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8   Active Interviewing

James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium

In our 'interview society' (Silverman, 1993), the mass media, human service providers and researchers increasingly generate information by interviewing. The number of television news programmes, daytime talk-shows and newspaper articles that provide us with the results of interviews is virtually incalculable. Looking at more methodical forms of information collection, it has been estimated that 90 per cent of all social science investigations use interviews in one way or another (Briggs, 1986). Interviewing is undoubtedly the most widely applied technique for conducting systematic social inquiry, as sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, clinicians, administrators, politicians and pollsters treat interviews as their 'windows on the world' (Hyman et al., 1975).

Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. In this respect, interviews are special forms of conversation. While these conversations may vary from highly structured, standardized, quantitatively oriented survey interviews, to semi-formal guided conversations and free-flowing informational exchanges, all interviews are interactional. The narratives that are produced may be as truncated as forced-choice survey answers or as elaborate as oral life histories, but they are all constructed *in situ*, as a product of the talk between interview participants.

While most researchers acknowledge the interactional character of the interview, the technical literature on interviewing stresses the need to keep that interaction strictly in check. Guides to interviewing – especially those oriented to standardized surveys – are primarily concerned with maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows (Gorden, 1987). The interview conversation is thus framed as a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding or misdirection, a persistent set of problems to be controlled. The corrective is simple: if the interviewer asks questions properly, the respondent will give out the desired information.

In this conventional view, the interview conversation is a pipeline for transmitting knowledge. A recently heightened sensitivity to representational matters (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) – characteristic of poststructuralist, postmodernist, constructionist and ethnomethodological inquiry – has raised a number of questions about the very possibility of collecting knowledge in the manner the conventional approach presupposes. In varied ways, these alternate perspectives hold that meaning is socially constituted; all knowledge is created from the actions undertaken

to obtain it (see e.g., Cicourel, 1964, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967). Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself.

Sociolinguist Charles Briggs (1986) argues that the social circumstances of interviews are more than obstacles to respondents' articulation of their particular truths. Briggs notes that, like all other speech events, interviews fundamentally, not incidentally, shape the form and content of what is said. Aaron Cicourel (1974) goes further, maintaining that interviews virtually impose particular ways of understanding reality upon subjects' responses. The point is that interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents (also see Manning, 1967; Mishler, 1986, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Both parties to the interview are necessarily and ineluctably *active*. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. Participation in an interview involves meaning-making work (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

If interviews are interpretively active, meaning-making occasions, interview data are unavoidably collaborative (see Alasuutari, 1995; Holstein and Staples, 1992). Therefore, any technical attempts to strip interviews of their interactional ingredients will be futile. Instead of refining the long list of methodological constraints under which 'standardized' interviews should be conducted, we suggest that researchers take a more 'active' perspective, begin to acknowledge, and capitalize upon, interviewers' and respondents' constitutive contributions to the production of interview data. This means consciously and conscientiously attending to the interview process and its product in ways that are more sensitive to the social construction of knowledge.

Conceiving of the interview as active means attending more to the ways in which knowledge is assembled than is usually the case in traditional approaches. In other words, understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed. The *hows* of interviewing, of course, refer to the interactional, narrative procedures of knowledge production, not merely to interview techniques. The *whats* pertain to the issues guiding the interview, the content of questions, and the substantive information communicated by the respondent. A dual interest in the *hows* and *whats* of meaning production goes hand in hand with an appreciation of the constitutive activeness of the interview process.

This appreciation derives from an ethnomethodologically informed social constructionist approach that considers the process of meaning production

to be as important for social research as the meaning that is produced (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Pollner, 1987). In many significant ways, this also resonates with methodological critiques and reformulations offered by an array of feminist scholars (see DeVault, 1990; Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987). In their distinct fashions, ethnomethodology, constructionism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and some versions of feminism are all interested in issues relating to subjectivity, complexity, perspective and meaning-construction. Still, as valuable and insightful as this is, these 'linguistically attuned' approaches can emphasize the *hows* of social process at the expense of the *whats* of lived experience. We want to strike a balance between these *hows* and *whats* as a way of reappropriating the significance of substance and content to studies of the social construction process. The aim is not to obviate interview material by deconstructing it, but to harvest it and its transactions for narrative analysis. While the emphasis on process has sharpened concern with, and debate over, the epistemological status of interview data, it is important not to lose track of *what* is being asked about in interviews and, in turn, *what* is being conveyed by respondents. A narrow focus on *how* tends to displace the significant *whats* – the meanings – that serve as the relevant grounds for asking and answering questions.

Taking the meaning-making activity of all interviewing as our point of departure, we will discuss how the interview cultivates its data. We begin by locating the active view in relation to more traditional conceptions of interviewing, contrasting alternate images of the subject behind the interview respondent.

Traditional images of interviewing

Typically, those who want to find out about another person's feelings, thoughts or actions believe that they merely have to ask the right questions and the other's 'reality' will be theirs. Studs Terkel, the consummate journalistic and sociological interviewer, says he simply turns on his tape recorder and invites people to talk. Writing of the interviews he did for his brilliant study of *Working*, Terkel notes:

> There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature . . . the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you. . . . In short, it was conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were opened. (1972: xxv)

As unpretentious as it is, Terkel's image of interviewing permeates the social sciences; interviewing is generally likened to 'prospecting' for the true facts and feelings residing within the respondent. Of course there is a highly sophisticated technology that informs researchers about how to ask questions, what sorts of questions not to ask, the order in which to ask them, and the ways to avoid saying things that might spoil, contaminate or otherwise bias the data (Fowler and Mangione, 1990; Hyman et al., 1975).

The basic model, however, remains similar to the one Terkel exploits so adroitly.

The image of the social scientific prospector casts the interview as a search-and-discovery mission, with the interviewer intent on detecting what is already there inside variably cooperative respondents. The challenge lies in extracting information as directly as possible. Highly refined interview techniques streamline, systematize and sanitize the process. This can involve varying degrees of standardization (see Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954), ranging from interviews organized around structured, specially worded questions and an orientation to measurement, to flexibly organized interviews guided by more general questions aimed at uncovering subjective meanings. John Madge contrasts what he calls 'formative' with 'mass' interviews, categorizing them according to whether the respondent 'is given some sort of freedom to choose the topics to be discussed and the way in which they are discussed' (1965: 165). Formative interviews include the non-directive interviews favoured in Rogerian counselling (see Rogers, 1945), informal interviews and life histories. Most large-scale surveys fall into the mass interview category. Mainly, classification centres on the characteristics and aims of the interview process, with little attention paid to how interviews differ as occasions for knowledge production.

The subject behind the respondent

Regardless of the type of interview, there is always an image of the research *subject* lurking behind persons placed in the role of interview respondent (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Projecting a subject behind the respondent confers a sense of epistemological agency, which bears on our understanding of the relative validity of the information that is reported. In traditional approaches, subjects are basically conceived as passive *vessels of answers* for experiential questions put to respondents by interviewers. They are repositories of facts and the related details of experience. Occasionally, such as with especially sensitive interview topics or with recalcitrant respondents, researchers acknowledge that it may be difficult to obtain accurate experiential information. None the less, the information is viewed, in principle, as held uncontaminated by the subject's vessel of answers. The trick is to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication between the interviewer and respondent.

Much of the methodological literature on interviewing deals with the nuances of these intricate matters. The vessel-of-answers view cautions interviewers to be careful in how they ask questions, lest their manner of inquiry bias what lies within the subject. The literature offers myriad procedures for obtaining unadulterated facts and details, most of which rely upon interviewer and question neutrality. For example, it is assumed that the interviewer who poses questions that acknowledge alternative sides of an issue is being more 'neutral' than the interviewer who does not. The

successful implementation of neutral practices elicits truths held in the vessel of answers behind the respondent. Validity results from the successful application of the procedures.

In the vessel-of-answers approach, the image of the subject is epistemologically passive, not engaged in the production of knowledge. If the interviewing process goes 'by the book' and is non-directional and unbiased, respondents will validly give out what subjects are presumed to merely retain within them – the unadulterated facts and details of experience. Contamination emanates from the interview setting, its participants and their interaction, not the subject, who, under ideal conditions, serves up authentic reports when beckoned to do so.

What happens, however, if we enliven the image of the subject behind the respondent? Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms the facts and details. The respondent can hardly 'spoil' what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating.

This activated subject pieces experiences together, before, during and after assuming the respondent role. As a member of society, he or she mediates and alters the knowledge that is conveyed to the interviewer; he or she is 'always already' an active maker of meaning. As a result, the respondent's answers are continually being assembled and modified and the answers' truth value cannot be judged simply in terms of whether they match what lies in a vessel of objective knowledge.

From a more traditional standpoint, the objectivity or truth of interview responses might be assessed in terms of reliability, the extent to which questioning yields the same answers whenever and wherever it is carried out, and validity, that is, the extent to which inquiry yields the 'correct' answers (Kirk and Miller, 1986). When the interview is seen as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion, however, different criteria apply. The focus is on how meaning is constructed, the circumstances of construction, and the meaningful linkages that are made for the occasion. While interest in the content of answers persists, it is primarily in how and what the active subject/respondent, in collaboration with an equally active interviewer, produces and conveys about the active subject/respondent's experience under the interpretive circumstances at hand. One cannot simply expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production. Similarly, the validity of answers derives not from their correspondence to meanings held within the respondent, but from their ability to convey situated experiential realities in terms that are locally comprehensible.

This active image of the interview is best put in perspective by contrasting it with specific traditional approaches. The two approaches we have selected differ considerably in their orientations to the experiential truths held by the passive subject. The first orients to the rational, factual value of what is communicated. Typical of survey interviewing, it focuses

on the substantive statements, explanations and reasons with which the respondent articulates experience. We use Jean Converse and Howard Schuman's candid book *Conversations at Random* (1974) as an exemplary text. The second approach orients to the purportedly deeper and more authentic value of the subject's feelings. It emphasizes sentiment and emotion, the ostensible core of human experience. We use Jack Douglas's book *Creative Interviewing* (1985) to illustrate this approach.

Survey interviewing

While Converse and Schuman attempt to elaborate upon the most standardized of interviewing techniques, their book also considers the survey interview 'as interviewers see it' and richly illustrates how interpretively engaging and, relatedly, how difficult and exasperating the survey respondent can be. It describes the interesting and complex personalities and meanings that interviewers encounter while interviewing, depicting them, respectively, as 'the pleasure of persons' and 'connoisseurs of the particular'. But the authors caution the reader that, even though it will be evident throughout the book that the respondent can be quite interpretively active, this does not work against the pursuit of objective information. This information, the reader eventually learns, is derived from the repository of knowledge that lies passively behind the respondent. The authors do not believe that the respondent's conduct implicates his or her subject in the construction of meaning. As lively, uninhibited, entertaining and difficult as the respondent might be at times, his or her passive subject ultimately holds the answers sought in the research.

Converse and Schuman's book is filled with anecdotal reminders of what interviewers must learn in order to keep the subject's vessel of answers in view and the respondent on target. In part, it is a matter of controlling oneself as an interviewer so that one does not interfere with what the passive subject is only too willing to disclose. The interviewer must shake off self-consciousness, suppress personal opinion and avoid stereotyping the respondent. Learning the interviewer role is also a matter of controlling the interview situation to facilitate the candid expression of opinions and sentiments. Ideally, the interview should be conducted in private. This helps assure that respondents will speak directly from their vessels of answers, not in response to the presence of others. The seasoned interviewer learns that the so-called 'pull of conversation', which might have an interpretive dynamic of its own fuelled by the active subjectivity of both the respondent and the interviewer, must be managed so that the 'push of inquiry' (p. 26) is kept in focus. Ideally, the cross-pressures of conducting inquiry that will produce 'good hard data' are managed by means of 'soft' conversation (p. 22).

Throughout, Converse and Schuman's book provides glimpses of how problematic the image of the passive subject is in practice. The illustrations repeatedly tell us that interviews are conversations where meanings are not only conveyed, but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted and recorded by the interviewer. While the veteran interviewer learns to manage the pressures of conversation for the purposes of inquiry, orienting to an active, meaning-making occasion seems to be a mere epistemological step away.

Creative interviewing

This is different from the approach exemplified in Douglas's book *Creative Interviewing*, but there are some marked similarities that borrow from traditional images. The word 'creative' in Douglas's title refers primarily to the interviewer, not the respondent, and, according to Douglas, derives from the difficulties he encountered attempting to probe respondents' 'deep experience'. Douglas writes that in his many empirical studies, he repeatedly discovered how shallow the standard recommendations were for conducting research interviews. Canons of rational neutrality, such as those Converse and Schuman espouse, failed to capture what Douglas calls his respondents' 'emotional wellsprings' and called for a methodology for deep disclosure.

Douglas's difficulties relate as much to his image of the passive subject as they do to shortcomings of standard interviewing technique. Like the image of the subject behind the survey respondent, Douglas also imagines his subjects to be repositories of answers, but in his case, they are well-guarded vessels of feelings. The respondent authentically communicates from an emotional wellspring, at the behest of an interviewer who knows that mere words cannot draw out or convey what experience ultimately is all about. Standard survey questions and answers touch only the surface of experience. Douglas aims more deeply by creatively 'getting to know' the real subject behind the respondent.

Creative interviewing is a set of techniques for moving past the mere words and sentences exchanged in the interview process. To achieve this, the interviewer must establish a climate for *mutual* disclosure. The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer's willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings. The interviewers' deep disclosure both occasions and legitimizes the respondent's reciprocal revelations. This, Douglas suggests, is thoroughly suppressed by the cultivated neutrality of the standard survey interview. As if to state a cardinal rule, he writes:

> Creative interviewing, as we shall see throughout, 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.* (1985: 25)

Douglas offers a set of guidelines for creative interviewing. One is to figure that, as he puts it, 'genius in creative interviewing involves 99 percent perspiration' (1985: 27); getting the respondent to deeply disclose requires much more work than obtaining mere opinions. A second admonition for

engaging in 'deep-deep probes into the human soul' is 'researcher, know thyself' (1985: 51). Continual self-analysis on the part of the interviewer, who usually is also the researcher, is necessary, lest the creative interviewer's own defence mechanisms work against mutual disclosure and understanding. A third guideline is to show a commitment to disclosure by expressing an abiding interest in feelings. Referring to a neophyte creative interviewer who 'has done some wondrously revealing life studies', Douglas writes that the creative interviewer is 'driven by . . . friendly, caring, and adoring feelings, but adds to those an endearing, wide-eyed sense of wonderment at the mysteries unveiled before her' (1985: 29).

The wellsprings tapped by creative interviewing are said to be emotional, in distinct contrast with the preferred rational image of facts that filters through Converse and Schuman's book. As Douglas puts it, knowledge and wisdom are *'partially* the product of creative interactions – of mutual searches for understanding, of soul communions' (p. 55). While Douglas's imagined subject is basically emotional, this subject, in the role of respondent, actively cooperates with the interviewer to create mutually recognizable meanings, paralleling what interviewers' accounts in Converse and Schuman's book suggest. In this regard, the mutuality of disclosure – the 'creative' thrust of creative interviewing – mediates, adds to and shapes what is said in its own right. What Douglas does not recognize, however, is that this ideally cooperative subject could alternatively constitute the wellsprings of experience in rational or other terms, not necessarily emotional ones. Thus, the subject behind Douglas's respondent remains an essentially passive, if concertedly emotional, fount of experience, not unlike the respondent who 'opens up' while having a drink with Studs Terkel.

The active interview

Ithiel de Sola Pool (1957), a prominent critic of public opinion polling, once argued that the dynamic, communicative contingencies of the interview literally activate respondents' opinions. Every interview, he suggests, is an 'interpersonal drama with a developing plot' (1957: 193). This metaphor conveys a far more active sense of interviewing than is traditionally conceived, an image of the interview as an occasion for constructing, not merely discovering or conveying, information. As Pool writes:

> [T]he social milieu in which communication takes place [during interviews] modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expression cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying 'true' opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline. (1957: 192)

The active interview and interpretive practice

Conceiving of the interview as an interpersonal drama with a developing plot is part of a broader image of reality as an ongoing, interpretive

accomplishment. From this perspective, interview participants are practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and communicate the recognizable and orderly features of experience. But meaning-making is not merely artful (Garfinkel, 1967); meaning is not built 'from scratch' on each interpretive occasion. Rather, interpretation orients to, and is conditioned by, the substantive resources and contingencies of interaction.

Meaning is constituted at the nexus of the *hows* and the *whats* of experience, by way of *interpretive practice* – the procedures and resources used to apprehend, organize and represent reality (Holstein, 1993; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Active interviewing is a form of interpretive practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretive structures, resources and orientations with what Garfinkel (1967) calls 'practical reasoning'. Linking artfulness to substantive contingencies implies that while reality is continually 'under construction', it is assembled using the interpretive resources at hand. Meaning reflects relatively enduring interpretive conditions, such as the research topics of the interviewer, biographical particulars and local ways of orienting to those topics (Gubrium, 1988, 1989, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994, 1995). Those resources are astutely and adroitly crafted to the demands of the occasion, so that meaning is neither predetermined nor absolutely unique.

An active subject

The image of the *active interview* transforms the subject behind the respondent from a repository of opinions and reasons or a wellspring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge. From the time one identifies a research topic, to respondent selection, questioning and answering, and, finally, to the interpretation of responses, interviewing itself is a concerted project for producing meaning. The imagined subject behind the respondent emerges as part of the project, not beforehand. Within the interview itself, the subject is fleshed out – rationally, emotionally, in combination, or otherwise – in relation to the give-and-take of the interview process and the interview's broader research purposes. The interview *and* its participants are constantly developing.

Two communicative contingencies influence the construction of the active subject behind the respondent. One kind involves the substantive *whats* of the interview enterprise. The focus and emerging data of the research project provide interpretive resources for developing both the subject and his or her responses. For example, a project might centre on the quality of care and quality of life of nursing home residents (see Gubrium, 1993). This might be part of a study relating to national debates about the organization of home and institutional care. If interviews are employed, participants draw out the substantiality of these topics, linking the topics to biographical particulars in the interview process, and thus producing a subject who responds to, or is affected by, the matters under discussion. For instance, a nursing home resident might speak animatedly during an

interview about the quality of care in her facility, asserting that, 'for a woman, it ultimately gets down to feelings', echoing Douglas's emotional subject and articulating a recognizable linkage between affect and gender. Another resident might coolly and methodically list her facility's qualities of care, never once mentioning her feelings about them. Offering her own take on the matter, the respondent might state that 'getting emotional' over 'these things' clouds clear judgement, implicating a different kind of subject, more like the rational respondent portrayed in Converse and Schuman's text. Particular substantive resources – such as the common cultural link between women and feelings or the traditional cultural opposition of clear thought and emotionality – are used to form the subject.

A second communicative contingency of interviewing directs us to the *hows* of the process. The standpoint from which information is offered is continually developed in relation to ongoing interview interaction. In speaking of the quality of care, for example, nursing home residents, as interview respondents, not only offer substantive thoughts and feelings pertinent to the topic under consideration, but simultaneously and continuously monitor who they are in relation to the person questioning them. For example, prefacing her remarks about the quality of life in her facility with the statement 'speaking as a woman', a nursing home resident informs the interviewer that she is to be heard as a woman, not as someone else – not a mere resident, cancer patient or abandoned mother. If and when she subsequently comments, 'If I were a man in this place', the resident frames her thoughts and feelings about the quality of life differently, producing an alternative subject. The respondent is clearly working at how the interview unfolds.

Narrative incitement, positional shifts and resource activation

Interviews, of course, hold no monopoly over interpretive practice. Nor are they the only occasions upon which subjects and their opinions, emotions and reports are interpretively constituted. Why, then, is interviewing an especially useful mode of systematic social inquiry? One answer lies in the interview situation's ability to incite the production of meanings that address issues relating to particular research concerns. In the traditional view of interviewing, the passive subject engages in a 'minimalist' version of interpretive practice, perceiving, storing and reporting experience when properly asked. Our active conception of the interview, however, invests the subject with a substantial repertoire of interpretive methods and stock of experiential materials. The active view eschews the image of the vessel waiting to be tapped in favour of the notion that the subject's interpretive capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated. The interview is a commonly recognized occasion for formally and systematically doing so.

This is not to say that active interviewers merely coax their respondents into preferred answers to their questions. Rather, they converse with

respondents in such a way that alternate considerations are brought into play. They may suggest orientations to, and linkages between, diverse aspects of respondents' experience, adumbrating – even inviting – interpretations that make use of particular resources, connections and outlooks. Interviewers may explore incompletely articulated aspects of experience, encouraging respondents to develop topics in ways relevant to their own everyday lives (DeVault, 1990). The objective is not to dictate interpretation, but to provide an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings that address relevant issues, and not be confined by predetermined agendas.

Pool's dramaturgic metaphor is apt because it conveys both the structuring conditions and the artfulness of the interview. As a drama of sorts, its narrative is scripted in that it has a topic or topics, distinguishable roles and a format for conversation. But it also has a *developing* plot, in which topics, roles and format are fashioned in the give-and-take of the interview. This active interview is a kind of limited 'improvisational' performance. The production is spontaneous, yet structured – focused within loose parameters provided by the interviewer, who is also an active participant.

While the respondent actively constructs and assembles answers, he or she does not simply 'break out' talking. Neither elaborate narratives nor one-word replies emerge without provocation. The active interviewer's role is to incite respondents' answers, virtually *activating narrative production*. Where standardized approaches to interviewing attempt to strip the interview of all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli (but see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, for a discussion of the inevitable failure of these attempts), the consciously active interviewer intentionally provokes responses by indicating – even suggesting – narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents. In the broadest sense, the interviewer attempts to activate the respondent's stock of knowledge (Schütz, 1967) and bring it to bear on the discussion at hand in ways that are appropriate to the research agenda.

Consider, for example, the ways in which diverse aspects of a respondent's knowledge, perspectives, roles and orientations are activated and implicated in an interview involving an adult daughter who is caring for her mother – a victim of senile dementia – at home. The daughter is employed part-time, and shares the household with her employed husband and their two sons, one a part-time college student and the other a full-time security guard. The extract begins when the interviewer (I) asks the adult daughter (R) to describe her feelings about having to juggle so many needs and schedules. This relates to the so-called 'sandwich generation', which is said to be caught between having to raise its own children and seeing to the needs of frail elderly parents. Note how, after the interviewer asks the respondent what she means by saying that she had mixed feelings, the respondent makes explicit reference to various ways of thinking about the matter, as if to suggest that more than one narrative resource (with contradictory responses) might be brought to bear on the matter. The

respondent displays considerable narrative control: she not only references possible *whats* of caregiving and family life, but, in the process, informs the interviewer of *how* she could construct her answer.

I: We were talking about, you said you were a member of the, what did you call it?

R: They say that I'm in the sandwich generation. You know, like we're sandwiched between having to care for my mother . . . and my grown kids and my husband. People are living longer now and you've got different generations at home and, I tell ya, it's a mixed blessing.

I: How do you feel about it in your situation?

R: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm being a bit selfish because I gripe about having to keep an eye on Mother all the time. If you let down your guard, she wanders off into the back yard or goes out the door and down the street. That's no fun when your hubby wants your attention too. Norm works the second shift and he's home during the day a lot. I manage to get in a few hours of work, but he doesn't like it. I have pretty mixed feelings about it.

I: What do you mean?

R: Well, I'd say that as a daughter, I feel pretty guilty about how I feel sometimes. It can get pretty bad, like wishing that Mother were just gone, you know what I mean? She's been a wonderful mother and I love her very much, but if you ask me how I feel as a wife and mother, that's another matter. I feel like she's [the mother], well, intruding on our lives and just making hell out of raising a family. Sometimes I put myself in my husband's shoes and I just know how he feels. He doesn't say much, but I know that he misses my company, and I miss his of course. [*Pause*] So how do you answer that?

The interviewer goes on to explain that the respondent can answer in the way she believes best represents her thoughts and feelings. But as the exchange unfolds, it is evident that 'best' misrepresents the narrative complexity of the respondent's thoughts and feelings. In the following extract, notice how the respondent struggles to sort her opinions to accord with categorically distinct identities. At one point, she explains that she knows how a wife could and should feel because she gathers from the way her husband and sons act that 'men don't feel things the same way'. This suggests that her own thoughts and feelings are drawn from a fund of gendered knowledge as well. Note, too, how at several points the interviewer collaborates with the respondent to define her identity as a respondent. At the very end of the extract, the respondent suggests that other respondents' answers might serve to clarify the way she herself has organized her responses, indicating that further narrative contextualizing might encourage even more interpretations of her own experience.

R: I try to put myself in their [husband and sons'] shoes, try to look at it from their point of view, you know, from a man's way of thinking. I ask myself how it feels to have a part-time wife and mama. I ask myself how I'd feel. Believe me, I know he [husband] feels pretty rotten about it. Men get that way; they want what they want and the rest of the time, well, they're quiet, like nothing's the matter. I used to think I was going crazy with all the stuff on my mind and having to think about everything all at once and not being able to finish with one thing and get on to the other. You know how it gets –

doing one thing and feeling bad about how you did something else and wanting to redo what you did or what you said. The way a woman does, I guess. I think I've learned that about myself. I don't know. It's pretty complicated thinking about it. [*Pause*] Let's see, how do I really feel?

I: Well, I was just wondering, you mentioned being sandwiched earlier and what a woman feels?

R: Yeah, I guess I wasn't all that sure what women like me feel until I figured out how Norm and the boys felt. I figured pretty quick that men are pretty good at sorting things out and that, well, I just couldn't do it, 'cause, well, men don't feel things the same way. I just wouldn't want to do that way anyway. Wouldn't feel right about it as a woman, you know what I mean? So, like they say, live and let live, I guess.

I: But as a daughter?

R: Yeah, that too. So if you ask me how I feel having Mother under foot all the time, I'd say that I remember not so far back that I was under foot a lot when I was a little girl and Mother never complained, and she'd help Dad out in the store, too. So I guess I could tell you that I'm glad I'm healthy and around to take care of her and, honestly, I'd do it all over again if I had to. I don't know. You've talked to other women about it. What do they say?

I: Well, uh

R: Naw, I don't want to put you on the spot. I was just thinking that maybe if I knew how others in my shoes felt, I might be able to sort things out better than I did for ya.

The respondent's comments about both the subject matter under consideration and how one does or should formulate responses show that the respondent, in collaboration with the interviewer, activates diverse narrative resources as an integral part of exchanging questions and answers. Treating the interview as active allows the interviewer to encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and stocks of knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing – the possible answers – that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. The active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher's interest. He or she does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections – that is, suggests possible horizons of meaning and narrative linkages that coalesce into the emerging responses (Gubrium, 1993). The pertinence of what is discussed is partly defined by the research topic and partly by the substantive horizons of ongoing responses. While the active respondent may selectively exploit a vast range of narrative resources, it is the active interviewer's job to direct and harness the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand.

Implications for analysis

Compared to more conventional perspectives on interviewing, the active approach seems to invite unacceptable forms of bias. After all, far more is

going on that simply retrieving the information from respondents' repositories of knowledge. 'Contamination' is everywhere. This criticism only holds, however, if one takes a narrow view of interpretive practice and meaning construction. Bias is a meaningful concept only if the subject is a preformed, purely informational commodity that the interview process might somehow taint. But if interview responses are seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed, nor ever pure. Any interview situation – no matter how formalized, restricted or standardized – relies upon the interaction between participants. Because meaning construction is unavoidably collaborative (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks et al., 1974), it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be construed as contaminants. All participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making meaning.

While naturally occurring talk and interaction may appear to be more spontaneous, less 'staged' than an interview, this is true only in the sense that such interaction is staged by persons other than an interviewer. Resulting conversations are not necessarily more 'realistic' or 'authentic'. They simply take place in what have been recognized as indigenous settings. With the development of the interview society, and the increasing deprivatization of personal experience (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Gubrium et al., 1994), the interview is becoming more and more commonplace, also making it a 'naturally occurring' occasion for articulating experience.

Nevertheless, discussion of some topics, while being deeply significant, may none the less be relatively rare in the normal course of everyday life, even in the interview society. For example, as seemingly ubiquitous as is talk about family and domestic life, we have found it useful to study 'family discourse' in a relatively circumscribed range of settings, most of which intentionally provoke talk about family as an integral part of conducting routine business, such as in a family therapy agency, for example (see Gubrium, 1992; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). Active interviews can thus be used to gain purchase on interpretive practice relating to matters that may not be casually topical, yet which are socially relevant. By inciting narrative production, the interviewer may provoke interpretive developments that might emerge too rarely to be effectively captured 'in their natural habitat', so to speak.

Given the unconventional nature of active interviewing, how does one make sense of its data? Analysing data concerning interpretive practice is something of an 'artful' matter in its own right. This does not mean that analysis is any less rigorous than that applied to traditional interview data; on the contrary, active interview data require disciplined sensitivity to both process and substance.

Interviews are traditionally analysed as more or less accurate descriptions of experience, as reports or representations (literally, re-presentations) of reality. Analysis entails systematically coding, grouping or summarizing the descriptions, and providing a coherent organizing framework that

encapsulates and explains aspects of the social world that respondents portray. Respondents' interpretive activity is subordinated to the substance of what they report; the *whats* of experience overwhelm the *hows*.

In contrast, active interview data can be analysed to show the dynamic interrelatedness of the *whats* and the *hows*. Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled. Using sociologically oriented forms of narrative and discourse analysis, conversational records of interpretive practice are examined to reveal reality-constructing practices as well as the subjective meanings that are circumstantially conveyed (see DeVault, 1990; Gubrium and Holstein, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Propp, 1968; Riessman, 1993; Silverman, 1993). The goal is to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning-making process. The analytic objective is not merely to describe the situated production of talk, but to show how what is being said relates to the experiences and lives being studied.

Writing up findings from interview data is itself an analytically active enterprise. Rather than adhering to the ideal of letting the data 'speak for themselves', the active analyst empirically documents the meaning-making process. With ample illustration and reference to records of talk, the analyst describes the complex discursive activities through which respondents produce meaning. The goal is to explicate how meanings, their linkages and horizons, are constituted both in relation to, and within, the interview environment. The analyst's reports do not summarize and organize what interview participants have said, as much as they 'deconstruct' participants' talk to show the reader both the *hows* and the *whats* of the narrative dramas conveyed, which increasingly mirrors an interview society.

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