

#### 4. NARRATIVE RESOURCES

What fund of experiential knowledge does the storytelling respondent summon to formulate his or her narratives? How does the respondent use this repository? Let us compare two kinds of answers to these questions.

One answer, of course, derives from the notion that the fund of knowledge is a vessel of answers and that access is relatively straightforward. In this view, the respondent ideally reports concisely and accurately his or her subjective sentiments, feelings, and behaviors. The respondent acts as the *reporter* of the subject's knowledge. The other kind of answer stems from the view that the fund of knowledge is a diverse, multifaceted, and emerging resource and that access to it is actively selective and constructive. In this view, the respondent both construes and calls on what is considered relevant in relation to the matters under consideration in the interview, assembling the information so that it makes sense as a response, that it coalesces into a circumstantially sensible and relevant story. In this case, the respondent acts as the *narrator* of experiential knowledge.

##### **Constructing the Stock of Knowledge**

Viewing the respondent as narrator, the active approach features a subject possessing a fund or *stock* of knowledge that is simultaneously substantive, reflexive, and emergent (Schütz, 1967). In practice, that which relevantly comprises the respondent's stock of knowledge depends on how parties to the interview construe and manage their respective roles in relation to what is being asked about and the answers being conveyed. What the respondent accesses in her stock of knowledge depends on the role she takes, on whether, say, she is speaking as a mother, as an adult daughter, or as a spouse. As Pool (1957) implied earlier, the experiential information or data obtained in the interview are as much about the particular drama from which that information or data are obtained as about the respondent's experience. Quite apart from the ostensible neutrality of the interview and the unbiased interviewer, the respondent's stock of knowledge can shift about in the course of the interview in relation to the role taken by the respondent. (This applies to the interviewer as well and will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.) For all practical purposes, the stock of knowledge is always the stock at hand.

Take a respondent who describes the home care she provides for her aged mother with dementia. When the respondent speaks as an adult daughter, her vessel of answers, as it were, might be very different from when she speaks as a spouse (see Abel, 1991). Speaking as an adult daughter, the respondent is likely to frame her answer in terms of the events and sentiments of the daughter and mother's interpersonal history. Speaking as a spouse, the experiential purview of the respondent's answers keys into relations with her husband and their domestic affairs. Further complications arise when it is not clear what position she takes in responding to interview items. The stock of knowledge is emergent in the sense that the respondent not only conveys information about his or her life but simultaneously activates and manages—narrates—what is accessed and the diverse meanings that this entails.

The narrating respondent's stock of knowledge is quite different from the passive respondent's vessel of answers. As a narrative resource, the stock of knowledge might be likened to several different shifting vessels of answers. In this regard, the vessels that are "there" and available for securing and conveying answers depend on the role or situated identity of the respondent. What is evidently there when the respondent, say, speaks as an adult daughter is not necessarily what is evidently there when she speaks as a spouse, a mother, or someone else. The circumstantial "thereness" or practical substance of this respondent's stock of knowledge depends on the position she takes in reaching back into her experience, retrieving information, and formulating an answer.

The analogy of the multiple, shifting vessels of answers does not fully capture the dynamic features of narrative resources, however. For example, the respondent who speaks of caregiving from the point of view of the adult daughter may, in the course of the interview, for the very first time admittedly consider what she might feel about her mother from the perspective of being her husband's wife. The ostensible vessel of answers from which she retrieves her answers in this instance substantively emerges *within* the interview, as the respondent considers how she might answer questions from that point of view. Strictly speaking, the analogy is not only a matter of shifting vessels but the simultaneous production of new vessels. The complex contents of the respondent's stock of knowledge are intertwined with the identities partaking in the interview.

Stocks of knowledge are only partially historical. Because the knowledge the respondent calls on is always knowledge-in-the-making, it

does not purely reflect the respondent's past. The past is linked with what is being made of the present, that is, the respective positions from which one can speak of life. In the preceding example, the respondent's history cannot directly convey the caregiving experience. What is conveyed—its experiential details and progress over time—depends on what is being made of the present—the role one takes—in the interview. As Michel Foucault (1979, p. 31) might put it, the history of the active respondent's experience is a history of the present. For the "same" respondent, we can imagine that there might be an adult daughter's version of caregiving, with its past attitudes and feelings; a spouse's version, with its particular history of sentiments; and so on. Putting this form of history in dramatic terms, we might say that each present role tells the story of its own past attitudes, feelings, and behaviors.

The active respondent constructs his or her experiential history as the interview unfolds, in collaboration with the active interviewer. The respondent's history is a history-in-the-making, complexly unfolding in relation to what has taken place in the past, to what is currently being made of the past, and to immediate prospects for the future. Whether experience is elicited in the form of opinions, feelings, or behaviors, it is as much a feature of the present as of the past. An opinion, for example, about the past cognitive status of one's mother is an opinion elicited and conveyed in terms of the particular perspective on the past being taken by the respondent. There are, then, several opinions about the mother's past cognitive status, depending on whether one's story is being told, say, from the perspective of an adult daughter, wife, or working mother. Indeed, there is no reason to limit narrative resources to these particular perspectives, as the respondent may take any viewpoint that he or she considers empirically warrantable.

What we, as researchers, make of the respondent who says that she feels both hateful and "totally loving" toward her mother depends on how we construe the respondent's relation to her fund of experiential knowledge. Viewing the respondent as a mere reporter of what lies in a vessel of answers suggests that we are getting a contradiction and that we must probe for the respondent's true or actual thoughts or feelings. Viewing the respondent as narratively active, however, suggests that the variability and contradictions of the experience under consideration be examined in relation to the interview's interpretive circumstances. In the active approach, it would be normal and routine for the respondent to offer complex descriptions of experience because, at the very

least, the respondent's stock of knowledge avails her of varied funds of information, and the active respondent has a continuing hand in the variability.

What the active respondent says is as much constructed as it is tapped from narrative resources. The respondent's stock of knowledge grows, diminishes, and is altered as the interview develops. As a narrative resource, the stock of knowledge may even be inadvertently deconstructed, such as when the ordinary yet savvy respondent, looking back on what she said at the start of an interview, comments that all the evident contradictions in her responses are "really" matters of "how you look at things," products of the perspective one takes.

Judith Globerman, a colleague at the University of Toronto, shared a vivid illustration of the transformation of respondents' stocks of knowledge from her interviews with caregivers of people with dementia. A year after caregivers were first interviewed, a second round of interviews showed that respondents recalled in detail what they had said in earlier interviews. More to the point, the respondents commented on their earlier responses, considering the earlier opinions, feelings, and actions in relation to what they now thought and felt. The comments indicated that what seemed in the initial interviews to have been straightforward and consistent reports were transformed in quality, not just in degree, when the respondent was given a second opportunity to "think about it."

### **Positional Shifts and Resource Activation**

Access to the narrative resources we have called stocks of knowledge does not operate in the passive way that access to the vessels of answers does. The simultaneous substantive, reflexive, and emergent features of stocks of knowledge require a more dynamic approach. With the interviewer's help, the respondent *activates* different aspects of his or her stock of knowledge, which we can hear in the conversational give-and-take of the interview. In the course of many open-ended interviews, for example, respondents intersperse their responses to interview items with telltale phrases such as "speaking as a mother," "thinking like a woman," "if I were in her shoes," "after I heard what he said," "wearing my professional hat," "on second thought," "when you bother to think about it," "now that you ask," "I'm not sure about that one," and "I haven't really thought about it." The phrases tell of changing roles,

shifts in narrative positions that, in turn, signal stocks of knowledge pertinent to the point of view being taken or the complexities of telling.

Positions may shift several times in the course of an interview. At one point, it may be clear that the respondent is speaking as an adult daughter; at another point, she evidently takes the role of a spouse. Or it may not be evident whose point of view is being taken, in which case the active interviewer is both analytically and procedurally obliged to seek clarification (see Chapters 5 and 8). At some point, a new role and perspective may be prompted by the interview questions themselves, such as when the respondent admits that he or she had not thought about the matter under consideration before and unknowingly proceeds to do just that as the interview continues. Indeed, occasionally, the respondent's comments may suggest that the point of view he or she takes is that of the "respondent," a role the respondent subsequently admits as having never taken before. For example, when a respondent becomes visibly anxious after a tape recorder is turned on and states that she does not know if she can think clearly with "that thing" on, we might infer that what will be said with the recorder turned on might not align with what would otherwise be said. The vessel-of-answers approach would necessarily take this to be a matter of reactivity. For the active respondent, however, it signals alternative validities, whose distinctive narrative resources *naturally* (and validly) convey equally acceptable responses.

To illustrate the multiplicity of positions and perspectives that respondents may take, consider the following extract from an open-ended interview with an adult daughter who cared for her mother, who had dementia, at home. The daughter was employed part-time and shared the household with her employed husband and their two sons, one a part-time college student and the other a full-time security guard. The extract begins when the interviewer (I) asked the adult daughter (R) to describe her feelings about having to juggle so many needs and schedules. This related to a discussion of the so-called sandwich generation, which was said to be caught between having to raise families and seeing to the needs of frail elderly parents. Note how, after the interviewer asked the respondent what she meant by saying that she had mixed feelings, the respondent made explicit reference to various ways of thinking about the matter, as if to suggest that more than one narrative resource (with contradictory responses) might be brought to bear on the matter. The respondent displayed considerable narrative activity: She not only referenced possible *whats* of caregiving and family life but, in

the process, informed the interviewer of *how* she could construct her answer.

**I:** We were talking about, you said you were a member of the, what did you call it?

**R:** They say that I'm in the sandwich generation. You know, like we're sandwiched between having to care for my mother . . . and my grown kids and my husband. People are living longer now and you've got different generations at home and, I tell ya, it's a mixed blessing.

**I:** How do you feel about it in your situation?

**R:** Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm being a bit selfish because I gripe about having to keep an eye on Mother all the time. If you let down your guard, she wanders off into the backyard or goes out the door and down the street. That's no fun when your hubby wants your attention too. Norm works the second shift and he's home during the day a lot. I manage to get in a few hours of work, but he doesn't like it. I have pretty mixed feelings about it.

**I:** What do you mean?

**R:** Well, I'd say that as a daughter, I feel pretty guilty about how I feel sometimes. It can get pretty bad, like wishing that Mother were just gone, you know what I mean? She's been a wonderful mother and I love her very much, but if you ask me how I feel as a wife and mother, that's another matter. I feel like she's [the mother], well, intruding on our lives and just making hell out of raising a family. Sometimes I put myself in my husband's shoes and I just know how he feels. He doesn't say much, but I know that he misses my company, and I miss his of course. [Pause] So how do you answer that?

The interviewer then explained that the respondent could answer in the way she believed best represented her thoughts and feelings. But as the exchange unfolded, it was evident that "best" misrepresented the narrative complexity of the respondent's thoughts and feelings. In the following extract, notice how the respondent struggled to sort her responses to accord with categorically distinct identities. At one point, she explained that she now knew how a wife could and should feel because she gathered from the way her husband and sons acted that "men don't feel things in the same way." This suggested that her own thoughts and feelings were constructively derived from a fund of gendered knowledge as well. Note, too, how at several points, the interviewer collaborated with the respondent to define her identity as a

respondent. At the very end of the extract, the respondent suggested that other respondents' answers might serve to clarify the way she herself organized her responses.

- R:** I try to put myself in their [husband's and sons'] shoes, try to look at it from their point of view, you know, from a man's way of thinking. I ask myself how it feels to have a part-time wife and mama. I ask myself how I'd feel. Believe me, I know he [husband] feels pretty rotten about it. Men get that way; they want what they want and the rest of the time, well, they're quiet, like nothing's the matter. I used to think I was going crazy with all the stuff on my mind and having to think about everything all at once and not being able to finish with one thing and get on to the other. You know how it gets—doing one thing and feeling bad about how you did something else and wanting to redo what you did or what you said. The way a woman does, I guess. I think I've learned that about myself. I don't know. It's pretty complicated thinking about it. [Pause] Let's see, how do I really feel?
- I:** Well, I was just wondering, you mentioned being sandwiched earlier and what a woman feels?
- R:** Yeah, I guess I wasn't all that sure what women like me feel until I figured out how Norm and the boys felt. I figured pretty quick that men are pretty good at sorting things out and that, well, I just couldn't do it, 'cause, well, men don't feel things the same way. I just wouldn't want to do that way anyway. Wouldn't feel right about it as a woman, you know what I mean? So, like they say, live and let live, I guess.
- I:** But as a daughter?
- R:** Yeah, that too. So if you ask me how I feel having Mother underfoot all the time, I'd say that I remember not so far back that I was underfoot a lot when I was a little girl and Mother never complained, and she'd help Dad out in the store too. So I guess I could tell you that I'm glad I'm healthy and around to take care of her and, honestly, I'd do it all over again if I had to. I don't know. You've talked to other women about it. What do they say?
- I:** Well, uh.
- R:** Naw, I don't want to put you on the spot. I was just thinking that maybe if I knew how others in my shoes felt, I might be able to sort things out better than I did for ya.

Such comments about both the subject matter under consideration and how one does or should formulate responses are far too common in interviews to ignore. They show that the respondent, in collaboration

with the interviewer, activates narrative resources as an integral part of exchanging questions and answers. Yet, because the activation process is not considered to be a proper part of standardized interviewing, it is not taken into account as data. A possible exception is the place traditionally left at the end of interview schedules for interviewer remarks. Ironically, Converse and Schuman (1974) admit in *Conversations at Random* that “survey research as interviewers see it” is replete with activation. One might take this as an implicit concession: If interviewers’ accounts were taken seriously, interviews and interview data would be testaments to interpretive activity. But faithful and guarded professional adherence to the vessel-of-answers view belies it.

Treating the interview as active allows the interviewer to encourage the respondent to shift positions in the interview so as to explore alternate perspectives and stocks of knowledge. Rather than searching for the best or most authentic answer, the aim is to systematically activate applicable ways of knowing—the possible answers—that respondents can reveal, as diverse and contradictory as they might be. This, of course, implicates an active interviewer, to whom we now turn.