Learning how to ask

A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research

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Contents

1. Introduction

Interviewing has become a powerful force in modern society. Starting almost from birth, we are confronted by questions posed by educators, psychologists, pollsters, medical practitioners, and employers, and we listen to flamboyant interviewers on radio and television. Our skill at playing the role of interviewee influences our success in education and employment; our answers will help determine whether we receive such basic services as bank loans or disability pay. On a societal level, polling "pundits" are no longer employed exclusively by such specialized agencies as the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago or the Gallup Poll. Major corporations spend millions of dollars on market surveys that estimate customer wants and resources. Pollsters form integral members of major political campaigns, and their findings have a profound effect on the way candidates approach the voters. "Exit polls" now enable the media to advise West Coast residents as to how the East Coast has voted in national elections – even before the polls have closed.

Research in the social sciences is the great bastion of the interview. Estimates suggest that 90 percent of all social science investigations use interview data (cf. Brenner 1981b:115). Interviews are used in a wide variety of social contexts. A central component of the anthropological tool kit, interviews have produced a good bit of the information we possess about contemporary non-Western societies. Interviewing is, however, also a mainstay of research within modern industrial societies. We use interviews in exploring people's beliefs about the future (e.g., "Who do you think will win the election?") as well as their recollections of the past. The validity of a great deal of what we believe to be true about human beings and the way they relate to one another hinges on the viability of the interview as a methodological strategy.

Our faith in the interview is not entirely unexamined. An overwhelming mass of literature in psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, political science, folklore, oral history, and other fields has

1

focused on interview techniques. Many of these works are of the "cook-book" type, providing recipes for better baking using interviews yet without seriously considering the nature of the interview or its inherent weaknesses. Others are devoted to analysis of the factors that "bias" interviews, skewing the results in a particular direction. The latter body of material has substantially increased the level of awareness with respect to the possibility that the interviewer's gender, race, political beliefs, linguistic characteristics, and the like may distort the results.

Given the ubiquity of interviews and the proliferation of works on the subject, I would hardly blame the reader for asking why we need one more book on interviewing. The reason is simple: We still know very little about the nature of the interview as a communicative event. Worse yet, because the interview is an accepted speech event in our own native speech communities, we take for granted that we know what it is and what it produces. One major problem is that the interview is most unusual, as communicative routines go. Accordingly, researchers base their interview strategies and the way they interpret the data on a number of false assumptions. This is, unfortunately, not a simple, naive mistake; I argue in later chapters that our methodological shortsightedness reflects our reluctance to face some thorny theoretical issues.

This mystification of the interview emerges primarily in three ways. First, interviews provide examples of *metacommunication*, statements that report, describe, interpret, and evaluate communicative acts and processes. All speech communities possess repertoires of metacommunicative events that they use in generating shared understandings with respect to themselves and their experiences. As I argue in Chapter 4, these native metacommunicative events are rich in the pragmatic features that root speech events in a particular social situation and imbue them with force and meaning. Unfortunately, researchers seldom gain competence (in Hymes's [1974a:92–97] sense of the term) in these repertoires, relying instead on the metacommunicative routine that figures so prominently in their own speech community – the interview. This practice deprives the researcher of an adequate sense as to how the information she or he obtains fits into broader patterns of thinking, feeling, and speaking.

An even more serious problem is inherent in the structure of the interview. By participating in an interview, both parties are implicitly agreeing to abide by certain communicative norms. The interview moves the roles that each normally occupies in life into the background and structures the encounter with respect to the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Attention is concentrated on the topics introduced by

the researcher's questions. Preliminary "small talk" may highlight the participants' present states of mind and body ("How are you?") and their relationship ("It's good to see you. I appreciate your letting me interview you again"). But the initial question then shifts the focus away from the interaction to another time, place, or process ("Now tell me about . . .").

The problem here is that this movement away from the interview as a speech event mystifies researchers to such an extent that they generally retain this focus in the course of their analysis. What is said is seen as a reflection of what is "out there" rather than as an interpretation which is jointly produced by interviewer and respondent. Since the context-sensitive features of such discourse are more clearly tied to the context of the interview than to that of the situation it describes, the researcher is likely to misinterpret the meaning of the responses.

A third difficulty arises because suppression of the norms that guide other types of communicative events is not always complete. Some potential respondents are drawn from communities whose sociolinguistic norms stand in opposition to those embedded in the interview. This is likely to be the case in groups that do not feature the interview as an established speech-event type. Lacking experience in this means of relating, such individuals are less likely to be able and willing to adhere to its rules. The farther we move away from home, culturally and linguistically, the greater the problem. This hiatus between the communicative norms of interviewer and researcher can greatly hinder research, and the problems it engenders have sometimes abruptly terminated the investigation. If the fieldworker does not take this gap into account, he or she will fail to see how native communicative patterns have shaped responses; this will lead the researcher to misconstrue their meaning.

It has not been possible to limit the discussion to a critique of interview methods alone, however, because broaching these methodological issues raises much broader questions. Why are interviews ubiquitous in the human sciences? Why is the nature of the interview process so poorly understood, and why has it not been more adequately researched? Why are we so reluctant to modify our research methodology, particularly in the light of theoretical advances? The answer is easy: *Interview techniques smuggle outmoded preconceptions out of the realm of conscious theory and into that of methodology.* Both our unquestioned faith in the interview and our reluctance to adopt a more sophisticated means of analyzing its findings emerge from the fact that the interview encapsulates our own native theories of communication and of reality.

The refusal to rely more heavily on native metacommunicative re-

pertoires as sources of information and our unquestioned belief that
we have the right to impose interview techniques on our consultants
have serious political implications. They indicate that social research is
characterized by less sensitivity and willingness to expose oneself to
other modes of learning than we may have imagined. By leaving the
interview situation itself out of the analysis, we have cleverly circum-
vented the need to examine our own role in the research process. A
clearer understanding of the interview will accordingly not only en-
hance its usefulness as a research tool but will greatly expand our
consciousness of what studying our fellow humans is all about.

Lest the reader gain the wrong impression, let me make my position on
the interview clear. *I am not trying to persuade researchers to abandon
interviewing altogether*. In addition to being utterly unrealistic, such an
attempt would undermine my project entirely. The presentation of a
simple and unfeasible solution would ultimately lead most interviewers
to lose interest in the task of critically examining the nature and limita-
tions of interview techniques. The point is that the communicative un-
derpinnings of the interview are tied to basic theoretical as well as
methodological issues. My goal is to elucidate the nature of the inter-
view as a communicative event and to contribute to our understanding
of these basic methodological and theoretical problems.

I will approach this task in four primary ways. As I will argue in later
chapters, one of the most important tasks confronting students of the
interview is to examine transcripts of interviews in great detail. The
point here is not simply to explain the problems that become explicit in
the course of the interview. This is the orientation of many researchers
who have focused on the problems of rapport-building and bias. My
approach is rather to study transcripts (and tape recordings) as a whole
in order to ascertain exactly what was said (the linguistic forms), what
each question and reply meant to the interviewer and interviewee, and
what the researcher can glean from these data. This technique reveals
the points at which interviewer and interviewee have misunderstood
each other and where one or both are likely to be misinterpreted by
the researcher, even when such misunderstandings do not become ex-
plicit in the interview.

Unfortunately, it is difficult indeed to obtain verbatim transcripts of
complete interviews in the published literature. I have accordingly con-
centrated my analysis on interviews I conducted over a thirteen-year
period in a Spanish-speaking community in northern New Mexico. (A
brief account of *Mexicano* society and the research site is provided in
Chapter 2.) The reason for choosing these data is that I have tape
recordings of interviews covering the span between my first few days in

the community and my most recent research. The interviews are of a number of types, from the most nondirected and informal to quantitatively oriented formal interviews that utilized questionnaires. The research foci consisted of material culture (the production of carved images of Catholic saints), oral history, political economy, sociolinguistics, and folklore (oral literature). My ability to interpret the interview data is thus aided by systematic study of sociolinguistic patterns and social relations. I also conducted a social survey of a city of 14,000 inhabitants (Smith and Briggs 1972) and am currently studying job interviews between college seniors and prospective employers. Although these investigations have informed my understanding of interview techniques, they do not form primary sources of data.

The second basic thrust of my analysis is an exploration of the communicative roots of the interview. This approach emerges mainly from my training in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. These fields utilize concepts derived from other types of linguistic analysis, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism in studying the way language is used in a variety of settings. Discourse analysis has focused a great deal of attention on the heretofore neglected study of conversation. My purpose here is to see what types of linguistic and social norms are presupposed by the interview and to compare them with the norms characteristic of other types of speech events. This task should reveal the basic communicative features that are most likely to prove problematic in interviews.

The third dimension is the presentation of steps that might be taken to overcome the problems posed by these communicative obstacles. I argue that one of the most important facets of this process is the development of a heightened awareness of the theoretical problems that lie behind methodological naiveté. This discussion is taken up primarily in Chapter 6. A practical approach to this task is developed in Chapter 5. The basic steps in designing, conducting, and interpreting research using interviews are outlined to show how investigators can make the best possible use of interviews.

These suggestions are addressed to interviewing in the social sciences as a whole as well as in linguistics, folklore, and oral history. Most of the examples will be drawn from fieldwork conducted in another society. This reflects the fact that the data used in this study were collected in the course of a fieldwork project and that the bulk of my training was in anthropology and linguistics. The book is addressed, however, to all practitioners who use interview and/or survey data in their research. Some of my remarks are directed specifically at one type of interviewing or to the way in which interviews are used in a particular discipline. I have nevertheless tried to avoid spelling out the implica-

tions of each point for the different fields in order to avoid burying the argument in excessive complication and tedium. The reader will thus find it necessary to assess the bearing of my remarks on her or his own concerns.

The process of critically examining the nature and limitations of interview techniques involves another step as well. As I noted above, an impressive number of sources have examined the way interviews are (or should be) used in research. This literature has increased the sophistication with which interviewers deal with problems of sampling, bias, the wording of questions, and so forth. Unfortunately, very few writers have contributed significantly to our understanding of the nature of the interview as a communicative event and of the metacommunicative norms it presupposes. This oversight leaves us without a clear understanding of the problems that result from gaps between the metacommunicative norms of the interview and those connected with other types of speech events. The result is that most students of the interview seem unaware of many of the basic obstacles confronting this type of research. In other words, the literature on interviewing has also contributed to the *mystification* of the interview. Given the influence these sources exert on the way interviews are conducted, an examination of these works is a necessary starting point for any effort to rethink the interview.

Previous research on the interview

The task of summarizing the literature that deals with the methodology of the social sciences is daunting. My treatment of these sources is confronted by two constraints. On the one hand, I seek to point out problems that confront a wide range of different types of interviews. I must perforce deal with sources on interviewing that emerge from a number of disciplines. My goal in this book is, however, to analyze unexamined aspects of interviewing, not to produce a monographic summary of the literature. I will accordingly treat selected sources that deal with interviews as used by ethnographers, oral historians, folklorists, sociologists, and political scientists. The point in each section will be to grasp the basic problems that underlie the body of literature in question, not to adumbrate each relevant work.

A couple of definitions might help prevent interdisciplinary confusion. I will use the term "interview" to cover a wide range of research activities from the most "informal," "open-ended" interviews to the use of "formal" instruments in survey research. In order to be considered an interview according to my definition, the collection of data

must occur in a face-to-face situation. The interaction must also occur in a research context and involve the posing of questions by the investigator. I thus exclude such events as telephone polling, the use of written questionnaires, and employment interviews. Although many points of my analysis apply to them as well, they also present special problems that I cannot elucidate in the course of this study. I will also use the term "fieldwork" in its anthropological sense to refer to research that involves intense interaction between a researcher and a given population over a substantial period of time. Fieldwork generally includes a number of different research modalities, including interviews of one or more types. My usage is thus to be distinguished from a common use of the term in sociology; here "fieldwork" often involves observation and other procedures *rather than* interviewing.

Anthropology

Classically, anthropologists have used a combination of observation and open-ended interviews in conducting fieldwork. Observing is not constituted in formal terms as it is, for instance, in the study of nonverbal communication. The classical paradigm is provided by Kluckhohn's article on "The Participant-Observation Technique in Small Communities" (1940). She urges fieldworkers to assume roles, such as housewife, teacher, and the like, that will afford extensive contact with members of the community in areas of interest to the research. In the eyes of Kluckhohn and of most anthropologists, participant-observation is not opposed to informal interviewing; the former rather provides opportunities for the latter.

   Ethnographers generally rely on open-ended interviews rather than on surveys or questionnaires. Even those practitioners who urge fieldworkers to use surveys suggest that formal instruments should be introduced after basic cultural patterns have been established through observation and informal interviewing. Ethnographers use open-ended interviews in two basic ways. The basic thrust of the first type is captured by Powdermaker (1966:156–7):

I used no interviewing schedule, but I had well in mind the problems to be discussed, and the interviews tended to follow a general pattern. They were always by appointment and usually in the informant's home. The tone was that of a social visit. After an exchange of polite greetings, my hostess often made an admiring comment on my dress or suit. I might note a photograph on the mantel over the coal grate fireplace, and the informant would point with pride to the members of the family in it and this often led to talking about them. My questions were open-ended, and directed towards certain areas for both factual information and attitudes.

This account pertains to her work with blacks in Mississippi. Many ethnographers arrange interviews more informally, without appointments. Sessions are often conducted in the ethnographer's residence in order to isolate the interviewee and obtain privacy. The basic pattern of inaugurating and ending the session with "normal conversation," the absence of a formal instrument, and the direction of the discussion toward the research goals of the ethnographer is, however, quite common.

The second major type is "key-informant interviewing." In the course of conducting informal interviews with a number of members of the community, ethnographers generally form close working and often personal relationships with a few consultants. These individuals are then singled out for much more intensive interviews on a more frequent basis, and, as Edgerton and Langness (1974:33) note, "most anthropologists . . . come to rely upon certain persons for much of their detailed or specialized information." The possible dangers of too great a reliance on a few individuals, particularly with regard to sampling and observer effect, have often been described (cf. Young and Young 1961). Why, then, is key-informant interviewing used to a high degree?

The rationale emerges in a statement by Pelto and Pelto (1978:72) that "humans differ in their willingness as well as their capabilities for verbally expressing cultural information. Consequently, the anthropologist usually finds that only a small number of individuals in any community are good key informants." This motive is reiterated by such authors as Chagnon (1974:60), Edgerton and Langness (1974:33), and Kobben (1967:42). As I will argue in Chapters 4 and 6, this facet of ethnographic interviewing is quite revealing with respect to the communicative basis of ethnographic interviewing in general.

Finally, formal interviewing has been used to a limited extent in fieldwork. Obtaining a census of the population that contained basic demographic and economic information used to be de rigueur. This was generally accomplished in small communities by a door-to-door survey using an instrument with both open-ended and precoded questions. Taking a census seems to have lost its general appeal in recent years as ethnographers have become increasingly problem-oriented in focus. Nevertheless, anthropological fieldwork has come under attack from sociologists and quantitatively oriented anthropologists as being too reliant on "subjective" and nonquantitative observation and informal interviewing. As Pelto and Pelto (1973:267–70) report, many fieldworkers have accordingly turned to survey research as a means of providing more "controlled," "objective," and quantifiable data on

their research foci. A number of sources have reported attempts to create a rapprochement between formal and informal techniques (see, for example, Bennett and Thaiss 1970; Brim and Spain 1974; Burawoy 1979; Cancian 1965; Denzin 1970; Freilich 1970; Mitchell 1965; Myers 1977; Speckman 1967).

The literature on ethnographic methodology. The literature on methodological aspects of fieldwork is substantial. One of the most common types of work in the area is the presentation of an anthropologist's experiences in one or more societies, drawing out his or her research design, methods of data collection, and mode of interpretive data. A few of the better-known examples of this type of study are Beattie (1965), Berreman (1962), Chagnon (1974), Freilich (1970), Georges and Jones (1980), Golde (1970), Henry and Saberwal (1969), Lawless, Sutlive, and Zamora (1983), Middletown (1970), Powder-maker (1966), Spindler (1970), and Wax (1971). A related body of literature describes the personal experiences of anthropologists in the field. Belmonte (1979), Dwyer (1982), and Rabinow (1977) provide leading examples of this type of discussion.

Several volumes feature articles that deal with specific aspects of fieldwork (see, for example, Jongmans and Gutkind 1967; Naroll and Cohen 1970). A large body of articles undertakes this task as well, much of which has been published in the "Field Methods and Techniques" section of the journal *Human Organization.* A number of manual-type publications have also been written, many with the beginning fieldworker in mind. (See, for examaple, Agar 1980a; Brim and Spain 1974; Edgerton and Langness 1974; Langness 1965; Langness and Frank 1981; Paul 1953; Pelto 1970; Pelto and Pelto 1973, 1978; Spradley 1979; Whyte 1984; Williams 1967). A number of works have appeared that treat fieldwork in historical perspective (cf. Firth 1957; Stocking 1968, 1974, 1983).

A critical assessment. This body of literature has produced insights that hold the potential for increasing the sophistication with which we view the fieldwork process. The work of Agar (1980a, 1980b; Agar and Hobbs 1982), for example, has helped us understand the way in which interview data reflect both the events described and the context of the interview itself. Berreman (1962) has increased our sophistication with respect to the complex ways in which both "natives" and ethnographers present themselves at different times to different people and regarding the effect of their shifts on data collection. Karp and

Kendall (1982) have questioned the misplaced analogies that have shaped our conception of the role of the fieldworker and the limitations of a positivistic conception of "social facts." Owusu (1978) questions the way in which fieldwork reifies basic Western cultural conceptions by "finding" theoretical constructs in the field.

Unfortunately, these pioneering efforts have not succeeded in turning the ethnographic enterprise onto itself in such a way that the nature of the interview and other research strategies would be revealed. Although a number of authors suggest that we must look at the interview itself as a cultural encounter (e.g., Agar 1980a:91–2, Conklin 1968, and Mintz 1979), no author has yet presented an in-depth statement of how this can be undertaken. Ethnographers accordingly fall back on their own native understanding of the interview. As I will try to show in later chapters, this view is based on a systematic distortion of the nature of the interview as a speech event. In the absence of an adequate grasp on the nature of the interview, the bulk of the literature thus gives the appearance of a host of reiterations of the status quo in terms of basic interviewing procedures and descriptions of how these have been applied in given fieldwork cases.

The lack of an adequate grasp of the interactional and communicative norms that underlie the interview is matched by a failure to grasp the importance of studying the correlative norms of the society in question. Ethnographers sometimes note that other groups have differing kinds of restrictions on who may ask what questions of whom in what circumstances. It has also been argued that questions may not mean the same thing to a member of another speech community, even if translated "accurately" (Edgerton and Langness 1974:44; Hollander 1967:12–13; Leach 1967; Paul 1953:447). These sorts of problems are cited as reasons for remaining critical of the potential of *formal* interviews as fieldwork tools.

The problem here is that rejection of surveys may serve as a cover for the failure to systematically explore the possibility that informal interviewing may suffer from the same sorts of problems. This can only be accomplished by a careful consideration of the compatibility of native communicative patterns and the norms presupposed by the interview and by a careful examination of interviews for hidden misunderstandings. Not only has this task not been accomplished, but the importance of undertaking it has been articulated only rarely. A great deal of attention has been devoted to the idea that "natives" frequently lie and/or give inconsistent answers. Such distortions do occur, but they are dwarfed in comparison with the effects of communicative disparities between ethnographers and their consultants.

Folkloristics

The field of folkloristics exhibits a nearly schizophrenic character with
respect to methodology. On the one hand, generations of amateur and
professional folklorists have compiled masses of oral material through
the most naive means. Collectors have traveled to communities with
folkloric traditions for very short intervals, frequently only days or
weeks. Once there, collectors query passersby with respect to the iden-
tity of the person "who knows the most" ballads, tales, or what have
you. When permission to tape-record or transcribe the material is
given, the informant is asked to tell (or sing) all the items that he or
she knows in the desired genre. The collector may take notes on the
performer and the social setting. The result is the collection of a vast
number of items in a relatively short period of time. Although this
approach is by no means as prevalent now, it is still used by a substan-
tial number of practitioners.

During the past two decades, a new generation of scholars in folk-
lore and related disciplines has discredited this orientation. Many of
these individuals have been influenced by linguistic training, thus de-
veloping greater interest in the formal properties of performances.
Scholars such as Bauman (1975) and Hymes (1981) have shown that
the "tell me all the X that you know" technique generally produces
reports or summaries of the content of folkloric traditions rather than
performances. In other words, the presentation of materials in such an
artificial situation transforms the overall structure and the stylistic de-
tails of the traditions. Worse still is the collector's lack of awareness
that such a transformation has occurred, thus distorting the process of
interpretation.

The influence of the old methodology has been countered by a grow-
ing emphasis on fieldwork methodology. Graduate students in folklore
frequently take classes in sociolinguistics and ethnography, and courses
in folklore methodology are generally de rigueur. Goldstein's *A Guide
for Field Workers in Folklore* (1964) has become the standard refer-
ence work. Here, Goldstein stresses the importance of *systematic* use
of a variety of techniques as well as a heightened awareness of the
need to take the collecting situation explicitly into account in analyzing
the materials (see also Ives 1974; MacDonald 1972). Like ethnogra-
phers, folklorists rely mainly on observation and informal interviewing
in collecting folkloric items and related materials.

A technique developed by Goldstein, the *induced natural context,*
has also gained in popularity (1964:87–90). This involves an initial

assessment of the situations in which a given genre is usually per-
formed. An "accomplice" is then induced to invite other performers
to a gathering; the real purpose of the meeting is not announced. The
collector arrives "unexpectedly," thus theoretically minimizing the ef-
fects of his or her presence. Goldstein reports that this technique
produces results closer to the "natural contexts" of folklore perfor-
mance than to those explicitly structured by the fieldworker ("artifi-
cial contexts").

Two major methodological shortcomings remain. First, Goldstein
and others have successfully identified some of the limitations on the
usefulness of the interview for collectors. They also have a sense of the
effects of the researcher's presence on the form and content of what is
collected, whether in "natural" or "artificial" situations. Like ethnog-
raphers, however, folklorists have seldom gone beyond a commonsen-
sical perspective on the interview. This leads them to misconstrue the
nature of the interview as a speech event and thus the status of the
data it yields. This prompts Goldstein (1964:104) to argue, for ex-
ample, that the interview "supplies the collector with an insider's view
of the individual, his culture, and his folklore" and of the way in which
the informant conceptualizes and orders this knowledge (1964:109,
123). Discourse generated by interviews is structured, however, by the
communicative norms of this type of speech event and by the role of
the interviewer.

This lack of sophistication with respect to the nature of the interview
and the role of the interviewer prevents folkloristic methodologists
from providing their readers with clear guidelines for assessing the role
of these factors in the generation and interpretation of interview data.
This hiatus is all the more important because "Interviewing is the most
common field method employed by folklore collectors" (Goldstein
1964:104).

A second major problem is tied to the concept of "context." Al-
though the new generation of folklorists have laudably pointed to the
importance of the social and linguistic setting in which materials are
collected, this has not led to the development of a sophisticated view
of the nature of contextual components. As Cook-Gumperz and Gum-
perz (1976) argue, the context of a speech event is not simply the sum
total of elements present at the time it emerges. Contexts are not
given, a priori, before the event begins. Contexts are interpretive
frames that are *constructed* by the participants in the course of the
discourse. The presentation of a checklist of elements in the social and
physical setting that are seen as constituting "the context" is thus
theoretically misdirected, as is the notion that "the collector has a clear
duty to place the total situation of record as he observes it" (MacDon-

ald 1972:410). Analysts would be better advised to look closely at the *form* of the performance in order to see how the participants are providing each other with signals as to the situational elements relevant to the meaning of what they are saying. The common practice of observing the "context" in "natural" performances and recording the texts in interviews thus creates a dangerous chasm between text and context (cf. Briggs 1985a).[1]

Oral history

In turning to oral historical interviewing, the same basic methodological schizophrenia is encountered. We find, on the one hand, a number of manuals that describe the way in which oral historians generally design and implement their interviews and interpret their findings. The authors generally include some tips as to how interviews are best undertaken. These pertain to techniques for establishing rapport, expressing interest in the interviewees' memories, avoiding "loaded" questions, and the like in addition to suggestions regarding tape-recording and transcribing interviews (cf. Baum 1971; Davis, Back, and MacLean 1977; Garner 1975; Hoopes 1979; Ives 1974; Moss 1974; Neuenschwander 1976; Shumway and Hartley 1973; Sitton, Mehaffy, and Davis 1983).

   These discussions simply assume, however, that both the authors and their readers know what interviews are, how they work, and their compatibility with the process of articulating one's experiences. They similarly eschew any serious concern with the fact that the products of interviews are dialogic texts that are largely structured by the interviewer. Several authors have argued, for example, that oral historians must compensate for "biases" on the part of either interviewer or respondent that reduce the reliability and validity of interview data (cf. Cutler 1970; Hoffman 1974). As I argue in the section on sociology, conceptualizing the interview process in terms of the way specific "biases" can "distort" the data ultimately succeeds in further obscuring the real problem – the dialogic, contextualized nature of all discourse, including interviews.

   A number of works that have appeared recently do take up some of these issues (see, for example, Allen and Montell 1981; Friedlander 1975; Joyner 1975, 1979; Thompson 1978). These writers help dispel the notion that oral historians collect, even in ideal terms, reflections of historical events. Thompson has articulated the point well. Speaking of social statistics, written documents, published sources, and oral history interviews, he notes: "They all represent . . . the *social perception*