**Why Use Semi-Structured Interviews?**

Semi-structured interviews have been used to great advantage in a wide variety of social movement studies. Such interviewing strategies have been particularly useful in research on loosely organized, short-lived, or thinly documented social movements and in studies that explore issues for which it is difficult to gather data through structured questionnaires, field observation, or documentary analysis. The following are some ways that semi-structured interviewing can be valuable in social movement research.

First, through interviewing methods, scholars can gain access to the motivations and perspectives of a broader and more diverse group of social movement participants than would be represented in most documentary sources. The propaganda and internal documents of social movement organizations, as well as the personal testimonies and recollections of participants, are often produced by official leaders and those who are articulate, educated, and confident about the historic importance of their movement activities. Additionally, the writings and statements of those who are prominent, wealthy, or access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher, but at the cost of a reduced ability to make systematic comparisons between interview responses.

In the field of social movements, semi-structured interviewing is a common methodological tool, especially useful in studies where the goals are exploration, discovery, and interpretation of complex social events and processes and when combined with participant observation and/or documentary methods (Morris 1984; Fantasia 1988; McAdam 1988; Staggenborg 1991; Whittier 1995; Robnett 1996; Ray 1999). But the semi-structured interview can also be used as a streamlined means of obtaining the rich, detailed data typically generated through field research without committing the investigator to prolonged involvement in the lives and activities of social movements (Blee 2001), or as a way of investigating research questions or propositions derived from social movement theory (Tarrow 1977; Rochon 1988; Meyer 1990; Dalton 1995; della Porta 1995).

We begin this chapter by exploring the usefulness of semi-structured interviewing in social movement research. Next, we address how the researcher’s position influences semi-structured interviewing. We then draw from our own research on a variety of social movements to illustrate the major subtypes of semi-structured interviews: oral histories, life histories, key informant interviews, and focus groups. We conclude with a discussion of strategies for analyzing qualitative interview data and a consideration of ethical issues.
influential in society are more likely to be recorded and preserved over time, which disproportionately favors men over women, higher-class participants over those from lower classes, and movement leaders or spokespersons over rank-and-file participants. Interviewing is one means of counteracting the biased availability of documentary material about social movements, allowing researchers access to members of social movements whose activities and understandings would otherwise be lost or filtered through the voices of others (Thompson 1988: 125). To illustrate, Robnett's (1996) interviews with African American women who were active in the civil rights movement uncovered a distinct form of grassroots leadership, which she terms "bridge leadership," carried out by women who were prevented from occupying formal leadership positions by the exclusionary practices of the Black church. This behind-the-scenes leadership that was central to mobilizing mass participation and creating solidarity in the civil rights movement was not acknowledged by earlier studies that relied on documents and interview samples constructed from archival sources generated by mainstream civil rights organizations and leaders (McAdam 1988; Morris 1984).

Any type of interviewing can be used to gain information from a broad range of social movement participants. In semi-structured interviewing, however, it is not only information but also themes and categories of analysis that are generated from the responses of diverse movement participants. The open-ended nature of such interviewing strategies makes it possible for respondents to generate, challenge, clarify, elaborate, or recontextualize understandings of social movements based on earlier interviews, documentary sources, or observational methods. This is particularly helpful for understanding little-studied aspects of social movement dynamics and for studying social movements that are difficult to locate, generate few documents, or have unclear or changing memberships. For example, interviews with members of gay employee groups and human relations officers in Fortune 1000 companies allowed Raeburn (2000) to discover the existence of an elaborate but submerged network of gay activists that has spearheaded the adoption of domestic partner benefits and other gay-inclusive policies in a growing number of American corporations.

Second, semi-structured interviewing strategies make it possible to scrutinize the semantic context of statements by social movement participants and leaders. It is often valuable to understand activists' talk in the context of wider social understandings and discourses. For example, a study of the British fascist movement found that some supporters made statements of racial tolerance and eschewed open expressions of prejudice yet still participated avidly in the agenda of the National Front (Cochrane and Billig 1984).

Social movement scholars often need to assess the context of motivations, beliefs, and attitudes of social movement participants for which it can be misleading to rely on the discrete statements and categorical answers generated by structured interviews or questionnaires (Potter and Wetherell 1988).

Third, semi-structured interviewing allow scrutiny of meaning, both how activists regard their participation and how they understand their social world. Social movement scholars have found such attention to subjective meaning particularly useful for understanding how social movement participants make sense of and justify their actions (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Jenness and Broad 1997). Thompson's (1988: 138) observation that "what the informant believes is indeed a fact (that is, the fact that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened" underscores the importance of understanding social movements from the point of view of their participants. Through semi-structured interviewing, researchers can gain insight into the individual and collective visions, imaginings, hopes, expectations, critiques of the present, and projections of the future on which the possibility of collective action rests and through which social movements form, endure, or disband. Through interviews with women in Italian revolutionary organizations, for example, Passerini was able to describe crucial, but intangible, motivations for women's participation in revolutionary social movements such as the women's expressed "illusion of a free and adventurous life" and their sense of being "worthless, unable to exist, outside the group" (Passerini 1992: 170).

Fourth, semi-structured interviews are able to provide a longitudinal window on social movement activism. They can capture the rhythms of social movement growth and decline, and participant involvement and withdrawal over time. In addition to providing information on how activists become involved when social movements are strong, as, for example, women's mobilization into the U.S. feminist movement in the 1970s, semi-structured interviews can illuminate how activists are mobilized or politically sustained during periods of relative quiescence or inactivity (Taylor 1989). Moreover, such interviewing strategies permit social movement researchers to probe complexities of cause and effect that are often neglected in cross-sectional data. Using interviewing to explore activists' lives over time, for example, scholars have challenged the assumption that involvement in social movements is necessarily preceded by beliefs consistent with the movement (Blee 2001).

Fifth, semi-structured interviews allow social movement scholars access to such nuanced understandings of social movement outcomes as the construction of collective and individual identities (Melucci 1989; Taylor 1996;
Rather than assuming that identities are simple reflections of background characteristics, scholars have become increasingly attentive to how social movement identities are formed and how they relate to social and political activism, as in Passerini's finding that female revolutionary identities are the result rather than the precipitator of involvement in political violence (Passerini 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Such analyses require researchers to probe deeply into the self-understandings of respondents, listening carefully to how social movement participants describe themselves and their movement practices and to the emotional investments participants make in activist identities. To the extent that emotions are what connect activists to one another and that emotions play an important role in channeling collective action (Taylor 1996; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000), intensive interviews are the best method for probing deep emotional issues.

Sixth, semi-structured interviews bring human agency to the center of movement analysis. Qualitative interviews are a window into the everyday worlds of activists, and they generate representations that embody the subjects' voices, minimizing, at least as much as possible, the voice of the researcher (Ragin 1994). Concepts that account for human agency—elite support, organization, indigenous networks, strategy, and rationality—are central to resource mobilization and political process approaches to social movements (Morris forthcoming). To the extent that qualitative interviews seek in-depth data that record subjects' own descriptions and understandings of events, they are particularly useful for discovering why the theory being tested may not fit the data well. For example, Morris's interviews (1984) with civil rights leaders revealed the various strategies used by Black activists as early as the 1910s to construct openings in the political system that facilitated the emergence of a mass-based civil rights movement in the mid-1950s. This information led Morris to a formulation of resource mobilization theory that assigns greater weight to the causal role that indigenous institutions (specifically, the Black church and Black colleges) play in mobilizing protest. Similarly, Staggenborg's (1991) interviews with pro-choice activists advanced social movement theory by demonstrating the importance of two distinct types of mobilizing structures—professional leadership and formalized organizational structures as well as indigenous, loosely organized grassroots networks—for the continued mobilization of the pro-choice movement following the legalization of abortion in 1973.

Finally, semi-structured interviewing allows scholars to scrutinize the ways in which messages of social movements are received by members, targeted recruits, intended audiences, and others (Gamson 1998). Studies of media reception find that people understand, assimilate, and use messages very differently, depending on their own identities, social positions, values, relationships to the broadcaster, and other factors. This finding suggests the importance of analyzing both the messages of social movements and their reception by intended audiences and others. Various types of in-depth interviewing allow social movement scholars to assess the complex ways in which movement ideas are interpreted both cognitively and emotionally by different audiences throughout the duration of a social movement.

**Positioning the Researcher**

All social research involves what Thorne (1978:73) describes as a "problematic balance, a dialectic between being an insider, a participant in the world one studies, and an outsider, observing and reporting on that world." That balance is absolutely fundamental for collecting rich data in social movement research. Successful qualitative interviewing depends on the interviewer's understanding of their own position vis-à-vis participants in the social movement under study.

**Insider versus Outsider Roles**

Certainly, being a participant can facilitate access to a movement and promote the trust and rapport necessary for collecting sound data. Feminist scholars and others have shown the benefits of the interviewer and interviewee sharing a common standpoint before the interview takes place, emphasizing especially the way the ideological compatibility of the researcher and those being studied enhances rapport, empathy, and trust (Collins 1991). It would have been very difficult for Rupp, Taylor, and Whittier to conduct their research on lesbian feminist communities in the United States had they not been involved over a long period of time in the lesbian feminist community (Taylor and Whittier 1992). In describing the benefits of their sexual identities, Taylor and Rupp (1996) emphasize that it is not that insider status gave them a privileged vantage point from which they could write a more authentic account of the community, but rather that they had knowledge of ephemeral developments that might not appear in any written sources or oral histories and were able to interview some women—particularly radical lesbian separatists—who were only willing to speak to them because they knew they were lesbians and trusted that they would generate their analysis from a lesbian feminist standpoint.

Despite the obvious advantages of an insider position, being a nonparticipant also has benefits. Outsiders can provide valuable perspectives on the taken-for-granted assumptions of social movement participants. They may be better able than would participants to elicit full rationales of and extensive
interpretive accounts from social movement participants (Snow, Bedford, and Anderson 1986). Yet nonparticipants can also have difficulty obtaining or retaining access to certain social movements. Consider what happened to Lofland when he was researching an aspiring new religion for his book *Doomsday Cult* (1977). When a local leader decided that Lofland's sociological interests, which he had expressed from the outset, were more sincere than his religious interests and that he was never going to convert to the religion, Lofland lost access to the group.

**Movement Factions**

Nearly all social movements contain factions. It would not be overstating the matter to say that the researcher who does not encounter differences of opinion, cliques, and conflicts in the course of doing field research on protest groups has probably failed to obtain accurate information about the movement being studied. In the data collection stage, the trick in handling factions and conflicts is to figure out how to remain neutral, because taking sides with one group most assuredly will mean being denied access to the other group. When it comes to dealing with highly factionalized movements, being a participant makes it less likely that the researcher can remain truly an outsider to disputes. One way to handle situations where complete neutrality is not possible is for the researcher to align with a single faction or group and be open about being "on your group's side" in any conflicts (Lofland and Lofland 1995). This is the standpoint Fantasia took in his study *Cultures of Solidarity* (1988), based on the modern labor movement. Fantasia was working at a small iron foundry when a wildcat strike occurred, a situation that allowed him to develop close personal relationships and sympathies with workers involved in labor struggles but that necessitated little contact with management.

For nonparticipants, it is particularly important to avoid making alignments with factions during the early stages of fieldwork when a researcher is seeking entrée and trying to build rapport with participants. In her study of a women's self-help movement, Taylor (1996) established her first contact with Depression After Delivery, the East Coast branch of the postpartum support movement, only to discover that there was another, West Coast group, Postpartum Support International, that had arisen earlier to address postpartum illness. Fortunately, this mistake did not jeopardize Taylor's initial access to either faction. However, the ongoing competition, differences of opinion, and personal conflicts between the leaders of these two groups were a minefield that had to be negotiated at every stage of the fieldwork. To maintain access to both groups, Taylor tried to make light of the conflict by openly discussing the tendency of all social movements to give rise to factions, conflicts, and disagreements and providing concrete examples of the divisions that plagued other social movements. She emphasized that she was studying both sides and would uphold strict confidentiality regarding the nature of each side's personal views.

**Strategies for Conducting Effective Interviews**

All types of semi-structured interviewing require the active and visible engagement of the researcher to create an authentic dialogue with interviewees. Researchers make use of several strategies to encourage interviewees to provide comprehensive answers that will make rich qualitative data. The first step is to construct an interview guide that takes into consideration the central aims of the research as well as the social and demographic characteristics of the interview sample (see Lofland and Lofland 1995 and Berg 1998 for more specific guidelines regarding the construction of semi-structured interview schedules). Both the order of the questions and the level of language should be adapted to the sample so as to promote rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. As a general rule, it is best to end rather than begin a semi-structured interview with a short written list of demographic questions, since the closed-ended format of such an instrument may discourage the open-ended discussion, reflection, and rapport that make for an effective qualitative interview. Perhaps most importantly, it is necessary at the outset of an interview to clearly explain the purposes of the interview, the topics in which the researcher is interested, and the depth of responses the researcher is seeking (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Once the interview begins, the interviewer should not feel too constrained by the guide. Follow-up questions, probes for clarification, and additional inquiries can be added when appropriate to the flow of the interview to encourage interviewees to provide more detailed responses, to give examples, to return to an earlier point, to convey intangible feelings and emotions, and to present a vivid sense of themselves and their experiences. In some situations, interviewers give respondents a great deal of latitude to direct the interview, and interject questions only when a particular avenue of discussion has been fully explored. Other times, especially with reticent informants, researchers play a more active role in directing the interview, presenting new issues or additional factors for a respondent to consider. Some social movement researchers report that the problem with interviewing activists who are highly committed to a cause is not drawing them out but rather keeping the interviewee focused on the type of information sought (Taylor and Rupp 1991). In every case, interviewers must be sufficiently
follow two principles. First, sampling should strive for completeness. Social movement researchers choose respondents who are knowledgeable about the topic under investigation, and continue to add new interviewees until the topic is saturated, that is, the interviews are garnering the same kinds of narratives and interpretations. Second, sampling should follow the principle of similarity and dissimilarity. Interviewees are chosen to see how the interpretations or accounts of similarly situated respondents compare, as well as to ascertain how those respondents with very different characteristics or in different circumstances differ. In her study of activists from the 1960s, Klatch (1999) used both methods, relying on snowball sampling to identify a pool of respondents who were former activists in a prominent "new left" group and those who had been active in a major "new right" movement organization, and then selecting additional respondents to increase the diversity of interviewees in terms of geography, ideologies, and organizational positions.

Taylor’s (1996) study of a women’s self-help movement illustrates a number of advantages of semi-structured interviewing, including how intensive interviews can maximize description, discovery, and the active involvement of participants in social movement research, as well as how interviewing methods can be used to create new theoretical insights. Initially Taylor hypothesized that postpartum illness was connected to the cultural and oppressive aspects of motherhood. In an effort to understand women's experiences of postpartum illness from their own point of view, Taylor initially relied on fifty-two semi-structured interviews conducted with women who self-identified as having suffered “emotional problems” in the year following the birth or adoption of a child, and a comparison group of fifty women who had given birth to or adopted a child within the previous two years. When, in the course of conducting the interviews, Taylor discovered that a national self-help movement focused on postpartum depression was emerging and was playing a role in women's self-definations, this opened the door for her to begin thinking about the role of social movements in the construction of illness. The open-ended nature of the interviews revealed that women use the term postpartum illness not in a strict clinical sense, but rather to communicate a complex of distressing emotions that violate gendered emotion norms of appropriate motherhood. Further, Taylor’s interviewees pointed to women’s organizing around postpartum illness as a means of questioning the male-dominated medical establishment and resisting the orthodox white and middle-class view of the selfless, devoted, glowing mother by conveying the variety of women’s experiences of motherhood. As Taylor’s focus shifted to the self-help movement mobilized around postpartum illness, she supplemented use of the interview method with a participatory action approach that incorporated both her own participation in the activist community and empowerment of the community by encouraging their involvement in the research process (see Naples and Clark 1996). She sought the advice of self-help activists in designing the study, identifying interviewees and obtaining other data sources, and interpreting results (Taylor 1998; Taylor 2000).

In providing an explanation of the postpartum self-help movement that links it to gendered norms and practices, Taylor also developed a theoretical framework that opened the way for research on such topics as the role of emotion in constructing the collective identities deployed by social movements, in defining the grievances that motivate activism, and in the distinctive rituals and cultural codes that characterize different social movement cultures (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Robnett 1996; Blee 1998; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000; Taylor 2000). As this study illustrates, one of the main uses of qualitative interviewing strategies is to allow the researcher to explore social movement participants' views of reality in order to revise and extend existing theory (Burawoy et al. 1991).
Types of Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to simple respondent interviews, there are four types of semi-structured interviews that are used extensively in social movement research. These involve somewhat different interviewing strategies, although many studies use elements of several approaches. Below we discuss interviewing focus group interviews.

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Oral History Interviewing

Oral history interviews aim to elicit a robust or “thick” description of a historical period or situation from the perspective of those who lived through that time. Researchers use oral history interviewing to understand social movements of the past (Morris 1984) or past periods of current social movements (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Staggenborg 1991). This technique is particularly valuable for social movements for which little documentary evidence has been preserved, such as those populated by the poor, those that are marginal or fleeting, and those that operate out of public view or through informal networks. Oral history interviewing also may be the best source of information on certain historical aspects of social movements—such as the role of influential allies and other shifting political opportunities in movement success, perceptions and experiences of rank-and-file members, and the internal dynamics of movement organizations—for which there are few other sources.

The goal of oral history interviewing, aptly summarized by Portelli (1997: ix), is to scrutinize “[t]he relationship between private and public histories, experiences, and narratives.” Oral history interviewing thus operates as a technique of bridging, seeking to understand social contexts through stories of individual experiences and to comprehend experiences of the past through stories told in the present. McAdam’s (1988) in-depth study of the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi used oral histories to develop important propositions pertaining to the significance of social networks for mobilization and to the short-run and long-run biographical consequences of participation in high-risk social movement activism. Oral history interviewing projects are often based on multiple interviews, seeking perspectives and accounts from those in various social groups and social positions at the time.

Blee’s (1991) study of women who joined the massive Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s suggests some of the strengths and weaknesses of research based on oral history interviewing. Most histories of the Klan based on documentary sources focus entirely on men members, assuming that women were minor, incidental players, mere window dressing behind which men carried out the real politics of hatred and bigotry. Blee’s oral histories of former Klanwomen, however, tell otherwise. Women played a significant role in this Klan’s vicious campaigns of rumor, boycotts, and intimidation of African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other minorities.

Moreover, Blee’s work illuminates how oral narratives can help develop new theoretical perspectives on social movements. Her oral histories revealed what documentary sources concealed: that many Klanwomen held complicated attitudes about gender and support for women’s rights (the rights of white, native-born, and Protestant women only, of course) with rigid adherence to nationalism, racial hierarchies, and Christian supremacy. These understandings—which raise questions about the extent to which the personal beliefs of participants match the ideologies of social movement organizations—are inaccessible except through oral interviews.

On the other hand, Blee’s work shows that oral accounts can be misleading if not used with proper caution. In their oral histories, Klanwomen related experiences with “clannish” Catholics and Jews, offensive African Americans, or troublesome immigrants to explain why they joined the Klan. But these are not likely to be true accounts of personal experience, as they mirror the stories circulated in Klan propaganda (Blee 1993). Moreover, the perspectives of Klan members provide little information on macro-level factors that influence social movement mobilization or outcomes. Thus it is important for social movement researchers to compare oral history accounts from differently situated persons and to compare oral histories with documentary and other historical data (Naples 1999: 10).

Life History Interviewing

In contrast to oral history interviewing’s focus on historical events and processes, life histories in social movement research are more oriented toward understanding the activist experiences of individual respondents over time, or to exploring the interaction between macro events such as protests and social movements with individual actions and identities (Connell 1995; Rubin and Rubin 1995). In life history interviewing, the informant her/himself often is the subject of study, in addition to serving as an observer and narrator of the past. Scholars using life histories pay close attention to how individuals tell stories about their past and to how their accounts of social movement participation fit with other events in their lives. The desired outcome of a life history interview is a personal narrative, what Hart describes as “analogous to a story with a beginning, middle and end; with a
plot; with main characters, scoundrels and paragons; and with background settings" (1992: 634). Life history interviews are particularly well suited to scholarship in which narrative is "both object and method of analysis" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 198). This includes research on identity construction and on how actors justify their social movement activity.

Life history interviews can be fairly unstructured. The researcher simply asks the interviewee to tell the story of her/his life, how s/he came to participate in the movement, the nature of her/his participation, and how it influences who s/he is today. Interviewers generally do not intervene in the informant's life story narration to suggest particular directions or questions, but make comments to encourage more complete expositions of events, to develop aids to respondents' memories by pegging recollections to historical events or life transitions, or to direct respondents to finish relevant stories that were incompletely narrated (see Connell 1995: 89-92). Researchers then analyze the narrative to understand what events were selected as sufficiently significant or pivotal to respondents' lives to be included in their life stories and how respondents connect experiences in social movements in causal sequences.

In Blee's study of women members of the contemporary U.S. racist movement (1996, 2001), she used life history interviewing to explore how women—most from stable, secure, and politically moderate backgrounds—came to be committed to the violent and extremist agendas of organized racism. Blee elicited the women's own life stories rather than posing questions about their beliefs in order to avoid the parroting of organizational propaganda that is so typical of members of racist groups. Her decision to use life history interviewing was also shaped by her theoretically informed interest in understanding racist activism as a constructed identity whose meaning changes with increased exposure to a racist group.

A life history approach was critical in Blee's research for eliciting information about the intersection of identity and ideology in the racist movement. In this narrative, racist women used conspiratorial teachings of the racist movement to describe events and turning points in their lives, for example, describing the loss of a job or a failed love affair as the consequence of Jewish power. Over time, they identified more closely with racist group ideas until, as one woman declared, "It is not that I am in the Klan. It is that the Klan is in me."

Although revealing how social movement participants make sense of their lives, life histories need to be used with caution since they can be highly unreliable indicators of autobiographical change. For example, virtually all of Blee's racist informants spoke of their decision to participate in an organized racist group as the result of a "conversion." Yet it was clear from their responses to a structured questionnaire that few became converted to racism before joining a racist group. Most joined through a personal connection to a current member and only then learned intensely racist ways of thinking. Mills's (1940) insight that vocabularies of motive are often furnished "after the act" is a useful reminder that it is problematic to take at face value a respondent's articulated reasons for joining a social movement. For this reason, social movement researchers need to weigh life history accounts against data from other sources.

**Key Informant Interviewing**

Key informant interviewing, originally derived from anthropological fieldwork, is used to gain access to insider understandings of a social movement (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 61). In key informant interviewing, the researcher questions a few well-placed informants, sometimes over an extensive period of time, to obtain descriptive information that might be too difficult and time-consuming to uncover through more structured data-gathering techniques, such as surveys, or through conducting multiple semi-structured individual interviews (Tremblay 1957). The researcher might be interested, for example, in social psychological questions, such as how members are recruited to a movement, the level of commitment participants invest in a movement, the emotions associated with participation, the evolution of a movement's collective action frame, or the biographical consequences of a social movement. Or the research question might pertain to organizational considerations, such as a movement's structure, strategies, and culture (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Staggenborg 1991; Taylor 1996).

The most important requirement for selecting a key informant is the interviewee's position or role in the social movement being studied. The criteria for choosing key informants are the amount of knowledge he or she has about a topic and his or her willingness to communicate with the researcher. Social movement researchers have used key informant interviewing to delineate the organizations and networks that comprise a movement (Rupp and Taylor 1987); obtain descriptive data about social movement strategies, cultures, and internal dynamics (Whittier 1995); and map out the relationships between social movement organizations in a larger social movement industry (Morris 1984; Fantasia 1988).

Key informant interviews played a major role in Rupp and Taylor's research documenting the continuity of the American women's movement between 1945 and the early 1960s, a period in which both the scholarly and popular literature assumed that the women's movement had died (Rupp and
Taylor 1987). The archival evidence pointed to a continuance phase during which the women's movement was not a broadly based grassroots movement but was instead a small movement of elite women, primarily white, middle-or upper-class, well-educated professional women who had developed a commitment to feminism in the early decades of the twentieth century and for whom "feminism" and "women's rights" had come to have a rather narrow application.

Although the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funded the research, suggested that Rupp and Taylor limit the use of interviews to key informants who might fill in gaps in the written record, they conducted interviews also to check the validity of sources and interpretations. They interviewed twelve women who occupied leadership positions in the movement. To the extent that they interviewed women to find out about the features of a movement that existed in the past, the interviews could also be considered oral histories. Since Rupp and Taylor needed to obtain large amounts of data from these women, the average interview lasted four to six hours. The interviews were structured conversations, with the "experts" doing most of the talking. Many of the women, who ranged in age from their mid-sixties to early eighties, were reliving major events of their pasts, some of them reflecting on them for the first time. In many cases, the interview became a social event involving food and general conversation, during which, with the tape recorder off, some of the most sensitive information—about conflicts between personalities and women's sexual orientation—was shared.

These key informant interviews were essential to Taylor's (1989) conceptualization of movement abeyance structures, which she defines as activist networks that provide organizational and ideological bridges between different upsurges of activism by the same challenging group. Certainly, the ties between the major suffrage organizations of the 1910s and the National Woman's Party, which was the core feminist organization in the post-1945 period, were clear from the archival evidence. However, it was only through interviews with three key informants that Rupp and Taylor uncovered the connections between the women's rights movement of the 1940s and 1950s and the resurgent women's movement of the 1960s.

As this example illustrates, the crucial distinction between key informant interviews and respondent interviews is that in key informant interviews the interviewee's experiences and motivations are not the unit of analysis; rather the interviewee is being asked to serve as an expert to inform the researcher about various aspects of the movement. At times, researchers treat interviewees as both informants and respondents, in which case it is advisable to group questions in the interview guide according to the role of the interviewee to enhance the flow of the interview (see the interview guide published in the appendix of Rupp and Taylor 1987 for an example). Although Rupp and Taylor did individual interviews of key informants, in some research it may be more efficient or productive to do group interviews with key informants (Melucci 1988).

Focus Group Interviewing

Focus group interviews are discussions between a small group of participants guided by a moderator to obtain information about a particular topic of interest to the researcher. There is some disagreement in the literature about the optimum size of a focus group; some writers recommend six to ten members as the ideal size (Morgan 1997), and others suggest that it is more effective to have smaller size (five to seven people) focus groups (Berg 1998). Focus group interviewing is relatively new to social movement research. Focus groups are less novel, however, to social movements, who sometimes use them to devise collective action frames and other strategies that reflect the interests of their constituencies.

There are several advantages to group interviews. In contrast to individual interviews, focus group sessions allow researchers to observe interactions about a discussion topic, which can illuminate the way social movement activists collectively frame issues and construct group solidarity. For example, Gamson (1992) held discussions among small groups of working-class people to probe the way people form collective opinions about current political issues, such as affirmative action and nuclear power. Focus groups "provide a window into how others think and talk" with the particular advantage of mimicking natural conversations and interactions, and creating an active, dynamic "process of sharing and comparing among participants" (Morgan 1997). Focus groups can also provide insight into the way a social movement's targets interpret the movement. To generate information about the way viewing audiences make sense of gay and lesbian activists' appearances on television talk shows, Gamson (1998) conducted focus groups with talk show audiences. Finally, like semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups allow the researcher to probe the meaning or interpretation of verbally expressed individual views, opinions, and experiences and to obtain naturally arising glimpses into people's biographies.

Focus groups are becoming a powerful tool among social movement scholars working from a "tripartite" model of cultural investigation in which data about texts, production, and reception are collected and the intersections between them analyzed. Focus group interviewing is particularly useful
for studying the cultural outcomes of social movements, such as how people understand and incorporate the ideas, goals, practices, and identities of protest groups (Gamson 1992). To the researcher's disadvantage, however, focus groups provide only fragments of individuals' biographies. They are further limited by the fact that the data generated by this method are essentially group data derived from interactions that distort individual expressions of opinion. Nevertheless, used in combination with other types of data, such as individual interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence, focus groups can produce data about the individual and collective social realities of social movement participants and the way audiences apprehend and interpret a movement.

As an offshoot of a larger project (Rupp and Taylor 2002), Taylor, Rupp, and Joshua Gamson are interested in drag performances as a form of protest that promotes some of the goals of the larger gay and lesbian movement. Treating drag performances as an example of the variety of cultural and discursive protest repertoires intended to enunciate new cultural codes, they are investigating the role that drag performances play in undermining gender and sexual dichotomies and fostering the construction of a collective identity by inscribing community among the seemingly diverse audiences (straight and gay, male and female) who attend the performances. Over a period of five months, they conducted ten focus groups ranging in size from four to twelve participants comprised of audience members who attended drag performances at a cabaret in a major resort area in the United States. Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson obtained participants by distributing invitations at the evening shows and conducted the focus group sessions in the cabaret the next evening prior to the show. Typically there were two researchers present at each focus group, one to facilitate the group and the other to observe the group, take field notes about group dynamics, and assist with tape-recording the groups and identifying voices later during transcription. The discussions were moderately structured to allow participants' interpretations to emerge through a process that resembles everyday conversation. Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson also administered a questionnaire to participants after the group session, covering basic demographic information as well as questions on income, education, religion, sexual identity, and political identification.

Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson had two rationales for using focus groups rather than individual interviews. First, they wanted to observe participants' interactions as they were asked to interpret collectively the meaning of the gender displays used in the performances. Second, they were interested in observing how participants would interact when placed in a situation that, like the shows themselves, required the construction of a collective identity that bridged different genders and sexualities. The focus groups were generally mixed in terms of class, race, education, income, and sexual identity. It was not unusual for a group to be composed of same-sex and heterosexual couples, working-class and upper-class individuals, and transsexual and transgendered participants, as well as people who embrace traditional gender and sexual categories. While the audience's diversity sometimes made it tricky to facilitate the groups, the heterogeneity of the groups and the interactions that took place in them revealed insights into the way the race, gender, class, ethnic, and sexual identities of audience members' shaped their political consciousness, as well as the complex negotiations that take place in the construction of a collective identity. Focus group participants were not only willing to express unconventional identities and sexual attractions, but they openly questioned other members of the group about their sexual identities and reactions to the gender performances of the drag queens. For example, in one group, which included two heterosexual-identified married couples and a lesbian couple, a married woman expressed her sexual attraction to one of the drag queens even though "I'm not a lesbian." In another, a heterosexual-identified married man admitted getting sexually aroused by one of the drag queens, who fondled him after he gave him a tip, and a gay male participant questioned him about how that led him to interpret his sexual orientation. Such openness was due in part to the sociopolitical climate of the drag shows—the drag queens deliberately use audience participation strategies in their shows to foster the contestation of gender categories and meanings and the construction of community—which spilled over to the discussion groups.

Although focus groups are just beginning to be used by students of social movements, they could become a powerful tool for generating data and building new theoretical perspectives about the cultural outcomes of social movements. In contrast to individual interviews, they allow the researcher to observe the group interactions that underlie the construction of collective identity, collective action frames, and the emotional dynamics involved in the creation of oppositional communities.

Interpreting and Analyzing Interview Data

In his textbook on social research, Ragin (1994) notes that a primary difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is that quantitative data-gathering techniques are data condensers: they condense data to reveal the big picture. Qualitative methods, by contrast, are data enhancers: they enhance data to make it possible to see aspects of their subjects that might otherwise be missed. If obtaining in-depth detailed knowledge of social
movements is one of the strengths of qualitative interview studies, this is also one of its drawbacks. When it comes to analyzing qualitative interview data, researchers find that they spend more of their time engaged in file work than in fieldwork. This is one of the reasons that studies based on semi-structured interviews are generally based on a fairly small number of interviews.

In semi-structured interviewing, analysis and interpretation are ongoing processes. As opposed to quantitative research, which depends on the completion of data collection to begin analysis, designs based on semi-structured interviews require researchers to begin analyzing data as it is being collected, and these initial analyses may provoke changes in the study. Based on their interpretations of earlier interviews, for example, researchers decide whom to select for subsequent interviews, what questions to ask, and what additional topics are worth exploring. The interpretation of initial interviews can also reshape the direction of the study. Social movement researchers may find the need to study different groups or activist networks, or to interview other types of respondents (followers as well as leaders), or to alter the questions and topics raised in subsequent interviews to reflect the understandings garnered in early waves of interpretation of interviews. Such flexibility allows researchers both to incorporate new avenues of inquiry suggested by respondents' interviews and to abandon areas that turn out to be unproductive or to correct theoretical misrepresentations in the original research design (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

In analyzing semi-structured interviews, researchers make an effort to clarify concepts and categories through successive, alternating waves of data collection and interpretation. In this iterative process, the first set of interviews are allowed to be wide-ranging in scope, with broad questions and little effort to limit the direction of interviewees' narratives (see Rubin and Rubin 1995 for further discussion of this technique). Through these interviews, the researcher seeks to develop a sense of important themes and directions. By interpreting and analyzing these initial interviews, the range and topics of successive waves of interviewing and analysis can be narrowed to focus on particular themes or topics that emerge as central or critical. Both the questions addressed to subsequent interviewees and the sampling of later respondents reflect these more tightly focused topics and interpretations. Oral and life history interviews and focus groups may also be organized in this fashion or, as in the case of research that seeks broad information about a social movement or detailed understanding of participants' self-understandings, may remain very open-ended and free-ranging throughout the project. In either case, interpreting interview data involves working both up from data and down from existing ideas, propositions, concepts, theories, and hypotheses in the social movement literature.

While we have emphasized the advantages of semi-structured interviewing in social movement research, it is important to keep in mind that even the most nondirective interviews ultimately produce data derived from artificially constructed realities. Interviews are highly situational conversations, respondents can engage in retrospective interpretation, the interviewer can fail to establish the level of rapport necessary to obtain accurate data, and interviewees can conceal or distort information. Because semi-structured interviews, like every method, reveal slightly different facets of social life, most scholars of social movements use a combination of several data-collection techniques (typically interviews, observation, and documentary evidence) to investigate the same question. Triangulation is the term used to refer to the combination of different kinds of data (usually three). Triangulation both increases the amount of detail about a topic and counteracts threats to validity associated with any one of the single methods (Denzin 1989).

Researchers develop interpretations of interview data through systematic procedures of coding, categorizing, and analyzing. Qualitative methods are used in social movement research to uncover the essential features of a case or number of cases, and the qualitative researcher typically uses the case or cases to exemplify one or more general theoretical processes pertaining to social movements. Coding transcribed interview narratives depends, therefore, on the objectives of the study. Passages in interviews can be coded descriptively for topics such as movement goals and strategies, names of individuals or organizations, chronologies of protest events, style and emotional content of narration, and any other meaningful dimensions. Linking coded interview passages together makes it possible to trace the history of the movement, activists networks and organizations, biographies of leaders or members, and chronologies of events.

In analyzing data derived from semi-structured interviews, researchers also pay attention to more abstract issues, including underlying themes, central ideas, core meanings, and the structures of narration, and use these to reexamine interview transcripts to check that the data are being represented accurately (see Denzin 1989; Lofland and Lofland 1995; and Berg 1998 for more detailed discussion of techniques for analyzing qualitative interview data). By coding, categorizing, and analyzing semi-structured interviews, researchers thus develop concepts that are increasingly abstracted from, but consistent with, individual accounts. At the same time, qualitative methods are holistic, which means that aspects of the movements are viewed in the context of whole movements. And, in analyzing the data, qualitative
researchers make every effort to anchor their interpretations in the everyday understandings and language of their subjects.

Until recently, the process of coding, categorizing, and analyzing was largely done by hand, but the availability of computerized software packages has reshaped how scholars manage and interpret qualitative interviewing data. A detailed description of computer software goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but there are two common types of computerized data handling for semi-structured interviews. (An excellent overview of relevant software is found in Dohan and Sanchez-Jankowski 1998.) First, many word-processing programs make it possible to code efficiently qualitative interviewing data by allowing researchers to search for key words or word patterns, although retrieval procedures for this type of coding can prove cumbersome (Richards and Richards 1994). Second, there are a number of computerized software packages written specifically for managing and analyzing qualitative data such as that generated by semi-structured interviewing. One of the more popular of these is NUDIST, which can manage various kinds of text data such as interview transcripts, allowing text to be coded, indexed, retrieved, and grouped through a number of searching methods, including Boolean, context, proximity, and sequencing searches.

Conclusion

In recent years scholars have made good use of semi-structured interviewing techniques to illuminate new areas of social movement mobilization, develop new theories and questions about social movements, and understand a broad range of social movement types. These methods offer significant advantages for emerging research agendas on the cultural and emotional dynamics of social movements and on the construction of meanings and identities by social movement participants. They offer the potential for much-needed longitudinal studies of social movements and their organizations and members. Triangulation of methods in social movement research offers particular promise as a means of increasing analytic comprehensiveness and complexity. For example, semi-structured interviewing can be combined with research strategies that allow more systematic comparisons between comparable response categories, such as structured questionnaires or network analysis to link participants' descriptions of meaning with characteristics of social movement organizations. Similarly, the combination of participant observation or document analysis with semi-structured interviewing can be a useful means of analyzing the specific contexts within which participants in social movements construct their understandings of these movements.

It is important to consider the ethical obligations of researchers when employing semi-structured interviewing. Some social movement researchers have a preference for data generated from qualitative interviews because they lend themselves to the construction of representations of social movements couched in the language that ordinary people use to observe and describe their world. However, researchers who solicit the stories of social movement participants—perhaps to a greater extent than researchers who rely on observational or documentary methods—can find themselves privy to very intense and private emotions and experiences. The scholarly obligation to protect research subjects from harm may necessitate guarantees of confidentiality that ensure that material gained in interviews will not be made public in such a way that individuals can be identified (Blee 1999). It may also involve broader and more vague measures, such as taking care that the process of interviewing itself does not exploit the emotional vulnerabilities of respondents simply to gain data or does not provoke unnecessarily painful or troubling emotions or memories on the part of the interviewee (Taylor 1996). The ethical obligation of scholars who operate according to feminist or other emancipatory principles may extend to including interviewees as research collaborators, even to according interviewees input into the interpretation of their stories. Such efforts seek to reduce the interpretive authority of researchers and expand those of participants in the analysis of social movements.

Social movements scholars who use semi-structured interviewing techniques must present interviews in sufficient detail that a reader can judge the strengths and limitations of their interpretation. That means taking care to avoid using dramatic data that may not be the most significant. Moreover, the presentation of such work should be consistent with inconsistencies in the interviews, which, if possible, should be explained, not omitted. To the extent that social movement researchers often focus on interpreting historically or culturally significant events, a high-quality analysis should communicate to the readers a full and accurate feel for the specific context and everyday world of the activist group, no matter how atypical (see Rubin and Rubin 1995). And, finally, qualitative researchers should strive for a balance between clarification of the underlying character of the movement under investigation and the theoretical concepts it exemplifies. These principles can be used to guide social movement interviewing projects toward a rich and complex presentation of research.

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