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## Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms

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*In this chapter, Ann Oakley discusses methodological problems highlighted by her research on motherhood, and in particular the gap between textbook 'recipes' for interviewing and her own experience as an interviewer. Traditional criteria for interviewing, suggests Oakley, can be summarised as, first, the admonition that the interviewing situation is a one-way process in which the interviewer elicits and receives, but does not give information. Oakley illustrates the absurdity of this situation through a discussion of the questions her respondents 'asked back'. Second, textbooks advise interviewers to adopt an attitude towards interviewees which allocates the latter a narrow and objectified function as data. Third, interviews are seen as having no personal meaning in terms of social interaction, so that their meaning tends to be confined to their statistical comparability with other interviews and the data obtained from them.*

*Oakley suggests that each of these paradigms of traditional interviewing practice creates problems for feminist interviewers whose primary orientation is towards the validation of women's subjective experiences as women and as people, and illustrates the lack of fit between theory and practice in this area.*

Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets. Despite the fact that much of modern sociology could justifiably be considered 'the science of the interview' (Benney and Hughes, 1970, p.190), very few sociologists who employ interview data actually bother to describe in detail the process of interviewing itself. The conventions of research reporting require them to offer such information as how many interviews were done and how many were not done; the length of time the interviews lasted; whether the questions were asked following some standardised format or not; and how the information was recorded. Some issues on which research reports do not usually comment are: social/personal characteristics of those doing the interviewing; interviewees' feelings about being interviewed and about the interview; interviewers' feelings about interviewees; and quality of interviewer-interviewee interaction; hospitality offered by interviewees to interviewers; attempts by interviewees to use interviewers as sources of information; and the extension of interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly-based social relationships.

I shall argue in this chapter that social science researchers' awareness of those aspects of interviewing which are 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' from the viewpoint of inclusion in research reports reflect their embeddedness in a particular research protocol. This protocol assumes a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society. The relative undervaluation of women's models has led to an unreal theoretical characterisation of the interview as a means of gathering sociological data which cannot and does not work in practice. This lack of fit between the theory and practice of interviewing is especially likely to come to the fore when a feminist interviewer is interviewing women (who may or may not be feminists).

### Interviewing: a masculine paradigm?

Let us consider first what the methodology textbooks say about interviewing. First, and most obviously, an interview is

a way of finding out about people. 'If you want an answer, ask a question . . . The asking of questions is the main source of social scientific information about everyday behaviour' (Shipman, 1972, p.76). According to Johan Galtung (1967, p.149):

The survey method . . . has been indispensable in gaining information about the human conditions and new insights in social theory.

The reasons for the success of the survey method seem to be two:

(1) *theoretically relevant* data are obtained (2) they are amenable to *statistical treatment*, which means (a) the use of the powerful tools of correlation analysis and multi-variate analysis to test substantive relationships, and (b) the tools of statistical tests of hypotheses about generalizability from samples to universes.

Interviewing, which is one<sup>1</sup> means of conducting a survey is essentially a conversation, 'merely one of the many ways in which two people talk to one another' (Benney and Hughes, 1970, p.191), but it is also, significantly, an *instrument* of data collection: 'the interviewer is really a tool or an instrument'<sup>2</sup> (Goode and Hatt, 1952, p.185). As Benny and Hughes express it, (1970, pp.196-7):

Regarded as an information-gathering tool, the interview is designed to minimise the local, concrete, immediate circumstances of the particular encounter — including the respective personalities of the participants — and to emphasise only those aspects that can be kept general enough and demonstrable enough to be counted. As an encounter between these two particular people the typical interview has no meaning; it is conceived in a framework of other, comparable meetings between other couples, each recorded in such fashion that elements of communication in common can be easily isolated from more idiosyncratic qualities.

Thus an interview is 'not simply a conversation. It is, rather, a pseudo-conversation. In order to be successful, it must have

all the warmth and personality exchange of a conversation with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching' (Goode and Hatt, 1952, p.191). This requirement means that the interview must be seen as 'a specialised pattern of verbal interaction — initiated for a specific purpose, and focussed on some specific content areas, with consequent elimination of extraneous material' (Kahn and Cannell, 1957, p.16).

The motif of successful interviewing is 'be friendly but not too friendly'. For the contradiction at the heart of the textbook paradigm is that interviewing necessitates the manipulation of interviewees as objects of study/sources of data, but this can only be achieved via a certain amount of humane treatment. If the interviewee doesn't believe he/she is being kindly and sympathetically treated by the interviewer, then he/she will not consent to be studied and will not come up with the desired information. A balance must then be struck between the warmth required to generate 'rapport' and the detachment necessary to see the interviewee as an object under surveillance; walking this tightrope means, not surprisingly, that 'interviewing is not easy' (Denzin, 1970, p.186), although mostly the textbooks do support the idea that it is possible to be a perfect interviewer and both to get reliable and valid data and make interviewees believe they are not simple statistics-to-be. It is just a matter of following the rules.

A major preoccupation in the spelling out of the rules is to counsel potential interviewers about where necessary friendliness ends and unwarranted involvement begins. Goode and Hatt's statement on this topic quoted earlier, for example, continues (1952, p.191):

Consequently, the interviewer cannot merely lose himself<sup>3</sup> in being friendly. He must introduce himself as though beginning a conversation but from the beginning the additional element of respect, of professional competence, should be maintained. Even the beginning student will make this attempt, else he will find himself merely 'maintaining rapport', while failing to penetrate the clichés of contradictions of the respondent. Further he will find that his own confidence is lessened, if his only goal is to maintain friendliness. He is a professional

researcher in this situation and he must demand and obtain respect for the task he is trying to perform.

Claire Selltiz and her colleagues give a more explicit recipe. They say (1965, p.576):

The interviewer's manner should be friendly, courteous, conversational and unbiased. He should be neither too grim nor too effusive; neither too talkative nor too timid. The idea should be to put the respondent at ease, so that he<sup>4</sup> will talk freely and fully . . . [Hence,] A brief remark about the weather, the family pets, flowers or children will often serve to break the ice. Above all, an informal, conversational interview is dependent upon a thorough mastery by the interviewer of the actual questions in his schedule. He should be familiar enough with them to ask them conversationally, rather than read them stiffly; and he should know what questions are coming next, so there will be no awkward pauses while he studies the questionnaire.

C.A. Moser, in an earlier text, (1958, pp.187-8, 195) advises of the dangers of 'overrapport'.

Some interviewers are no doubt better than others at establishing what the psychologists call 'rapport' and some may even be too good at it — the National Opinion Research Centre Studies<sup>5</sup> found slightly less satisfactory results from the . . . sociable interviewers who are 'fascinated by people' . . . there is something to be said for the interviewer who, while friendly and interested does not get too emotionally involved with the respondent and his problems. Interviewing on most surveys is a fairly straightforward job, not one calling for exceptional industry, charm or tact. What one asks is that the interviewer's personality should be neither over-aggressive nor over-sociable. Pleasantness and a business-like nature is the ideal combination.

'Rapport', a commonly used but ill-defined term, does not mean in this context what the dictionary says it does ('a sympathetic relationship', *O.E.D.*) but the acceptance by the interviewee of the interviewer's research goals and the interviewee's active search to help the interviewer in providing the relevant information. The person who is interviewed has a passive role in adapting to the definition of the situation offered by the person doing the interviewing. The person doing the interviewing must actively and continually construct the 'respondent' (a telling name) as passive. Another way to phrase this is to say that both interviewer and interviewee must be 'socialised' into the correct interviewing behaviour (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p.210):

it is essential not only to train scientists to construct carefully worded questions and draw representative samples but also to educate the public to respond to questions on matters of interest to scientists and to do so in a manner advantageous for scientific analysis. To the extent that such is achieved, a common bond is established between interviewer and interviewee. [However,] It is not enough for the scientist to understand the world of meaning of his informants; if he is to secure valid data via the structured interview, respondents must be socialised into answering questions in proper fashion.

One piece of behaviour that properly socialised respondents do not engage in is asking questions back. Although the textbooks do not present any evidence about the extent to which interviewers do find in practice that this happens, they warn of its dangers and in the process suggest some possible strategies of avoidance: 'Never provide the interviewee with any formal indication of the interviewer's beliefs and values. If the informant<sup>6</sup> poses a question . . . parry it' (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p.212). 'When asked what you mean and think, tell them you are here to learn, not to pass any judgement, that the situation is very complex' (Galtung 1967, p.161). 'If he (the interviewer) should be asked for his views, he should laugh off the request with the remark that his job at the moment is to get opinions, not to have them' (Selltiz



*et al.*, 1965, p.576), and so on. Goode and Hatt (1952, p.198) offer the most detailed advice on this issue:

What is the interviewer to do, however, if the respondent really wants information? Suppose the interviewee does answer the question but then asks for the opinions of the interviewer. Should he give his honest opinion, or an opinion which he thinks the interviewee wants? In most cases, the rule remains that he is there to obtain information and to focus on the respondent, not himself. Usually, a few simple phrases will shift the emphasis back to the respondent. Some which have been fairly successful are 'I guess I haven't thought enough about it to give a good answer right now', 'Well, right now, your opinions are more important than mine', and 'If you really want to know what I think, I'll be honest and tell you in a moment, after we've finished the interview.' Sometimes the diversion can be accomplished by a head-shaking gesture which suggests 'That's a hard one!' while continuing with the interview. In short, the interviewer must avoid the temptation to express his own views, even if given the opportunity.

Of course the reason why the interviewer must pretend not to have opinions (or to be possessed of information the interviewee wants) is because behaving otherwise might 'bias' the interview. 'Bias' occurs when there are systematic differences between interviewers in the way interviews are conducted, with resulting differences in the data produced. Such bias clearly invalidates the scientific claims of the research, since the question of which information might be coloured by interviewees' responses to interviewers' attitudinal stances and which is independent of this 'contamination' cannot be settled in any decisive way.

The paradigm of the social research interview prompted in the methodology textbooks does, then, emphasise (a) its status as a mechanical instrument of data-collection; (b) its function as a specialised form of conversation in which one person asks the questions and another gives the answers; (c) its characterisation of interviewees as essentially passive individuals,

and (d) its reduction of interviewers to a question asking and rapport-promoting role. Actually, two separate typifications of the interviewer are prominent in the literature, though the disjunction between the two is never commented on. In one the interviewer is 'a combined phonograph and recording system' (Rose, 1945, p.143); the job of the interviewer 'is fundamentally that of a reporter, not an evangelist, a curiosity-seeker, or a debater' (Selltitz *et al.*, 1965, p.576). It is important to note that while the interviewer must treat the interviewee as an object or data-producing machine which, when handled correctly will function properly, the interviewer herself/himself has the same status from the point of view of the person/people, institution or corporation conducting the research. Both interviewer and interviewee are thus depersonalised participants in the research process.

The second typification of interviewers in the methodology literature is that of the interviewer as psychoanalyst. The interviewer's relationship to the interviewee is hierarchical and it is the body of expertise possessed by the interviewer that allows the interview to be successfully conducted. Most crucial in this exercise is the interviewer's use of non-directive comments and probes to encourage a free association of ideas which reveals whatever truth the research has been set up to uncover. Indeed, the term 'nondirective interview' is derived directly from the language of psychotherapy and carries the logic of interviewer-impersonality to its extreme (Selltitz *et al.*, 1965, p.268):

Perhaps the most typical remarks made by the interviewer in a nondirective interview are: 'You feel that . . .' or 'Tell me more' or 'Why?' or 'Isn't that interesting?' or simply 'Uh huh'. The nondirective interviewer's function is primarily to serve as a catalyst to a comprehensive expression of the subject's feelings and beliefs and of the frame of reference within which his feelings and beliefs take on personal significance. To achieve this result, the interviewer must create a completely permissive atmosphere, in which the subject is free to express himself without fear of disapproval, admonition or dispute and without advice from the interviewer.

Sjoberg and Nett spell out the premises of the free association method (1968, p.211):

the actor's (interviewee's) mental condition (is) . . . confused and difficult to grasp. Frequently the actor himself does not know what he believes; he may be so 'immature' that he cannot perceive or cope with his own subconscious thought patterns . . . the interviewer must be prepared to follow the interviewee through a jungle of meandering thought ways if he is to arrive at the person's true self.

It seems clear that both psychoanalytic and mechanical typifications of the interviewer and, indeed, the entire paradigmatic representation of 'proper' interviews in the methodology textbooks, owe a great deal more to a masculine social and sociological vantage point than to a feminine one. For example, the paradigm of the 'proper' interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and 'science' as an important cultural activity which takes priority over people's more individualised concerns. Thus the errors of poor interviewing comprise subjectivity, involvement, the 'fiction'<sup>7</sup> of equality and an undue concern with the ways in which people are not statistically comparable. This polarity of 'proper' and 'improper' interviewing is an almost classical representation of the widespread gender stereotyping which has been shown, in countless studies, to occur in modern industrial civilisations (see for example Bernard, 1975, part I; Fransella and Frost, 1977; Griffiths and Saraga, 1979; Oakley, 1972; Sayers, 1979). Women are characterised as sensitive, intuitive, incapable of objectivity and emotional detachment and as immersed in the business of making and sustaining personal relationships. Men are though superior through their capacity for rationality and scientific objectivity and are thus seen to be possessed of an instrumental orientation in their relationships with others. Women are the exploited, the abused; they are unable to exploit others through the 'natural' weakness of altruism – a quality which is also their strength as wives, mothers and housewives. Conversely, men find it easy to exploit, although it is most

important that any exploitation be justified in the name of some broad political or economic ideology ('the end justifies the means').

Feminine and masculine psychology in patriarchal societies is the psychology of subordinate and dominant social groups. The tie between women's irrationality and heightened sensibility on the one hand and their materially disadvantaged position on the other is, for example, also to be found in the case of ethnic minorities. The psychological characteristics of subordinates 'form a certain familiar cluster: submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think and the like. In general, this cluster includes qualities more characteristic of children than adults – immaturity, weakness and helplessness. If subordinates adopt these characteristics, they are considered well adjusted' (Miller, 1976, p.7). It is no accident that the methodology textbooks (with one notable exception) (Moser, 1958)<sup>8</sup> refer to the interviewer as male. Although not all interviewees are referred to as female, there are a number of references to 'housewives' as the kind of people interviewers are most likely to meet in the course of their work (for example Goode and Hatt, 1952, p.189). Some of what Jean Baker Miller has to say about the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups would appear to be relevant to this paradigmatic interviewer-interviewee relationship (Miller, 1976, pp.6–8):

A dominant group, inevitably, has the greatest influence in determining a culture's overall outlook – its philosophy, morality, social theory and even its science. The dominant group, thus, legitimizes the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society's guiding concepts. . . .

Inevitably the dominant group is the model for 'normal human relationships'. It then becomes 'normal' to treat others destructively and to derogate them, to obscure the truth of what you are doing by creating false explanations and to oppose actions toward equality. In short, if one's identification is with the dominant group, it is 'normal' to continue in this pattern. . . .

It follows from this that dominant groups generally

do not like to be told about or even quietly reminded of the existence of inequality. 'Normally' they can avoid awareness because their explanation of the relationship becomes so well integrated *in other terms*; they can even believe that both they and the subordinate group share the same interests and, to some extent, a common experience. . . .

Clearly, inequality has created a state of conflict. Yet dominant groups will tend to suppress conflict. They will see any questioning of the 'normal' situation as threatening; activities by subordinates in this direction will be perceived with alarm. Dominants are usually convinced that the way things are is right and good, not only for them but especially for the subordinates. All morality confirms this view and all social structure sustains it.

To paraphrase the relevance of this to the interviewer-interviewee relationship we could say that: interviewers define the role of interviewees as subordinates; extracting information is more to be valued than yielding it; the convention of interviewer-interviewee hierarchy is a rationalisation of inequality; what is good for interviewers is not necessarily good for interviewees.

Another way to approach this question of the masculinity of the 'proper' interview is to observe that a sociology of feelings and emotion does not exist. Sociology mirrors society in not looking at social interaction from the viewpoint of women (Smith, 1979; Oakley, 1974, chapter 1). While everyone has feelings, 'Our society defines being cognitive, intellectual or rational dimensions of experience as superior to being emotional or sentimental. (Significantly, the terms "emotional" and "sentimental" have come to connote excessive or degenerate forms of feeling). Through the prism of our technological and rationalistic culture, we are led to perceive and feel emotions as some irrelevancy or impediment to getting things done.' Hence their role in interviewing. But 'Another reason for sociologists' neglect of emotions may be the discipline's attempt to be recognised as a "real science" and the consequent need to focus on the most objective and measurable features of social life. This coincides with the values of the traditional "male culture"' (Hochschild, 1975, p.281).

Getting involved with the people you interview is doubly bad: it jeopardises the hard-won status of sociology as a science and is indicative of a form of personal degeneracy.

### Women interviewing women: or objectifying your sister

Before I became an interviewer I had read what the textbooks said interviewing ought to be. However, I found it very difficult to realise the prescription in practice, in a number of ways which I describe below. It was these practical difficulties which led me to take a new look at the textbook paradigm. In the rest of this chapter the case I want to make is that when a feminist interviews women: (1) use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible; (2) general and irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of the textbook paradigm are exposed; and (3) it becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.

Before arguing the general case I will briefly mention some relevant aspects of my own interviewing experience. I have interviewed several hundred women over a period of some ten years, but it was the most recent research project, one concerned with the transition to motherhood, that particularly highlighted problems in the conventional interviewing recipe. Salient features of this research were that it involved repeated interviewing of a sample of women during a critical phase in their lives (in fact 55 women were interviewed four times; twice in pregnancy and twice afterwards and the average total period of interviewing was 9.4 hours.) It included for some<sup>9</sup> my attendance at the most critical point in this phase: the birth of the baby. The research was preceded by nine months of participant observation chiefly in the hospital setting of interactions between mothers or mothers-to-be and medical people. Although I had a research assistant to help me, I myself did the bulk of the interviewing — 178 interviews over a period of some 12 months.<sup>10</sup> The project was my idea<sup>11</sup> and the analysis and writing up of the data was entirely my responsibility.

My difficulties in interviewing women were of two main kinds. First, they asked me a great many questions. Second, repeated interviewing over this kind of period and involving the intensely personal experiences of pregnancy, birth and motherhood, established a rationale of personal involvement I found it problematic and ultimately unhelpful to avoid.

### Asking questions back

Analysing<sup>12</sup> the tape-recorded interviews I had conducted, I listed 878 questions that interviewees had asked me at some point in the interviewing process. Three-quarters of these (see Table 2.1) were requests for information (e.g. 'Who will

Table 2.1 *Questions interviewees asked (total 878), Transition to Motherhood Project (percentages)*

Information requests	76
Personal questions	15
Questions about the research	6
Advice questions	4

deliver my baby?' 'How do you cook an egg for a baby?') Fifteen per cent were questions about me, my experiences or attitudes in the area of reproduction ('Have you got any children?' 'Did you breast feed?'); 6 per cent were questions about the research ('Are you going to write a book?' 'Who pays you for doing this?'), and 4 per cent were more directly requests for advice on a particular matter ('How long should you wait for sex after childbirth?' 'Do you think my baby's got too many clothes on?'). Table 2.2 goes into more detail about the topics on which interviewees wanted information. The largest category of questions concerned medical procedures: for example, how induction of labour is done, and whether all women attending a particular hospital<sup>13</sup> are given episiotomies. The second-largest category related to infant care or development: for example, 'How do you clean a

Table 2.2 *Interviewees' requests for information (total 664), Transition to Motherhood Project (percentages)*

Medical procedures	31
Organisational procedures	19
Physiology of reproduction	15
Baby care/development/feeding	21
Other	15

baby's nails?' 'When do babies sleep through the night?' Third, there were questions about organisational procedures in the institutional settings where antenatal or delivery care was done; typical questions were concerned with who exactly would be doing antenatal care and what the rules are for husbands' attendance at delivery. Last, there were questions about the physiology of reproduction; for example 'Why do some women need caesareans?' and (from one very frightened mother-to-be) 'Is it right that the baby doesn't come out of the same hole you pass water out of?'

It would be the understatement of all time to say that I found it very difficult to avoid answering these questions as honestly and fully as I could. I was faced, typically, with a woman who was quite anxious about the fate of herself and her baby, who found it either impossible or extremely difficult to ask questions and receive satisfactory answers from the medical staff with whom she came into contact, and who saw me as someone who could not only reassure but inform.<sup>14</sup> I felt that I was asking a great deal from these women in the way of time, co-operation and hospitality at a stage in their lives when they had every reason to exclude strangers altogether in order to concentrate on the momentous character of the experiences being lived through. Indeed, I *was* asking a great deal – not only 9.4 hours of interviewing time but confidences on highly personal matters such as sex and money and 'real' (i.e. possibly negative or ambivalent) feelings about babies, husbands, etc. I was, in addition, asking some of the women to allow me to witness them in the highly personal act of giving birth. Although the pregnancy interviews did not have to compete with the demands of motherhood for time,



90 per cent of the women were employed when first interviewed and 76 per cent of the first interviews had to take place in the evenings. Although I had timed the first postnatal interview (at about five weeks postpartum) to occur after the disturbances of very early motherhood, for many women it was nevertheless a stressful and busy time. And all this in the interests of 'science' or for some book that might possibly materialise out of the research — a book which many of the women interviewed would not read and none would profit from directly (though they hoped that they would not lose too much).

### The transition to friendship?

In a paper on 'Collaborative Interviewing and Interactive Research', Laslett and Rapoport (1975) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of repeated interviewing. They say (p.968) that the gain in terms of collecting more information in greater depth than would otherwise be possible is partly made by 'being responsive to, rather than seeking to avoid, respondent reactions to the interview situation and experience'. This sort of research is deemed by them 'interactive'. The principle of a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee is not adhered to and 'an attempt is made to generate a collaborative approach to the research which engages both the interviewer and respondent in a joint enterprise'. Such an approach explicitly does not seek to minimise the personal involvement of the interviewer but as Rapoport and Rapoport (1976, p.31) put it, relies 'very much on the formulation of a relationship between interviewer and interviewee as an important element in achieving the quality of the information . . . required'.<sup>15</sup>

As Laslett and Rapoport note, repeated interviewing is not much discussed in the methodological literature: the paradigm is of an interview as a 'one-off' affair. Common sense would suggest that an ethic of detachment on the interviewer's part is much easier to maintain where there is only one meeting with the interviewee (and the idea of a 'one-off' affair rather than a long-term relationship is undoubtedly closer to the traditional masculine world view I discussed earlier).

In terms of my experience in the childbirth project, I found that interviewees very often took the initiative in defining the interviewer-interviewee relationship as something which existed beyond the limits of question-asking and answering. For example, they did not only offer the minimum hospitality of accommodating me in their homes for the duration of the interview: at 92 per cent of the interviews I was offered tea, coffee or some other drink; 14 per cent of the women also offered me a meal on at least one occasion. As Table 2.1 suggests, there was also a certain amount of interest in my own situation. What sort of person was I and how did I come to be interested in this subject?

In some cases these kind of 'respondent' reactions were evident at the first interview. More often they were generated after the second interview and an important factor here was probably the timing of the interviews. There was an average of 20 weeks between interviews 1 and 2, an average of 11 weeks between interviews 2 and 3 and an average of 15 weeks between interviews 3 and 4. Between the first two interviews most of the women were very busy. Most were still employed and had the extra work of preparing equipment/clothes/a room for the baby — which sometimes meant moving house. Between interviews 2 and 3 most were not out at work and, sensitised by the questions I had asked in the first two interviews to my interest in their birth experiences, probably began to associate me in a more direct way with their experiences of the transition to motherhood. At interview 2 I gave them all a stamped addressed postcard on which I asked them to write the date of their baby's birth so I would know when to re-contact them for the first postnatal interview. I noticed that this was usually placed in a prominent position (for example on the mantelpiece), to remind the woman or her husband to complete it and it probably served in this way as a reminder of my intrusion into their lives. One illustration of this awareness comes from the third interview with Mary Rosen, a 25-year-old exhibition organiser: 'I thought of you after he was born, I thought she'll *never* believe it — a six-hour labour, a 9lb 6 oz baby and *no* forceps — and all without an epidural, although I had said to you that I wanted one.' Sixty two per cent of the women expressed a sustained and quite



detailed interest in the research; they wanted to know its goals, any proposed methods for disseminating its findings, how I had come to think of it in the first place, what the attitudes of doctors I had met or collaborated with were to it and so forth. Some of the women took the initiative in contacting me to arrange the second or a subsequent interview, although I had made it clear that I would get in touch with them. Several rang up to report particularly important pieces of information about their antenatal care — in one case a distressing encounter with a doctor who told a woman keen on natural childbirth that this was 'for animals: in this hospital we give epidurals'; in another case to tell me of an ultrasound result that changed the expected date of delivery. Several also got in touch to correct or add to things they had said during an interview — for instance, one contacted me several weeks after the fourth interview to explain that she had had an emergency appendicectomy five days after my visit and that her physical symptoms at the time could have affected some of her responses to the questions I asked.

Arguably, these signs of interviewees' involvement indicated their acceptance of the goals of the research project rather than any desire to feel themselves participating in a personal relationship with me. Yet the research was presented to them as *my* research in which I had a personal interest, so it is not likely that a hard and fast dividing line between the two was drawn. One index of their and my reactions to our joint participation in the repeated interviewing situation is that some four years after the final interview I am still in touch with more than a third of the women I interviewed. Four have become close friends, several others I visit occasionally, and the rest write or telephone when they have something salient to report such as the birth of another child.

#### A feminist interviews women

Such responses as I have described on the part of the interviewees to participation in research, particularly that involving repeated interviewing, are not unknown, although they are almost certainly under-reported. It could be suggested

that the reasons why they were so pronounced in the research project discussed here is because of the attitudes of the interviewer — i.e. the women were reacting to my own evident wish for a relatively intimate and non-hierarchical relationship. While I was careful not to take direct initiatives in this direction, I certainly set out to convey to the people whose cooperation I was seeking the fact that I did not intend to exploit either them or the information they gave me. For instance, if the interview clashed with the demands of housework and motherhood I offered to, and often did, help with the work that had to be done. When asking the women's permission to record the interview, I said that no one but me would ever listen to the tapes; in mentioning the possibility of publications arising out of the research I told them that their names and personal details would be changed and I would, if they wished, send them details of any such publications, and so forth. The attitude I conveyed could have had some influence in encouraging the women to regard me as a friend rather than purely as a data-gatherer.

The pilot interviews, together with my previous experience of interviewing women, led me to decide that when I was asked questions I would answer them. The practice I followed was to answer all personal questions and questions about the research as fully as was required. For example, when two women asked if I had read their hospital case notes I said I had, and when one of them went on to ask what reason was given in these notes for her forceps delivery, I told her what the notes said. On the emotive issue of whether I experienced childbirth as painful (a common topic of conversation) I told them that I did find it so but that in my view it was worth it to get a baby at the end. Advice questions I also answered fully but made it clear when I was using my own experiences of motherhood as the basis for advice. I also referred women requesting advice to the antenatal and childbearing advice literature or to health visitors, GPs, etc. when appropriate — though the women usually made it clear that it was my opinion in particular they were soliciting. When asked for information I gave it if I could or, again, referred the questioner to an appropriate medical or non-medical authority. Again, the way I responded to interviewee's questions probably

encouraged them to regard me as more than an instrument of data-collection.

Dissecting my practice of interviewing further, there were three principal reasons why I decided not to follow the textbook code of ethics with regard to interviewing women. First, I did not regard it as reasonable to adopt a purely exploitative attitude to interviewees as sources of data. My involvement in the women's movement in the early 1970s and the rebirth of feminism in an academic context had led me, along with many others, to re-assess society and sociology as masculine paradigms and to want to bring about change in the traditional cultural and academic treatment of women. 'Sisterhood', a somewhat nebulous and problematic, but nevertheless important, concept,<sup>16</sup> certainly demanded that women re-evaluate the basis of their relationships with one another.

The dilemma of a feminist interviewer interviewing women could be summarised by considering the practical application of some of the strategies recommended in the textbooks for meeting interviewee's questions. For example, these advise that such questions as 'Which hole does the baby come out of?' 'Does an epidural ever paralyse women?' and 'Why is it dangerous to leave a small baby alone in the house?' should be met with such responses from the interviewer as 'I guess I haven't thought enough about it to give a good answer right now,' or 'a head-shaking gesture which suggests "that's a hard one" ' (Goode and Hatt, quoted above). Also recommended is laughing off the request with the remark that 'my job at the moment is to get opinions, not to have them' (Selltitz *et al.*, quoted above).

A second reason for departing from conventional interviewing ethics was that I regarded sociological research as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology, but, more importantly, in society, than it has traditionally had. Interviewing women was, then, a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives. What *was* important was not taken-for-granted sociological assumptions about the role of the interviewer but a new awareness of the interviewer as an instrument for promoting a sociology for women<sup>17</sup> — that is, as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women

on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society. Note that the formulation of the interviewer role has changed dramatically from being a data-collecting instrument for researchers to being a data-collecting instrument for those whose lives are being researched. Such a reformulation is enhanced where the interviewer is also the researcher. It is not coincidental that in the methodological literature the paradigm of the research process is essentially disjunctive, i.e. researcher and interviewer functions are typically performed by different individuals.

A third reason why I undertook the childbirth research with a degree of scepticism about how far traditional percepts of interviewing could, or should, be applied in practice was because I had found, in my previous interviewing experiences, that an attitude of refusing to answer questions or offer any kind of personal feedback was not helpful in terms of the traditional goal of promoting 'rapport'. A different role, that could be termed 'no intimacy without reciprocity', seemed especially important in longitudinal in-depth interviewing. Without feeling that the interviewing process offered some personal satisfaction to them, interviewees would not be prepared to continue after the first interview. This involves being sensitive not only to those questions that are asked (by either party) but to those that are not asked. The interviewee's definition of the interview is important.

The success of this method cannot, of course, be judged from the evidence I have given so far. On the question of the rapport established in the Transition to Motherhood research I offer the following cameo:

- A.O.: 'Did you have any questions you wanted to ask but didn't when you last went to the hospital?'
- M.C.: 'Er, I don't know how to put this really. After sexual intercourse I had some bleeding, three times, only a few drops and I didn't tell the hospital because I didn't know how to put it to them. It worried me first off, as soon as I saw it I cried. I don't know if I'd be able to tell them. You see, I've also got a sore down there and a discharge and you know I wash there lots of times

a day. You think I should tell the hospital; I could never speak to my own doctor about it. You see I feel like this but I can talk to you about it and I can talk to my sister about it.'

More generally the quality and depth of the information given to me by the women I interviewed can be assessed in *Becoming a Mother* (Oakley, 1979), the book arising out of the research which is based almost exclusively on interviewee accounts.

So far as interviewees' reactions to being interviewed are concerned, I asked them at the end of the last interview the question, 'Do you feel that being involved in this research — my coming to see you — has affected your experience of becoming a mother in any way?' Table 2.3 shows the answers.

Table 2.3 'Has the research affected your experience of becoming a mother?' (percentages)

No	27
Yes:	73
Thought about it more	30
Found it reassuring	25
A relief to talk	25
Changed attitudes/behaviour	7

\*Percentages do not add up to 100% because some women gave more than one answer.

Nearly three-quarters of the women said that being interviewed had affected them and the three most common forms this influence took were in leading them to reflect on their experiences more than they would otherwise have done; in reducing the level of their anxiety and/or in reassuring them of their normality; and in giving a valuable outlet for the verbalisation of feelings. None of those who thought being interviewed had affected them regarded this affect as negative. There were many references to the 'therapeutic' effect of talking: 'getting it out of your system'. (It was generally felt that husbands, mothers, friends, etc., did not provide a sufficiently sympathetic or interested audience for a detailed recounting of

the experiences and difficulties of becoming a mother.) It is perhaps important to note here that one of the main conclusions of the research was that there is a considerable discrepancy between the expectations and the reality of the different aspects of motherhood — pregnancy, childbirth, the emotional relationship of mother and child, the work of childrearing. A dominant metaphor used by interviewees to describe their reactions to this hiatus was 'shock'. In this sense, a process of emotional recovery is endemic in the normal transition to motherhood and there is a general need for some kind of 'therapeutic listener' that is not met within the usual circle of family and friends.

On the issue of co-operation, only 2 out of 82 women contacted initially about the research actually refused to take part in it,<sup>18</sup> making a refusal rate of 2 per cent which is extremely low. Once the interviewing was under way only one woman voluntarily dropped out (because of marital problems); an attrition from 66 at interview 1 to 55 at interview 4 was otherwise accounted for by miscarriage, moves, etc. All the women who were asked if they would mind me attending the birth said they didn't mind and all got in touch either directly or indirectly through their husbands when they started labour. The postcards left after interview 2 for interviewees to return after the birth were all completed and returned.

### Is a 'proper' interview ever possible?

Hidden amongst the admonitions on how to be a perfect interviewer in the social research methods manuals is the covert recognition that the goal of perfection is actually unattainable: the contradiction between the need for 'rapport' and the requirement of between-interview comparability cannot be solved. For example, Dexter (1956, p.156) following Paul (1954), observes that the pretence of neutrality on the interviewer's part is counterproductive: participation demands alignment. Selltiz *et al.* (1965, p.583) says that

Much of what we call interviewer bias can more correctly be described as interviewer *differences*, which are



inherent in the fact that interviewers are human beings and not machines and that they do not work identically.

Richardson and his colleagues in their popular textbook on interviewing (1965, p.129) note that

Although gaining and maintaining satisfactory participation is never the primary objective of the interviewer, it is so intimately related to the quality and quantity of the information sought that the interviewer must always maintain a dual concern: for the quality of his respondent's participation and for the quality of the information being sought. Often . . . these qualities are independent of each other and occasionally they may be mutually exclusive.

It is not hard to find echoes of this point of view in the few accounts of the actual process of interviewing that do exist. For example, Zweig, in his study of *Labour, Life and Poverty*, (1949, pp.1-2)

dropped the idea of a questionnaire or formal verbal questions . . . instead I had casual talks with working-class men on an absolutely equal footing . . .

I made many friends and some of them paid me a visit afterwards or expressed a wish to keep in touch with me. Some of them confided their troubles to me and I often heard the remark: 'Strangely enough, I have never talked about that to anybody else'. They regarded my interest in their way of life as a sign of sympathy and understanding rarely shown to them even in the inner circle of their family. I never posed as somebody superior to them, or as a judge of their actions but as one of them.

Zweig defended his method on the grounds that telling people they were objects of study met with 'an icy reception' and that finding out about other peoples' lives is much more readily done on a basis of friendship than in a formal interview.

More typically and recently, Marie Corbin, the interviewer for the Pahls' study of *Managers and their Wives*, commented

in an Appendix to the book of that name (Corbin, 1971, pp.303-5):

Obviously the exact type of relationship that is formed between an interviewer and the people being interviewed is something that the interviewer cannot control entirely, even though the nature of this relationship and how the interviewees classify the interviewer will affect the kinds of information given . . . simply because I am a woman and a wife I shared interests with the other wives and this helped to make the relationship a relaxed one.

Corbin goes on:

In these particular interviews I was conscious of the need to establish some kind of confidence with the couples if the sorts of information required were to be forthcoming . . . In theory it should be possible to establish confidence simply by courtesy towards and interest in the interviewees. In practice it can be difficult to spend eight hours in a person's home, share their meals and listen to their problems and at the same time remain polite, detached and largely uncommunicative. I found the balance between prejudicing the answers to questions which covered almost every aspect of the couples' lives, establishing a relationship that would allow the interviews to be successful and holding a civilised conversation over dinner to be a very precarious one.

Discussing research on copper mining on Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, Alexander Mamak describes his growing consciousness of the political context in which research is done (1978, p.176):

as I became increasingly aware of the unequal relationship existing between management and the union, I found myself becoming more and more emotionally involved in the proceedings. I do not believe this reaction is unusual since, in the words of the wellknown black sociologist Nathan Hare, 'If one is truly cognizant of

adverse circumstances, he would be expected, through the process of reason, to experience some emotional response'.

And, a third illustration of this point, Dorothy Hobson's account of her research on housewives' experiences of social isolation contains the following remarks (1978, pp.80-1):

The method of interviewing in a one-to-one situation requires some comment. What I find most difficult is to resist commenting in a way which may direct the answers which the women give to my questions. However, when the taped interview ends we usually talk and then the women ask me questions about my life and family. These questions often reflect areas where they have experienced ambivalent feelings in their own replies. For example, one woman who said during the interview that she did not like being married, asked me how long I had been married and if I liked it. When I told her how long I had been married she said, 'Well I suppose you get used to it in time, I suppose I will'. In fact the informal talk after the interview often continues what the women have said during the interview.

It is impossible to tell exactly how the women perceive me but I do not think they see me as too far removed from themselves. This may partly be because I have to arrange the interviews when my own son is at school and leave in time to collect him.<sup>19</sup>

As Bell and Newby (1977, pp.9-10) note 'accounts of doing sociological research are at least as valuable, both to students of sociology and its practitioners, as the exhortations to be found in the much more common textbooks on methodology'. All research is political, 'from the micropolitics of interpersonal relationships, through the politics of research units, institutions and universities, to those of government departments and finally to the state' - which is one reason why social research is not 'like it is presented and prescribed in those texts. It is infinitely more complex, messy, various and much more interesting' (Bell and Encel, 1978, p.4). The

'cookbooks' of research methods largely ignore the political context of research, although some make asides about its 'ethical dilemmas': 'Since we are all human we are all involved in what we are studying when we try to study any aspect of social relations' (Stacey, 1969, p.2); 'frequently researchers, in the course of their interviewing, establish rapport not as scientists but as human beings; yet they proceed to use this humanistically gained knowledge for scientific ends, usually without the informants' knowledge' (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, pp.215-16).

These ethical dilemmas are generic to all research involving interviewing for reasons I have already discussed. But they are greatest where there is least social distance between the interviewer and interviewee. Where both share the same gender socialisation and critical life-experiences, social distance can be minimal. Where both interviewer and interviewee share membership of the same minority group, the basis for equality may impress itself even more urgently on the interviewer's consciousness. Mamak's comments apply equally to a feminist interviewing women (1978, p.168):

I found that my academic training in the methodological views of Western social science and its emphasis on 'scientific objectivity' conflicted with the experiences of my colonial past. The traditional way in which social science research is conducted proved inadequate for an understanding of the reality, needs and desires of the people I was researching.

Some of the reasons why a 'proper' interview is a masculine fiction are illustrated by observations from another field in which individuals try to find out about other individuals - anthropology. Evans-Pritchard reported this conversation during his early research with the Nuers of East Africa (1940, pp.12-13):

I: 'Who are you?'

Cuol: 'A man.'

I: 'What is your name?'

Cuol: 'Do you want to know my name?'

- I: 'Yes.'
- Cuol: 'You want to know my name?'
- I: 'Yes, you have come to visit me in my tent and I would like to know who you are.'
- Cuol: 'All right, I am Cuol. What is your name?'
- I: 'My name is Pritchard.'
- Cuol: 'What is your father's name?'
- I: 'My father's name is also Pritchard.'
- Cuol: 'No, that cannot be true, you cannot have the same name as your father.'
- I: 'It is the name of my lineage. What is the name of your lineage?'
- Cuol: 'Do you want to know the name of my lineage?'
- I: 'Yes.'
- Cuol: 'What will you do with it if I tell you? Will you take it to your country?'
- I: 'I don't want to do anything with it. I just want to know it since I am living at your camp.'
- Cuol: 'Oh well, we are Lou.'
- I: 'I did not ask you the name of your tribe. I know that. I am asking you the name of your lineage.'
- Coul: 'Why do you want to know the name of my lineage?'
- I: 'I don't want to know it.'
- Cuol: 'Then why do you ask me for it? Give me some tobacco.'

I defy the most patient ethnologist to make headway against this kind of opposition [concluded Evans-Pritchard].

Interviewees are people with considerable potential for sabotaging the attempt to research them. Where, as in the case of anthropology or repeated interviewing in sociology, the research cannot proceed without a relationship of mutual trust being established between interviewer and interviewee the prospects are particularly dismal. This inevitably changes the interviewer/anthropologist's attitude to the people he/she is studying. A poignant example is the incident related in Elenore Smith Bowen's<sup>20</sup> *Return to Laughter* when the anthropologist witnesses one of her most trusted informants dying in childbirth (1956, p.163):

I stood over Amara. She tried to smile at me. She was very ill. I was convinced these women could not help her. She would die. She was my friend but my epitaph for her would be impersonal observations scribbled in my notebook, her memory preserved in an anthropologist's file: 'Death (in childbirth)/Cause: witchcraft/Case of Amara.' A lecture from the past reproached me: 'The anthropologist cannot, like the chemist or biologist, arrange controlled experiments. Like the astronomer, his mere presence produces changes in the data he is trying to observe. He himself is a disturbing influence which he must endeavour to keep to the minimum. His claim to science must therefore rest on a meticulous accuracy of observations and on a cool, objective approach to his data.'

A cool, objective approach to Amara's death?

One can, perhaps, be cool when dealing with questionnaires or when interviewing strangers. But what is one to do when one can collect one's data only by forming personal friendships? It is hard enough to think of a friend as a case history. Was I to stand aloof, observing the course of events?

Professional hesitation meant that Bowen might never see the ceremonies connected with death in childbirth. But, on the other hand, she would see her friend die. Bowen's difficult decision to plead with Amara's kin and the midwives in charge of her case to allow her access to Western medicine did not pay off and Amara did eventually die.

An anthropologist has to 'get inside the culture'; participant observation means 'that . . . the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role' (Becker and Geer, 1957, p.28). A feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing. However, in these respects the behaviour of a feminist interviewer/researcher is not extraordinary. Although (Stanley and Wise, 1979, pp.359-61)

Descriptions of the research process in the social sciences often suggest that the motivation for carrying out sub-



stantive work lies in theoretical concerns . . . the research process appears a very orderly and coherent process indeed. . . . The personal tends to be carefully removed from public statements; these are full of rational argument [and] careful discussion of academic points. [It can equally easily be seen that] all research is 'grounded', because no researcher can separate herself from personhood and thus from deriving second order constructs from experience.

A feminist methodology of social science requires that this rationale of research be described and discussed not only in feminist research but in social science research in general. It requires, further, that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias — it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

### Notes

- 1 I am not dealing with others, such as self-administered questionnaires, here since not quite the same framework applies.
- 2 For Galtung (1967, p.138) the appropriate metaphor is a thermometer.
- 3 Most interviewers are, of course, female.
- 4 Many 'respondents' are, of course, female.
- 5 See Hyman *et al.* (1955).
- 6 This label suggests that the interviewer's role is to get the interviewee to 'inform' (somewhat against his/her will) on closely guarded and dangerous secrets.
- 7 Benney and Hughes (1970) discuss interviewing in terms of the dual conventions or 'fictions' of equality and comparability.
- 8 Moser (1958, p.185) says, 'since most interviewers are women I shall refer to them throughout as of the female sex.'
- 9 I attended six of the births.
- 10 What I have to say about my experience of interviewing relates to my own experience and not that of my research assistant.
- 11 I am grateful to the Social Science Research Council for funding the research and to Bedford College, London University, for administering it.

- 12 The interviews were fully transcribed and the analysis then done from the transcripts.
- 13 The women all had their babies at the same London maternity hospital.
- 14 I had, of course, made it clear to the women I was interviewing that I had no medical training, but as I have argued elsewhere (Oakley, 1981b) mothers do not see medical experts as the only legitimate possessors of knowledge about motherhood.
- 15 It is, however, an important part of the Rapoport's definition of 'interactive research' that psychoanalytic principles should be applied in analysing processes of 'transference' and 'counter-transference' in the interviewer-interviewee relationship.
- 16 See Mitchell and Oakley (1976) and Oakley (1981a) on the idea of sisterhood.
- 17 See Smith (1979).
- 18 Both these were telephone contacts only. See Oakley (1980), chapter 4, for more on the research methods used.
- 19 Hobson observes that her approach to interviewing women yielded no refusals to co-operate.
- 20 Elenore Smith Bowen is a pseudonym for a well-known anthropologist.

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