THE FOCUSED INTERVIEW[1]

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ABSTRACT

The focused interview is designed to determine the responses of persons exposed to a situation previously analyzed by the investigator. Its chief functions are to discover: (1) the significant aspects of the total situation to which response has occurred; (2) discrepancies between anticipated and actual effects; (3) responses of deviant subgroups in the population; and (4) the processes involved in experimentally induced effects. Procedures for satisfying the criteria of specificity, range, and depth in the interview are described.

For several years, the Bureau of Applied Social Research has conducted individual and group interviews in studies of the social and psychological effects of mass communications—radio, print, and film. A type of research interview grew out of this experience, which is perhaps characteristic enough to merit a distinctive label—the "focused interview."

In several respects the focused interview differs from other types of research interviews which might appear superficially similar. These characteristics may be set forth in broad outline as follows:

1. Persons interviewed are known to have been involved in *a particular concrete situation:* they have seen a film; heard a radio program; read a pamphlet, article, or book; or have participated in a psychological experiment or in an uncontrolled, but observed, social situation.
2. The hypothetically significant elements, patterns, and total structure of this situation have been previously analyzed by the investigator. Through this *content analysis* he has arrived at a set of hypotheses concerning the meaning and effects of determinate aspects of the situation.
3. On the basis of this analysis, the investigator has fashioned an *interview guide,* setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses which locate the pertinence of data to be obtained in the interview.
4. The interview itself is focused on the *subjective experiences* of persons exposed to the pre-analyzed situation. The array of their reported responses to this situation enables the investigator
   a) To test the validity of hypotheses derived from content analysis and social psychological theory, and
   b) To ascertain unanticipated responses to the situation, thus giving rise to fresh hypotheses.

From this synopsis it will be seen that a distinctive prerequisite of the focused interview is a prior analysis of a situation in which subjects have been involved.

To begin with, foreknowledge of the situation obviously reduces the task confronting the investigator, since the interview need not be devoted to discovering the objective nature of the situation. Equipped in advance with a content analysis, the interviewer can readily distinguish the objective facts of the case from the subjective definitions of the situation. He thus becomes alert to the entire field of "selective response." When the interviewer, through his familiarity with the objective situation, is able to recognize symbolic or functional silences, "distortions," avoidances, or blockings, he is the more prepared to explore their implications. Content analysis is a major cue for the detection and later exploration of private logics, personal symbolisms, and spheres of tension. Content analysis thus gauges the importance of what has not been said, as well as of what has been said, in successive stages of the interview.

Finally, content analysis facilitates the flow of concrete and detailed reporting of responses. Summary generalizations, on the other hand, inevitably mean that the informant, not the investigator, in effect provides the interpretation. It is not enough for the interviewer to learn that an informant regarded a situation as "unpleasant" or "anxiety-provoking" or "stimulating"—summary judgments which are properly suspect and, moreover, consistent with a variety of interpretations. He must discover precisely what "unpleasant" denotes in this context; what further feelings were called into play;

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what personal associations came to mind; and the like. Failing such details, the data do not lend themselves to adequate analysis. Furthermore, when subjects are led to describe their reactions in minute detail, there is less prospect that they will, intentionally or unwittingly, conceal the actual character of their responses; apparent inconsistencies will be revealed; and, finally, a clear picture of the total response emerges.

The interviewer who has previously analyzed the situation on which the interview focuses is in a peculiarly advantageous position to elicit such detail. In the usual depth interview, one can urge informants to reminisce on their experiences. In the focused interview, however, the interviewer can, when expedient, play a more active role: he can introduce more explicit verbal cues to the stimulus pattern or even *re-present* it, as we shall see. In either case this usually activates a concrete report of responses by informants.

USES OF THE FOCUSED INTERVIEW

The focused interview was initially developed to meet certain problems growing out of communications research and propaganda analysis. The outlines of such problems appear in detailed case studies by Dr. Herta Herzog, dealing with the gratification found by listeners in such radio programs as daytime serials and quiz competitions.[2] With the sharpening of objectives, research interest centered on the analysis of responses to particular pamphlets, radio programs, and motion pictures. During the war Dr. Herzog and the senior author of the present paper were assigned by several war agencies to study the psychological effects of specific morale-building devices. In the course of this work the focused interview was progressively developed to a relatively standardized form.

The primary, though not the exclusive, purpose of the focused interview was to provide some basis for *interpreting* statistically significant effects of mass communications. But, in general, *experimental studies of effects* might well profit by the use of focused interviews in research. The character of such applications can be briefly illustrated by examining the role of the focused interview at four distinct points:

1. Specifying the effective stimulus
2. Interpreting discrepancies between anticipated and actual effects
3. Interpreting discrepancies between prevailing effects and effects among subgroups—"deviant cases"
4. Interpreting processes involved in experimentally induced effects

1. Experimental studies of effect face the problem of what might be called the *specification of the stimulus*, i.e., determining which x or pattern of x's in the total stimulus situation led to the observed effects. But, largely because of the practical difficulties which this entails, this requirement is often not satisfied in psychological or sociological experiments. Instead, a relatively undifferentiated complex of factors—such as "emotional appeals," "competitive incentives," and "political propaganda"—is regarded as "the" experimental variable. This would be comparable to the statement that "living in the tropics is a cause of higher rates of malaria"; it is true but unspecific. However crude they may be at the outset, procedures must be devised to detect the causally significant aspects of the total stimulus situation. Thus Gosnell conducted an ingenious experiment on the "stimulation of voting," in which experimental groups of residents in twelve districts in Chicago were sent "individual nonpartisan appeals" to register and vote.[3] Roughly equivalent control groups did not receive this literature. It was found that the experimental groups responded by a significantly higher proportion of registration and voting. But what does this result demonstrate? To *what* did the experimental group respond? Was it the nonpartisan character of the circulars, the explicit nature of the instructions which they contained, the particular symbols and appeals utilized in the notices, or what? In short, to use Gosnell's own phrasing, what were "the particular stimuli being tested"?

According to the ideal experimental design, such questions would, of course, be answered by a series of successive experiments, which test the effects of each pattern of putative causes. In practice not only does the use of this procedure in social experimentation involve prohibitive problems of cost, labor, and administration; it also assumes that the experimenter has been successful in detecting the pertinent aspects of

[2] "What Do We Really Know about Day Time Serial Listeners?" in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton (eds.), *Radio Research, 1942–43* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1944).

[3] Harold F. Gosnell, *Getting Out the Vote: An Experiment in the Stimulation of Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

the total stimulus pattern. The focused interview provides a useful near-substitute for such a series of experiments; for, despite great sacrifices in scientific exactitude, it enables the experimenter to arrive at plausible hypotheses concerning the significant items to which subjects responded. Through interviews focused on this problem, Gosnell, for example, could probably have clarified just what elements in his several types of "nonpartisan" materials proved effective for different segments of his experimental group.[4] Such a procedure provides an approximate solution for problems heretofore consigned to the realm of the unknown or the speculative.[5]

2. There is also the necessity for *interpreting* the effects which are found to occur. Quite frequently, for example, the experimenter will note a *discrepancy* between the observed effects and those anticipated on the basis of other findings or previously formulated theories. Or, again, he may find that one subgroup in his experimental population exhibits effects which differ in degree or direction from those observed among other parts of the population. Unless the research is to remain a compendium of unintegrated empirical findings, some effort must be made to interpret such "contradictory" results. But the difficulty here is that of selecting among the wide range of *post factum* interpretations of the deviant findings. The focused interview provides a tool for this purpose. For example:

> Rosenthal's study of the effect of "pro-radical" motion-picture propaganda on the socioeconomic attitudes of college students provides an instance of *discrepancy between anticipated and actual effects.*[6] He found that a larger proportion of subjects agreed with the statement "radicals are enemies of society" *after* they had seen the film. As is usually the case when seemingly paradoxical results are obtained, this called forth an "explanation": "This negative effect of the propaganda was probably due to the many scenes of radical orators, marchers, and demonstrators."

Clearly *ad hoc* in nature, this "interpretation" is little more than speculation; but it is the type of speculation which the focused interview is particularly suited to examine, correct, and develop. Such interviews would have indicated how the audience actually responded to the "orators, marchers, and demonstrators"; the author's conjecture would have been recast into theoretical terms and either confirmed or refuted. (As we shall see, the focused interview has, in fact, been used to locate the source of such "boomerang effects" in film, radio, pamphlet, and cartoon propaganda.[7])

> In a somewhat similar experiment, Peterson and Thurstone found an unexpectedly small change in attitudes among high-school students who had seen a pacifist film.[8] The investigators held it ". . . . probable that the picture, 'Journey's End,' is too sophisticated in its propaganda for high school children."

[4] Significantly enough, Gosnell did interview citizens in several election districts who received notices. However, he apparently did not focus the interviews in such fashion as to enable him to determine the significant phases of the total stimulus pattern; see his summary remark that "interviews . . . . brought out the fact that [the notices] had been read with interest and that they had aroused considerable curiosity." And note his speculation that "part of the effect [of the mail canvass] may have been due to the novelty of the appeal" (*op. cit.*, pp. 29, 71). Properly oriented focused interviews would have enabled him to detect the points of "interest," the ineffectual aspects of the notices, and differences in response of different types of citizens.

[5] The same problem arises in a more complicated and difficult form when the experimental situation is not a limited event but an elaborate complex of experiences. Thus Chapin studied the gains in social participation which can be attributed "to the effects of living in the [public] housing project." As he recognized, "improved housing" is an unanalyzed "experimental" situation: managerial policies, increased leisure, architectural provision for group meetings, and a host of other items are varying elements of the program of "improved housing" (see F. S. Chapin, "An Experiment on the Social Effects of Good Housing," *American Sociological Review*, V [1940], 868–79).

[6] Solomon P. Rosenthal, "Change of Socio-economic Attitudes under Radical Motion Picture Propaganda," *Archives of Psychology*, No. 166, 1934.

[7] Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, Series II*, VI (1943), 58–79; Robert K. Merton and Patricia Kendall, "The Boomerang Effect—Problems of the Health and Welfare Publicist," *Channels* (National Publicity Council), Vol. XXI (1944); and Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Patricia Kendall, "The Listener Talks Back," in *Radio in Health Education* (prepared under the auspices of the New York Academy of Medicine) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945).

[8] Ruth C. Peterson and L. L. Thurstone, *Motion Pictures and the Social Attitudes of Children* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933).

Once again, the plausibility of a *post factum* interpretation, would have been enhanced, and entirely different hypotheses would have been developed had they conducted a focused interview.[9] How did the children conceive the film? To what did they primarily respond? Answers to these and similar questions would yield the kind of data needed to interpret the unanticipated result.

3. We may turn again to Gosnell's study to illustrate the tendency toward *ad hoc* interpretations of *discrepancies between prevailing effects and effects among subgroups* ("deviant cases") and the place of focused interviews in avoiding them.

> Gosnell found that, in general, a larger proportion of citizens registered or voted in response to a notice "of a hortatory character, containing a cartoon and and several slogans" than in response to a "factual" notice, which merely called attention to voting regulations. But he found a series of "exceptions," which invited a medly of *ad hoc* hypotheses. In a predominantly German election district, the factual notice had a greater effect than the "cartoon notice" —a finding which at once led Gosnell to the supposition that "the word 'slacker' on the cartoon notice probably revived war memories and therefore failed to arouse interest in voting." In Czech and Italian districts the factual notices also proved more effective; but in these instances Gosnell advances quite another interpretation: "the information cards were more effective than the cartoon notices probably because they were printed in Czech [and Italian, respectively] whereas the cartoon notices were printed in English." And yet in a Polish district the factual notice, although printed in Polish, was slightly *less* effective than the cartoon notice.[10]

In short, lacking supplementary interviews focused on the problem of deviant group responses, the investigator found himself drawn into a series of extremely flexible interpretations instead of resting his analysis on pertinent interview data. This characteristic of the Gosnell experiment, properly assessed by Catlin as an exceptionally well-planned study, is, a fortiori, found in a host of social and psychological experiments.

4. Even brief introspective interviews as a supplement to experimentation have proved useful for discerning the *processes involved in experimentally induced effects*. Thus Zeigarnik, in her well-known experiment on memory and interrupted tasks, was confronted with the result that in some cases interrupted tasks were often forgotten, a finding at odds with her modal findings and her initial theory.[11] Interviews with subjects exhibiting this "discrepant" behavior revealed that the uncompleted tasks which had been forgotten were experienced as failures and, therefore, were subjectively "completed." She was thus able to incorporate this seeming contradiction into her general theory. The value of such interpretative interviews is evidenced further in the fact that Zeigarnik's extended theory, derived from the interviews, inspired a series of additional experiments by Rosenzweig, who, in part, focused on the very hypotheses which emerged from her interview data.

> Rosenzweig found experimentally that many subjects recalled a larger percentage of their successes in tasks assigned them than of their failures.[12] Interviews disclosed that this "objective experimental result" was bound up with the emotionalized symbolism which tasks assumed for different subjects. For example, one subject reported that a needed scholarship depended "upon her receiving a superior grade in the psychology course from which she had been recruited for this experiment. Throughout the test her mind dwelt upon the lecturer in this course: 'All I thought of during the experiment was that it was an intelligence test and that he [the lecturer] would see the results. I saw his name always before me.' "

Without such supplementary data, the hypothesis of repression which was introduced to interpret the results would have been wholly conjectural.

This brief review is perhaps sufficient to suggest the functions of the focused interview as an adjunct to experimental inquiry, as well as in studies of responses to concrete situations in everyday life.

OBJECTIVES AND PROCEDURES

A successful interview is not the automatic product of conforming to a fixed routine of mechanically applicable techniques. Nor is interviewing an elusive, private, and incommunicable art. There are recurrent situations and problems in the focused interview which can be

[9] On the problems of *post factum* interpretations see R. K. Merton, "Sociological Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, L (1945), esp. 467–69.

[10] *Op. cit.*, pp. 60, 64, 65, 67

[11] B. Zeigarnik, "Das Behalten erledigter und unerledigter Handlungen," *Psychologische Forschung*, IX (1927), 1–85.

[12] Saul Rosenzweig, "The Experimental Study of Repression," in H. A. Murray, *Exploration in Personality* (Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 472–90.

met successfully by communicable and teachable procedures. We have found that the proficiency of all interviewers, even the less skilful, can be considerably heightened by training them to recognize type situations and to draw upon an array of flexible, though standardized, procedures for dealing with these situations.

In his search for "significant data," moreover, the interviewer must develop a capacity for continuously evaluating the interview as it is in process. By drawing upon a large number of interview transcripts, in which the interviewer's comments as well as the subjects' responses have been recorded, we have found it possible to establish a set of provisional criteria by which productive and unproductive interview materials can be distinguished. Briefly stated, they are:

1. *Nondirection:* In the interview, guidance and direction by the interviewer should be at a minimum.
2. *Specificity:* Subjects' definition of the situation should find full and specific expression.
3. *Range:* The interview should maximize the range of evocative stimuli and responses reported by the subject.
4. *Depth and personal context:* The interview should bring out the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects' responses, to determine whether the experience had central or peripheral significance. It should elicit the relevant personal context, the idiosyncratic associations, beliefs, and ideas.

These criteria are interrelated; they are merely different dimensions of the same concrete body of interview materials. Every response can be classified according to each of these dimensions: it may be spontaneous or forced; diffuse and general or highly specific; profoundly self-revealing or superficial; etc. But it is useful to examine these criteria separately, so that they may provide the interviewer with guide-lines for appraising the flow of the interview and adapting his techniques accordingly.

For each of these objectives, there is an array of specific, effective procedures, although there are few which do not lend themselves to more than one purpose. We can do no more here than indicate the major function served by each technique and merely allude to its subsidiary uses.[13] And since these procedures have been derived from clinical analysis of interview materials rather than through experimental test, they must be considered entirely provisional. Because, in the training of interviewers, it has been found instructive to indicate typical errors as well as effective procedures, that same policy has been adopted in this paper.

THE CRITERION OF NONDIRECTION

The value of a nondirective approach to interviewing has become increasingly recognized, notably in the recent work of Carl Rogers and of Roethlisberger and Dickson.[14] It gives the subject an opportunity to express himself about matters of central significance to him rather than those presumed to be important by the interviewer.[15] That is, in contrast to the polling approach, it uncovers what is on the subject's mind rather than his opinion of what is on the interviewer's mind. Furthermore, it permits subject's responses to be placed in their proper context rather than forced into a framework which the interviewer considers appropriate. And, finally, the informant is ordinarily far

[13] This paper is based upon an extensive manual of procedures for the focused interview. It is our hope that it represents an addition, however slight, to the growing number of critical self-examinations of method by sociologists and psychologists which lead to closer scrutiny of prevailing procedures. We refer to works such as Carl R. Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942); John Dollard, *Criteria for the Life History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935); Gordon W. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1942); Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Robert Angell, *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1945); and Florence Kluckhohn, "The Participant-Observer Technique in Small Communities," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLVI (1940), 331–43.

[14] Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–28; F. J. Roethlisberger and W. J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), chap. xiii.

[15] Thus meeting the objection raised by Stuart A. Rice: "A defect of the interview for the purposes of fact-finding in scientific research, then, is that the questioner *takes the lead.* That is, the subject plays a more or less passive role. Information or points of view of the highest value may not be disclosed because the direction given the interview by the questioner leads away from them. In short, data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitudes of the subject interviewed"(S .A. Rice [ed.], *Methods in Social Science* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931], p. 561).

more articulate and expressive than in the directed interview.[16]

Direction in interviewing is clearly incompatible with eliciting unanticipated responses. Private definitions of the stimulus situation are rarely forthcoming when directive techniques are used. By their very nature, direct questions presuppose a certain amount of structuring by the interviewer. Direct questions, even though they are not "leading" in character, force subjects to focus their attention on items and issues to which they might not have responded on their own initiative. (This is a basic limitation of those questionnaires or schedules which provide no opportunity for subjects to express a lack of concern with items on which they are questioned.) For instance, informants who had seen a documentary film dealing with the war in Italy were asked: "Did you feel proud or annoyed when you saw how the Americans were helping in the reconstruction of Naples?" A directed question of this type at once prejudices the possibility of determining just how the subjects structured the film. The film might have been experienced impersonally as merely "interesting information." The question implies that Americans were actually taking part in the reconstruction, although some informants found the film vague on this point. Even had the subjects recognized that Americans were engaged in reconstruction, they may have learned only from the question that others were also engaged in the same work. Their replies reflected some of these implications and suggestions, which had colored their own interpretation of the film and ruled out the possibility of indicating misapprehensions. A single direct question inadvertently supplies many biasing connotations.

Nondirective techniques sometimes prove ineffective in halting irrelevant and unproductive digressions, so that the interviewer seemingly has no alternative but to introduce a direct question. But in a focused interview the limits of relevance are largely self-defined for the subject by the concrete situation. Not only are digressions less likely to occur, but, when they do occur, they are more easily dealt with by nondirective references to the concrete situation. In other words, the focal character of the experience results in a maximum yield of pertinent data through nondirective procedures.

Procedures.—The interrelations of our criteria at once become evident when we observe that nondirection simultaneously serves to elicit depth, range, and specificity of responses. For this reason the tactics of nondirection require special consideration.

The unstructured question.—Unstructured questions are intentionally couched in such terms that they invite subjects to refer to virtually any aspect of the stimulus situation or to report any of a range of responses. By answering a query of this type, the subject provides a crude guide to the comparative significance of various aspects of the situation.

In the focused interview, then, an unstructured question is one which does not fix attention on any specific aspect of the stimulus situation or of the response; it is, so to speak, a blank page to be filled in by the subject. But questions have varying degrees of structure. Several levels of structure may be distinguished as a guide to the interviewer.

1. *Unstructured question (stimulus and response free)*
   What impressed you most in this film?

   or

   What stood out especially in this radio program?

   (This type of query leads the subject, rather than the interviewer, to indicate the foci of attention. He has an entirely free choice. Not only is he given an opportunity to refer to any aspect of the stimulus pattern, but the phrases "impressed you" and "stood out" are sufficiently general to invite reports of quite varied types of responses.)
2. *Semistructured question*
   Type A: *Response structured, stimulus free*
   What did you learn from this pamphlet which you hadn't known before?
   Type B: *Stimulus structured, response free*
   How did you feel about the part describing Jo's discharge from the army as a psychoneurotic?

   (There is obviously increased guidance by the interviewer in both types of query, but the informant still retains considerable freedom of reply. In Type A, although restricted to reports of newly acquired information, he is free to refer to any item in the pamphlet. In Type B, conversely, he is confined to one section of the document but is free to indicate the nature of his response.)
3. *Structured question (stimulus and response structured)*

[16] Rogers (*op. cit.*, p. 122), reporting an unpublished study by E. H. Porter, states that in ten directive interviews, the interviewer talked nearly three times as much as the subject. In nine non-directive interviews, on the other hand, the interviewer talked only half as much as the subject.

Judging from the film, do you think that the German fighting equipment was better, as good as, or poorer than the equipment used by Americans?

or

As you listened to Chamberlain's speech, did you feel it was propagandistic or informative?

(Through questions of this type the interviewer assumes almost complete control of the interview. Not only does he single out items for comment, but he also suggests an *order of response* which he assumes was experienced. This leads to an oral questionnaire rather than a free interview.)

Although the fully unstructured question is especially appropriate in the opening stages of the focused interview, where its productivity is at a peak, it is profitably used throughout the interview. In some instances it may be necessary for the interviewer to assume more control at later stages of the interview, if the other criteria—specificity, range, and depth—are to be satisfied. But even in such cases, as we shall see, moderate rather than full direction is fruitful; questions should be partially rather than fully structured.

Imposing the interviewer's frame of reference.—At some points in almost every protracted interview, the interviewer is tempted to take the role of educator or propagandist rather than that of sympathetic listener. He may either interject his personal sentiments or voice his views in answer to questions put to him by subjects. Should he yield to either temptation, the interview is then no longer an informal listening-post or "clinic" or "laboratory" in which subjects spontaneously talk about a set of experiences, but it becomes, instead, a debating society or an authoritarian arena in which the interviewer defines the situation.

By expressing his own sentiments the interviewer generally invites spurious comments or defensive remarks, or else inhibits certain discussions altogether. Any such behavior by the interviewer usually introduces a "leader effect," modifying the informant's own expression of feelings. Or should the interviewer implicitly challenge a comment, the informant will often react by defensively reiterating his original statement. The spontaneous flow of the interview halts while the subject seeks to maintain his ego-level intact by reaffirming his violated sentiments. In the following example the interviewer has supplied the logical implications of an expressed point of view and then has, in effect, asked whether the subject is willing to abide by these implications.

INTERVIEWER: You say we should make a democracy out of Germany. In a democracy, the people have the right to choose their own leaders.....

(Note the didactic formulation in terms of *textbook definitions*. The attitudinal and affective implications of the subject's statement—the material looked for in a focused interview—have been ignored. Instead, the interview becomes an exercise in semantics.)

INTERVIEWER: Supposing we were to set up a democracy and then they wanted to choose Hitler for president?

(Here the interviewer has made invidious use of the *logical* implications of the respondent's comments. Translated, this statement reads: "Surely, you can't mean this; this is a wholly indefensible position.")

SUBJECT No. 1: *Wait a minute:* What Hitler done, he took children and we should take and mobilize this group and teach them democracy, have a constitution like the United States and make democrats out of them.

(Note the defensive and controversial nature of the phrase: "Wait a minute." The informant's self-esteem leads him to a defensive reiteration of his original view. And, grimly pursued to his last line of retreat by the interviewer, he wards off further attack by an explosive monosyllable.)

INTERVIEWER: And they wouldn't want to choose a leader like Hitler?

SUBJECT No. 1: No!

Whether the subject nominally agrees or disagrees with the interviewer's sentiments, their expression often inhibits further elaboration of comments. What is intended to draw out the informant serves only to cut off a channel of expression. Witness the following example:

SUBJECT No. 2: In America a man has the privilege of living in a democracy where, even though he may be of the middle or lower class, he may still reach for and attain positions of high office, whereas in England, the upper class or monied people selfishly hold onto the positions of leadership, never giving the middle or lower class an opportunity to gain such positions. For instance, *a coal miner could never hope to attain a position of high office.*

INTERVIEWER: What about David Lloyd George: *wasn't he a coal miner?*

SUBJECT No. 2: Yes, I guess that's true.

(What the inverviewer hoped to accomplish by his challenge is not at all clear. Whatever his intentions, however, the only apparent result is the abrupt silencing of a subject, who, just a moment before, had been highly articulate.)

The interviewer's introduction of his own opinions and sentiments into the discussion,

then, seriously prejudices that free flow of expression which nondirection seeks to achieve.

On occasion, it will be the subject who seeks out the interviewer's attitudes or feelings by directing toward *him* such questions as "How do you feel about . . . . ?" or "Do you think that . . . . ?" This attempted reversal of roles is particularly likely to occur at just those points in the interview when continued self-exploration by the subject would be most revealing. These questions frequently reflect emotional blockage. The subject may be reluctant to explore his own feelings because they are painful or embarrassing or because they are so amorphous that he cannot easily put them into words. By directing questions to the interviewer, then, he diverts attention from himself. He hopes, at times, that the answer will provide the "correct" formulation for his own vague feelings. In other words, psychological groping finds its grammatical expression in the form of a question.

Should the interviewer respond to the manifest content of these questions, however, he at once structures the stimulus material and, in this way, introduces the problems reviewed in the preceding section. It is incumbent upon the interviewer to avoid responding to the nominal meaning of many such questions posed by subjects. Although there is no way of curbing the expression of sentiments except through self-discipline, fairly specific procedures have been developed for dealing fruitfully with such questions.

In general, the interviewer should *counter a question with a question, thus converting the implied content of the informant's question into a cue for further discussion.* In doing so, he indicates that he understands the problem and is sympathetically awaiting further elaboration by the informant. This sort of stimulation is often all that the informant needs to continue his self-exploration. The following instance illustrates this technique for leading a subject to develop his own views:

SUBJECT No. 5: Did the Germans think that the girl was working with them?

INTERVIEWER: *You mean it wasn't clear* whether she was working with the Germans or not?

SUBJECT No. 5: That's right. You remember when. . . . . .

(Rather than answer the informant's question which would reduce the possibility of ferreting out the way in which he structured this phase of a film, the interviewer responds to the *implied* meaning of the question: "You mean it wasn't clear . . . . ?" This provided an opportunity for the subject to indicate the film sequences which led to his confusion.)

The interview guide.—The interview guide, containing typical questions, areas for inquiry, and hypotheses based on the content analysis, is indispensable to the focused interview. It tends to make for comparability of data obtained in different interviews by insuring that they will cover much the same range of items and will be pertinent to the same hypotheses. The guide does, however, lend itself to misuse. Even when the interviewer recognizes that it is only suggestive, he may come to use it as a fixed questionnaire, as a kind of interviewing strait jacket.

The interviewer may intrude questions from his guide before it is clear that the informant has, in fact, been concerned with the matter to which the question refers. *Forcing a topic* in this way typically leads to an abrupt break in the continuity and free flow of the interview. The informant is brought up short by a question which does not apply to his immediate experience and for which, therefore, he has no ready answer. His self-explorations cease, and he often responds by a series of questions designed to have the interviewer "define his terms" or otherwise provide clues to the expected answer.

Or the interviewer may cleave too closely to the wording of questions set up in the interview guide, rather than pursuing the implications of an informant's remarks. Though it is convenient for the interviewer not to have to improvise all questions in the course of the interview, predetermined questions may easily become a liability; for, if the interviewer recognizes in the respondent's comment an allusion to an area of inquiry previously defined in the guide, he is likely to introduce one of the type questions contained in the guide. This is all well and good *if* the question happens to be appropriate in the given case. But unproductive interviews are those cluttered with the corpses of fixed, irrelevant queries; for often the interviewer, equipped with fixed questions dealing with the given topic, does not listen closely or analytically to the subject's comments and thus fails to respond to the cues and implications of these comments, substituting, instead, one of the routine questions from the guide. If the interviewer is primarily oriented toward the guide, he may thus readily overlook the unanticipated implications of the subject's remarks.

By listening to the implied content of what is said, the interviewer can the more readily improvise fruitful questions. He will recognize, for example, the familiar tendency of subjects to raise questions which cloak their own private feelings. For instance, informants, who were at the time undergoing military training, initially hesitated to express the anxiety provoked by having seen a film of American prisoners on Bataan:

SUBJECT No. 9: How about *a man* being interested in a picture, but not liking it? It might rub him the wrong way, even though he finds himself interested in it.

INTERVIEWER: Do *you* have a particular film in mind?

(By listening to the implied content, the interviewer detects the possibly projective nature of the informant's question. He can then test this provisional hunch by utilizing a counterquestion to convert the discussion into a personal report. Instead of continuing to talk in the abstract terms of "*a man*," the informant comes to betray his own feelings.)

SUBJECT No. 9: That part where they showed some of the wounded soldiers there on Bataan. *I* don't care to see that kind of stuff, although it was interesting in a way. . . . . [And then, temporarily reverting to a projective formulation] *The public* might have a reaction to that if they were exposed to it. Although some of them realize that under battle conditions men must lose their lives or be wounded. *Some people* would say, "Look at that," and it would lower their morale.

SUBJECT No. 5: The main thing was, I think, that most of the fellows got a realization that it might be them. . . . .

THE CRITERION OF SPECIFICITY

In the study of real life rather than, say, in nonsense-syllable experiments in rote memory, there is all the greater need for discovering the meaning attributed by subjects to elements, aspects, or patterns of the complex situation to which they have been exposed. Thus army trainees, in one such study, reported that "the scene of marching Nazi soldiers" in a documentary film led them to feel anxious about their ability to withstand the German army. This report does not satisfy the canon of specificity. Anxiety may have been provoked by the impression of matchless power symbolized by massed armies; by the "brutal expressions" on their faces to which the commentary referred; by the elaborate equipment of the enemy; by the extensive training seemingly implied by their maneuvers. Without further specification, there is no basis for selecting among the several possible interpretations.

In stressing specificity, we do not at all imply that subjects respond to each and every element of the total situation as a separate and isolated item. The situation may be experienced "as a whole" or as a complex of configurations. Individual patterns may be perceived as figures against a background. But we cannot rest with such facile formulations; we have yet to detect the "significant wholes" to which response has occurred, and it is toward the detection of these that the criterion of specificity directs the interviewer's attention. It is only in this way that we are led to findings which can be generalized and which provide a basis for predicting selective responses.[17] Inquiry has shown that, as a significant whole, brief scenes in a motion picture, for example, have evoked different responses, quite apart from the fact that seeing-a-film-in-conjunction-with-two-thousand-others was *also* a "configurative experience." But without inquiring into specific meanings of significant details, we surrender all possibility of determining the effective stimuli patterns. Thus our emphasis on "specificity" does not express allegiance to an "atomistic," as contrasted with a "configurational," approach; it serves only to orient the interviewer toward searching out the significant configurations. The fact of selective response is well attested; we must determine what is differentially selected and generalize these data.

[17] An overcondensed case illustrates this point. Following a series of tests of documentary films, the hypothesis was advanced that audiences retain items of information presented in the form of "startling facts" of the type exploited by the Ripley "Believe-It-or-Not" column. Such items have attention value; they stand out as a figure against the ground. They have diffusion value, readily becoming part of the currency of small talk ("Did you know that . . . . ?"). And they have confidence value: they are "cold facts," as idiom so aptly puts it. On the basis of such tentative formulations, which await more theoretical phrasing, it was predicted that a "startling fact"—namely, that the first American casualty in this war occurred as early as 1940—would be one of the most notable informational effects of a documentary film. This proved to be the case, with a differential of 36 per cent between the experimental and the control groups. Without focused interviews, the differential effects of different phases of such a complex situation as a forty-minute film would be difficult to anticipate.

Procedures.—We have found that specificity of reporting can be obtained through procedures in which the interviewer exercises a minimum of guidance.

It seems difficult, if not impossible, to recapture highly specific responses. Interviews on experiences of the immediate or remote past, of course, involve the problem of losses and distortions of memory. Extensive experimentation and clinical study have shown the importance of such lapses and modifications in recalled material.[18] The focused interview is, of course, subject to this same liability but not, perhaps, to the same extent as diffuse interviews; for there are certain procedures in the focused interview which facilitate the accurate report of the initial experience, which aid accounts of the "registration" of the experience rather than a distorted, condensed, elaborated, or defective report based on unaided recall.

Retrospective introspection.—These procedures are all designed to lead subjects to adopt a particular mental set—which may be called "retrospective introspection." (Of course, just as the unstructured question is essential at all stages and for all objectives of the focused interview, so retrospective introspection is more than a device for facilitating specificity of reports. It is a mood which must be maintained throughout the interview if a wide range of depth responses is to be obtained.)

Mere retrospection, without introspection, usually produces accounts of what was remembered and does not relate these to significant responses. Introspection without retrospection, on the other hand, usually leads the informant to report his reactions after they have been reconsidered in the interval between the event and the interview, rather than his experience at the time he was exposed to the stimulus situation. To minimize this problem, procedures have been developed to expedite retrospective introspection by *re-presenting* the stimulus situation so far as possible.[19] They seek to approximate a condition in which subjects virtually *re-experience* the situation to aid their report of significant responses and to have these linked with pertinent aspects of it. Re-presentation also serves to insure that both interviewer and subject are referring to the same aspects of the original situation.

The most immediate means of re-presenting documentary material is to exhibit "stills" from a motion picture, to play back sections of a transcribed radio program, or to have parts of a pamphlet re-read. Although such devices do not fully reproduce the original situation, they markedly aid the subject in recapturing his original response in specific detail. Such re-presentations do have the defect of interrupting the smooth, continuous flow of the interview, at least for a moment. If they are used frequently, therefore, the interview is likely to deteriorate into a staccato series of distinct inquiries. The best procedure, then, is to combine occasional graphic re-presentations with more frequent verbal cues. But, except for the closing stages of the interview, such cues should be introduced only after subjects have spontaneously referred to the materials in point.

Each re-presentation, whether graphic or verbal, calls for reports of specific reaction. Otherwise, subjects are likely to take the re-presentation as an occasion for merely exhibiting their memory. Questions soliciting these reports take somewhat the following form:

> Now that you think back, what were your reactions to that part of the film?

Whatever the exact wording of such questions, they have several features in common. The interviewer alludes to a retrospective frame of reference: "Now that you think back. . . . ." He refers to introspection: "What were your reactions (or feelings, or ideas, etc.) . . . . ?" And, finally, he uses the past tense: "What *were* your reactions . . . . ?" This will lead the subject to concentrate on his original experience. Emphasis on such details as the components of this type of question may seem to be a flight into the trivial. Yet experience shows that omission of any of them lessens the productiveness of replies.

Explicit references to stimulus situation.—To elicit specificity, the interviewer combines the technique of re-presentation with that of the unstructured question. A typical situation requiring further specification occurs when the

[18] See the survey by David Rapaport, *Emotions and Memory* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Co., 1942).

[19] A mechanical device, the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, has been developed to serve much the same purpose with certain kinds of test materials (for a detailed description of the Analyzer and its operation see Tore Hallonquist and Edward A. Suchman, "Listening to the Listener," in Lazarsfeld and Stanton [eds.], *op. cit.*).

subject's report of his responses has been *wholly unlinked* to the stimulus-situation. Repeatedly, we see the necessity for establishing such linkages, if observed "effects" are to be adequately interpreted. Thus tests in 1943 showed that documentary films concerning the Nazis increased the proportion of subjects in experimental groups who believed that Germany had a stronger army than the United States. Inasmuch as there was no explicit indication of this theme in the films, the "effect" could have been interpreted only conjecturally, had it not been for focused interviews. Subjects who expressed this opinion were prompted to indicate its source by questions of the following type:

Was there anything in the film that gave you that impression?

It soon became evident that scenes which presumably stressed the "regimentation" of the Nazis—e.g., their military training from an early age—were unexpectedly taken as proof of their exceptionally thorough training, as the following excerpts from interviews indicate:

It showed there that their men have more training. They start their men—when they are ready to go to school, they start their military training. By the time they get to our age, they are in there fighting, and they know as much as the man who has been in our service eight or nine years.

By the looks of them where they took the boys when they were eight and started training them then; they had them marching with drums and everything and they trained them for military service when they were very young. They are well trained when they are grown men.

Thus the search for specificity yielded a clue to the significant scenes from which these implications were drawn. The interpretation of the experimental effect rests on the weight of cumulative evidence drawn from interviews and not on mere conjecture.

This case serves to bring out the need for progressive specification. If the subject's report includes only a *general* allusion to one or another part of the film, it is necessary to determine the particular *aspects* of these scenes to which he responded. Otherwise, we lose access to the often *unanticipated symbolisms* and private meanings ascribed to the stimulus situation. A subject who referred to the "regimentation of the Nazis" exemplified in "mass scenes" is prompted to indicate the particular items which led to this symbolism:

What about those scenes gave you that impression?

It develops that "goose-step parades" and the *Sieg Heil!* chorus are taken as symbols of regimentation:

When it showed them goose-stepping out there; it numbed their mind. It's such a strain on their mind and body to do that. Just like a bunch of slaves, dogs—do what they're told.

It will be noted that these questions refer explicitly to the document or situation which is at the focus of the interview. We have found that, unless the interviewer refers to "scenes in this film," "parts of this radio program," or "sections of this pamphlet," the subjects are likely to shift toward an expression of generalized attitudes or opinion. Indispensable as such auxiliary data may be, they do not take the place of reports in which responses are linked to the test situation. Yet it is only with difficulty that the inexperienced interviewer is weaned from his embarrassment over the seeming monotony of repeated references to the stimulus situation. Preferring variety of phrase to productiveness of interview, he becomes elliptical and resorts to implicit allusions. The ease with which this leads subjects to shift to generalized opinions is brought out in the following excerpt:

SUBJECT NO. 8: The German people were armed, but they covered it up. We didn't know about it.
INTERVIEWER: Why didn't we know? [Note the absence of any reference to the film and the subject's immediate flight into a conjecture entirely unrelated to the film.]
SUBJECT NO. 2: *I imagine* their country was so well policed. . . . .

Specificity not only enables the investigator to ferret out meanings of different phases of the stimulus situation; it also enables him to discover differential responses to the "same" phases of that situation. Differences in prior predispositions lead subjects to "perceive" quite different aspects of the same content. Thus, Anglophobes responded to film scenes of the Dunkirk evacuation by seizing solely upon the self-interest of the British:

The evacuation of Dunkirk showed me that the British *could* do it, if they have to. They showed they could do it and were brave enough to do it *in the case where it was Britain they were fighting for*. They didn't start fighting until they got awful close to home.

But those with favorable or neutral attitudes toward the British noted that some French soldiers were also rescued:

> It shows courage; you mustn't give up. These fellows were practically doomed, and up comes England and salvages them, saves the greatest number of them. The English did a marvelous job.... fighting their way to the coast, evacuated the whole army *and the French.*

Specific evidence of such selective perception enables the investigator to interpret the occurrence or absence of effects rather than accepting these as brute data or resorting to conjecture, unbuttressed by evidence.

In general, specifying questions should be explicit enough to aid the subject in relating his responses to determinate aspects of the stimulus situation and yet general enough to avoid having the interviewer structure it. This twofold requirement is best met by unstructured questions, which contain explicit references to the stimulus material.

THE CRITERION OF RANGE

The criterion of range refers to the coverage of pertinent data in the interview. Since any given aspect of the stimulus situation may elicit different responses and since each response may derive from different aspects of the stimulus situation, it is necessary for the interviewer to uncover the range both of response and of evocative stimuli. Without implying any strict measure of range, we consider it adequate if the interview yields data which

a) Confirm or refute the occurrence of responses *anticipated* from the content analysis;
b) Indicate that ample opportunities have been provided for the report of *unanticipated* reactions; and
c) Suggest *interpretations* of findings derived from experiments or mass statistics.

Procedures.—The tactics considered up to this point have been found useful at every stage of the interview. But the procedures primarily designed to extend range do depend, in some measure, on the changing horizons of the interview: on the coverage already obtained, on the extent to which subjects continue to comment spontaneously, and on the amount of time available. The interviewer must, therefore, be vigilant in detecting transitions from one stage of the interview to another, if he is to decide upon procedures appropriate for widening range at one point rather than at another. He will, above all, utilize these procedures when informants prove inarticulate.

The central tactical problem in extending range consists in effecting transitions from one area of discussion to another. In the early stages of the interview, such transitions follow easily from the intermittent use of general unstructured questions. But, as the interview develops, this type of question no longer elicits fresh materials. Subjects then require assistance in reporting on further foci of attention. From this point, the interviewer introduces new topics either through transitions suggested by subjects' remarks or, in the final stages, by the initiation of topics from the interview guide which have not yet been explored. The first of these procedures utilizes *transitional questions;* the second, *mutational questions.*

Subject transitions.—It is not enough to say that shifts to a new area of discussion should be initiated by the subject. The interviewer who is possessed of what Murray has called "double hearing" will soon infer from the context of such shifts that they have different functions for the informant and call for different tactics by the interviewer.

Of the several reasons for shifts engineered by the informant, at least three should be considered.

> 1. The topic under discussion may be peripheral to the subject's own interests and feelings, so that he turns to one which holds greater significance for him. In talking about the first topic, he manifests no affect but merely lack of interest. He has little to say from the outset and exhibits boredom, which gives way to heightened interest as he moves on to a new topic.
>
> 2. The informant may have talked at length about a given subject, and, having exhausted what he has to say, he moves the interview into a new area. His behavior then becomes very much the same as in the preceding instance.
>
> 3. He may seek to escape from a given area of discussion precisely because it is imbued with high affective significance for him, and he is not yet prepared to verbalize his feelings. This is betrayed by varying signs of resistance—prolonged pauses, self-corrections, tremor of voice, unfinished sentences, embarrassed silences, half-articulate utterances..

On the basis of such behavioral contexts, the interviewer provisionally diagnoses the meaning of the informant's transition and proceeds accordingly. If he places the transition in the third category, he makes a mental note to revert to this critical zone at a later stage of the interview.

If, however, the transition is either of the first two types, he may safely abandon the topic unless it arises again spontaneously.

Interviewer transitions.—Generally preferable though it is to have the transitions effected by the subject, there will be occasions, nonetheless, when the interviewer will have to bring about a change in topic. When one topic is exhausted, when the informant does not spontaneously introduce another, and when unstructured questions no longer prove effective, the interviewer must introduce transitional questions if he is to tap the reservoir of response further. He may introduce a *cued* transition, or, as the interview progresses and he accumulates a series of items which require further discussion, he may effect a *reversional* transition.

In a *cued* transition, the interviewer so adapts a remark or an allusion by an informant as to ease him into consideration of a new topic. This procedure has the advantage of maintaining the flow of the interview.

Cued transitions may require the interviewer to exercise considerable ingenuity. In the following case, avowedly cited as an extreme, even bizarre, example, the informant was far afield from the radio program under discussion, but the interviewer ingeniously picked up a cue and refocused the interview on the program:

> SUBJECT NO. 1: The finest ingenuity in Germany that you ever saw. They are smart. But I think this: I don't think when this World War is over that we won't have another war. We will. We have had them since Cain killed Abel. As long as there are two human beings on this earth, there's going to be a war.
>
> INTERVIEWER: *Talking about Cain,* he could be called something of a small-time gangster, couldn't he? Do you happen to remember anything about gangsters being brought out at any point in this program?
>
> SUBJECT NO. 1: Dillinger. That was where. . . . .
>
> (Here, although the interviewer's association was more than a little far fetched, it served its purpose in bringing the informant back to a consideration of the radio program. Had the interviewer simply changed the subject, he would have indicated that he thought the informant's remarks irrelevant, with a consequent strain on rapport. As it was, the cued transition led the informant to develop at length his structuring of a specific section of the program. When the time for the interview cannot be extended indefinitely, the cued transition enables the curbing of patent digressions, without prejudice to rapport.)

Reversional transitions are those effected by the interviewer to obtain further discussion of a topic previously abandoned, either because the subject had avoided it or, in a group interview, because someone had moved on to a new theme.

Whenever possible, the reversional question is cued, i.e., related to the topic under discussion. It can, for instance, take this form:

> That suggests something you mentioned previously about the scene in which. . . . . What were your feelings at that point in the picture?

When it does not seem possible to relate the reversional query to the present context, a "cold" reversion may be productive:

> INTERVIEWER: A little while ago, you were talking about the scenes of bombed-out school houses, and you seemed to have more ideas on that. How did you feel when you saw that?
>
> SUBJECT NO. 2: I noticed a little girl lying under a culvert—it made me ready to go fight then. Because I have a daughter of my own, and I knew how I would feel if anything like that happened to her. . . . .

This latter type of reversional query is used infrequently, however, and only in instances where it seems likely that the informant has "warmed up" to the interviewing situation sufficiently to be articulate about the topic he had avoided earlier.

Mutational questions.—Toward the close of the interview, there may still remain important points to be covered. Failing an opportunity for a cued transition, the interviewer may have to introduce a mutational question, which contains an explicit reference to previously unmentioned area:

> How did you feel about that part of the talk which dealt with the use of drugs in an X-ray examination?

Ideally, there should be no occasion for mutational questions. The more skilfully the interviewer uses unstructured questions, the more alert he is to cues, the more carefully he notes items to which he should revert, the less need for mutational questions. And their use should be kept at a minimum; for, as soon as the interviewer introduces a query of this kind, he selects a focus of attention which may have little saliency for the informant.

But mutational questions should be avoided for an additional reason. The interviewing novice (who uses them more frequently) often develops a feeling of desperation as he approaches the close of the interview with a long list of topics still to be discussed. In his anxiety to obtain some response—any response—he breaks

out with a rash of questions in the desperate hope that at least one will strike a responsive chord.[20] His efforts are not unlike those of the young child who, having planted a seed, digs it up at hourly intervals to see how much it has grown—and they are just as productive. Consider the following examples taken from our dustbin of conspicuous errors:

> How did you like the combination of these various types of music in one program? Was the selection of numbers a wise one? Did it interest you? Would it make you listen to it if you were home?
>
> Do you remember the map showing just how Germans operated in France and the explanation by an intelligence officer? Do any of the rest of you remember that part of the film? Did you find yourselves pretty well bored by that kind of discussion, or do you feel you learned something from it? If you had your choice, would you want that to be in the film or cut out?

Engulfed in this deluge of questions and discouraged by the apparent request to answer all, the informant ordinarily succeeds in answering none. The flurry of queries destroys the atmosphere necessary for a successful interview, as the interviewer is cast in the role of an inquisitor, charged with anxiety and not interested in the informant, except as a source of needed data.

In general, then, mutational questions should be used only as a last resort, and, when there is no alternative, they should be phrased as generally and unspecifically as possible.

Overdependence on the interview guide.—As we have seen, misuses of the interview guide may endanger the nondirective character of the interview; they may also impose serious limitations on the range of material obtained.

The interviewer may confine himself to the areas of inquiry set forth in the guide and choke off comments which do not directly bear upon these areas. This may be termed the *fallacy of arresting comment.* Subjects' remarks which do not fall within these pre-established areas of interest may be prematurely and spuriously interpreted as "irrelevant," thus arresting what is at times the most useful type of interview material: the unanticipated response.

> INTERVIEWER: Well, now what about the first part of the film? You remember, they had photographs of the German leaders and quotations from their speeches. . . . .
>
> SUBJECT NO. 10: I remember Goering, he looked like a big pig. That is what that brought out to me, the fact that if he could control the land, he could control the people.
>
> SUBJECT NO. 7: He is quite an egotist in the picture.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Did you get any impression about the German people from that?
>
> (Here the interviewer introduces a section of the film for discussion. Before he has finished his remarks, an informant volunteers his impression. No. 7 then begins his interpretation of the section. Both remarks suggest that the informants have "something on their minds." Being more attentive to his interview guide than to the implications of the informants' remarks, the interviewer by-passes the hints which might have added further to the range of the interview. He then asks the question, from his guide, which he had probably intended to ask in the first place.)

Excessive dependence on the interview guide increases the danger of *confusing range with superficiality.* The interviewer who feels obligated to conform closely to the guide may suddenly discover, to his dismay, that he has covered only a small portion of the suggested areas of inquiry. This invites a rapid shift from topic to topic, with a question devoted to each. In some cases the interviewer seems scarcely to listen to the responses, for his questions are in no way related to previous comments. Comments elicited by this rapid fire of questions are often as superficial and unrevealing as those obtained through a fixed questionnaire. The quick "once-over" technique wastes time: it diverts respondents from their foci of attention, without any compensating increase in the interviewer's information concerning given areas of inquiry. In view of the shortcomings of rapid shifts in discussion, we suggest the working rule: *Do not introduce a given topic unless a sustained effort is made to explore it in some detail.*

THE CRITERION OF DEPTH

Depth, as a criterion, involves the elaboration of affective responses beyond limited reports of "positive" or "negative," "pleasant" or "unpleasant," reactions. The interviewer seeks to obtain a maximum of *self-revelatory*

[20] The inexperienced interviewer, beset by social anxiety, often reacts in the same way to the silences which occasionally follow unstructured questions. He is insensitive to the "pregnant silence." Instead of remaining silent himself for a minute or modifying his original question, he may bombard the subject with questions. This only makes the informant more inarticulate and discourages whatever comments might have been forthcoming.

comments concerning how the stimulus material was experienced.

The depth of reports in an interview varies; not everything reported is on the same psychological level.[21] The depth of comments may be thought of as varying along a continuum. At the lower end of the scale are mere descriptive accounts of reactions which allow little more than a tabulation of "positive" or "negative" responses. At the upper end are those reports which set forth varied psychological dimensions of the experience. In these are expressed symbolisms, anxieties, fears, sentiments, as well as cognitive ideas. A main task of the interviewer, then, is *to diagnose the level of depth on which his subjects are operating at any given moment and to shift that level toward whichever end of the "depth-continuum" he finds appropriate to the given case.*

The criterion of maximizing depth—to the limited extent possible in a single focused interview—guides the interviewer toward searching out the *personal context* and the *saliency* of responses.

It is a central task of the focused interview to determine how the prior experiences and predispositions of respondents relate to their structuring of the stimulus situation.[22]
Personal and social contexts provide the links between the stimulus material and the responses. It is through the discovery of such contexts that variations in the meaning ascribed to symbols and other content are understood; that the ways in which the stimulus material is imported into the experience world of subjects are determined; and that the self-betrayals and self-revelations which clarify the covert significance of a response are elicited. Thus, in the following excerpt, it becomes clear that social class provided the context for heightened identification with the British portrayed in a documentary film:

INTERVIEWER: In what way does this picture make you feel closer [to the British]?

SUBJECT NO. 6: I don't come from such a well-to-do family as Mrs. Miniver's. Hers was a well-to-do family, and that picture didn't show anything of the poor families. But this one brought it closer to my class of people, and you realize we are all in it and everybody gets hurt and not just the higher class of people.

The criterion of depth also sensitizes the interviewer to variations in the saliency of responses. Some responses will be central and invested with affect, urgency, or intense feelings; others will be peripheral, of limited significance to the subject. The interviewer must elicit sufficiently detailed data to discriminate the casual expression of an opinion, which is mentioned only because the interview situation seems to call for it, from the strongly motivated response which reaches into central concerns of the informant. It appears that the atmosphere of an expressive interview allows greater opportunity for degrees of saliency to be detected than the self-ratings of intensity of belief which have lately been incorporated into questionnaires and attitude scales. But, unless the interviewer is deliberately seeking out depth responses, he may not obtain the data needed to distinguish the central from the peripheral response.

Procedures.—In following up the comments of subjects, the interviewer may call for two types of elaboration. He may ask the subjects to describe *what* they observed in the stimulus situation, thus inviting fairly detached, though significantly selective, accounts of the content. Or he can ask them to report how they *felt* about the content. Both types of elaboration are useful; but, since the latter more often leads to depth responses, it is preferable in a fairly brief interview. Consequently, we sketch only those tactics which lead to the second type of elaboration.

Focus on feelings.—It has been found that subjects move rather directly toward a report of depth responses when the follow-up questions contain key words which refer explicitly to a *feeling context.* Focusing on a fairly recent, concrete experience, subjects usually become progressively interested in exploring its previously unverbalized dimensions, and, for the most part, no elaborate detour is needed to have them express their sentiments. But the context

[21] See Roethlisberger and Dickson, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–78.

[22] Two kinds of personal context typically find expression in the focused interview. The one is the *idiosyncratic context,* highly personalized experiences which are likely to occur rarely even within a relatively homogeneous group (e.g., the American subject who remarks: ". . . . it reminds me of the way I felt when my brother came back from the war after he had been reported dead. We were living in Russia and . . . ."). The other is the *role context,* experiences which are common for persons occupying a given status. Which of these types of context is of greatest concern to the interviewer depends, of course, on the purposes of his study.

for such reporting must be established and maintained. Thus the interviewer should phrase a question in such terms as "How did you *feel* when . . . . ?" rather than imply a mere mnemonic context by asking "What do you *remember* about . . . . ?"

Illustrations are plentiful to show how such seemingly slight differences in phrasing lead respondents from an impersonal description of content to reports of their emotional responses to this content.

INTERVIEWER: Do you happen to remember the scenes showing Warsaw being bombed and shelled? What stood out about that part of the film?

SUBJECT NO. 1: The way people didn't have any shelter; the way they were running around and getting bombed. . . . .

(The interviewer's "What stood out?" has elicited only an abbreviated account of the film content. He might have proceeded to follow this line of thought—elaborations of the objective events, further details of the squadrons of bombers, and so on. But this would have been comparatively unproductive, since the interviewer is primarily concerned with what these scenes *meant* to the informant. Therefore, he shifts attention to the response level and at once elicits an elaborate report of feeling, which we reproduce in part.)

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel when you saw that?

SUBJECT NO. 1: I still can't get worked up over it yet [1942], because in this country you just can't realize what war is like over there. I'm talking for myself. I know I couldn't fight at the present time with the viciousness of one of those people. I could shoot a man before he'd shoot me, knowing he was going to shoot me. But I couldn't have the viciousness I know those people have. . . . .

Restatement of implied or expressed feelings.—Once the feelings context has been established, further elaboration will be prompted by the occasional restating of the feelings implied or expressed in comments. This technique, extensively developed by Carl Rogers in his work on psychotherapeutic counseling, serves a twofold function. By so rephrasing emotionalized attitudes, the interviewer implicitly invites progressive elaboration by the informant. And, second, such reformulations enhance rapport, since the interviewer thus makes it clear that he fully "understands" and "follows" the informant, as he proceeds to express his feelings.[23]

[23] Carl Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, and "The Non-directive Method for Social Research," *American Journal of Sociology*, L (1945), 279–83.

Comparative situations.—In certain cases the interviewer can use the partially directive technique of suggesting meaningful comparisons between the test situation and parallel experiences which the subjects are known, or can be presumed, to have had. Such comparisons of concrete experiences aid the verbalization of affect. The suggested comparison is designed not so much to have subjects draw objective parallels (or contrasts) between the two experiences as to serve as a release for introspective and affective responses.

Witness the following excerpt from an interview with inductees, who had implied that they were viewing a documentary film of Nazi military training within the context of their own current experience:

INTERVIEWER: Do you suppose that we Americans train our men in the same way [i.e., comparison with Nazi training as shown in film]?

SUBJECT NO. 6: They train them more thoroughly.

SUBJECT NO. 2: The way we are rushed through our training over here, it doesn't seem possible.

SUBJECT NO. 1: That's what enters my mind about the training we are getting here. Of course, a lot of talk exists among the fellows that as soon as training is over, we're going into the fight. I don't know any more about it than they do. The training we're going to get right here is just our basic training and if we get shipped across, I can't see that we'd know anything about it except marching and doing a little left flank and right flank and a few other things like that. . . . .

(The suggested comparison provided an apt opportunity for the subjects to go on to express their anxieties about going overseas unprepared for combat. The interviewer was then able to ascertain the specific scenes in the film which had further provoked these anxieties.)

It should be emphasized, however, that this procedure is effective only when the experience drawn on for comparison is known to be centrally significant to the subject and if the comparison flows from the interview. Otherwise, comparisons, far from facilitating depth responses, actually disrupt the continuity of the interview and impose an alien frame of reference upon the informant. In such instances the interviewer becomes a target for hostility: he is asked to define his terms, state the purpose behind his question, and the like.

CONCLUSION

Social scientists have come to abandon the spurious choice between qualitative and quan-

titative data; they are concerned rather with that combination of both which makes use of the most valuable features of each.[24] The problem becomes one of determining *at which points* he should adopt the one, and at which the other, approach.

The passing references made to the chief functions of the focused interview can perhaps be best summarized by indicating how such qualitative materials have been integrated with quantitative data. When the interview precedes the experimental or statistical study, it is used as a *source of hypotheses*, later submitted to systematic test. A study of the social psychology of mass persuasion exemplified in a war-bond drive on the radio provides a case in point.[25]

In the preliminary phases of this study, focused interviews were conducted with 100 persons who had heard a "marathon" war-bond drive by a radio "celebrity," Kate Smith, whose broadcasts at fifteen-minute intervals during a period of seventeen hours resulted in $39,000,000 bond pledges. Analysis of the interviews indicated that the public image of Smith as a "patriot nonpareil" played an important role in the process of persuasion and, further, that this image was, in turn, the result of "propaganda of the deed," i.e., of publicized *acts* rather than *verbal claims*. The marathon bond drive itself was an instance of such propaganda, as the interviews revealed. To test this interpretation, a polling interview with a representative sample was conducted to determine the comparative currency of the Smith-as-patriot image among those who had and had not heard the marathon bond drive. By keeping constant listeners' relationships to Smith—"fans," "occasional listeners," and non-listeners—the hypothesis was confirmed. Among all three groups it was found that exposure to the marathon served to increase the frequency of the Smith-as-patriot image which entered into the process of persuasion. In this instance the focused interview was used to develop hypotheses, the mass schedule to check them at strategic points.

In other cases the procedure has been reversed. The focused interview has served *to interpret previously ascertained experimental findings*. In one experimental study of a documentary film, an effect was found which ran counter to all expectations.

The basic theme of the film, iterated and reiterated throughout, held that Britain fought and won the crucial "Battle of Britain" *alone*, thus securing a precious year in which the United States could prepare. Nevertheless, the film produced the boomerang effect of significantly increasing the proportion of those who felt that Britain would have been conquered had it not been for our Lend-Lease supplies at the time (despite the commentator's reminder that our aid was then little "more than a trickle"). Focused interviews were conducted with sample audiences to determine, among other things, the sources and process of this boomerang effect. The interviews found that audiences responded selectively; they magnified a single ten-second clip of a few crates stamped "from the U.S.A." being unloaded on a London dock. This scene was taken to symbolize American aid and, to all intents and purposes, an American victory. Just as ethnocentrism leads subjects to perceive American stamps as larger than foreign stamps of equal size, so part of the audience seized upon and magnified the only scene in the entire film which referred to an American achievement.

Such interview evidence not only provides grounds for interpreting an otherwise unintelligible experimental result but also helps design a further experimental check on the interpretation by appropriate revisions of the film.

These brief illustrations must suffice to indicate the auxiliary role of the focused interview as an instrument of research. It is hoped that, with increasing use, its procedures will be substantially improved and its applications greatly extended.

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[24] See Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Controversy over Detailed Interviews—an Offer for Negotiation," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, VIII (1944), 38–80; and Paul Wallin, "The Prediction of Individual Behavior from Case Studies," in Paul Horst (ed.), *The Prediction of Personal Adjustment* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1941).

[25] Robert K. Merton, Alberta Curtis, and Marjorie Fiske, *Mass Persuasion* (New York: Harper & Bros., in press).