Interview

Interviewing is a process which all of us use informally. We ask people about an art exhibition in order to learn their feelings in response to the works; we inquire about the preparation of a dish we have been served so that we may utilize the information for our future dining. People ask us how we selected a particular brand of some object we own, or they question us about our reactions to a book we have read. Whether the method is employed by researchers, or, casually, by any of us in our everyday lives it is a social interaction which we engage in when we decide that the only way to know what people are thinking is to ask them.

While they are comfortable with the common-sense attitude toward such inquiries in the routines of daily life, some people, from their experiences, have constituted a cognitive style toward research which raises questions about sampling, repetitive observations, and statistical comparisons. A review of theoretical issues underlying interviewing procedures in research is available in Aron V. Cicourel's (1964) Method and Measurement in Sociology. He pointed out that observers who are concerned with means for increasing precision and reliability in interviewing frequently find themselves striving for incompatible objectives. "For example, standardized questions and answers yet focused and unfocused probes; 'good rapport' yet detachment of respondent and interviewer from the social impact of the interview" (p. 74). One solution may be to adopt an anthropological stance. Spradley and McCurdy (1972) contended that, if we want to learn something about a cultural scene which we assume is shared by a group, it possibly is more productive

to interview a limited number of people in depth. They suggested that the reliability of a single informant can be increased by developing good rapport (all sources share a common concern about establishing this condition), and by asking informants what others in the group believe rather than inquiring only about their personal opinions. Another possible resolution of this traditional dilemma is to work in the journalistic mode exemplified by Studs Terkel in Division Street: America (1967) and in Working (1972).

> I realized quite early in this adventure that interviews, conventionally conducted, were meaningless. Conditioned cliches were certain to come. The question-and-answer technique may be of some value in determining favored detergents, toothpaste and deodorants, but not in the discovery of men and women. There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature--at the beginning: the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone; the kind he would ask you. The talk was idiomatic rather than academic. In short, it was conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were opened. (pp. xx-xxi)

Clearly, Terkel believed that the attitudes which he hoped to learn about from these people would emerge only from what theoreticians designate as the interactive quality of interviewing. Kahn and Cannell (1957) noted that once this condition is acknowledged, we are confronted with a question: "What becomes of the conveniently simple notion that the ideal interview is something that springs from the soul of the respondent to the notebook of the interviewer without encountering any contaminating influences enroute" (p. 59)? Their answer is to reject this concept of the interview and of the roles of the respondent and the interviewer.

Bill Moyers (1971) recounted an incident at the conclusion of Listening to America which illustrates how offensive impersonal inter-

actions can be to people. He was watching television with a friend when a local announcer asked viewers to call in with their comments about the stations' programming. He assured them that the staff wanted to know what they thought, and concluded by saying that their messages would be recorded and analyzed later. Moyers' friend was so upset that he threw his shoe at the TV. "It is treacherous to tell people that you want to know what they think and then force them to speak to a machine. People want contact. They want to affirm themselves" (Moyers, 1971, p. 341). This book is the fruit of his travels through thirteen thousand miles in the United States, interviewing in such places as Yellow Springs, Ohio and East Gary, Indiana, in Denver, Colorado and Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, in San Francisco and Beaumont, Texas, in Johnsonville, South Carolina and Washington, D.C. because, as he put it: "I wanted to hear people speak for themselves" (p. vii). He reflected, at his journey's end, on the responses:

> I found that most people not only hunger to talk, but also have a story to tell. They are not often heard, but they have something to say. They are desperate to escape the stereotypes into which pollsters and the media and the politicians have packaged them for convenient manipulation. (p. 341)

Selden Rodman (1957) learned that artists were eager to talk about their work and about one another when he interviewed thirty-five painters, sculptors and architects between January and July of 1956. His title, Conversations with Artists, emphasizes the interactive concept he held of interviewing. He noted that inevitably "the conversations are given some kind of unity by the preoccupations of the interviewer. These dictated, perhaps, a particular kind of question, though I tried to avoid asking the same questions and following any set pattern, preferring to

let 'happen' what might and the character of the interview take shape from the nature of the subject" (p. xx). Alexander Eliot, in his Foreword to the volume, mentioned that Rodman's greatest qualification was that the artists trusted him (another bit of evidence for the value placed on rapport).

At times Rodman's preoccupations shaped the interviews very directly, as in this example with June Wayne which is included in the chapter, "Unlocking the Image."

> "One more question," I said. "Does a picture for you begin with spontaneous-accidental experimenting in the medium? Or with some experience you've had and want to pass along?"
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> "For me," she answered, "it hinges on having experienced something so moving that I want others to know about it. But emotional experiences are fugitive things, violent or delicate, and of many orders. The line between the experience itself and the memory of it is so fragile that one must use every bit of wit, skill, brain, intuition and faith one has in order to transmute it into a work of art." (p. 30)

In other instances, such as with Larry Rivers, the conversation evolved into the artist's asking questions of Rodman, and finally into Rivers' expressing a philosophical view of life:

> No contemporary person can tell you exactly what he's after. Not even Einstein could. Freud certainly can't. You have to take some of it on faith. Go as far back as Darwin--do you think he really knew exactly what he was after, until he found it? No. It happened that way--through the searching. (p. 120)

Cindy Nemser (1975) searched for problems which are peculiar to women artists in her interviews. Danziger and Conrad (1977) felt that photography continues to be an enigma for the general public. They cited the often-debated question about whether photography is art as evidence for their contention. They believed that "To better understand photography,

what was needed at this time was a closer focus on the individuals who take the photographs and the photographs themselves" (p. 12). They set out to accomplish this by interviewing eight master photographers. Hill and Cooper (1979) published their dialogues with twenty-one individuals whom they regard as the shapers of photography in our century. In their Acknowledgments, they state that "every interview was a history lesson in itself." It is interesting to compare the photographers who are represented in both collections: Minor White, Imogen Cunningham, and Brett Weston. Cunningham's skepticism about interviews is evident in both contexts:

> IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM: What are you going to do with this trash?
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> BC: It will be included in a book of interviews.
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> CUNNINGHAM: That's not a good enough reason. I'm not so curious about everybody's life. I like biography myself, but I don't like little snips of questions and answers. I like somebody who really knows what he's writing about. Now the other day a man came to interview me about Dorothea Lange. That's the way to do it--wait until I'm dead, then get the real truth from someone who knew me. (Danziger & Conrad, 1977, p. 38)
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> How did you get started in photography?
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> Everyone asks me that question. I'm asked it at parties, everywhere. Nobody started me, I was self-motivated. But I did see something of Gertrude Kasebier--and that's all I'm going to tell you about what started me off.
> (Hill & Cooper, 1979, p. 293)

I have taped interviews with artists, students, teachers, and children for several years. Since all of these were people I knew establishing rapport was not a problem. The example which follows was given to the graduate students at the time of their assignment to use the interview method as a means of inquiring into a topic related to art education. They were asked to think of a few neutral questions and to

write these down. Some models were provided: "What's going on?" and "In general, how do you feel about (the topic)?" These were to be followed by probing in areas that interested them by asking, "Can you tell me any more about that?" or "Why do you think that happens?" Their instructions were to tape record or to take notes that were nearly verbatim. Evidence from the interviews was to be used to support the findings discussed in their papers. They were encouraged to mention any problems they encountered with the method. It also should be noted that several of the graduate students were aware of two dissertations which employed interviews. Jay Ulbricht (1976) studied the art world of a small town, and Kaye Winder (1981) attempted to identify the reasons why thirty Iowa artists became artists.

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