CHAPTER 6

# POLICY ANALYSIS AS CRITICAL LISTENING

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## 1. Introduction

In public policy work, we interview people all the time. We try to find out what happened at yesterday's meeting, and we find ourselves asking questions to find out what Harry's done now, what Sue's up to, or how Chris reacted to our new proposal. To work on any new project we may have to "talk to" many different people, and in doing so, we need to listen as much as, or more than to talk as we try to find out about others' perspectives and experiences, their needs and interests, their weak or strong support, and always, too, as we're trying to get a better grasp of the organizational, legal, and practical world we're in with them.

To make new things happen, to find out what we can do effectively in politically uncertain and fluid settings, we need to learn—and to learn, we very often need to ask questions and listen carefully. When we do this, we're "planners" and policy analysts in the most general sense: exploring what's possible, finding out about what we can and can't do. In what follows, I use the term "planners" to refer very generally to all those who need to learn about their environments—public or private, social or natural—in order to change them. As we shall see, "planning for change" not only requires learning in pragmatic and politically astute ways, but in social and political environments, it requires skillful and sensitive interviewing too. But such interviewing, it turns out, is not so simple.

In the world of social science, interviewing can often be formal, but in the world of policy analysis and planning, interviewing may just as often be informal;

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no less serious, but more subtle. In the world of social science, clipboards may be appropriate ritual objects; in the world of policy and planning analysis, though, a cup of coffee or something stronger might help an informative conversation along. Social scientists work to analyze—to understand, and perhaps to explain—"what's going on," and although we as policy and planning analysts certainly share that aspiration, we have to do more: we have to assess what's possible in a future political world, what might yet work for better or worse in a politically reconstructed world that does not yet exist! So let's consider how change agents—entrepreneurs, organizers, managers, policy analysts, activists of many kinds—"planners" we shall call them generically—can do this work of interviewing and practical learning and do it well (Schön 1983; Greenwood and Levin 1999; Forester 1999*a*; cf. Wildavsky 1989).

In public and private sectors alike, planners often work in between diverse "stakeholders." The head of a hospital department wants to improve care and cut costs, and she works in between higher-level administrators and all those working in her department. The manager of a regional parts supply office works in between local customers and more central suppliers. One of the governor's policy advisers wants to get an economic development taskforce going once again, this time to make a difference in the legislature. The director of a community center works between staff, board members, funders, city officials, community residents, interested academics, and yet others. And so on. Call them "administrators," "managers," "policy staff," "community leaders," or "organizers," but they all try carefully to shape future action: they are all "planners" faced with daunting but intriguing challenges.

Not only must these planners try to protect fragile relationships in often contested, fluid, and ambiguous situations, but they also have to bring about sanity and confidence, some practical order, light as well as heat, from the chaos. Often blessed with a bit of thick skin, they will try to respond to others' felt needs, interests, and desires even as these often conflict. Trying to do their work within and through these webs of relationships, these planners must work to understand many points of view, many perspectives, many senses of what counts, what's valuable—for both technical and political reasons.

Technically, understanding multiple perspectives may enhance planners' own understanding of a particular case because the planners themselves have no special access to truth, full or perfect information. Politically, understanding and being able to integrate many perspectives enables planners to address questions of feasibility and power as well.

So planners have to learn through conversations every day—about people, places, and projects—and to do that, they will find themselves doing many different kinds of interviews. A few interviews will be formal, carefully arranged and recorded. But many more will be much more informal: side conversations before, during, or after meetings; impromptu telephone conversations, ad hoc office visits, "getting a heads-up," "checking in," "seeing how you're doing," and so on.

But this inevitably intermediating role that's played by planners can make their interviews quite special. These interviews search not only for attitudes and relationships that now exist but for possibilities that do not yet exist—so that where

some social scientists might be wary of exploring hypotheticals, "What if . . . ?" questions, those same questions are often crucial, if not altogether essential, for planners.

But in a political world, we know, what any party believes to be possible at all depends on their assumptions about other parties. So planners' and policy analysts' interviews are more typically inter-views: the planners and analysts seek to understand what this neighbors' representative fears about what this developer proposes, what this politician wants as it overlaps and partially contradicts what that politician wants, how this group's concern for "environmental quality" avoids another group's claims regarding affordable housing, and so on. Exploring the stakes and issues in between stakeholders, then, planners' interviews can subtly foster virtual argumentative spaces in which stakeholders not only stake out but explore future possibilities; not only set out positions but clarify, reformulate, and probe the diverse interests they seek to satisfy—and the practical ways they might really satisfy them (Forester 2004*b, c; 2005*).

So planners listening to contradictory arguments find themselves between views, needing to understand them all in order to work with them, sometimes to mediate between them, sometimes simply to acknowledge them, sometimes simply to be able to craft practical responses that will actually address citizens' real interests. This work is not simple, even though we have been exhorted since elementary school to "listen to others." Planners, mediators, negotiators, and organizers all stress the significance of astute listening to their practice as they face situations full of conflict, ambiguity, posturing, and differences of culture, class, race, gender, and values (Forester 1999*a*).

We can now explore this work of inter-viewing and listening to multiple parties—from the planners' "in-between" standpoint—in two ways. First, if briefly, we can note the conceptual problems that arise: what, for example, does it mean for an attentive listener or interviewer to be responsibly "rational" in a very messy world of complexity, incommensurability, emotion, conflicting obligations, and the need to improvise when simply following rules, even optimizing, won't do?

Second, we can address at greater length in what follows the practical problems analysts face here. How in actual cases can planners learn, diagnose, inter-view—under the realistic but daunting conditions of unequal power relationships, diverse forms of conflict, and sheer organizational messiness, each of which involve distinct challenges of their own?

Assessing relations of power often reveals shifting interdependencies, and thus spaces of negotiation, and in turn, contingently shifting degrees of participation and thus possibilities of future cooperation and collaboration—possibilities that understandably skeptical, fearful, and distrusting parties may hardly think to be possible at all.

Assessing conflict carefully can reveal multiple perspectives articulated in complex rhetorical ways, including many postures and styles, all framing future possibilities of action and interaction quite selectively. Assessing organizational messiness and complexity reveals not only unique particulars and encompassing general norms,

but uncertainties and ambiguities as well as layers of distrust and fear, anger and division, interests and desires, too. Here we find that planners' interviews echo—and can learn from—the work that public dispute mediators do both in the early stages they call "conflict assessment" and in the actual process of mediating as well.

## 2. Inter-viewing in Everyday Policy, Planning, and Public Management Practice

We can begin with four simple examples to suggest the challenges and possibilities of listening and learning in such planning and change-oriented interviews. We then turn, in the following three sections, to consider: (i) what's at stake as planners listen and inter-view well or poorly; (ii) what makes such work difficult; and finally, (iii) what helps.

Consider first, then, a city planner's short story of his own earlier blindness, his own dawning recognition of what was involved in really listening to the people with whom he'd been working (for a time as a social worker). Jim (as we can call him) says:

> First I thought I could at least be polite, that I'd be dealing with the poorest and the most downtrodden of society, that even if I didn't have the power to do much, I could be polite. But then I saw that some people were just so personally obnoxious that it was the most I could do to be business like. Being polite to them was more than I could do. Then, some people just expected the agency to give them hell, and they acted like it.
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> There was one woman she was just impossible to deal with. She just yelled and screamed and pounded her fists on my desk and nothing I could say did anything. There wasn't anything I could do; I'd try to talk to her, but she'd yell and demand this and that she was just irate.
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> Then once I couldn't take it anymore. I threw my casebook down on the floor, slammed my fist, and yelled right back at her. What happened? She had a big smile on her face, and in the first calm and steady voice I'd ever heard out of her, she said, "Well, there! You'll be all right yet!"
>
> I was astonished. It seemed I hadn't really been paying attention to her, taking her seriously, really listening to her, until then. (Forester 1989, 112)

Now what's Jim telling us? We notice his early orientation to rules, manners, and politeness—all as a hedge against his own powerlessness, "even if I didn't have the power to do much," in the face of the overwhelming need of "the poorest and the most downtrodden of society," as what he could do "at least"—all of which reflects Jim's preoccupation with Jim himself, and perhaps the inadequacy of his position, rather than any specific recognition of particular people and their particular situations. Jim's demeanor begins with manners but retreats to being "business-like" as

he came to work with people "so personally obnoxious that it was the most I could do to be business-like." Here the conventions of civil deference and regard, being polite, called for more than he could give, and the impersonality of being business-like provided him with a style of work and, it seems, protection.

But then, he tells us, one woman taught him a lesson by provoking him to drop that armor of being business-like, to tell her what he really thought. He slammed his fist, threw the book, yelled back—and what happened? For the first time, perhaps, he became—to the woman in front of him—not just a bureaucratic functionary but a real person: and with "a big smile on her face, and in the first calm and steady voice I'd ever heard out of her, she said, 'Well, there! You'll be all right yet!' "

What had happened here? Jim believes he had not been seen to be really paying attention before. He wonders if he had been, then, even with the best of intentions, giving others the impression that he was not taking them seriously, not recognizing their own dignity—so he suspects, no wonder they were angry, and not just with the agency but with him! One part of listening to others and learning from others then, he tells us, involves expressing a real regard for the other, taking them seriously, showing a concern that fits the gravity of the situation at hand: No visible respect, no success interviewing!—as we shall see (Slack 2003).

Consider a second example now as a community organizer-turned-city planner warns us of the constant danger of professional blindness in a world of structured inequalities, felt commitments, and economic conflicts. Sue speaks of working in between landowners, shopkeepers, and local residents involved in a local street-widening project, and she tells us:

> In the middle, you get all the flak. You're the release valve. You're seen as having some power and you do have some ....
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> Look, if you have a financial interest in a project, or an emotional one, you want the person in the middle to care about your point of view and if you don't think they do, you'll be angry!
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> [I asked her then, "So when planners try to be 'professional' by appearing detached and objective, does it get people angry at them?" and she responded,]
>
> SURE! (Forester 1989, 97)

Notice that Sue begins by locating herself in the structure of the situation: when planners are in the middle, both sides imagine that the planner has some influence, some power, and thus that they on each side are vulnerable and at risk in some ways. She tells us too that social and political-economic structures organize investment and attachment—so landowners will be concerned about the value of their real estate; homeowners and residents who have lived in the area for many years may well have attachments to and affection for their neighborhood in other less commercial, less economic ways (and of course they may well also be concerned about economic value).

But each of these parties will face risk, and each of these parties will demand recognition, Sue tells us: "You want the person [the planner] in the middle to care about your point of view." Sue does not say, or even seem to feel, that everyone wants

the planner to agree with them, for she implies that the parties recognize complexity, that they do recognize many views and competing concerns (cf. Sanoff 1999). Still, she suggests, the landowners, shopkeepers, and residents alike want the planner at least to "care about [their] point of view," thus to recognize it, to acknowledge its claims, to understand it (even if it is just one view of many), to consider it seriously, to respect it. Not least of all, she warns us—"and if you don't think they do [care, thus understand and respect, even if not agree!], you'll be angry," an anger that all too many planners and professionals have faced, even despite their best intentions (Susskind and Field 1996).

But then in a wonderfully illuminating moment, too, Sue speaks to the difficulties any of us create if we imagine professional rationality to be detached and uninvolved. Asked, "So when planners try to be 'professional' by appearing detached and objective, does it get people angry at them?" she responded quickly and emphatically, "SURE!"

Here we find in a few lines a damning indictment of traditional ideas of professional rationality that make no place for emotional sensitivity and responsiveness, no place for the moral resonance of professional attentiveness—in speech or writing—with the character of situations they face (Benhabib 1990; Slack 2003). But more: we see here too the immediate emotional reaction confronting planners, administrators, managers, organizers . . . who fail to be sensitive and responsive to citizens' felt attachments and concerns: these citizens will be angry, and rightfully so (Forester 1999*a*, ch. 2).

Sue teaches us, as Martha Nussbaum (1990) does, that a rationality that makes no place for such emotional responsiveness is an impoverished rationality, one not only partially blinded to what comes before it but one that's actually counter-productive, fueling anger and resentment and thus exacerbating rather than working to respond sensitively to civic problems at hand. Such an emotionally flat rationality is a weaker, thinner rationality, not one more robust and capable, but one more blind rather than more perceptive.

Listen now as another planning consultant ("public manager") tells us about the deceptively simple but politically complex process of learning via interviews in a contentious comprehensive planning process in a busy East Coast transportation corridor. An organizer turned mediator says:

> While I love [doing] surveys . . . I know that for purposes of conflict resolution surveying absolutely is no substitute for personal contact. Interviewing is partially information gather ing, but it's sixty percent relationship building. You are introducing yourself and inviting people to trust you.
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> It's a negotiation in itself. And if they trust you, to share information with you, and you treat that information with the respect that you promise, it's then not a very large leap to say, "Now, will you trust me to put together a meeting where you won't get beaten up?"

Here we see that interviewing and asking questions reach far beyond information gathering—and we glimpse not just the qualities of sharing information, manifesting respect, earning trust, building relationships, but then all of this in the service of

convening conversations, "a meeting," in which parties' fears of aggression, distrust, and disrespect (where they "won't get beaten up"!) can be overcome in the pursuit of practical learning and actual civic deliberation. Here the work of interviewing no longer remains prior to—but is thoroughly interwoven with—planning and acting and implementation, because as it builds relationships and trust and encourages future collaboration, it enacts a future-oriented planning imagination and directs practical attention as well (Forester 2006; Umemoto 2001).

Finally, listen to a European port city's planning director and public administrator who contrasts two very different styles of interviewing. Rolf Jensen suggests that he tried to wean his own staff from a conventional, "old fashioned way" to a more exploratory, diagnostic, even deliberative style of planning and policy analysis. He begins by illustrating his staff's earlier practice:

> For instance, when [our planners] did urban renewal, and they talked about public partici pation, it was in the more old fashioned way. You go out with a sketch and say look, "This is what I think is good for you," and some [people] will not be able to understand the sketch at all, and they'd think, "Well, what should I comment on? What should we do? I won't say anything."
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> And some will say, "This portion is really good; but this portion we don't think is good at all." And the planners would say, "Why do you think so?" And the people would say, maybe, "We're lacking trees," or "There's not enough place for the kids." And the planner would go back, and he would say, "Well, I think they still could use the space for the kids over there," or the planner might change the plan and then go back again.
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> But it's not really a negotiated process at all. You listen to something, and you decide what you will hear and not hear, and what you will do and not do. When you've done that a couple of times, then you say, "Well, I've done participation. Now, here's a plan as a result of that process." And I don't think I'm exaggerating. That was about the way it was done. *So I wanted to do it differently.*

This planning director continues to describe another way that planners could work with others, encourage "participation," and learn in the process:

> [There] was a [land use] issue that was hard to solve. So we created a special group, trying to come up with schemes for this area, and then the planner would be just a mediator in that group. The planner would let the parties argue, and try to find solutions; they would work with colored pens and papers; they could write; they could do whatever they liked. They had what you might call workshops together, in which the basic task of the planner was to get the parties to understand each other because in [this country's] tradition, many times, you just present the maps, and that's it: "Take my demand or not!" [It's] a sort of power play.
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> We tried to conceive from the first day that we are here to listen. We are here to try to understand. But we are also here to try to tell you a story in other words why we are concerned about certain things . . . if you do that, you gain two things.
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> First of all, the other party recognizes you too as a party . . .
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> But also, secondly, you might be able to help that party to come up with other demands.
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> This happened both when we as planners met with individual groups and met altogether all the time! That attitude we used over and over and over again: never presenting a sketch as the sketch. Always saying, "Look, the sketch is not important, but what I've been trying to find a solution to, through this sketch, is this and that and that and that and that and that." In other

words, it was the intentions and the characteristics with the sketch that was important, not the sketch itself.

It was important as a way of asking questions, and as a way of controlling questions to the parties: "Does that serve your needs?" "Is this something that you can live with?" Or, "What is really burning you if you look at this sketch?" (Forester 1994, 1999)

Here we find a full-fledged sense that planners' ways of asking questions embodies their overall planning strategies: collecting information and then making their own decisions or, instead, involving affected people more directly and intimately in framing options and choices in varied processes of discussion and dialogue. This planner's account of learning through "the sketch" acknowledges that sketches are also ways to control questions, to focus attention selectively, but we can see the sketch too as a door to newly imagined options and possibilities. In the contrast between the old-fashioned way and the more deliberative strategy, we see the significance of the planners' learning with others, the significance of planners both informing and learning from the views and cares of stakeholders.

In applied settings, in the face of complex projects and policy and project disputes, planners' interviews, we will see, need to reach far beyond traditional survey research interviews, and far even beyond ethnographic interviews, in part because planners must try not only to explain, not only to understand, but also to imagine, clarify, and refine—actually design!—future action. So they must try both to probe and to organize possibilities and thus too, profoundly, in revealing those possibilities, they work to organize hope. We will see this more clearly as we explore now just how much is at stake in planners' practical interviews.

## 3. What are the Stakes: How Much More than "the Facts?"

So let's consider how much we can learn from these interviews—or miss! In practice, it turns out, we can not just learn reflectively—as we reframe our assumptions and expectations—but we can learn deliberatively with others as well: we can reformulate our strategies (how we might act), our relationships (who "we" are), and our interests (what we really care about) too. If we appreciate these many ways that we can learn, we will see much more clearly too what planners and policy analysts might miss in their meetings, what they might not "get," what they actually might never know that they've missed!

We can explore "what's at stake" in good interviewing, what's to be learned or missed, first by asking what's to be learned about the other person, the interviewee; second, by asking what can be learned about the possible relationships between interviewers and interviewees, and perhaps others; and third, by asking what can be learned about the interviewer's own actions. Consider each briefly in turn.

## 3.1 Learning about the Other

### *Information*

We often interview people to get basic information about what they do, their behavior. "How often do you use the park?" we might ask, or "When you take your children to the doctor, do you use the bus, take a car, get a ride from a friend?" And so forth. We look for the facts of the matter, even if we know that the facts never speak for themselves. And sometimes, of course, we wonder not just about others' behavior but about their preferences—and these concerns are among the classic concerns of survey research (e.g. Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991).

### *Preferences*

Beyond some "baseline" facts, then, we may look for subjective desires of the people we interview: "How do you feel about that undeveloped land nearby? Would you welcome a housing project built there? Do you want a park for local children to play in? Given a choice between leaving the land as-is or building A, B, or C, what do you prefer?" And so on, as discussed in standard discussions of survey research (Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991, 230–3).

### *Values*

But preferences are just one form of subjective orientations that we might wish to explore. What about "values?" We say typically that we "hold" preferences, but we "cherish" values. We take values to make up part of who we are, what we stand for, what makes us distinctive—in ways that mere preferences do not. When we cannot have one preference, we typically try to substitute another satisfaction in its place. But when we cannot honor a value or lose the valued object, we don't simply look for other satisfactions but we grieve, we feel a deep loss for the intrinsic good that we've lost (Nussbaum 1986). Asking about values, probing for what can be deeply meaningful in a person's life, accordingly, involves an intimacy and requires a degree of respect that asking about preferences typically does not—and so treating another's cherished values as merely strategic preferences can get interviewers in a good deal of trouble (Forester 1999*b*).

### *Identity*

We might wish to know not only what community members value deeply, but how they imagine themselves, how they understand themselves as members of a community of place or faith or commitment. Here we explore not only elements of commitment, but the ways that history, tradition, and long practice have shaped (even tacit) senses of "who we are" or "who I am"—so that in turn we may regard certain Others as "foreign" or "strange," or to be feared or presumed as not interested

in certain issues, or presumed not to be open to dialogue, discussion, or cooperative relationships.

So in interviews that assess the social structuring of controversies or disputes, we need to examine how citizens' identities might shape strong presumptions of yet other citizens. Jones calls herself "an outsider" and speaks of Smith as "an insider," for example, and this sense of political identity might help to explain both their never having spoken face to face, despite their deep concerns with neighborhood issues, and the yet unexplored possibilities of their meeting and perhaps even collaborating.

### *Local Knowledge*

We certainly might want to know not just what a community member desires, prefers, wants, or values, but what special knowledge they bring to the situations at hand. That "local knowledge" forms the expertise about their own lives that they have in the case at hand, the expertise they bring as perceptive people having lived and worked where they have, having had the problems and meaningful experiences that they uniquely and particularly have had.

We should explore this knowledge not as an either–or alternative to the specialized, professional knowledge that others might bring to bear, but as an additional source of insight, suggestion, suspicion, or consideration, as an additional source of relevant enquiry and research. To miss this local knowledge would assure our blindness to the particular cases in front of us. Listening only to the special knowledge of professionals, we might find ourselves generally correct but particularly, in this specific case, irrelevant (Corburn 2005).

## 3.2 Learning about Possible Relationships

### *Needs for Recognition*

How we do an interview can profoundly shape, and be just as important as, what we learn from it. If our approach to interviewing makes community members feel used, manipulated, taken advantage of, disrespected, or not really heard, our interviews will do far more harm than good. Part of what's at stake in many interviews, then, is the opportunity for the interviewee to be heard: to be listened to, to gain the recognition of the interviewer as having value and dignity, having a "voice" deserving to be heard (Stein and Mankowski 2004), having an experience that will be taken seriously (whether or not others subsequently agree or disagree)—and, not least of all, having a clear sense from the interviewer how his or her comments might inform future planning or decision making.

So the interviewer who cares more about organizing the clipboard and interview questions than respecting the interviewee may well do damage and learn little in

the interview conversation too. In contrast, the interviewer who asks questions with respect and pays attention to the tone and pace and experience of the interviewee gives something back as well as takes information and insight from the interview conversation. As interviewers enact respect or disrespect in asking questions, they satisfy or frustrate interviewees' needs for recognition, and the success of their interview can easily hang in the balance (Arnstein 1969).

## *Distrust*

Along with that dignity, respect, and recognition at stake in every interview come matters of trust and the dangers of distrust. Depending upon the way an interviewer acknowledges what's been said as worthy of attention, as deserving of respect, as tied to the person speaking and their vulnerability and safety, the interviewer can earn the trust or distrust of those with whom they speak. The interviewer who shows up unannounced, a stranger, with few connections to the community—who appears ready to vanish just as quickly and never to be in touch again—will hardly inspire trust and confidence that they'll either understand really what they've been told or act in accord with its insight. A South African public official put this nicely once when he said, "Show up [for the first time] in my community to do interviews with a tape recorder and you could get hurt!"

## *Value, not only "Values"*

In many interviews, especially when the subject matter can be complex or controversial, the words spoken are just doorways to deeper worlds of issues and concerns. Interviewers in applied settings are often looking not just for answers to questions, not just for bits of information, but also for clues to what really matters, to what needs to be worried about, what needs to be attended to, what needs to be honored or protected or explored further—so that some actual action can follow. Good listeners know that what's significant to a speaker will often be implicit, so interviewers need to listen as much or more for revealing metaphors as for any clear declarations of values.

Here the interviewer needs to reach well beyond the literal words and well beyond the simple facts at hand to ask about "the facts that matter," to probe as they wonder, "what's being disclosed here as really significant?" Here interviewers try to learn about underlying value, what matters, as well as about the more superficial, if also important, rhetorically espoused "values," preferences, or commitments.

## *Co-invention*

Interviews provide opportunities, too, not just for information gathering but for cooperation, collaboration, even co-invention. An interviewer's question can prompt

fresh thoughts—responses that suggest, "I've never thought of it that way before." An interviewer might ask about a possible line of action, about options, "Would there be any other way to approach this, any other way to explore getting time off?" and find that the question prompts a new thought, "Well, maybe if I offered to help beforehand . . ."

Here the interview becomes not just an exchange, a quid pro quo, not just a back and forth conversation, but actually a process of collaboration and co-creation. By exploring possible moves, efforts, suggestions, enquiries, or questions that might be asked of still others, both sides can enquire together to explore new options or new ways of understanding issues at hand.

## 3.3 Learning about the Interviewer's Own Influence

### *Emotional Responsiveness*

If interviewers display no emotion at all as they listen and pose questions, they can be seen as callous, arrogant, egotistical, disinterested, and disrespectful, or worse. So in our opening quotations above, for example, we see that only when professionals show that they take seriously the experience of those with whom they're speaking will they be likely to have productive conversations—and actually showing that may only be possible through their own emotional responsiveness that they as interviewers bring to bear, that they themselves express.

Being responsive need not mean being wholly deferential, being cowed or intimidated or hopelessly distracted, but it might well mean being led to new questions, being led to even more important areas of conversation than the interviewer imagined initially. In part the promise of every interview lies in such discovery, in surprise, in the interviewee at times showing the questioner altogether new issues, new domains to explore, new matters of significance and relevance that ought to be "looked into." Such responsiveness, Sarah Dooling suggests, requires a quality of presence that works "from a place of curiosity and hope," as well as from "a place of political savvy and strategic caution" (personal communication, May 2004).

So emotional responsiveness on the interviewer's part offers opportunities as well as dangers, opportunities for discovery as well as dangers of getting lost. Such responsiveness challenges interviewers to show that when they ask questions, they hope not just to fill out boxes on a clipboard but to show that they "can relate" to the experience, or at least to this telling of the experience, of the interviewee.

### *Relationship Building*

Interviewers who can't inspire a minimum of trust may not just lose their interviews, for worse still can happen. Instead of being asked to leave, interviewees might ask

them to stay and give them a taste of the game they seem to be playing. So a distrusted interviewer might evoke stories and tales designed for many purposes—many purposes that the interviewer may never discover.

Distrusted interviewers may be told "just what they want to hear," whether or not it has any relationship to any real world. They may evoke feigned cooperation just because the interviewee is more worried about his or her own safety than with helping the interloping interviewer: the interviewee might wonder, "Who will find out, and how might I suffer, if I say really what I feel here?"

Similarly, when interviewers can inspire trust and ensure the safety of those they're talking to, they can build relationships that they might build upon in the future. Not least of all, the interviewer might be able to come back, to keep in touch, to learn in the future. So the organizer turned mediator and public manager above told us, "If they trust you, to share information with you, and you treat that information with the respect that you promise, it's then not a very large leap to say, 'Now, will you trust me to put together a meeting where you won't get beaten up?' "

Curiously, a sense of humor can help both to level and to build collaborative working relationships across the interviewer–interviewee divide. Humor can play an ironic role, not just because everyone might laugh, but because they might laugh together: because humor creates a temporary common ground from which new relationships can arise—new relationships of those who come to see something surprising together, and to see in doing so that they share the possibility of viewing the world together, recognizing similar experiences in the world, finding some experiences similarly strange, or surprising, or wacky, or contradictory, or ambiguous, and evoking similarly "a laugh" (Forester 2004*a*).

## *Discovery and Humility*

Finally, interviewees often promise to break the presumptions and ordinary expectations of their interviewers. People just say the strangest and most wonderful things. Or they do it in the most unexpected ways. Robert Coles writes of interviewing African-American families with children who'd been the object of the most vicious, hateful heckling as they went daily to school, and Coles tells us of the astounding graciousness and generosity with which he, a stranger and an outsider, a white professional psychiatrist, was received and welcomed.

Humility is a virtue in interviewing not only as a corrective to the dangers of the arrogance that those of us with our important questions can have, the arrogance of those of us who "need to know," as we're on some "official mission" to "find out," but humility counts too because as interviewers we are so ridiculously finite, so merely mortal, so imperfect, so far really from any full rationality or omniscience, that we need to be as open to surprise and discovery as anyone else in the world (Woodruff 2001). Or more: Humility can help us because we may too often already have our sights set, our blinders in place, our presumptions operating even when we think we know to hold our "biases" aside.

So the wonder of words, and the wonder of each new meeting, lies in part in the discoveries we can share in inter-views, if we listen for far more than words, for far more than intentions too (Coles 1989; Reich 1994).

# 4. But what Obstacles make Interviewing Tough?

Talking about interviews is easy, but conducting them can be much tougher. Who are you, after all, to interview someone else? What will they think, once you start to ask questions? How badly have they felt treated by other interviewers—and how will that predispose them to treat you? What are you doing for them? Will they have any reason to trust you? Let's review several of the obstacles that you might face.

## 4.1 How Do You Look Before You Ever Open Your Mouth?

Consider all the non-verbal signals you send when you approach another person to "do" an interview. How do you dress (casually, formally, officially)? How do you smell (full of aftershave or perfume)? How do you arrive (by bus, by foot, by car, whose car)?

The South African official who warned us about the dangers of bringing a tape recorder to interviews unannounced was not alone. Speaking of her experiences as a young planner in Jerusalem, Sarah Kaminker recalled walking in neighborhoods with official-looking maps and having people stream out of their houses, once with rocks. Another planner spoke of introducing herself in a community meeting, and she recalled how she was then greeted as the representative of the city's powerful planning agency: "A guy got up in the back of the room and started yelling at me that his family had lost their home because of what we had done—but I hadn't even been born when that had happened!"

In such cases, these planners teach us, interviewers often send signals before they ever open their mouths. They way they dress, drive, equip, and identify themselves shapes the expectations of others, expectations for which the interviewers have some responsibility too.

## 4.2 "Mere Words" Matter

If interviewers use language that interviewees find strange, overly formal, obscurely technical, ambiguous, or arrogant, their interviews will fail. The language of our

questions will shape not just the language of answers but perhaps whether any answers will be forthcoming at all.

In a striking story of intercultural negotiations, Shirley Solomon quotes a Native American tribal leader's experience of the silencing effects of the formal procedures and language of Robert's Rules of Order: He says, "In those meetings where it's Robert's Rules of Order, I know that I either have nothing to say or what I have to say counts for nothing" (Forester and Weiser 1995).

The point here reaches far beyond "Robert's Rules" or parliamentary or other formal procedures. The language of our questions, and the language in which we might presume a conversation to unfold, can discourage, intimidate, humiliate, or otherwise silence many people with important experiences and knowledge to share. If we neglect these languages of interviewing and instead assume some supposedly "neutral" terminology, we risk not only keeping ourselves stupid but undermining future cooperation and weakening our future relationships as well.

## 4.3 Safety Matters

When those asking the questions and those being asked have histories between them, histories of distrust and inequality, interviews will be more complicated than they would otherwise be. Those asking the questions sometimes think that their own "good intentions" should be enough to pave the way to successful interviews, but they can face rude surprises. Ken Reardon writes of taking planning students to East St Louis to interview community leaders about prospective local projects they might work on—only to find that they would be interviewed in turn, if not grilled, and then told pointedly by community leaders of the long history that residents had suffered as objects of previous generations of university researchers (Reardon et al. 1993).

In any situation of conflict, too, parties will be reluctant to "tell all" to third-party mediators for just the same reasons that very few of us "tell all" to many others: we very reasonably worry about how others will use the information we might disclose, especially if others might come to see us in some partial light or take advantage of that information. Even "students" can have difficulties doing interviews if community residents fear that their words will not be accurately reported or that the confidentiality they've assumed (or have been promised) could be violated.

The more general point is simple enough: the more afraid interviewees feel about having their words used against them, the more limited will be the utility of the interview results. Interviewers need to know that these issues reach far beyond their ostensible "good intentions," of course, for they conduct their interviews on institutional stages, in historically and politically staged contexts that frame every word they speak.

## 4.4 Theoretical Blinders

Interviews can run aground on other rocks too: the interviewer's theoretical framework may be so selective, so narrow, that he or she cannot grasp effectively, much less adequately report, what's been said or what's significant about it (Umemoto 2001).

Robert Coles puts this beautifully, quoting William Carlos Williams here: "Who's against shorthand? No one I know. Who wants to be shortchanged? No one I know" (Coles 1989, 29).

We do interviews to learn, but we need to ask questions to help others help us, and sometimes our preoccupations, our own selective attention can work not just to focus attention too partially, but to mislead us as well. We might "frame" a question as a matter of time and resources, for example, and not really hear an answer that hints that the problem of limited resources is really humiliation, not economic capacity.

So in a mediation once I asked a young man, as I tried to check what I thought I'd heard, "So, because you're working, you don't have much *time* to do the things that your father's talking about here?"—and when he replied, "Yeah, right, it's hard to do," I missed the significance of his answer altogether. But his father who was sitting across the table didn't miss a thing and exclaimed: "Oh! (I get it!) This is hard for you! Sure, of course; Yes, I can see that it is . . ." and their whole conversation then turned from arguing and bickering to a real search for cooperation. The point, it turned out, was not about time at all, but about the father's pressure, the son's pride and embarrassment to admit that what the father was asking was difficult because of his job's demands, the father's having been fooled by the son's brave face—and only now, with the son hinting and the father seeing past the blinders of my question about "time," were the father and son able to try together not only to address the supposed "issues" at hand but to improve their relationship as well.

## 4.5 Presumptions Can Blind Interviewers and Interviewees Alike

Robert Coles warns us that patients can have presumptions about what their doctors wish to hear, and so what those doctors learn through their questions can be limited accordingly. Similarly, professionals of all kinds bring presumptions of what others know or don't know, what they will be able or unable to respond to, what they will be willing or unwilling to talk about, and so what they (or we) learn will be shaped accordingly.

Lawyer-turned-mediator Gordon Sloan suggests the influence that such presumptions can have. Talking to parties participating in a Vancouver Island land use mediation that he had convened, he found many parties telling him that they were quite willing to talk to others, but they then said quite confidently of their adversaries, "But they'll never talk to us!"

Sloan tells us, instructively, that he found himself saying then to several of these parties, "Funny thing: that's exactly what they said about you!" and found them responding, in surprise, "They did?!?" (Forester and Weiser 1995).

Here presumptions reach past what gets asked to the very possibility of discussion and dialogue in the first place!

## 4.6 Professional Education as a Source of Blinders and Bias

Our own training encourages us to pay attention selectively, to ask some questions and not others, to see some responses as relevant and not others, to treat some claims and some emotions as significant and others as less so. So in the first part of this chapter we read one planner's warning: if we work with people who've invested years of work and commitment in their neighborhoods, and our own professional self-image leads us to suppress *showing that we care* about those places, those commitments, and that real work, we can very well then seem not to be sensitive, impartial, and professional, but callous, unfeeling, and distant—and if we seem to be blind and unresponsive, we will inspire not confidence and reassurance but resentment (Sandercock 2003; Krumholz and Forester 1990, 256).

If our training misleads us to think of emotion as simply a distraction from rationality—as if irrelevant facts could not be just as distracting—that very training will have saddled us with a terribly thin, emaciated idea of rationality, as Martha Nussbaum has so often argued (1990). We can learn through emotions as well as from facts, which explains why in the face of complex problems we might seek counsel from those capable of feeling as well as thinking. Consider the risks of taking advice—about anything important in your life—from someone with lots of brains but with no emotional sensitivity, no emotional awareness or responsiveness.

## 4.7 Impatience

It can be hard to listen sensitively, or be difficult emotionally to spend the time required to understand someone, when as interviewers we're itching to "get to the point" (or to the next interview!). So having patience as an interviewer can be an art form. New questions can so easily derail a train of thought, and part of the wonder of doing any good interview is enabling surprise, enabling the person being interviewed to bring something wholly new into the conversation: a distinct turn of phrase, a way of putting something, a new idea, an angle that's important, a sense that "I've never really thought of it that way before" (Weiss 1994).

But interviewers may think, after all, that they "don't have all day," and they have others to talk to and other work to do (and so do the interviewees, of course!)—and

so interviewers have to be careful: if they show signs of impatience, they're likely not only to shorten the interview, but to get canned and ready-made answers instead of the thoughtful, if less crisp, responses that will really be fresh and instructive.

## 4.8 The Fear of Loss of Control

Not only can patience be in short supply, but so can confidence. When an interviewee seems to be wandering, interviewers have a judgement call to make: do I interject or interrupt to "bring them back" to the topic at hand, or not? Questions often provoke unintended responses, and these can be the most interesting of all or be the most irrelevant—and good interviewers must know the difference!

Questions can provoke strong emotions too, and when they do, in unanticipated ways, interviewers will wonder what they've been missing, what they should have known but didn't, and more: they will wonder if the strong emotions they've provoked will threaten (or help to redirect) the flow and direction of the interview itself.

The more an interview matters, at times, the more emotional the response of those questioned may be. Asked about grievances or the responsibility of others or promises made or betrayed, respondents may quite reasonably become angry, cynical, distressed, disgusted, perhaps prone to go off on a screed that can threaten all but the most experienced interviewer.

So control can often be an issue negotiated all the way along an interview. Like their interviewees, interviewers too have purposes and limited time and limited capacities to understand and assess what they hear—and so they might reasonably fear losing control of interviews when respondents have very strong views or stronger emotions.

## 4.9 Posturing Threatens Successful Interviews

Sound bites threaten interviews no less than they subvert substantive political discussion. If interviewers hope to explore fresh material rather than pre-scripted "pat" answers, then they have to be careful not simply to evoke respondents' "posturing" instead of their more candid replies.

Parties can posture for many reasons. They may distrust the interviewer and so fall back on tried and true answers. They may worry that the interviewer will reveal sensitive information and so not disclose anything that's not already "canned." They may have little time and rely on "tried and true" answers. They may presume that the interviewer wants well-rehearsed, well-thought-out, and prepared answers, and so posturing becomes a way to appear 'prepared' and in control. In these ways and

others, interviewees can withhold fresh and thoughtful responses, and their interviewers can learn little, perhaps and very likely never knowing what they are missing.

# 5. So, to Overcome these Obstacles, What can Help us to Inter-view Well?

So you're going to do a series of interviews, and you're reasonably a bit apprehensive about how they might go. What can you do to avoid some of the obstacles just discussed? What can you do to learn a good deal rather than wasting your time? There's a good deal you can do, so consider first at least these dozen or so suggestions:

## 5.1 Think about Ceremony and Rituals of Indirection that Allow Talk

Conversation just doesn't happen. Especially when controversial issues are involved, interviewers may need to build relationships if they're going to be able to ask good questions and get good answers. Tel Aviv public official Baruch Yoscovitz put this wonderfully once when he described the experience of a Japanese planning colleague who'd worked on a major transportation infrastructure project in metropolitan Tokyo (Forester, Fischler, and Shmueli 2001, 39). "How'd you manage to do it?" Yoscovitz recalls asking. He found the answer striking: "Over two thousand cups of tea."

Curiously here, the rituals of meals, breaking bread or sharing tea, allow interviewees to see what sort of person they may be dealing with in the interviewer: is this someone who just wants to "hit and run," to ask pre-scripted questions quickly and leave, or does this person bring a broader agenda? Given our situation, what's appropriate here? And in these same rituals, of course, interviewers may build trust and rapport and learn as well.

## 5.2 Remember that People Care about Much More than they Say

If we know not to take people "literally," as if everything they mean could possibly be expressed in their words, we know to look beyond words, to take what we hear as indications, metaphors, expressions, practically produced accounts in specific

(interview-structured) situations. So we know that what we hear is almost always provisional, not the "last word," always incomplete. Once we understand that speakers very often care about much more than they can put into words, we can treat their words as doors to yet other of their concerns, beliefs, worries, commitments, and more—even as we must also be careful about reading too much into what they've said (Spirn, personal communication, 2003).

Just as we must listen for more than mere "words," so do we read quotes not just for "words" but also for meanings and implications, clues and cues, hints and tips to matters of concern far more complex than any simple sentences might literally render. If we resist being too literal as we listen to answers, we might remember the saying that "a picture's worth a thousand words"—and apply that thought to the many pictures that our interviewees paint in our conversations.

## 5.3 Recognize Emotions as Modes of Vision Tied to Cognition (No More Distracting than "Facts"!)

We should listen carefully to the emotional tone of what we hear, and we should appreciate emotions as being equally capable of either distracting us from *or* leading us to "the truth of the matter" at hand (including a party's strategic posturing!). At the risk of repeating a suggestion made above: if we think about it for a moment, we can see that anyone with a deeply hidden agenda can use an appeal to "the facts" to distract others just as much as they ever might use "emotion" for the same ends. But more ironically: the appeal to "facts" might distract us even more subtly (as if "the facts" were simply, out of any context, free of any selectivity, independent of any language of representation, just "the facts").

So instead of assuming either that "the facts" ever speak for themselves or that emotions of fear or anger or suspicion have little to teach us in a specific case, we should try sensitively to learn through such emotions rather than try pre-emptively and blindly to suppress them as "non-rational," "misleading," or "distracting." We can learn through another's fear or anger, for example—if we listen closely—for fear and anger are typically related to evaluative judgements and cognitions: a resident fears losing their neighborhood's "character" if "other people" start to come in, and a sensitive listener might now probe for issues of class or racial stereotypes associated with the fear of "other people." Or a resident's anger at "City Hall" might be understood to involve not just what "City Hall" allowed to happen last time, but the lack of any recognition on officials' parts respecting residents or concerning what actually happened.

Emotions can disclose important information, but interviewers have to listen sensitively so they can probe—or they will just miss the cues, miss the tips, and learn less than they very well might in the practical case at hand.

## 5.4 Realize that Messiness Matters, and Details Help

Mediators need to do careful interviews with parties before they might ever bring them together to try to settle a few of their differences. One mediator—call her Mary—shared a time-tested strategy she has often used: to do a good interview, she remembers to let her interviewees get past their first fifteen minutes, past their tried and true routines, their favorite summaries of "what it's all about"—so she can, then, learn a lot from the details of their less rehearsed and less reductive accounts.

Mary teaches us that interviewers can be held hostage to these summary stories, the favorite phrasings, the practiced simplifications of interviewees, so we ought deliberately to press for further elaboration, for the details, for unexpected angles that can reveal both new information and also at times a better understanding on the part of the interviewees themselves. So we might often ask, for example, "Can you say a bit more about how that happens?" or "Can you give me an example of that?"

## 5.5 Moving Beyond the Rush to Interpretation

Robert Coles warns young doctors that patients may often only tell them what they think the doctors wish to hear. So too in social research can interviewers miss important insights if they fail to appreciate the preconceptions that their interviewees have of the interview process and the interviewer's purposes. Coles warns us to beware of "the rush to interpretation," our own temptations to interpret too quickly, to jump to premature conclusions because of our own lack of time, our own anxiety about getting "the point," our own over-confidence, or simply our own inability to listen well.

The same problem arises in the world of public policy. So students of the field pass along "Goldberg's Rule:" Instead of asking someone, "What's the problem?" ask them instead, "What's the story?"—so you find out not just one narrow perspective on "the" problem at hand, but a broader fabric of relevant details that might do justice to the complexity of what's actually going on (Forester 1999*a*).

## 5.6 Moving Beyond Contextual Blinders

Recalling their interviews, mediators of public disputes have said some strange things about the parties to those disputes. Sometimes, mediators suggest, parties seem not to have thought very thoroughly about their own "interests" in a given case and seem instead to focus their attention much more narrowly on goals, objectives, positions, or outcomes they hope to achieve.

What sense can that make? If the parties themselves haven't thought these things through, who in the world has? But now, if we don't treat these mediators as blind or condescending here, we can actually learn from these curious comments: parties understandably express "what they want" within the contexts of what they take to be possible, within the frameworks of relationships and institutional possibilities that they take for granted as "realistic."

So too if we were interviewees: our answers would depend on some institutional context we assumed, on some set of possibilities we took to be plausible. So we might believe "the City Council will never allocate funds to honest work on race relations," and so we might not "waste time talking about irrelevancies," things that will never happen (Forester 2005).

The challenge for interviewers here is a complex and theoretically intriguing one: in a world in which everyone has limited vision, limited rationality, we may need to call into question taken-for-granted assumptions that severely restrict what might actually be thought to be politically possible. So interviewers can try to be explicit about contingencies: "If, somehow, the City Council were to consider funding for work on race relations," for example, "what would you recommend? If that were possible, what might you support? Advise?"

Mediators face a related difficulty when they do interviews: parties may fear being exploited if they reveal what really matters to them. Of course, when parties who are interdependent all do this, when they all misrepresent what they care about, they set themselves up ironically and tragically for failure. They make it much more difficult to "trade" across their different priorities. So failing to take advantage of mutually beneficial exchanges—actually possible and mutually beneficial reciprocity, each giving what matters less to them in order to get in return what matters more to them—they reach lose–lose agreements: agreements, but agreements that are "lousy" for both parties relative to what they really might have achieved if they had taken advantage of their differences in priorities, concerns, worries, fears, or "interests" (Susskind et al. 1999; Forester 1999*a*).

The more general problem for interviewing is this: if interviewees fear being exploited in any way for being truthful, the interviewer may not learn very much, not even that (or why) the interviewee is perhaps quite rightly afraid. What can interviewers do? They can bring a keen sense of politics to their interviews and a practical awareness of the political settings that frame and loom behind them.

If interviewers seem oblivious to those institutional contexts, as if their "good intentions" alone were all that mattered, they will not likely inspire confidence and trust. But they can try to build trust and protect their interviewees in many ways: acknowledging political contexts, clarifying just how they will use interview materials, at times ceasing to take notes or turning off tape recorders, perhaps bringing trusted third parties along, and perhaps most importantly creating their own track record of living up to their word, building relationships over time.

## 5.7 Take Small Steps, Make Small Offers

Imagine that someone wants to interview you about your childhood. If they begin by asking, "Were your parents successful?" what's likely to happen? You might ask in turn, "Well, what in the world do you mean by 'successful'?" Or if you defer to the interviewer and accept her terms, you might now feel put in a bind, as if you had to decide upon a first "yes or no" answer, "successful" or not, and then give subsequent answers that would back up that first answer.

Interviewers might do much better, it would seem, to ask for evidence rather than for summary judgements: to ask for information or stories that might support overall judgements (perhaps about anyone's "success") later in the research process. This means that as interviewers, we have to resist the temptation to ask our interviewees to do our work for us.

So if we want to find out what sort of parents (or alternatively, residents, neighbors, activists, patients, and so on), for example, Sue and Chris are, we'll do far better to ask them for evidence (How do you spend time with your children? How do you respond to your children when they . . . ?) rather than to ask them point blank, "What sort of parents (and so on) are you?"

In part, this means interviewers must build trust; they must take small steps with interviewees to show that they are interested in the details of experience that matter, not just in easy summary judgements. Small steps build confidence; they invest time and attention; small steps are far less threatening (and less obscure) than big overall questions that overreach and so eventually underachieve. Asking, "How does this political process work?" might ask for such a summary account, and it might signal such ignorance of the process that the question itself may prompt a far more reductive response than the interviewer really wants (and than the interviewee would be willing to give).

Big questions need to be broken into pieces, so interviewers can ask interviewees to walk with them in small steps rather than to jump in front of them in big leaps. Interviewers who ask smaller questions will threaten less, build trust and confidence more, and produce surprising results as well.

## 5.8 Deflecting the Blame Game: Probe Possibilities Too

As Mary suggested above, interviewers, like mediators, can be held hostage to familiar but reductive rationalizations, whether we call them "scripts" or "raps" or "bones to pick" or "spiels" or "homilies" or political doctrines. But they can do better, too, not only by asking for details and examples, but by asking their interviewees for positive suggestions, for proposals, for offers, for possible solutions to problems at hand. This move accomplishes several objectives at once: it moves beyond a "blame game," it searches for value to be protected and honored, and it asks the interviewee

to take responsibility as an agent not just to lay blame, but to imagine constructive alternatives too.

Mediators find this "future orientation" to be axiomatic, for the blame game escalates easily and displaces contingent and constructive offers, "What if we tried X, Y, Z? Could we do A, B, C?" Similarly, interviewers can probe not only for the allocation of blame, but for the suggestion of possibilities too—and enrich their research results by doing so.

In a land use case a mediator we'll call "Monica" put this search for proposals this way:

> Whenever somebody put something negatively, I would just try to find a positive idea there.
>
> I'd try to turn it around to a positive idea. So someone would rant and rave, somebody could become angry about houses being built in cornfields, let's say they didn't want to see that, and they mentioned something about a land trust in the course of talking. So I'd pick out that idea, and I'd say, "So are you saying it would be good if we had a local land trust that could try to protect some of this land?" and they'd say, "Yes."
>
> So it was really a question, whenever anybody spoke negatively, of trying to turn it around into a positive suggestion, or just coming back with, "Well, what would you like to see happen?"
>
> That set the tone for our meetings, and it really set the tone for our organization as a whole about what we're trying to do which is find positive solutions.

## 5.9 Let a Sense of Humor Break Presumptions

Having a sense of humor does more than produce smiles and laughter. It conveys to interviewees that an interviewer has a sense of perspective about her work, that she is not so earnest, so narrow-minded, or so grimly serious that the interviewee must worry from the very beginning, for example, about giving "inadequate," "wrong", or "stupid" answers. Bringing a sense of humor does not only lighten the work for the interviewer, but sharing that sense of multiple perspectives encourages interviewees, too, to share the contradictions and complexities, the riddles and peculiarities they see in cases at hand.

Sharing a sense of humor signals to the person being interviewed that the interviewer is not in full control of the situation; he or she doesn't know all the answers; he or she is prepared for the unexpected, for multiple meanings and views, for not just a soberly serious attitude but for the contributions that a playful approach might make as well.

Having a sense of humor in this way can help build trust and ease the anxieties of interviewer–interviewee relationships; it can align questioner and respondent together collaboratively in the face of ambiguous and puzzling, complex, and contentious subjects. Not least of all, having a sense of humor can make it possible for both interviewee and interviewer to face very difficult, even painful subjects, recognizing them and yet not being held hostage to them (Forester 2004*a*; Sclavi 2003).

## 5.10 Take a Walk!

Still another approach to interviewing takes a less conversational and more physical, even more ambulatory, form. Talk less about issues in the abstract, and instead get out and move around more and look at the setting or city or neighborhood or view corridor or open space together. As you do things together, you will learn things, and sometimes talking may only come after walking, traveling, touring, moving through space together, going door to door or site to site together. In Tony Gibson's memorable phrase describing participants working together on community planning strategies and physical models: "Eyes down (to the work), hands on, rubbing shoulders, a lot less big mouth" (Gibson 1998).

## 5.11 Pre-brief and De-brief

It might help to realize that interviews live in our imaginations not only before we "do them," but after we have "done them" too. So it can help, early on, to talk to trusted and informed others about what we're getting into—what we might ask or not ask, do or not do. Similarly, we might discuss what we've heard and what we think we've learned with others after the fact, for often others will bring other perspectives, insights, and knowledge to bear on what we've heard, and we will learn even more than we first thought as we "go over" what we've heard with others.

# 6. Conclusions

So inter-viewing means listening to and learning from others and doing that with their cooperation, even collaboration. To interview well is to act practically, responding to the particulars of the person to whom you're talking in the unique situation of your conversation. In more philosophical terms, doing an interview requires a form of practical rationality, a context-sensitive rationality that's finely aware of details and richly responsible to encompassing histories of obligations and responsibilities (as Martha Nussbaum (1990) might put it).

In interviewing well, we try to explore possibilities of understanding the world in new ways. We are asking questions not simply to confirm our suspicions, but ideally to be surprised and to be taught, to be shown in new ways the world about which we care. In policy and planning situations, interviews often involve the sense of future as well as the perception of the past, and in conversations of depth, we can come to see both past and future in new ways—so that we reconstruct the past as hardly so "past"