major reason to use the interview method and qualitative methods generally. They are best able to capture fine-grained levels of significance. Meaning uncovers how people make sense of themselves—how they know themselves and the perspectives they have adopted to achieve this self-understanding.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The art of listening for data sets great interviews apart from ordinary ones. But despite its importance to superlative interviewing, it has received only minimal attention in the literature on interviewing. This void may partly stem from nebulosity of the principle itself—“hearing” data is among the most difficult of interview strategies to explain. But readers should see Rubin and Rubin (1995), who help correct the deficit in their excellent volume, entirely dedicated to this one (albeit of many) core characteristic of outstanding interviewing.

<sup>4</sup>Despite its age, Merton et al.’s *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures* (1956) remains a valuable source. Chapter 5, “Depth,” includes a classic discussion on the interview as occasion for meaning-making. In light of contemporary debates about the active-passiveness divide in conceptualizing the interview process (see note 2), it is worthwhile to

**4. Probe.** The only way to uncover meaning is through *detail*—the fourth characteristic of a great interview. Great interviews are very detailed. Not-so-good interviews are general. The great interviewer compels interviewees to be doggedly detailed—this is the only way true understanding will emerge.

If an interviewer asks—as I have in my studies of people and their occupations—“Are you satisfied in your work?” and the respondent answers “Yes, I’m pretty happy”—and it is left at that, we have found out almost nothing (as it turns out, most Americans report that they are pretty happy with their work, but upon probing, report many of its unexpected downfalls). The response is notable for its lack of detail. The word “pretty” is a cue, a piece of data one needs to “hear” in order to probe: “You say ‘pretty’ happy? Why ‘pretty’? What makes you say ‘pretty happy’?”

Interview questions themselves should not be overly general. Sometimes generality/specificity is difficult to judge until actually testing the questions. Thus one needs to be prepared to ask more specific questions when others are found to elicit only generalities.

Meaning is typically the most problematic part of interviews, and is the monster that most often eludes the beginning interviewer. People are inclined to be general rather than detailed—this is a common speaking convention. But like great conversations, great interviews reveal things previously unknown and often hidden about dates—the things that define their essence and “inner core.” People often do not provide a direct route to their inner core; one gets there through a series of routes—a series of probes.

Ask your date meaningful questions—the two of you have agreed to meet for this very purpose. When you get answers, be sure you understand them in their right context. And if you do not, follow up with more specific, deeper questions. More often than not, your date will appreciate seeing in you, and be responsive to, your efforts to understand on his or her terms because those terms hold significant meaning.

**5. Sometimes remain quiet when your date is quiet.** This is also known as the “silent probe.” In response to (often sensitive) questions that merit an extended response, respondents will be brief—again, the inclination is to speak in generalities, not in detail. One of the best strategies to follow when this occurs is to re-state or re-phrase the question, and then sit quietly until your date opens up. While this strategy constitutes a particular variety of probing, it is also a manifestation of self-control and the preservation of integrity (discussed later on). Most respondents get nervous when there is silence beyond a conventional length of time. Talking is often the way they resolve this nervousness. Moreover, by occasionally remaining silent when situations like this arise, the interviewer

look back at Merton’s timely discussion of flexibility, retrospection, and focus on feelings, re-statements, and comparative situations as devices used by interviewers to *actively* engage their subjects.

affirms the way in which the interview has been defined, namely as an occasion in which your date should speak freely and openly about the subjects at hand.<sup>5</sup>

**6. Persist.** The practice of probing and finding one's way to someone else's "core" develops from cultivated persistence. An interviewer will routinely need to ask sub-questions (the "probe questions" mentioned earlier). At other times an interviewer will need to ask questions in different ways—re-stating, re-phrasing, and re-casting them, sometimes in different tones of voice. The goal is to get respondents to open up, to convey detailed meaning; this will usually happen by being persistent (while also patient—see #15) in questioning. Moreover, in dealing with questions that cause discomfort, some dates will attempt to move the conversation in a different direction, or convey to the interviewer that he or she should move on to another question. If the subject being discussed is important, and if an insufficiently detailed account has been supplied, the interviewer should politely persist on the topic. While the interviewer is always respectful, never use politeness as an excuse to move on—remember: This is someone whose many sides you want to get to know, including those that may not be graced with charm. Interviewers who help define interviews in this way make possible the realization that no one is perfect—not even the perfect date—which more readily allows them to speak thoughtfully and candidly about themselves.

A great date, like a great interviewee, likes to be chased. It is an invitation to come along and see more. It demonstrates your active interest in knowing more about your date, along with his or her willingness to reveal. As with probing, persistence can be flattering because it shows your genuine interest with whom you are interacting.

**7. Play the innocent sometimes.** An instrumental manifestation of persistence that often opens people up is the practice of playing the innocent, also known as *appealing to their altruism*—making people want to help you. Most people want to be helpful—they have agreed to be interviewed—and they especially want to be helpful if you appeal to their altruistic tendencies. All one has to do is ask: "Can you help me understand what you're saying?" "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying, can you help me understand what it's like to have experienced this situation?" What one does in playing the role of the innocent is become an outsider to the respondent's world. Indeed, the outsider is a role an interviewer truly leads. By appealing to people's altruism, the interviewer puts the respondent in the position of being a kind of teacher. The interviewer therefore makes respondents feel that they are doing a service—which they truly are—by opening up and conveying their experiences. But play the innocent sometimes (usually not

<sup>5</sup>Gorden (1969, pp. 187–190) provides an additional explanation of the silent probe, generally well-established as a technique, if not always included in discussions of interviewing strategy.



more than once or twice in an interview—more frequent usage undermines the interviewer's sincerity).<sup>6</sup>

In playing the innocent with your date, you know that you are coy while also charming, interested in your date and what he or she is revealing. You are pretending not to know in an effort to know more. Used well and in small amounts, your charm will not run thin and you will succeed in having your date show you more.

**8. Don't stay out all night; don't come home too early.** Great interviews are not short nor are they excessively long. If one executes all of these strategies well, a great interview normally runs no shorter than an hour. The outer limit of great interviews is more difficult to gauge, but the level of meaning and detail achieved through responses are a testable guide. Most respondents grow tired after about ninety minutes, and some even sooner. Most respondents will not be as forthcoming, detailed, and candid when they are tired. A ninety-minute interview that is richly detailed is of course much more useful than a two-hour interview that is general. Thus, the working principle, with flexibility on both ends, is that great interviews should normally last between sixty and ninety minutes. Studies that require longer interviews may have divided interview sessions, such that each runs no longer than about ninety minutes.

The length of time to allow (and to take from a respondent), combined with the imperative to get at meaning, limits the number of questions an interviewer can pose. A common tendency—which produces the number one problem with interviews: lack of detail (see #4)—is to ask too many questions, gliding through each one (sometimes as a result of nervousness), and letting the respondent get away with generalness.

A sixty-to-ninety-minute great interview typically has between twenty and thirty main questions. In addition to these main questions, there are several already prepared sub-questions, or probes. In addition to these, there are normally other probes that the great interviewer decides to ask on the basis of hearing data. A great conversation does not run through a list of topics and questions at breakneck speed. Likewise a great interview focuses on selected topics and consists of a limited number of questions together with probes. The result often is a very detailed, rich account.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Some of the strategies I offer as “base-essentials” for great interviewing fail to occupy an established home in the interview literature: this is one of them. I do not ever recall reading about “the innocent,” nor do current searches yield the unambiguous acknowledgment of those who have written on this variety of role-playing. Many have undoubtedly known of it, understood it, and taught it; far fewer, it seems, have put it in print. I am able to trace its presence within me to a helpful conversation, some years ago, with Charles Bidwell at the University of Chicago, just before I went on one of my first forays into the field.

<sup>7</sup>Readers can compare McCracken (1988), who advocates an altogether different view. Interviewers of all stripes will find that most people do not have time for a “long” interview—often even an hour or ninety minutes is much to ask and a challenge to schedule. Longer interviews are best broken up into multiple sessions, as in cases where one is seeking a life story (Atkinson 1998).

**9. Word questions clearly.** You want your date to understand you, insofar as the questions you ask are concerned. The interviewer who is verbose on the one hand or truncated on the other is confusing. On the part of the interviewee, such confusion can create uncertainty, ill-confidence, and even annoyance—a date gone bad. Interview questions should not be overly long with a lot subordinate clauses. Nor should they include terms or expressions that are most likely unfamiliar to respondents. They should normally be short and specific, but without eliminating the candor, subtlety, and nuance that prompt respondents to speak personally. They should mostly use terms that are part of general speech, although in some situations using terms or expressions germane to the particularities of types of respondents (e.g., lawyers, high school students) are helpful in eliciting detailed conversation.<sup>8</sup>

**10. Sequence your moves.** A great interview, like a great time out with a date, is structured by questions that are well-sequenced. A great interview is not a random mix of questions in which the last question can be asked first, the first last, and so on; the great interview is strategically organized and planned. A basic rule of thumb is that a given question (within a given topic) normally anticipates the next question, so that there is a progression and flow to the conversation. Besides this, there are three general sets of tactics to bear in mind in how to sequence questions:

- a. The first questions are often introductory, easy to answer, and nonthreatening. The interviewer gets things off to a start; the intent is to get the respondent talking and comfortable at talking in the interview situation. For this reason, it is not a good idea to put difficult or threatening questions at the beginning of an interview.
- b. If one uses difficult or threatening questions (as one should; see #13) they should be placed in the middle of the interview. The interviewer will have gotten the respondent used to talking and can gradually begin to ask more difficult questions.
- c. An interview should always end on a positive note. The interviewer should “cool down” the respondent. The interviewer will have moved out of the difficult and threatening part of the interview; now it is time to ease up. Above all, never conclude an interview on a negative or merely a faintly positive note, particularly if parts of the interview have involved rough questions for the respondent. It is often useful and appropriate to conclude with a question that will be easy and flattering for the respondent to answer.

My studies of scientists and their unfolding careers illustrate this point. I wanted to understand and present for my readers how people experience and interpret their work over the course of their lives. Scientists, on the whole, are people who are very closely tied to their work: Much of their identity is derived

<sup>8</sup>For an excellent book-length discussion of how to word questions, sequence them, and organize them into sections of an interview schedule, see Sudman and Bradburn (1982).

from their profession and their professional accomplishments—some met, others gone unfulfilled. In order to get at their inner thoughts, feelings, and wishes, I had to sequence my moves—not in a surreptitious way, but in a way that would comfortably and effectively get them to open up. Thus, my interview protocol was divided into sections in which questions got respondents talking, then heated them up with difficult and sensitive questions, and then cooled them down with questions that were easier and often flattering to answer. To get them talking, I asked them to describe their work and what they do at work—topics that scientists (and most other professionals) love to discuss. To ascertain their subjective views of success and failure in the middle part of the interview, I asked them questions like: “What ultimate thing would you like to achieve?” and “How do you envision yourself at the end of your career?” and “What about your life do you think will outlive you?” To cool them down, in the final stage of the interview, I asked, among other questions: “What stands out as something that has left a strong positive impression on you?”—allowing us to end on a good note after a long, reflective journey of providing a career account.

All of the questions asked, wherever placed, should relate to the overall research question that has generated the interview. Asking a question for the sake of asking a question should not be a normal procedure—it wastes precious time; it can be counterproductive and cause confusion, anger and resentment on the part of the respondent. While questions might be included to warm up or cool down the respondent, they should always be pertinent to the research, such as was the case with the illustrative examples of questions asked of the scientists.<sup>9</sup>

**11. Divide conversation into topical stages.** Questions are sequenced and so are larger, more encompassing topical areas among which they should ideally be divided. An interview with twenty questions might have five sections, each with four questions. The sections can be labeled by the subject that their questions address, and these sections—like the questions—follow a progression of heating up and then cooling down.

In my study of science careers, the interview protocol was divided into six parts, one feeding into and anticipating the next by the specific questions asked under each heading:

- A. Location in the Division of Scientific Labor
- B. Construction of Personal Histories and Personal Identities
- C. Generalized Definitions of Success Ladders
- D. Conceptions of Future and Immortalized Selves
- E. Ambition
- F. Self-Doubt/Self-Fragmentation

This division helps give the interview an organization, which often helps both interviewer and respondent to recognize and to focus on the subject at hand. The

<sup>9</sup>See note 8.

topics into which an interview is divided are also often useful for the interviewer in analyzing, organizing, and presenting subsequent findings and discussion. Many excellent research papers partly achieve their excellence by having been organized in ways roughly, if not exactly, parallel to interviews on which they are based.<sup>10</sup>

As with a date, an interview has a structure. On a date—if it is to be a great one, and not simply mediocre—you don't move through conversation topics in random fashion. Rather, you are aware of the topics you want to cover before meeting your date; you are aware in advance of many questions you will ask and how you will ask them; and you have a sense of how questions will be organized topically (school, family, aspirations, religion, politics) and how, in turn, those topics might be arranged in relation to each other—when on the date you will talk about them, based upon how well you have established a rapport and can delve into more personal topics.

And like a great date, a great interview is not “locked” into rigid sequences of topics or questions. Other, unanticipated topics and questions will arise in the course of a flowing conversation (probing, #4). Your interview protocol, like the game plan you have in mind for a date, serves as a guide with an expected but as yet unknown set of detours and points at which to pause and linger, while ultimately returning to the main course.

**12. Be balanced.** If we were more often balanced in the questions we asked of the people we have studied, Goffman would have had no need to encourage sleeping around. It's those difficult to reach, hidden sides—sides that are undoubtedly large and consequential, not only for the individual, but also for the social order—that too easily escape inspection, even by those whose professional business it is to inspect society. A great interview has balance between questions that are easy for a respondent to answer and questions that are sensitive and at times unflattering for a respondent to answer. A date who is never fielded the difficult or unflattering has not been allowed to be fully true; who among the great, in that most noble usage of the term, shares the romantic company with someone who is less than fully true? We need to ask more often questions that effectively tap people's disappointments, let-downs, private worries, dreams and aspirations—the content of their inner core. To accomplish this, we must . . .<sup>11</sup>

**13. Be candid.** While many questions in an interview will be easy to answer, we must develop the muscle to ask the hard questions. “What happened when you lost your job at the age of 49?” “What have you seen as the consequences of your divorce?” If we fail to be candid, we will not get to the detail and meaning that make up people's lives. Great conversations—like great interviews—are not

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Most writers on interviewing leave difficult or threatening questions as an option (see, for example, Sudman and Bradburn 1982). If exercised, there are then guidelines about where in the interview to place such questions. Guidelines of placement are to be heeded (see #10), but we know now that much of the motive in writing this article would be lost if we continue to view the difficult or threatening as options to be pleasantly weighed.

all about pleasantries and niceties. A great interview uncovers something about someone in detail, and that often has to come from candor.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, on a date, the people involved—in the end—respect candor because in the end they have been truthful about themselves. Even when this truth makes you and your date uncomfortable or, perhaps, establishes a ground for your eventual parting of ways, this knowledge is important, indeed crucial, since it shows you for who you truly are. A date, let alone any other form of more serious union, lacking in candor, stands on shaky ground where the details of one's life will not surface. This defeats a relationship begun with a date as much as it does the primary purpose of interviewing.

**14. Preserve the integrity of meeting someone new.** Candor is made possible by *integrity*: In the case of interviews, this involves the exercise of conduct, formal and informal, spoken and unspoken, that works to preserve functional orderliness to the interview. In great interviews, the interviewer maintains a *sense* of equality but possesses authority over how the interview will run, which questions are asked, when they are asked, how they are asked, and so on. Moreover, the interviewer has the authority to stop the respondent when he or she is talking; to re-direct

<sup>12</sup>Some researchers will beg to differ in who is to be candid, and in what ways, throughout the interview process. Following points in note 2, these researchers might argue that, in order for an interview and an interviewer to be active, the interviewer must also be candid in order to produce the same result in the respondent. Douglas (1985) articulates among the strongest views in this regard: "Creative interviewing . . . involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction, largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimize *cooperative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding*" (Douglas 1985, p. 25; original emphasis). For Douglas, disclosure of feelings in both interviewee and interviewer is sought after and is a sign of an effective interview.

The activeness of an interview, however, is not conditional on an interviewer divulging his or her own personal secrets or feelings. The interviewer can call upon other strategies (see, for example, Gorden 1992 and Holstein and Gubrium 1995) to achieve an active orientation to the interview—strategies including those in which interviewers actively encourage respondents to consider alternative points of view or interpretations of statements they have made.

Indeed, on this specific point, I take a very different stand than that held by Douglas. In interview situations, interviewer candor about his or her own feelings, thoughts, and/or wishes can actually undermine the interview by eroding the confidence a respondent has in the interviewer. The intent may be to encourage the respondent to open up ("You tell me a secret, because I've shared one of mine . . ."), but the outcome can easily be a tightened tongue, not to mention elevated discomfort and unease with the entire affair.

While I take this point to be generally true of interviews, my sense is that it is especially pertinent to interviews with high-status individuals (cf. Hertz and Imber 1995; Zuckerman 1977). Under no circumstances could I have envisioned my interviews with academic scientists—let alone college leavers or sexually active adult Americans—proceeding in terms of a mutual confessional. Just as the psychiatrist proceeds by refraining from personal self-disclosure, so does the sociologist; in doing so, both conduct their roles—as therapist and researcher—professionally and ethically. This is what most respondents expect; this is what they should receive.

In that same spirit of professionalism and ethics, the interviewer should be honest in response to questions posed by the interviewer, particularly in regard to ones concerning the intent, purpose or logistics of the interview. But note here the difference between honesty and candor. The interviewer has an ethical responsibility to be honest, to the extent that responses to questions posed by the interviewee do not contaminate data derived from the interview.

the respondent; to get the respondent back on course; to press and be candid with the respondent. These actions are taken in the interests of the respondent and the situation in which that respondent speaks; a date, responsive to your invitation to meet, wants to know that he or she is in good hands. An interview in which the respondent takes control is an interview out of control and one, therefore, that will yield mixed results. This is not to say that interviewers should be authoritarian (see #15), for then respondents will not be forthcoming. Rather, in the absence of functional orderliness the integrity of the interview situation is compromised, and the interview fails to yield significant substance.

The best way to preserve the integrity of an interview is for the interviewer to develop self-control, a confidence and clarity about the goals, purposes, and strategies for the interview. The interviewer who is confident and self-controlled will so define the interview as an occasion for respondents to talk and behave in ways wanted.<sup>13</sup>

**15. Show respect.** While the interviewer preserves the integrity of interviews by possessing authority over how they are run, the interviewer at the same time shows respect for the respondent, what the respondent says, the setting in which the respondent speaks, and all other aspects of the interview. Respect extends a courtesy and thereby acknowledges the dignity of the people interviewed, regardless of whether they or what they say departs from the set of personal values held by the interviewer. Respect facilitates the preservation of integrity (see #14). What is more, a respondent has taken time out of his or her schedule to be interviewed

<sup>13</sup>For a helpful discussion of how the interviewer gets along with self and others, see Lofland and Lofland (1971, chapter 4).

Some researchers (e.g. Oakley 1981; Reinhartz 1992) have argued, as an extension of the activeness/passiveness epistemological divide described in note 2, that many expressions of authority are "paternalistic" and exploitative. They claim that interviewers can gain trust and full disclosure only when they "collaborate" rather than "control." Partnership and mutuality in the act of disclosure become the operative terms.

I draw a distinction between interviewer activeness as a means to aid the openness of respondents (see Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Merton, Fiske, and Kendall 1956) and interviewer pretensions about playing the same or equivalent role as interviewees. The patient does not understand the doctor as another patient, nor does the client understand the attorney as another client. But both doctor and attorney may, of course, actively perform their professional roles to best work with and establish cooperative relations in their dealings with people. And while interviewees are certainly free to ask questions of interviewers—as they assuredly do just as clients ask questions of doctors and lawyers—most, I suspect, do not enter an interview thinking that an interviewer is another interviewee. There is an understanding, if effectively produced by the interviewer, that they can work together to communicate effectively, yielding rich insights, but all involved are aware that they perform distinct roles. The interviewer who purports to be a "collaborator," an equal partner in self-disclosure, is manipulative and exploitative in ways most interviewees will quickly recognize. Interviewers, I contend, have an unambiguous professional responsibility to maintain integrity of their procedures and practices, indeed of the entire interview situation, much as the equivalent responsibility is assumed by other kinds of professionals in their practices. This sometimes will require the respectful exercise of authority to maintain control. This will rarely occur, primarily because both parties have, in most instances, agreed to the interview occasion itself. Despite the rarity of occurrence, interviewers who endow the interview with integrity are best apt to establish positive, cooperative relations that produce significant insights.

and is thus doing the interviewer a favor, often getting nothing in return, except perhaps greater self-understanding. Failing to pay due accord to someone who has done you a favor shows a gracelessness that will be noted and which can work against the interviewer's desired outcomes. *Never* be rude to a respondent, even though they will sometimes be rude. Rudeness itself is a piece of data within our interests to observe respectfully.

The consequences of failing to show respect for a date should be obvious: you don't get what you are after. One can hardly bank on getting to know a date by treating him or her indifferently or poorly. In showing respect, for a date as for an interviewee, you honor the person for who he or she is, regardless of whether what they reveal differs from your own understanding of who you are.

**16. Embody detached concern.** You want to get to know your date deeply, and minimizing the amount of unproductive influence, or interviewer bias, moves you closer to accomplishing that goal. Interviewees are dates in the metaphorical sense of divulging personal intimacies, and are "cared for" in the course of revealing them. One's date, like the best of dates, is cherished and taken seriously. As such, do not view them as casual friends, acquaintances, or informal encounters with whom you joke, tease, or otherwise engage in repartee.

Self-control is again paramount; care needs to be exercised in what the interviewer says, and how and when he or she says it, together with facial and other body expressions that should simultaneously convey respect, self-confidence, and openness on the part of the interviewer.

Great interviewers thus display a "quiet concern": They are interested and respectful in what their interviewees tell them but do not succumb to excessive emotional display. This is often best accomplished by eliminating the element of surprise. The interviewer who is surprised and shows it risks influencing the respondent in unintended ways: by showing naivete, insensitivity, or immaturity manifested in an unawareness of the life circumstances faced by the respondent. The great interviewer, however personally far removed from the circumstances or style of life that guide a respondent's "way of knowing," always maintains at least some resemblance to an ability to silently put him or herself in the position of the respondent. Most respondents, particularly adult respondents, will realize that values between them and interviewer do not perfectly, or even vaguely, coincide. But if respondents are able to detect openness on the part of the interviewer, made possible by his or her detached reserve, they themselves will be more likely to talk openly, to delve into detail and to convey meaning. While it is perfectly reasonable for interviewers to react, and even to respond to occasional questions that interviewees themselves have of their interviewer, this is best done in ways that minimize bias—through the self-presentation of a quiet concern and active preservation of the interview's integrity (#14).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Detached concern is not equivalent to neutrality (see notes 2, 4, 12, and 13). While the interviewer is not exuberant and gushy, nor is the interviewer solemn and stoical or otherwise unmoved by anything

**17. Test your questions beforehand.** Great interviewing involves *piloting*. Try out the questions to be used on some sample of people before moving ahead with the research. Do the questions elicit the right kind of information? Do they secure detail and meaning? Do they get people to open up? Are they well-sequenced and topically organized? You do know how embarrassing or damaging it can be to ask your date the wrong question, don't you?

**18. Rehearse.** Anticipate how your date will go, and what you will say and do. This means: Know your questions. A great interviewer has a very good sense of the questions—both main and probe—that comprise the interview, the sequence in which they will be asked, and the way in which they will be asked. In most circumstances, the interviewer should take the interview guide to the interview and have it rest on the lap if sitting, or in hand if standing. But the great interviewer is not overly reliant on the guide, for she or he has rehearsed the questions. This also allows the interviewer to be more comfortable and confident and to preserve integrity—one is always in a better position to handle the unpredictable when knowing the course one wants to travel and the end one ultimately seeks to reach.

**19. Don't date members of your own family.** Avoid interviewing people you know, except if a very particular kind of research design calls for it. Talk to strangers, because they are more apt to share their secrets than are the people one knows. In many cases, the interviewer will never see these strangers again, and will therefore have nothing to hold over them. Probing for detail and meaning with people you know often results in biased data. Playing the innocent almost never works, and being candid, embodying detached reserve, and preserving integrity all become difficult if not impossible.<sup>15</sup>

**20. Start off on a strong note.** Part of sequencing involves having a *good introduction*. A good introduction is read at the interview; it does three things:

- a. It tells the respondent what the study is about in slightly more detail than discussed at any previous time.
- b. It makes clear any risks that might be involved for the respondent—that you might pose questions, for example, that ask the respondent to make personal judgments about themselves.

said. The great interviewer is engaged and engaging, active, as it were, in an understated kind of way. This quality has most frequently been conveyed in the literature as “empathic understanding” (Gorden 1969; Rubin and Rubin 1995). Often this can be achieved with one's eyes and facial expressions, apart from anything spoken. Playing the role of an outsider who seeks to know, appreciate, and respect the respondent's world best facilitates this sometimes difficult to grasp behavioral stance.

<sup>15</sup>In their discussion of the similarities and differences between interviewing and conversing, Rubin and Rubin (1995), like several other scholars, point out how interviews—like conversations—can involve people the interviewer already knows. While such a circumstance may arise from time to time, I differ in suggesting it as an equally plausible and fruitful form of data gathering, for the reasons explained.



- c. It informs them of their rights and gets their consent to be recorded if not previously secured (see #23).

To give but one example, allow me to share the introduction I used in my study of academic science careers. I first contacted potential interviewees by letter, describing the project and what their participation would involve. I told them in the letter that I would call them in about a week to discuss the project further, answer any questions they had, and ask them for an interview. A relatively high percentage of scientists—70 percent—agreed to be interviewed. When I sat down with them, having finished with preliminary greetings and handshakes, I told them the following:

This is a study about the aspirations of academic scientists. The questions I would like to talk about deal with one's individual identity and how that identity has unfolded over time. Some of the things I will discuss ask you to reflect upon yourself and often involve making personal judgments that will touch on various professional and related personal topics. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential. Interviews are normally tape-recorded, and this simply provides for accurately keeping track of information. Subsequently the tape will be destroyed. Your participation in this study is important. However, should you at any time wish to stop, you may do so without prejudice to you, and at any time you should feel free to ask me questions concerning the interview or the study. May we begin? (Hermanowicz 1998)

It is useful for the interviewer to read the introduction verbatim. This accomplishes two objectives: It ensures that all of the points are covered and it conveys to the respondent that the interview is to be taken seriously. Reading an introduction therefore helps to define the interview situation on terms desired by the interviewer, terms that will typically lead to candid, frank discussion. I had never been told this bit of advice, nor have I read it anywhere in the literature—I simply stumbled upon it, perhaps partly out of nervousness, in the course of doing my first interviews. But I have no doubt that reading an effectively composed introduction at the time of interviews lets people know, more than ever before, what the study is about *and* that they need to take it seriously.

A date that begins with you limping along conveys that you don't know what you're doing. Your date will likely think that you are disorganized and failed to put in the time to prepare for your rendezvous. This does not convey respect (#15). A date who shows up tripping over his undone pants or mumbling through her garlic breath leaves a decidedly bad impression. In many cases, the date is over before it even has a chance of beginning. Think of your interviewees with this point clear in mind.

**21. End on a positive note.** This includes a concluding question or set of questions that “cool down” the respondent followed by an effusive, sincere thank you at the very end, something such as: “You’ve been so helpful; I really appreciate the time you’ve taken to talk with me. Thank you very much.” There is a second part to the conclusion, which the interviewer attends to after the actual interview. A great interviewer—regardless of whether the interview went well or not—always

sends a thank you note. This practice conveys additional respect; it also helps to preserve a field and method of inquiry for others who follow. Make your date feel important, since any date is worthy of respect, regardless of how well the outing went.<sup>16</sup>

**22. Bring the memory of your date home.** Many insights are readily available during and immediately after interviewing; they are also readily lost if not noted. Note-taking during an interview is often distracting for respondents and disrupts the natural flow of the conversation. This is generally the reason why we don't take notes in bed. Note-taking should, therefore, be kept to a severe minimum. But writing notes immediately upon returning from the field is often extraordinarily useful. Fieldnotes are notable for their general lack of form, for they are, after all, "notes." Fieldnotes that consist of a written storm of mental activity—all of the many thoughts, impressions, hints, possibilities, and self-suggestions that arise from an interview—will normally stimulate subsequent thinking as the interviewer attempts to assemble pieces of the research puzzle.<sup>17</sup>

**23. Tape-record.** Goffman asked for bravery, so, yes, be a little kinky while in bed: Tape your session. All kinds of data are lost without tape-recording: the narrative itself, intonation, nuance, meaning, sequence. Some people will claim that in some instances tape-recording is obtrusive, or is not feasible given the type of interview or the unwillingness of a respondent to be recorded. These situations arise from time to time. But more often than not, interviews lend themselves to recording without problems and most respondents, when informed about the intended uses and benefits of recording, agree to it. For example, explaining to respondents that tape-recording is an essential part of maintaining accuracy, that they will always remain anonymous, and that subsequently the tape will be destroyed often is sufficient reassurance to allow the interview to proceed. Those who might simply feel nervous or distracted by the presence of a recorder can normally be reassured by being told that they—like most people—will quickly forget the recorder is even there. Most often, interviewees are nervous and uncomfortable around tape recorders when interviewers are nervous and uncomfortable. Interviewers

<sup>16</sup>Zuckerman (1977, pp. 256–279) provides an excellent account of handling interviewees before, during, and after their interviews, particularly in regard to contact and communication with them.

<sup>17</sup>The agnosticism of the interview literature commonly assumes an "anything is okay" approach: One can take notes during the interview, after the interview, with or without a tape recorder; notes can be short or long, directed at specific or general response features. The problems of extensive note-taking during interviews have been noted. In lieu of taking notes, I have often found it useful to keep the interview protocol on my lap, and with a pen or pencil circle or check the questions that yield especially useful data. Afterward, I take more extensive notes on the interview, the checked questions and marginal notations helping to keep track of the major points to immediately expand upon. In this way, each interviewee gets assigned a protocol, and the highlights of individual interviews are noted on each respondent-specific form. After all interviews have been completed, a chart can be made, if so desired, crossing respondents with each interview question, and rating the depth or usefulness of the responses. This becomes a strategic and time-efficient way to begin organizing and analyzing data.

For writing lengthy notes once back from the field, see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995).

who are deft and comfortable help their respondents establish a similar level of ease.<sup>18</sup>

**24. Carry on long-distance only as a last resort.** Telephone interviews are difficult to manage; the situation is not as easy to control as when face-to-face with a date; breakdowns and misunderstandings in communication easily arise simply by being apart. Consequently the ability to conduct a meaningful conversation is readily compromised. Telephone interviews are unavoidable sometimes, often for reasons over which the interviewer has little control. Make the best of them where unavoidable by following these strategies as closely as possible. But overall, try to avoid this kind of relationship.<sup>19</sup>

**25. Practice, practice, practice.** As with the violin, hockey, and public speaking, the interviewer gets good, and then sometimes great, only through concerted practice. With repeated performance, habits form around each of these strategies, and the techniques of “sleeping around” are thus cultivated.<sup>20</sup>

On a great date, you get your partner to open up. The same holds true for interviewing to the extent that it separates ordinary interviews from outstanding ones. Erving Goffman introduced the romance metaphor so that we might listen, to

<sup>18</sup>To be certain, there will be times when a recorder cannot be used, either because a respondent disallows it or because the nature of the interview precludes it. Some interviewers—veterans and novices alike—will recount stories of respondents who stonewalled, were reticent, or opened up only after the recording session was over. While these situations do arise, they are less common in my experience than those where the respondent soon forgets that the recorder exists. Again, making explicit comments along the lines of why the recorder is used, and that most people forget it is there, will help put respondents at ease, as will interviewers who are themselves at ease.

Zuckerman has noted, in ways as germane to her work on Nobel laureates as to interviews with others, that “tape recording turned out to be beneficial for both interviewer and interviewees. The full attention of the interview was focused on what was being said, and the usual pauses required to transcribe the contents of the interview did not intrude” (Zuckerman 1977, p. 270). Moreover, she states what is often unsaid about the benefits of using a recorder, and that with which nearly all interviewers can identify: “In several senses, the presence of the recorder acted as an ice-breaker. It happened to be a very attractive machine and many laureates asked about its operation and cost. During the interview, some expressed concern as to whether the machine was recording properly . . . On one occasion, when the recorder was not operating properly, the interviewee, a physicist, repaired it with dispatch” (Zuckerman 1977, p. 270 n21).

In articulating the use of a tape recorder, the standard approach in the interview literature—like the approach taken on numerous other strategies—is predictably agnostic. Gorden (1992, pp. 173–186) illustrates the stance by outlining the various means of recording an interview, from minimal to extensive notetaking to recording with or without eventual transcripts. I have come across few interview guides that take either of the two extreme positions: never tape-record; always tape-record. Thus I part company by leaning toward the latter view. There is simply too much to lose by not tape-recording; we need the words of the people who speak them in order to meaningfully share those people with others.

<sup>19</sup>We again confront the agnosticism of the interview literature. Telephone interviews are overwhelmingly viewed as an established and acceptable format for securing data, when and where they are wished to be used. But while established and acceptable, and while necessary at times, they are among the least desirable interview formats, for the reasons explained.

<sup>20</sup>As Chambliss (1989) provocatively tells, there are miles to go before excellence becomes “mundane,” for it is then when we find ourselves searching about society in the company of other Olympic interviewers. Thus the quest for well-honed habits may be as, if not more, exciting as the end itself.

him as to others, and move more deeply and substantively into the lives and social worlds of people we want to know about. I have tried to show how the metaphor applies to interviewing by using it to distinguish the characteristics that separate the good from the great.

As the examples throughout this paper show, a metaphor—even one as dicey as romance—is a figure of speech. Goffman knew this; so must we. We may think of great interviewing in terms of something else—in this case, the romantic encounter—and that hopefully helps us to see how we can be better in the qualitative work we must do. But of course in practice, metaphor and action are distinct. One might think of great surgeons in terms of the friendly butcher we know in our local meat market—but that doesn't give surgeons the license to slaughter their patients. One might think of priests in terms of the intimate relations established among kin, but that doesn't give priests the license to emotionally abuse their congregants. We can think of great interviewing in terms of great romance, but all things that are similar also have their differences: Credible researchers, committed to ethical research, always know the difference between metaphor and practice. We expect this of sociologists as much as we should physicians, attorneys, or ministers whose relationships we enter into with trust and the expectation they will honor it.

While interviewing is among the most central, revealing, and enjoyable of methods that one can use in research, it is deceptively difficult. The routine talking we do daily (which is of course itself a product of practice and honed habit) perhaps makes it look as if it would be easy. Some of these strategies specify principles one would not follow on an ordinary "date." On how many dates have we been truly candid and balanced? When was the last time we had an extended conversation that was truly meaningful? But it is, of course, the ordinary "dating" that we seek to transcend. Following these strategies will create a strong chance of having an interview unlike any other.

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I dedicate this article to my students in Sociology 3850.

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