GATHERING EVIDENCE BY INTERVIEW IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this paper is to draw together at the end of 1979 the author's thoughts and experiences concerning the art of interviewing in educational research. No one seems to know very much about such interviewing and the author is not an expert, but three circumstances have conspired to elicit this paper: the commencement of a project on Library Access and Sixth-form Studies; a commitment to provide a lecture on interviewing for part-time M.A. students in CARE, and the enrolment in the Centre of an S.S.R.C. research-linked student, John Cockburn, whose subject is likely to be close to the title of this paper.

In the context of the project, in which seventeen to twenty researchers will each contribute one or more case studies of sixth forms in interaction with libraries the purpose of the paper is to provide common ground for the research group from which a cooperative programme of action can grow. In the context of the part-time M.A. the purpose of the paper is similar except that the researches which will be undertaken will lead to individual dissertations and that the researchers will most often be conducting research in their own schools or colleges. In the context of the research-linked studentship the purpose of the paper is to hand on what seems worth handing on to someone whose enterprise will be to advance our knowledge of the research procedure discussed here.
2. The Title and Scope of the Paper

I have chosen the historian's word, evidence, rather than the scientist's word, data, to distinguish two purposes in interviewing.

There is a style of interviewing which seeks to gather information in as nearly as may be a standardized form. The object of this is to make it possible to aggregate the responses of many interviewees on the assumption that similar responses can have similar meanings or values (in the quantitative sense) attributed to them. Such standardization of questions and consequently of responses obliterates the personal into the sample so as to make possible either survey generalizations or predictive generalizations: i.e. generalizations which report on the distribution of a variable in a population or generalizations which predict behaviour in a population. An example of the first might be a survey of opinions about the existence of God; of the second, prediction of voting patterns derived from an election poll.

This style of interviewing at its tightest is virtually the oral presentation of a questionnaire; at its freest the questions tend to be standardized even though an extended - and consequently freer - response may be allowed. The information yielded by such interviews I call data: a plural word implying in this context a number of responses evoked by procedures which are intended to make these responses 'comparable'. Although the concept of comparability is the one most familiar in this context, paradoxically the objective is that units of data should be sufficiently consistent for them to be aggregated or processed without the need for critical comparison.

My title is intended to exclude from consideration here this kind of structure interviewing to secure data. Such interviewing is well covered by the literature on questionnaires and on surveys.

The alternative style of interviewing which is my concern here has as its objective to elicit, not data, but evidence. When we interview for data, we attempt to gather information whose reliability and status is defined by the process of data gathering. When we interview for evidence our aim is to gather information whose reliability and status
Is left problematic and has to be established by critical comparison and scrutiny. Meaning is ascribed to information by critical interpretation: its reliability or status is assessed by critical verification. The process of critical verification and interpretation is one familiar to the historian and there is quite a large literature on the subject. Basic concepts include internal and external criticism. There are parallels in law.

The objective of the interviewer who is gathering evidence must be to evoke extensive and naturally expressed information because rich texture and contextualization is necessary if an adequate critique is to be mounted. Moreover, vivid natural discourse may be needed to support communication with the reader to whom the researcher appeals for verification of his own judgments by presenting evidence. The reportage of research in this tradition is not a presentation of results, but of interpretation accessible to reflection or discussion.

In the study of educational institutions and educational processes a parallel tradition to that outlined above is derived from social anthropology. In this style of work the interviewer is conceived as a participant observer rather than as a non-participant (though not non-interventive) interviewer. Where the quasi-historical tradition rests on the interviews as 'documents', the quasi-anthropological tradition adds as a source of evidence the researcher's observations as he participates in the institution or process which is the subject of study. The researcher thus becomes an important witness as well as a gatherer of the perceptions of the ordinary participants in the situation being studied. The anthropological field worker, commonly called an 'ethnographer', does usually conduct interviews or record oral transactions, but he feels freer than does the contemporary historian to interpret these in the light of his own observations.
What is at stake between the historical and the ethnographic traditions is quite subtle and cannot be pursued at length here. But it is worth noting that the ethnographer is prepared to give greater credence to his own observation, is more inclined to theoretical interpretation and, according to Levi-Strauss, is interested in unconscious elements in the situations he studies whereas the historian is more interested in consciousness.

In much of the literature of educational research the descriptive and naturalistic tradition is described as 'ethnography'. This usage (which is particularly widespread in the United States) is not adopted here. Much of the naturalistic study of education is—and properly so, I believe—based upon a much less intimate and prolonged contact with the situation studied than would be needed to justify the use of the term participant observation in its classic sense. And interviewing for evidence takes place in other contexts than ethnography.

Both the background traditions, of history and of social anthropology, need to be adjusted mentally as we consider them in the context of contemporary and domestic educational research. Here we face the problem of applying historical methods of ethnography in our own, rather than in an exotic, society.

This paper will not explore these issues except in the context of educational research of a kind intended to improve educational practice or deepen educational practitioners' understanding of their practice. I am distinguishing educational research from research in history or social science whose main ambition is to contribute to the development of those disciplines. In my parlance social science helps social scientists to act as social science researchers, while educational research helps educators to act.
From the standpoint of the social scientist the interviewer in educational research may be thought to have a 'commonsense' view. This is because his research will be largely couched in the language of practice. The historian will find this ground more familiar: it has often been claimed that history is a study which does not have an extensive technical language of its own but relies rather on the technical languages of those it studies: politicians or architects or entrepreneurs.

In so far as this aspiration towards the language of the practitioner or participant is valued, so will be the interviews, for interviews record participants' voices.

3. The Context and Purpose of the Interview

If the purpose of the interview is to elicit evidence from participants, it might be thought that all that is necessary is to get the interviewee to talk, and to an extent this must be true; but in most interview situations the interviewer and the circumstances limit the amount of talk. Thus the task of the interviewer is to get the richest evidence within the limits of time available.

One issue is whether or not the interviewer should be explicit about timing. Explicitness about the time available means that the responsibility for using that time to best purpose is shared between the interviewer and the interviewee: if the time constraints are not made explicit, then the responsibility for the good use of time rests with the interviewer alone. It is probably helpful to share the responsibility unless the interviewer judges that the interviewee cannot reasonably be asked to do so. This might apply for instance in the case of a child or in the case of a busy person who cannot or will not commit himself to an agreed time.
Interviews may range from informal conversations to formal discourse. Informal conversations shade into interview when the researcher participates in the conversation with a view to gaining information, i.e. evidence. For example, a coffee-time conversation in a staffroom may provide a researcher with an opportunity he values. The first step towards formalization occurs if the researcher asks to be allowed to record the conversation in any way. From this it is a small step to 'opportunity' interviewing: interviewing explicitly when the opportunity offers either available or predetermined interviewees. To make an appointment formalizes further: to make an institutionally recognized series of appointments still further.

There is no consistent basis for preferring informal to formal interviews, though a romantic notion commonly exists that informal interviews yield better evidence. It cannot be assumed that people are more relaxed in informal than formal situations or more truthful or even more off guard: the more informal the interviewing the greater the possibility that the researcher be perceived as devious. Probably informal interviews are best when either the context of study is very explicit, or the interest of the interviewees in the research is low.

It seems preferable when conducting interviews by appointment to make appointments to suit the interviewee rather than the researcher and to arrive at the place of appointment precisely on time. An interview should only overrun an agreed time on the initiative of the interviewee or perhaps in response to: 'It's a pity to end there, but our time is up', followed by the interviewee's expression of a desire to go on a little longer. It is rarely realistic to make an appointment which is open-ended. I think it is often useful to remind the interviewee of the passage of time: 'At this point perhaps we could talk about ...', 'In the last quarter of an hour ...' All such reminders serve to increase the interviewee's share in the responsibility for a good interview.
The place of the interview is an issue. Most of our experience is of interviews off one's own ground: typically the researcher is in a school. In such a situation senior staff commonly have their own rooms. It is arguable that it is best to interview them there, and it is in any case difficult to interview them elsewhere. Teaching staff and pupils lack private rooms in day schools, and it is necessary for the interviewer to find somewhere to conduct interviews. This can be difficult; my most successful locations have been a medical room and a large walk-in bookstore.

Of course some interviewers might prefer to interview off the school premises and in one case in my experience a senior staff interviewee insisted that he be interviewed at home.

Some participant-observer interviewers in particular favour short 'interviews' in corridor, office room or classroom, particularly when they are not recording during the interview but writing up a recollection of it immediately afterwards.

We have next to no experience of the problems of setting when interviewing one's own colleagues in school. An important issue is whether the interviews will be conducted on your ground or their ground or neutral ground. Possibly familiarity would suggest an advantage in somewhat formalizing the occasion.

I believe that the dress of the interviewer is important, and that here the golden rule is that the interviewer should not have a style which in any way conflicts with the context of the interview. In school the golden rule for interviewing staff seems to be to look like a teacher; but what of interviewing pupils?

The purpose of the interview will vary from situation to situation. It might be to collect autobiographical evidence on teachers' experience
of in-service education, or to evaluate a curriculum enterprise or to achieve a portrayal of a school as an institution. The purpose provides the intentional context of the interview and all the other variables which call for decisions on the part of the researcher need to be considered in the light of the purpose.

On the whole members of CARE have felt that the purpose should be made explicit to the interviewee, largely because of a belief in the rights of the subjects of research over the information they provide; but there are many people who regard this as damaging to research and who are not prepared to disclose the purpose of their interviewing. In such a case it is important to note and allow for the fact that the context of the interview is different in respect of perception of purpose for the interviewer and the interviewee.

4. Recording evidence from Interviews

In a research context the evidence gathered in interviews is generally preserved and stored for future use. In order to make this possible some sort of record of the interview must be produced.

Clearly in one sense the most satisfactory way of recording an interview is the most complete way and this appears to be video-tape or film, which record both verbal and non-verbal interaction. However, video-recording is expensive, usually involves the intrusion of technicians into the interview, and can readily induce nervousness. Also the video-record is difficult to index and retrieve. In practice video-taping of interviews is not much used.

The most common way of recording is a tape-recorder. Either reel-to-reel or cassette can be used, but on the whole the cassette is preferred as more convenient. The recorder should ideally run off batteries or mains, have a counter, a pause button, a battery-level indicator and a self-adjusting condenser microphone. It should also have some form of warning signal when the tape has come to an end.
When one uses a tape recorder, non-verbal communications are of course lost, but, given reasonable recording conditions and comprehensible speech, all verbal communication is preserved in usable form. However, the great disadvantage is the relative inaccessibility of taped information. If one has, say, a dozen tapes — and it might well be more — how is one to bring together for comparison the statements of all the interviewees on such a theme as the balance of pastoral and academic concerns in a school?

An obvious solution is to transcribe, then, if possible, index the tapes. It is certainly much easier to work from transcripts, but transcription itself is laborious and time-consuming operation. The researcher who does not have generous secretarial support may well find it daunting. A compromise is to listen to the tapes and index them by the tape recorder counter (bearing in mind that readings vary from recorder to recorder) and then to transcribe sections only of the interviews.

Although there is some possibility of inducing nervousness when using a tape recorder, I believe this is commonly exaggerated. It seems to afflict only a small proportion of subjects and it generally wears off fairly soon. In most cases self-consciousness remains, but this may as well be regarded as an advantage as a disadvantage. Self-consciousness I take to contribute to the interviewee’s capacity to use the form of the interview skilfully while nervousness diminishes this capacity.

The tape recorder has the advantage of obstructing the interviewer from falsely reporting or misrepresenting the interviewee, but of course it does not safeguard the interviewee from misrepresenting himself in his later judgement. My own general practice is to invite the interviewee to amend the transcript of the interview on the grounds that tape-recorded evidence should not be given a status independent of the
affirmation of the person who contributed it. I have found teacher interviewee's generally more concerned with the grammar or the comprehensibility of their utterances than concerned to alter content. On the rather rare occasions when content has been altered it has most often been to moderate criticism of colleagues or - in my own judgement - to provide a more elegant rationalization for some aspect of one's situation and for conduct. This last has been rare and in my belief has not disguised the element of post facto rationalization (which is a common factor in all recollection of course), but rather improved its art. There are, however, many researchers who regard the freedom of the interviewer to amend the record with suspicion. This seems to me only right, and it is good practice to keep a record of the amount of alteration in any transcript.

From the point of view of the interviewer, tape recording has the great advantage of yielding an accurate record (though one must have the skill and experience to ensure that the recorder works effectively throughout the interview). For me the most important benefit is freedom from having to take notes: I concentrate hard on the interview as the process of the present and have no thought about the record: the warning light when the tape runs out is enough to distract me into turning the tape over.

However, some experienced interviewers like to take notes as well as make a tape recording. Presumably this can be justified as helping the interviewer to organize the interview at the time, or providing a briefer account of the interview than the transcript or safeguarding against failure of the tape recording.

I find that taking notes makes me a much more obtrusive factor in the interview, but one early learns that such effects appear to be closely linked to the personality or style of the interviewer.
Some interviewers prefer to take notes rather than to tape record; interviewees who prefer tape recording will need to do this when interviewees will not grant permission to use a tape recorder. There are obviously innumerable ways of taking notes, but to provide beginners with a focus for their thinking, I offer my preferred procedure. This is to work on pages ruled down with a vertical line, setting down on one side of the line catchwords which record the topics covered and on the other verbatim quotations: thus, for example

move towards
comprehensives

belief that
comps do best for
children
barriers of 11+

need to delay
choice

I made a deliberate move into secondary modern
work as an as a head
doing the very best for all the children we have

I didn't want to say - "You're a success, you're a failure!

3rd form choice

So the choice we delay to the third form.

From such a record I can tape record or write my own account of the interview, preferably immediately it is over. It seems clear to me that written records made during the interview would be greatly improved by the effective use of shorthand, though I have never actually encountered an educational researcher using interview as a field technique who is an efficient shorthand writer. Since the simpler forms of shorthand can - they advertise - be learned in six weeks or so, no doubt some fieldworker will find time for that before long.

One form of recording needs still to be mentioned: the training of the memory and writing up of interviews after they have finished without having taken notes or made recordings at the time. This procedure
seems to be favoured by a number of workers in the ethnographic tradition in particular. There is a natural suspicion regarding the authenticity and reliability of such notes which threaten to construe the interview entirely through the eyes of the interviewer and hence to invade it with his concerns. Yet it must be said that a colleague who has used this technique but has referred his record of the interviews back to the interviewees for their confirmation and clearance has found that they have been more ready to accept his accounts as fair representations of their views than interviewees have been on past occasions ready to accept transcriptions of tape recorded interviews. Yet there are problems in the interviewer becoming the voice of the interviewee even with his consent.

There are of course some marginal transactions in participant observation which may be regarded rather as opportunist conversations than as interviews. These are necessarily recorded after the event. Accuracy must be related to the length of the exchange being reported. My personal view is that the use of indirect speech is to be preferred here as on other occasions when the record depends upon the recollection of the interviewer.

There remains the problem of remarks 'off the record'.

Whatever the means of recording an interview, the interviewee may declare that he is prepared to say something only 'off the record'. I consider this problem on the assumption that what is declared off the record in this way must be kept out of the record by the researcher. How are we to regard such 'lost evidence'?

The problem is that the researcher is - properly in my view - expected to shape his presentation of evidence and his interpretation in such a manner that he can appeal to evidence in his support. A purist might therefore argue that he should not, as an interviewer, listen to statements off the record since they may influence his selection or interpretation yet cannot be used to support it. However, in practice, it is often not possible to stum the information or would be deleterious to the rapport with the interviewee to do so.
Given possession of off-the-record information, the researcher's decision about its use will almost inevitably be case made. One possibility is to seek the same information on the record from an informant not likely to feel the same constraints as the one who declared it off the record. For example, a civil servant may declare something off the record which is available on the record from participants who do not regard themselves as having his obligations. Or a teacher may be happy to tell you something about himself which a colleague will only declare off the record.

If there is no way of getting the information on to the record, then the next best strategy seems to be to point up the gap in the information. 'Although we have no evidence on the point, it would see that there must be mixed feelings in the school about ...' Should this not be possible, one must examine the gap in one's own perceptions of the situation with and without the missing evidence and look for ways of handling it. In one instance a colleague has destroyed a study, after considerable labour on it, because the impression it gave was false in the light of off-the-record evidence which could not be disclosed.

5. The Assumptions of the Interview

It is quite clear that researchers value the interview as a research tool in different ways; and it is probably helpful that I set out my present position as a point of departure for an exploration of this issue. (My view is likely to change in the light of experience).

I have a background in both history and social science and a concern for research which informs participants in education - particularly teachers as the most responsible and accountable participants - and which contributes to the improvement of educational practice. I do not want to discount the utility of psychology and sociology in this
respect, but I believe that their relevance to educational practice has been seriously overestimated. Researchers in these disciplines are primarily concerned with theory which holds the discipline together and guides research and this concern expresses itself in a technical vocabulary within the discipline which obstructs rather than facilitates application to practice.

I sympathise with Harry Ree when he writes (of Peter Woods' The Divided School):

In a strange sad way this failure to get read is the fault of the author. Peter Woods is an academic sociologist who, although he worked for a year in a staffroom of school teachers, writes 'professionally' for other sociologists. Who else but one of that clever selected breed would write of 'analysing social referents' and a few lines further on explain that his sociological approach 'elevates the process of meaning-assignation and situation-defining to prime importance' ...

But in spite of these defects there can be no doubts about the potential value of the book, and I would advise teachers, especially heads, to press on through the early pages to where the normal language of teachers and pupils seems to have a good influence on the sociological style of Peter Woods. (Roe 1979)

I believe that educational research could usefully learn from history a parsimony of terms technical in its discipline and use instead of the language of those it studies. This may be technical to an extent - the terminology of constitutional lawyers or agriculturists or architects is used by the historian - but it is set in a world of action and of the understanding of actors.

Now the problem is that the historian - like the good novelist or playwright/philosopher/audience a knowledge of the human condition, of motives and the way the world works; but he assumes too
that such knowledge is both divergent and speculative and thrives on a certain degree of ambiguity. Shall I say the historian is interested in human action and human experience - consciousness - and how it can be explored without plumping for a theory of behaviour or motivation? Historians of this persuasion are less interested in cause than in careful analytic portrayal of situations and actions and decisions and perceptions for the consideration of those likely to bring considerable resources to understanding them. And their discourse is adapted to inform the actions of actors.

In the style of work I have in mind the historian addresses an audience whose knowledge is a practical complement to his work. Thus, the historian of medicine addresses the doctor, of diplomacy the diplomat, of architecture the architect. Others can read him, but those with a developed interest in his subject can read him best.

It is important to stress that those who work in the tradition I am trying to characterize are not naive enough to take the surface of things - consciousness, for example - as unquestionable. Rather they take the view that these matters are so questionable that we must leave them to shrewd speculation and the interplay of possibilities. I shall return to this later when we look at the social scientists who are more interested in treating these problematics directly.

First, however, I want to look at another kind of historian. I have been writing of a historian for whom the identity of the instance is instrumental rather than intrinsic. I mean by this that he is analysing and portraying to further understanding of a field - church architecture, for example - and the specification of identity is locational within that field and helps to order it - Durham Cathedral and Earl's Barton Church contextualize observations rather than are contextualised by them. But there is another, more central and traditional strand of history, where identity is central: the history of named events or movements.
Here the assumption is that the audience is interested in these particular events as important in themselves. They are interested not in war, but in the First World War not in kingship but in Henry VIII.

Now, in educational research this tradition has been mainly represented in the post by histories of individual schools or biographies of figures like Thomas Arnold or Michael Sadler written for those who judge their subjects of intrinsic interest or of importance. Here, however, we are considering educational research founded on interviews, and in this genre the main tradition which asserts the interest of the particular case is that which might be described by the term 'evaluation'. This, I take it, is because the primary task of evaluation is to evaluate the instance rather than to use the instance to evaluate ideas about the class of situations from which the instance is drawn.

A useful discriminator between research and evaluation in this context is the force of anonymity. If the problem of anonymisation is simply that of locating the instance within the class, then the investigation tends to research: if anonymization threatens to rob the investigation of its subject, then the investigation tends to evaluation. Most investigations are mixed cases.

Nevertheless, the distinction is important for the interviewer. In the kind of research I am describing the evidence is the voices of the participants in the situation speaking of their experience to an outsider. The relation of that chorus to other perceptions of the truth of the matter is not questioned in the interview but questioned in the treatment of the evidence. At an extreme the interviewer might restrict himself to asking questions when he does not understand the interviewee's message but refuse to allow himself to question when he doubts the 'truth' of the message. This position is too extremely put, but it serves to highlight the point.
By contrast the evaluator, it seems to me, must normally bring a criterion of 'truth' into the interviewing situation, because his concern with the particulars of the case presses him to penetrate it, to seek a solution to or illumination of the case itself. He cannot afford the luxury of using the case to develop a more general understanding; he must offer an interpretation of a case caught in a political context within which the personnel are accountable.

I may well have drawn these distinctions badly and coloured the drawings with my own experience. But they do serve to highlight two roles for the interviewer: that of the listener and that of the interrogator. Perhaps, my association of the listener role with research and the interrogator role with evaluation is superficial. I am for the moment concerned with history as a conceptual framework. The research and the evaluation I have considered take place within time, are concerned with acts and with consciousness, and treat subjects as responsible in the sense of properly accountable. Both address themselves to a relation of consciousness to action.

A cue to relate this tradition to that of social science (as it is generally understood in the English-speaking world) can be taken from Levi-Strauss (1963, p.18)

The issue can thus be reduced to the relationship between history and ethnology in the strict sense. We propose to show that the fundamental difference between the two disciplines is not one of subject, of goal or of method. They share the same subject, which is social life; the same goal, which is a better understanding of man; and, in fact, the same method, in which only the proportion of research techniques varies. They differ, principally, in their choice of complementary perspectives: History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations.
I believe there is a substantial distinction here. Both those who approach interviewing from a social science standpoint and those who approach it from a historical standpoint will employ superficially similar methods. The social scientist may be a listener or an interrogator. But he will attach a significance to different things and he will ask questions from a different curiosity.

The social scientist works from theory, which either organizes information for understanding (classificatory theory) or offers explanations of action (explanatory theory). The theory is in the consciousness of the interviewer, qua social scientist, but not of the interviewee, qua actor. Consequently, the discourse of the interview and the direction of questions has quite a different significance for interviewer from that it has for interviewee. Moreover, some social science theory, particularly that deriving from psycho-analysis, from social anthropology and from Marxism implies unconscious causation or at least accounts of action and events which depend upon the operation of tendencies not adequately represented in the consciousness of those whose actions are influenced by them. And this not merely because of the obliteration of self-awareness by habit.

An interviewer should try before and during the practice of interviewing to be clear to what degree he is to be listener or interrogator; and then to be clear about what he is listening for or pursuing by questions. Even a listener sets an expectation about what is worth saying: evokes descriptions, or opinions, or perceptions, or reflections, or questioning. All questions which are sharpened towards invitation imply a theory: of what actually happened in this case; of how people are motivated; of how society hiddenly affects the consciousness or actions of those who live in it.

Even if your interviewing is not shaped by theory, developing a theory of your art as an interviewer by study of your own work may be important.
6. The Conduct of the Interview

In the context of the previous section, I want now to consider certain variables in the conduct of interviews. I shall regard the main stylistic distinction as that drawn between the reflective or evocative interview on the one hand and the interrogative or investigative interview on the other, though it is important to bear in mind that in practice most interviews mix these categories in differing proportions.

I think that the most significant variable of all is whether the interviewer and the interviewee sit side by side or facing each other.* Sitting side by side favours the reflective style. The interviewer invites the interviewee to look out on his world and share his perception of it with others. Interviewer and interviewee collaborate to make a record, probably on a tape-recorder which they face and which becomes their audience. Sitting face to face favours the interrogative style. The interviewer becomes a questioner, even perhaps a challenger, rather than a prompter. The tape recorder mediates between them; is perhaps a referee.

The side-by-side position may possibly produce a fuller verbal record since it cuts out face-to-face non-verbal communication and hence might be expected to force the speakers into words rather than expressions or gestures. In the face-to-face situation an important variable is whether the controls of the tape recorder face the interviewer or - once started by the interviewer - face the interviewee and fall within his control. ** If he wishes to speak off the record, he need only press the pause button. In real situations, especially with the interview conducted in the interviewee's room, it is often difficult to achieve the position you desire, though I personally, as a side-by-side interviewer find it easy to say: 'Because I want to look at the world through your eyes and collaborate with you in getting that view on record, I prefer that, if it is not inconvenient, we sit side by side.'

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*This was first pointed out to me by Dr. Tony Gibson, H M I., an experienced free-lance interviewer from the BBC.

** This was first pointed out to me by my colleague, Barry MacDonald.
There are a number of factors worth mentioning as contributory to the tone of an interview. The formality or informality of the relationship established is an important consideration. A common error is to assume that people feel more comfortable in an informal relationship. One the whole, in interviewing as in daily life, the more sustained the relationship the greater the degree of informality. Someone who is conducting two or three hour-long interviews with a person needs probably to be rather formal unless the other pushes towards informality: even then it may pay to resist the push a little since informality can create the illusion of familiarity and induce the interviewee too readily to assume that the interviewer possesses general or background knowledge of the situation under discussion and hence not to offer it. On the other hand if one is working with a limited number of people over weeks or months of study, then it seems that an attempt to maintain formality can strain the interview process. But I think the interviewer should always maintain the distance of being a visitor or stranger to the situation, however friendly he may become.

The more informality or intimacy the researcher allows himself, the more background knowledge he should have of the situation he is studying. The naivety which is understandable and excusable in an outsider can be very useful: indeed, I have found that foreigners often evoke from the people they interview valuable evidence of the way they see the familiar background of education which will not be offered to the native who, because he is expected to have his own perception of such matters, often seems not to need the interviewee’s.

The formality or informality of the relationship is an interplay with the formality or informality of the physical setting, and on the whole one can lean against the spirit of the setting more safely than lean with it. It can too readily run away with you!

And important factor related to but not identical with the issue of formality is the question of the explicitness or unobtrusiveness of the interview. On the whole I think the style of the reflective interview
leans towards explicitness: the interview is an 'occasion', an opportunity for the person interviewed to make his voice heard. Making this explicit can help both interviewer and interviewee to control the timing and shape of the interview. There may be an art in being interviewed, as well as an art of interviewing, and explicitness about the interview encourages the cultivation of that art.

Other factors may press towards unobtrusiveness. It may be for example, in a face-to-face interview that the interviewer knows that part of his own success in gathering the kind of evidence he finds useful is grounded on engagement of the eyes locking interviewer and interviewee in an interaction which in some cases at least will make the context of the interaction grow pale. Moreover, there can be situations where the interviewer believes that information may be withheld if the condition of interview can never be forgotten. In such circumstances, to be unobtrusive may be advantageous but the near synonym of unobtrusive, covert reminds us that ethical issues are raised. The problem is that there may be things that interviewee wants to tell someone, and the issue of whether they trust you may be interpersonal, rather than about use of the record. It is the way the national armband inscribed 'interviewer' affects their judgement of your personal reaction that is at stake rather than a fear of publication: they want a sympathetic, rather than a neutral, listener. Perhaps here I am speaking too much from my own experience as an interviewee.

Smoothness or grittiness are important in interview. I mean by smoothness the degree to which an interview's dynamic hinges on the interviewer's being agreeable, confirming and understanding; by grittiness the extent to which dissent, questioning or failure to understand contribute to the dynamic. The interview which is too smooth runs the risk of exaggerating perceptions by encouragement* that which is too gritty, of producing defensive rationalizations where more honest accounts might have been offered. Given a smooth style, then the best armour against its weaknesses is to cultivate a curiosity so lively that it keeps the interviewer from settling easily for understanding. Given a gritty style, perhaps the best armour is to emphasize the understanding achieved.

* See Imaginary Friends by Alison Lurie for a fictional representation of this effect.
An important aspect of interviewing style is the proportion of the talk which is that of the interviewer. On the whole the interviewer may be expected to talk much less in the reflective style than in the interrogative.

As a reflective interviewer, I generally start with some such introduction as: 'I should like you, if you would to look at the situation in this school, and talk about how you see it,' or 'I should like you to think about your own place or role in the school and talk about how you see it.' In principle, I would be content not to talk again. My intrusions, which are rather sparse, most often occur when I do not understand what has been said, or when I feel the interviewee need help with form, or when I need coverage of certain topics and want to introduce them, or when I naturally confirm or sum up something said. (When I refer to the interviewee needing help with form, I mean that he has digressed and obviously feels he has, or that he has offered to make four points, has made two and has now forgotten the others.)

I have less experience in the interrogative style. In both styles the categories and styles of interviewer utterances need to be studied systematically. So far as I know, this has not yet been done.

EVIDENCE GATHERED IN INTERVIEWING

All the evidence gathered in interviewing is the voices of the participants. (Observational notes taken on the setting or context of the interviewee or on the interviewer I am considering as observation rather than interviewing, even though it be undertaken in the interview situation).

My own way of regarding interview evidence is as a record of meanings which the actor in a situation is prepared to share on a given occasion with an interviewer.
This record is defective within that conception if inaudibility fragments or distorts the text or if meanings are altered by the exclusion of gesture and expression and tone from a record.

However, given a record with such defects there remains the question of its relation to whatever other 'realities' we may think exist outside the interview. At this level of 'reference' I find it useful to use four terms to distinguish five different relationships to 'reality', namely: assumption, testimony, witness, hearsay, account and reflection. So far as I know these distinctions are not generally used.

An assumption is a statement which assumes without declaring a reality outside the interview, e.g. 'After assembly I generally look into the staffroom on my way to class' assumes the existence of assembly, a staffroom and organization by classes, 'The librarian can't read all the books she orders so it is really the responsibility of the member of staff who recommends the book to vet it and make sure it is not unsuitable, so much nowadays' assumes that a school library should exercise careful censorship in its buying policy. On the whole assumptive evidence is good evidence because it is not self-conscious.

Testimony is evidence in which an interviewee testifies about his own thoughts and feelings. 'So there was an extra special lift about this, the furniture was new, the walls were new, and in the early years . . . I don't know, there's still a feeling that we're in the throes of creating. We took children at the age of 11 and it was enormously pleasurable to see them going through a process of education which we had devised.' 'I think the Head should be the boss, the last word should be his.' Of course all testimony should be looked at critically, but I find it much more honest than many people who have not worked with it concede: it is also easier to detect unreliability in testimony than those used to handling data rather than evidence appear to realize.
Witness reports what the interviewee has seen or known of events:
'At staff meeting the head sits with his back against the wall, with the senior deputy on one side and the senior mistress and senior master on the other.' 'There was a terrible argument in the staffroom.' 'We opened in 1963.' Witness is rather unreliable both because memory fails and because interpretation clings to events. Factual statements usually need to be corroborated if they carry importance.

Hearsay reports what one has heard others say about events, interpretations and feelings, and needs to be treated with great caution. 'One of her former colleagues says she was quite different in her last school.' Consider this difficulty: 'We used to have all the kids in uniform' many mean 'I have been told that we used ...'.

In 'account' an interviewee gives an account of the working of some process or of some past event or situation which is specifically organized for the interviewer. 'How does a curriculum change take place?' 'Well, it normally begins as a proposal from within the department which wants the change and that proposal will come to Head of Departments meeting, possibly after the Head of Department Involved has consulted the Head - he must see him to get it on the agenda - and canvassed a colleague or two ...' and so forth. Such accounts are, I think almost certain to tidy events, translating habits into procedures for instance.

Finally, there is reflecting, occurring when a problem in the evidence of fact or interpretation is recognised by the interviewee (perhaps on the prompting of the interviewer) and is tackled by 'figuring it out in the interview'. 'I think it must have been 1972 that we introduced HCP - funny that we have no record - but that was certainly the year - 1972-73 - 1973 summer when we went to the Netherlands. I remember some of the boys had read part of Ann Frank's diary from the war pack.' And as a response to the idea from the interviewer that, since P.E. was partly extra curricular and drew on staff across departments, it did not really fit under the Deputy Head (Curriculum
but was almost an independent 'barony' within the school: 'You've
given me a good point to think on. One which obviously I haven't
given sufficient reflection. Obviously PE is an important part of the
curriculum. In general I would think it fair to say that the
head of PE did organize it. It's interesting though because he does
get involved in other ways and we were planning sixth-form options
and courses and so on and inviting members of staff, Heads of
Department, as volunteers to join the working party. The Head of
PE was one of those who worked with us on that working party on
academic subjects as well as recreational. So he isn't cut off from
us in that sense of the word, no. Nor from Head of Department
meetings either in which he has as full a say, if he wishes, as any
other Head of Department.' Where the problem which evokes the
reflection is one of recollection or understanding, that evidence is
relatively easy to handle satisfactorily through criticism. I am more
suspicous of such evidence when it evokes reflection towards personal
justification or even about causes.

This raises questions regarding the shaping of evidence into an
account. I am myself rather puritanical about such accounts,
believing that they should avoid so far as possible embodying a
view of the motivation of characters in the case on the part of the
writer. This is partly because I do not believe we can undertake case
studies which provide evidence sufficient to underwrite such a view:
hence one value of the novel which can explore motivation fictionally.
But it also relates to the relevance of educational case studies to
action. It is both more intelligent in an action frame and more
feasible to attempt to infer or reason about
consequences rather than causes, and these inferences and reasonings
are much more readily tested by the practitioner.

My position here is, however, contentious.

The most important problem in handling interview evidence is the
decision as to the world of discourse in which one will operate.
present preference is to attempt to build the 'intersubjective school' from recorded perceptions of its participants and to consider the internal logic of the participants in relation to alternative logics and the consequences of act and policies of participants as they and others might perceive them.

Whatever the interpretive cast may be it seems to me that the purpose of gathering evidence by interview in educational research is to create referant materials which will support a discussion of educational experience.

This is not the place to probe the epistemological foundations on which the study of a case in this spirit is built.