Discourse Studies

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Published by:

SAGE

Questions, questioning, and institutional practices: an introduction

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ABSTRACT   This article introduces the special issue on questions, questioning, and institutional practices. We begin by considering how questioning as a discursive practice is a central vehicle for constructing social worlds and reflecting existing ones. Then we describe the different ways questions and question(ing) have been defined, typologized, and critiqued, in general and within seven institutions including policing, the courts, medicine, therapy, research interviews, education, and mediated political exchanges. The introduction concludes with a preview of the articles in the special issue.

KEY WORDS: *identity-work, institutional discourse, question, questioning*

The avowal and imputation of motives is concomitant with the speech form known as the 'question'. (Mills, 1940: 904)

Asking a question is not an innocent thing to do. (Steensig and Drew, 2008: 7)

The most general thing we can say about a question is that it compels, requires, may even demand a response. (Goody, 1978: 23)

Questioning is one of, if not *the*, central communicative practice of institutional encounters. As a practice it enacts and reflects an institution's specific goals and values, and the professional and lay identities of key parties. In this special issue we analyze some institutionally specific purposes accomplished through questioning. The studies that comprise this special issue focus on four contexts. In each the author(s) seeks to describe purposes of questioning that are non-obvious; each makes visible significant institutional purposes that questioning accomplishes that would neither be espoused in members' self-descriptions of their actions nor spelled out in institutional documents. To set the stage for the studies, we selectively review past research on questions and questioning. The review starts by considering how questioning as a discursive practice is a

central vehicle for constructing social worlds and reflecting existing ones. Then we describe the different ways questions and question(ing) have been defined, typologized, and critiqued, both in general and within specific institutions. We conclude with a preview of the upcoming studies.

Question(s/ing) as constructing and reflecting institutional worlds

The linguistic lineage of 'question' is both fascinating and pertinent. Obsolete uses include 'discourse' more generally for the noun, as well as 'to call or name' for the verb (question, n.d.).[1] In contemporary English, semantic senses of 'questioning' can range from asking to challenging, and 'questions' can include everything from a problem to a quarrel (question, n. question, v., n.d.).[2] An obsolete meaning of 'discourse' that existed concomitant to the meaning of question-as-discourse was 'a process or succession of time, events, action'. The nature of actuality – of things that have happened, or what things 'are' – appears to be central to meanings of 'question'. Reliable information is sought in an inquiry; events are challenged on the basis of the factuality of their representation; problems are real, practical and consequential realities to be dealt with; quarrels erupt over differences about what something *really* is, or what is *really* going on.

When Kuhn (1962) asserted that scientists enter another kind of 'world' after a scientific revolution, social constructionism blossomed in social science disciplines (Searle, 1995). The sociology of scientific knowledge challenged the notion of 'facts', and post-structuralism fractured the notion of the stable iden-tity into subject positions (Wetherell, 1998). Discourse is the primary method by which realities are constructed and represented. As questions and questioning concern reality, their instances are particularly demonstrative of the way in which language shapes and mirrors realities. Questions do not spring up in a vacuum: questions are underpinned by matrices of assumptions, possibilities, explanations, arguments, and expectations about what would constitute a reasonable response (Cox, 1981; Garfinkel, 1981; Schiappa, 2003). Thus, an institutional encounter constitutes a particular reality, constructed in the moment of communication, but buttressed by the relevant discourses marshaled by that institution.

Because institutions constitute little worlds, institutional discourse con-structs its own kind of reality in any context (Berger and Luckmann, 2002), from social problems and medical conditions (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977) to academic disciplines (Clark, 1989). Such discourse creates the structure of an institutional world, which espouses and reinforces its apparent internal con-sistency through discursive processes of maintenance. Such processes might include organizational chains of command, professional expectations, policies, and roles. More importantly, however, discourses maintain organizational struc-ture at a micro-level, down to the specific use of language. As Cooren et al. (2006) put it, 'organizing' is performed 'one interaction at a time' (p. 99). This perspective sees institutions as ongoing processes that are re-experienced, reformulated, and reified in situated action.

People *live* institutions with the feeling that those institutions are not being continually re-invented. Institutions are experienced as stable, with fixed identities and enduring histories (Gioia et al., 2000). The sense-making of institutional worlds is therefore important to the talk of people who interact with and within institutions. Questions do important work when it comes to negotiating an institutional encounter. As arbiters of reality, questions are a primary means by which institutions determine truth and amass facts. Questions are account-seekers: they do the jobs of eliciting, as well as asserting, accounts of reality. Such accounts do not merely 'abstractly' recreate grand notions of institutional identity or official positions, but oftentimes accomplish very specific, material, everyday goals. On the other side of the equation, experts associated with institutions respond to questions about salient matters.

Questioning is also a method of challenging what an institution may have normalized over the course of its years of self-maintenance: a newspaper reporter may 'question' in both ways simultaneously (by *asking* literally, but with a *challenge* implied) (Koshik, 2005). Rather than disrupting the apparent stability of institutions, the process of challenging is crucial in its maintenance through the recording, mediation and possible publication of the re-stabilizing response.

Form, function, and place

People are likely to presume that the communicative activity of questioning is accomplished by the posing of questions. Such an assumption is largely reasonable, although it does not address the definitional complexities that surround 'the question'. For a conventional definition, Heritage (2002) offers: 'a form of social action, designed to seek information and accomplished in a turn at talk by means of interrogative syntax' (p. 1427). But utterances recognizable as questions and the doing of questioning can be accomplished without the interrogative form, without possessing the purpose of information seeking, and even with the absence of both the interrogative form and the information-seeking function.

To be sure, there are specific linguistic resources through which utterances are usually constructed and recognized as questions. Among the most important are the presence of interrogative words such as what, why, when, where, and how at the start of an utterance; the inversion of subjects and auxiliary verbs in English ('Is the dog outside?'); and the inclusion of tag constructions at the end of assertions (e.g. 'Aren't you? Is it?') (Steensig and Drew, 2008). At the same time utterances are readily recognizable as questions even when they are packaged as declaratives (e.g. 'you're going to be home tomorrow'), as long as they either use a rising intonation or make a statement about which the recipient has more rights than the speaker to pronounce (Koshik, 2005). When questions are distinguished in terms of their form, the most common categories are to divide questions into yes–no questions, wh-questions, declarative questions, tag questions, and alternative questions ('Are you going to Whole Foods or King Soopers?') (Heritage and Roth, 1995; Koshik, 2008).

Question typologies based on form change as they are taken up in different traditions or settings. In discourse processing research, for instance, a domain centrally related to education and learning, Graesser (1990) and Lehnert (1978) used a typology that made three distinctions: questions that seek verification (Y-N), open-ended questions (i.e. wh-), and comparison questions (alternative). In a courtroom-based typology, where coerciveness was a central concern, Danet and Bogoch (1980) divided questions into imperatives, requestations, wh-interrogatives, Y-N interrogatives, and declaratives.

Studies have also examined responses to questions. Looking across three contexts (courts, doctor–patient, and survey interviewing) Raymond (2003, 2006) divided responses to yes-no questions into two types: those that are type-conforming providing some version of yes or no (e.g. yep, nah) and those that are type-disconfirming, resisting the straightforward provision of a yes or no answer. Although yes-no questions are designed to constrain a recipient's response, recipients can resist the structure. The challenge for recipients, though, is to resist a question's thrust without being sanctioned, as can happen in court contexts for 'not answering the question'.

Seeking information is an important purpose of questions, but it is by no means the only or even the main function. Interrogatively formatted utterances make assertions (Sidnell, in press); perform invitations, requests, corrections, complaints, and challenges (Koshik, 2002; Monzoni, 2008; Pomerantz, 1988); do affiliation and disaffiliation (Steensig and Drew, 2008; Steensig and Larson, 2008); express entitlement, hostility, or deference (Grisci and Portecorvo, 2004; Heinemann, 2008; Rendle-Short, 2007); support and attack face (Gnisci, 2008; Penman, 1990); and most broadly, exercise control and power (Goody, 1978; Rogers and Farace, 1975; Wang, 2006). These general purposes for questions, as we will soon see, get enacted and inflected in institutionally specific ways.

Besides conceptualizing questions in terms of their form or their function, there is a third way to think about questions and questioning. This third way is to see questioning as a demarcated social practice that exists in particular institutional scenes. Public hearings, interviews with institutional representatives, police interrogations, and dissertation defenses are examples of communicative practices within which questioning is a recognizable activity. In these sites 'questions' become what occur in particular turn slots of the institution's interactional dance. Whatever quantity and format of talk is put in a slot, a situationally pre-specified party is expected to respond it. In dissertation defenses, for instance, after one party (the PhD candidate) makes a presentation, others (faculty committee members) ask 'questions'. At a public hearing after someone testifies, others pose 'questions'. There may be topical or form constraints on these 'questions' and what will count as answers, but the constraints are often a lot looser than institutional members realize.

Sidnell (in press) studied two public fact-finding inquiries in Canada that were investigating whether government officials had been negligent or corrupt. In the inquiry, attorneys' jobs were to ask questions, and witnesses' jobs were to respond. Of note, both question- and assertion-formatted utterances by attorneys were treated as 'questions'. In the few instances where utterances were treated

by the person running the hearing as 'not a question', the speaker asked a question interpretable as making a sarcastic comment. Thus, whether a stretch of talk is treated by participants as 'a question' or 'an answer' will depend on its institutional place, its linguistic form, and the explicit and implicit purposes attributed to it.

Questioning within institutions

Just about every institutional site has a rich professional literature that offers advice to practitioners. In this review, we begin by examining both professional and academic writings about questioning in one institution where it is especially extensive: policing. As institutions are governed by professionals, it is valuable to reflect about the similarities and differences between a particular profession's thinking about how it actually does and ought to question, and what discourse-communication scholars have to say about the same activity. In the second section, we turn our attention to academic studies of question practices in institutional sites that are most relevant to this special issue: the courts, medical exchanges, therapy, research interviewing, education, and mediated political exchanges. For each site we describe the questioning genres that are visible in that institution and the institution-specific distinctions made about questioning.

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC APPROACHES TO QUESTIONING: THE CASE OF POLICING
Law enforcement as an institutional arena has myriad books, manuals, and articles offering advice to police officers and agencies about how to question. A Google search on 'police interviewing', for instance, returned more than 15,000 hits. There are flavors to this professional advice literature, with strands of it being very similar to the discourse and communication-focused academic literature. Texts range from popular advice manuals about how to interview and interrogate suspects (and get them to confess) (e.g. Holmes, 2002; Yeschke, 2002) to more theoretically steeped texts that might be used in a college criminal justice class (e.g. Milne and Bull, 1999; Schafer and Navarro, 2004) to descriptions of professionally endorsed procedures, such as an article that recently appeared in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (Simons and Boetig, 2007) describing an eight-phase structured interviewing procedure for encounters between police and citizens.

Although the vast majority of books are written from the point of view of the institution, they occasionally take another point of view. Luger (1991), for instance, offered advice to those anticipating undergoing police interrogation. His text provides tips regarding how interviewees could resist being manipulated and pressured into giving information. Moving toward the academic end of the continuum are texts written by or for professional associations that take up assessment and policy issues. The UK Home Office, for instance, analyzed 600 videotaped police interviews taken from a two-year period in England and Wales to determine how well police officers were routinely conducting interviews (Baldwin, 1992), and an earlier commission considered whether police departments should regularly be tape-recording interviews (Barnes and Webster, 1980).

When we turn to the academic literature, questioning has received attention in the telephone calls that citizens make to the police to request help or report a crime. In these calls, call-takers adhere to a particular sequential questioning order in opening their calls (Zimmerman, 1992), and callers' responses frequently evince concerns to be seen as reasonable and moral actors (Tracy and Agne, 2002; Tracy and Anderson, 1999).

The most studied questioning activity in academic studies of policing, similar to the professional literature, is the police interview of suspects or witnesses. Shuy (1998) makes a distinction between interrogations and interviews, arguing that police should be doing more interviewing and less interrogating. In his distinction, an interview is an occasion for collecting data to be used for decision-making, whereas an interrogation is a questioning session that has the goal of gaining an admission of guilt from a suspect. Police will of necessity have both goals but, as Shuy sees it, too often the purposes become tangled. Questioning needs to be done first and more often in an interview style, probing and not cross-examining, inquiring and not challenging, guiding rather than dominating, suggesting rather than demanding, and avoiding tag questions, while asking a lot of open-ended ones.

Much of Shuy's scholarly writing consists of case reports of police interrogations in which he consulted as a forensic linguist for defense attorneys in criminal and civil cases (see also Shuy, 1993, 2005). There is a decided pro-interviewee, anti-police sentiment to his work. We placed his work on the academic side of the professional/academic divide because it is linguistically detailed, has appeared in academic outlets, and it critiques professional policing commonplaces. At the same time, his work has much in common with the professional texts he critiques. Most striking is the mixing of descriptions of what police interviewers do with normative assessments of what they should or should not be doing. In *The Language of Confession: Interrogation, and Deception,* Shuy (1998) concludes by offering principles of conduct. Police officers, he advises, should be conversational when they question, adopting an informal style that uses contractions, includes continuer tokens such as 'uh huh' and 'yeah', and add small personal comments (e.g. thanking the other for minor accommodations). Officers should also avoid questioning sessions that mix informational purposes with persuasive, interrogation ones and should work to ask clear, explicit questions.

As exemplified by Shuy, much of the discourse research on police questioning adopts a critical stance toward police questioning practices, varying from a soft critical, just the other side of neutral, to an edgy, strong critical stance. For instance, when police questioners simultaneously act as interpreters for limited English suspects, Berk-Seligson (2002) shows, they mix the interrogating role into their interpretations in an unfair fashion. In a study of police questioners of Aborigine teens, Eades (2002) shows how officers generate gratuitous concurrence (i.e. saying yes when it is not really meant) by asking questions that advance several propositions simultaneously, repeating the questions, and asking questions in a shouting style.

In the United States police are required to inform suspects of their Miranda rights to remain silent and have an attorney before their questioning begins. Ainsworth (in press) shows that this right exists, but only if speakers ask for it just so, using very particular words. Leo (1996) argues that police have learned how to question suspects so that they regularly waive their Miranda rights and provide incriminating information.

Other facets of questioning examined include how officers' bodily movements in confined spaces during an interrogation work to elicit a confession (LeBaron and Streeck, 1997), how gaze is used to manage witness hysteria (Kidwell, 2006), sensitivities in interviewing child victims (Cederborg, 2002), how interviewers use 'so-prefaces' to give child victims' answers a stronger narrative shape (Johnson, 2002), how taping of questioning leads to different institutional reports of interview sessions than those in which police officers create a written summary statement (Gibbons, 1996), and how 'silly questions', inquiries about obvious facts, are used to gain on-the-record statements from interviewees that increase the seriousness of the crimes for which interviewees can be convicted (Stokoe and Edwards, 2008).

Insuring a safe, fair, and just society: policing is a societal institution committed to high ideals, ones that it often does not or cannot live up to. The practice of questioning is a central vehicle for enacting or endangering these ideals. It is not surprising, then, that so much discourse research has focused on questioning the institutional descriptions that are proffered about what police officers are doing and exposing gaps between the espoused ideals and actual practices.

THE COURTS

Questioning has also been a prominent concern in discourse studies of the law. The drama of the Anglo-American legal system is all about questioning, particularly in cross-examination. This has been displayed in a particularly vivid fashion in trials of rape (e.g. Ehrlich, 2001; Mateosian, 1993, 2001) or when issues of race or ethnicity intersect a defendant's charge (e.g. Goodwin and Goodwin, 1997; Schuetz, 1999). Providing an historical overview of questioning practices in the English courts in the 17th and 18th centuries, Archer (2005) traced how law became a profession as questioning became the sole right of attorneys, rather than of lay speakers defending themselves. In an early discourse study of actual courtroom interaction, Atkinson and Drew (1979) showed how questions are 'designed to build up the facts *progressively* – and get the witness's agreement to those facts' and in that process 'counsel's *selection of descriptions* plays a crucial role in the design of questions to achieve that task' (p. 106). These *facts*, built up through an extended question-and-answer string, create a narrative of the crime that allocates blame toward or away from particular parties (Drew, 1992; Penman, 1990).

How questioning in direct (i.e. examination in chief in the UK) and cross-examination differs has been of considerable interest (Rieke and Stutman, 1990). In a study based on 100 cases in the UK, Heffer (2005) shows how questions that allow for specifying and narrating (wh-questions) are more common in direct examination whereas questions asking for confirmation (e.g. polar

yes/no, declarative) are more frequent during cross-examination. Questions always make assumptions and these assumptions are value-laden (Abimola, 2002; Aldridge and Luchjenbroers, 2007) and conveyed by the way a question is formulated. For instance, asking whether someone saw 'a' broken window versus 'the' broken window decreases the number of eye witnesses reporting an observation, and a negatively worded question such as 'You didn't have the lock on the door?' typically indicates surprise and often the unreasonableness of an action (Woodbury, 1984). Other areas that have received attention include questioning of potential jury members during voir dire (Shuy, 1995) and judges taking defendants' guilty pleas (Philips, 1998).

MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS

In some health institutions, questions are highly relevant even when they seem tangential to the matter at hand. In medicine, for example, questions are asked in initial interviews with new patients as well as any time a patient comes in for an appointment. Though the purpose of visiting a doctor tends to revolve around very physical matters, the work that gets done in hospitals emerges out of a tension between patients' claims, requests, complaints, and descriptions about themselves and their bodies, and the technical results of physiological, biological, and chemical tests.

Mishler's (1984) *The Discourse of Medicine* was a critique of interviewing practices in general as well as of patient–doctor interaction in medical contexts. Morris and Chenail (1995) dealt specifically with medical and therapeutic discourse as well as interactions between questioners and respondents around a variety of issues and situations. As it turns out, questions in medical contexts can be sensitive indeed. Police questioning has a strong moral inflection to it. It, perhaps, is less obvious that health-related questioning would be similarly imbued with moral awareness. But in fact, people who ask and answer questions in health institutions must be sensitive to moral issues (Bergmann, 1992) because these institutions do not only deal with biological or physiological situations, but also sociological situations (Gerbert et al., 1999), and, more specifically, lifestyle choices.

Vincent et al. (2007) call certain answers to questions in health-care 'unspeakable' when questions 'incite' a person to lie in order to avoid rebukes based on violations of social norms. Since interactions involve potential risks to face, 'dangerous' questions require extra work on behalf of question-askers. If this work is not done, someone who seems to be 'merely' asking a question may be implicitly encouraging lying. Lie-inciting questions are likely to depend on the social norms of a particular culture: for example, health-risk behavior might not be as devalued as deviating from forms of social prestige (thus making having multiple sexual partners easier to admit to than being abstinent).

In medical interviews, the ostensive purpose of questions is to get 'facts' about the patient that are not easily available by means of technology (Gorman and Helfand, 1995). These kinds of questions tend to be related to lifestyle choices, and include, for example, questions about sexual activity, safe-sex practices, and drug and alcohol use. Both questioner and questioned are aware that these

kinds of questions are sensitive (Denvir, 2008) because they relate to practices that may have adverse effects on health, making choices that pertain to an espoused problem particularly difficult to ask about as well as answer (for example, asking someone with liver problems about her or his drinking habits). The sensitivity of the questions can get in the way of the fact-accumulation because certain conduct-oriented answers are more preferred than others.

Institutionally inflected questions may also occur below the level of awareness, especially when that inflection reveals implicit bias. Stivers and Majid (2007) studied speaker selection in pediatric interviews with parents and children and discovered that black children and Latino children were less likely to be selected to answer questions than white children of the same age: physicians instead directed questions to parents, showing that they perceived the children as less competent to answer their questions. Because this research demonstrates a bias as widespread rather than due to a few individuals, it implicates processes of institutionalization in interaction inequalities. Thus, question-asking can have broader consequences even than its effect on those who respond, and can perpetuate and embed inequality in institutional practices.

THERAPY

In therapy, questions are recognized to be the primary vehicle of interaction. The popular stereotype of a psychiatrist or psychologist, in fact, is someone who asks questions, especially related to feelings. Therapy interviews involve questions that are partly related to the 'world of medicine' (Mishler, 1984) but also involve more aspects of social life which may or may not pertain directly to the reason for being in therapy. While medical questions are specific to physical wellness or ailments, therapy questions are general to a person's life or broad ongoing troubles related to a particular incident in a life. Medical questions are not as likely as therapeutic questions to be answered in longer narratives (Jones and Beach, 1995). Furthermore, therapy is seen as involving less of a power difference, with therapist and patient collaborating to make sense of the situation (Chenail and Fortugno, 1995). Questions in therapy are considered less direct than questions in medical areas, and may be represented as ways of 'getting the patient talking' rather than getting 'facts'.

People who seek therapy are often there for support for emotional or psychological distress. Such situations require that therapists create a highly supportive kind of communication for their clients. This kind of communication involves a rather delicate attention to face, since emotions such as self-blame, shame, embarrassment, and stigma around 'needing help' can put the patient in a socially vulnerable position (Albrecht et al., 1994). Therapists try to ask questions from a position of 'not-knowing' (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992: 28) in an attempt to treat the patient as an 'expert' on his or her situation. This is an attempt to limit any a priori institutional methodologies in question–answer exchanges by making the practice less influenced by a therapist's expertise.

Despite such attempts, roles in therapy talk are difficult to divest of their institutionality. Leahy (2004) examines how inequality in the therapy roles get played out in discourse even when those roles might not be specifically

'therapist and patient'. For example, in a case study of a 13-year-old young woman who stutters, Leahy found that asymmetries were produced by the therapist's habit of adopting authoritative tones when asking questions, mirroring other but similarly asymmetrical relationships (such as 'student and principal'). Sometimes, understanding therapy *as* therapy can lead to a greater institutional coloring than even other forms of institutionalized question-asking. A qualitative analysis of one couple's reactions to therapy versus interviewing by the researcher found that the couple rated the research interview as being more helpful to their marriage than the eight therapy sessions (Gale, 1991). The couple expressed the opinion that they felt the therapy was trying to change their behaviors, while the interview was merely clarifying. Regardless of the goals of the therapist or the researcher, the couple seemed to attach a certain kind of institutional goal depending on the interview context.

On one hand, the purposes and goals of questions in medicine and therapy are different, as well as differently understood by lay audiences; however, they have important things in common. Both orient to aspects of a person's life for which outside help is required – people usually voluntarily interact with doctors and psychiatrists (Buttny and Jensen, 1995), while someone in a police interrogation most likely does not want to be there at all. As with research interviews, questions asked in health contexts may be survey-like or even list-like – just checking off the requisite items – or more in-depth, especially in therapy, in which a person's life history can be quite relevant. An important difference, however, is that medically oriented questions are more likely to be more personal (getting deep into very internal physical or mental phenomena) as well as wellness-oriented or even cure-oriented, depending on the state of a person's health.

RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Research interviewing encompasses several traditions, some of which would constitute 'academic research', with the rest distributed among various areas of life including government research and market research. Considering the vast differences between the relevant institutions and methodologies, it might seem ambitious to attempt to typify research interviews as a whole; however, there are important similarities among types of research interviews that set them apart from other questioning situations despite their range.

The most general of these similarities is that, to some extent, research interviews accumulate data for their own sake. Unlike police-related interviews, research interviews do not consider answers to questions to be 'evidence' in the legal sense that police officers or attorneys would consider them. Nor do research interviews constitute a record of a particular person in order to track physical and mental status and change over time, as in health institutions. And neither do research interviews settle disputes or make assessments about the people being interviewed. Rather, research interviews work to gather some amount of information, examples, accounts or situations related to people's or populations' attitudes, tastes, and behaviors. However, since academic disciplines and institutions outside of the university can overlap (Borrero, 1991), research

interviews can have uses that align more with institutional goals, as, for example, with social studies related to health.

The role of the question in research interviews has a slightly different flavor depending on whether it is part of a survey or a qualitative interview methodology. Survey interviews emerged from the practices of political polling and market research and became a key social science research method by the 1970s (Platt, 2002), with methodological texts devoted entirely to considering the best ways to word and sequence questions (e.g. Bradburn et al., 1979, 2004). Questions in surveys have classically aimed at standardization and 'design', with the assumption that better-formed questions yield better answers (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). Qualitative interviewing, which includes anything else that is not a survey, emerged in reaction to the limitations of survey interviews, including their inflexible format, straightforward stimulus-response assumptions, and nomic aspirations. Writers such as Briggs (1986), Douglas (1985) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995) re-conceptualized interviewing as an interaction in which the interview is a creative enterprise jointly constructed by interviewers and interviewees, neither of which passively enact their assumed roles. This attention to the situatedness of the research interview also distinguishes it from other kinds of question-asking events, for which handbooks and practitioners espouse much different goals such as getting a suspect to confess, getting accurate information 'on record', getting people to compromise, or comparing a person to an ideal.

Houtkoop-Steenstra (2000) describes survey interviewing as 'a form of talk embedded in a broader framework of institutional or organizational activities' (pp. viii–ix). Because survey questions are generally scripted for organizational requirements, they have consequences for the interactional roles enacted by interview participants. Respondents, for example, may be asked to categorize life experiences in technical terms that do not match the way in which respondents would naturally describe their experiences, or they may hear repeated questions, ostensibly seeking clarity, as judgments on their answers as 'unsatisfactory'.

Other strands of qualitative interviewing are similarly institutionally inflected in question formulation. In their work on focus group interviewing, Puchta and Potter (2004) point out that 'asking questions is a very different thing from answering them'; questioning is 'a rather tricky thing' (p. 48). They draw on the long established distinction first developed in education between 'exam' and 'real' questions, the former of which tend to be heard as testing what is already known to the questioner, while the latter are genuine requests for what is not known by the questioner. Focus group interviewers try to avoid 'exam'-style questioning, but their methods are limited by the context of the interview: the range of questioning available to people in everyday conversations does not appear to be available in focus groups. Indirect or fishing questions, for example, are common in conversation, as well as other kinds of institutionalized talk (e.g. therapy), but rarely effective in focus groups.

A question in a research survey or interview may seem, on the surface, to have fewer confrontational possibilities than questions in other contexts. In a police interview or court case, questions might be highly antagonistic. In a

health-related context, questions about lifestyle choices can 'prefer' more morally oriented answers. In mediation, questions may need delicate handling between opposing parties. In job interviews applicants know that questions are designed to either eliminate them or keep them in the running. But questions in research can be tricky as well, sometimes because they deal with sensitive issues (e.g. Van den Berg et al., 2003), other times because the parties involved may represent or speak on behalf of institutions (Tracy and Robles, 2008).

EDUCATION

In a review of questioning in kindergarten through 12th grades carried out two decades ago, Dillon (1988) commented that 'those who asks questions in school – teachers, texts, tests – are not seeking knowledge; those who would seek knowledge – students – are not asking questions at all. Classrooms are full of questions but empty of inquiry' (p. 115). The notion that a high amount of question-asking by students is a key feature of good classrooms is a commonplace but questionable belief. Dillon's dour assessment about classrooms fails to deal with the face issues at play in education settings. As Goody (1978) points out, students' questioning of teachers enacts a sensitive relationship, as students are typically subordinate to teachers and a question implies that a question-asker has the right to hold another accountable for a particular piece of information. So unless a question concerns very simple information, is enacted with hedges that legitimate not knowing (Pomerantz, 1988), or does extensive deference work, it inverts the understood status relationship. At the same time question-asking can be delicate business for the asker as question-posing reveals how knowledgeable the question-asker actually is (Miyake and Norman, 1979; Tracy and Naughton, 2007).

That children ask limited numbers of questions and that teachers' questions do not generally seek new information is a well-established fact of classroom life. Evidence for this claim is the frequency of the three-part IRE sequence (Mehan, 1979; see also Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) in which a teacher initiates a question (I) that is followed by a student response (R) and then a teacher evaluation (E). Commentaries on the usefulness and problematic quality of the IRE sequence abound (e.g. Cazden, 2001; Edwards and Mercer, 1987).

More than acting as devices to solicit new information, questioning in classrooms is used to teach students how to think (Hunkins, 1989). Questions are the discourse devices that scaffold student learning. Typologies of question types abound in education with questions arrayed in typologies in terms of their complexity of knowledge. One of the best known taxonomies is Bloom's (1956) six-category one that distinguishes the most basic questions that ask for facts and explanations from those at an intermediate level of difficulty, that require application or analysis from those at the highest cognitive level that ask for synthesis or evaluation. A recent study (Parker and Hurry, 2007) of teachers' questioning practices to teach reading, conducted with 51 London teachers, found that teachers ably used questions to help students understand literal information and the likely inferences that could be drawn from a text, but their questioning did little to encourage students to evaluate what they were reading.

Although primary and secondary classrooms have been the focal site for questioning research, other facets of education have also received attention. Camicrottoli (2008) compared the use of questions in university business studies lectures to their use in written texts and Internet sources. In both of these contexts, questions were plentiful. Questions not only checked understanding but were used to evoke audience interest and seek agreement. In academic advising sessions, questioning (and responding) is used to navigate competing responsibilities built into the advisor role, such as being neutral and not telling students what to do and at the same time being encouraging and helpful (Erickson and Shultz, 1982; He, 1994). In university departments, the questioning that occurs in brown bag seminars or research colloquia simultaneously enacts departments as places that engage seriously with ideas and as sites where faculty and graduate students regularly jockey with each other to support and challenge their own and others' institutional status, intellectual abilities, and friendly relationships (Tracy, 1997).

MEDIATED POLITICAL EXCHANGES

Most studies of questioning in political contexts are simultaneously studies of media encounters: radio or television interviews with political figures or talk shows of one type or another. A distinctive feature of questioning in mediated political settings is that questions and responses are primarily designed for an 'overhearing audience', or as Hutchby (2006) proffers as a better term, for 'distributed recipients'. In earlier years television news was usually packaged as stories, but now its most common format is as interviews (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). In news interviews the management of questioning by interviewers and politicians becomes *the* central focus.

Across multiple studies, conversation analysts Clayman and Heritage have examined an array of issues related to questioning in political encounters, including how journalists express deference or adversarialness in questions (Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Heritage, 2003), how hostility toward the questioner is accomplished through the paring of negative interrogatives (isn't, doesn't) with particular content (Clayman, 1995; Heritage, 2002), the ways in which politicians can 'not answer' questions (Clayman, 1993), and what styles of answering questions will lead an interviewer to treat a response as an evasion (Clayman, 2007). The topics of evasion and equivocation in political questioning have animated other scholars as well (e.g. Bull, 2000; Harris, 1991).

The ideal for political interviewing, argue Clayman and Heritage (2002), forwards the portrait of an interviewer who is adversarial, asking tough questions and, at the same time, neutral and not politically positioned. Accomplishing this opinionated, neutral role requires interviewers to employ very particular discursive moves in questioning, including citing of a third party for advancing critical assertions rather than treating anything said as his or her opinion, and, still neutral, albeit less forcefully so, using the language of 'viewpoints' rather than using personal pronouns and naming people. Clayman and Heritage's work is based on political interview studies in the US and UK; recent studies in other countries, such as Italy (Gnisci, 2008) and Australia (Rendle-Short, 2007),

suggest that the interviewer as a neutral party may be a collapsing ideal. Political exchanges involve sequences of questions. It is the ability to summarize and hence tilt the implied evaluation of a politician's answer before moving that gives the interviewer such interactional power (Hutchby, 1996).

Although most research has focused on what we might think of as capital 'P' political figures, there are studies of exchanges with small 'p' government-officials: local reporters questioning a police chief in a murder investigation perceived to be mishandled (Agne and Tracy, 1998), citizens 'questioning' through speeches during public participation a university's proposed changes to its affirmative action policies (West and Fenstermaker, 2002), and exchanges between an investigating committee and a government official in a Canadian town where a changed policy resulted in deaths (Ehrlich and Sidnell, 2006; Sidnell, 2004).

SUMMARY

Our review of questioning in institutional sites is not comprehensive – the literature is too vast and the topic's boundaries slippery at best. We have omitted consideration of a number of institutional arenas where questioning is also important, such as job interviews (e.g. Krone, 1993), negotiations (e.g. Putnam and Jones, 1982), and mediation (Garcia et al., 2002); and in each of the sites we have examined, there are additional studies of interest. What we have sought to do in this opening essay is to provide a sense of the diversity of ways to conceptualize and study questioning, as well as to make visible how institutionally embedded the practice of questioning is. Questioning addresses multiple, often contradictory, institutional aims while simultaneously attending to myriad presentational and relational concerns that are at work whenever people talk with others.

The four studies that comprise this special issue explore questioning in novel institutional sites and/or identify unacknowledged or poorly recognized purposes for institutional questioning.

Overview of special issue

In the first article, Mariaelena Bartesaghi analyzes how the written texts of therapeutic intervention – a depression inventory, an initial visit questionnaire – inform and shape therapist questioning to transform clients' initial problem presentations into clinic-actionable ones. Studying the opening sessions in a family therapy clinic in a large US city, Bartesaghi illuminates how the philosophy of family therapy, which sees the source and solutions to individual troubles to lie in family relationships, is laminated onto parental accounts of teens skipping school and fighting with peers and parents. Although therapeutic questioning often sounds like ordinary conversation, Bartesaghi shows it is anything but ordinary. Therapeutic questioning asks questions that cannot be answered, replaces first-person knowledge with third-person professional knowledge, and connects ordinary life troubles to therapeutic states of 'anger' and 'depression'.

In the second article, Theresa Castor focuses on a difficult-to-categorize site of questioning – a university senate and hence a small 'p' politics setting in an educational organization as it dealt with a key business issue. Castor's analysis examines the questioning and responding of a US public university's faculty leaders and administrators during a budget crisis. Confronted by a $12 million shortfall necessitated by a state funding decision, faculty members in their senate meetings questioned the institution's administrators regarding the proposed plan regarding how budget cuts were to be made. Castor describes the strategies used by these faculty to question the budget proposals, and by the administrators to deflect the criticism and to resist making changes to their proposed plan. The article concludes with reflections about the role of questioning in the construction of crises.

The third article, a study by Karen Tracy, examines questioning in a courtroom site that has largely been ignored: oral argument between attorneys and judges during appeals proceedings. Focusing on New York State's Supreme Court hearing regarding the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, Tracy considers the face and identity-work functions accomplished in the questioning that comprises oral argument. The explicit purpose of oral argument is to help judges sort through the voluminous arguments raised in litigant and *amicus curiae* briefs so the court can arrive at a decision and craft an opinion on the disputed issue. But overlaid on this task function and occurring concurrently, Tracy shows, are the ways questioning creates distinct judge identities, implicating each judge's personal style (quieter, measured, or aggressive), political-legal leaning (conservative, liberal; favoring a restricted or expanded judicial role), attitudinal stance toward gay marriage, and his or her view about what is suitable questioning conduct during oral argument.

The final article by Mariaelena Bartesaghi and Sheryl Bowen examines questioning in a small set of research interviews conducted with US Holocaust victims and their adult daughters. With the twin goals of making a record of survivors' experiences and coming to a better understanding of what accounts for resilience in survivor families, the Transcending Trauma Project, from which Bartesaghi and Bowen draw their discourse, comprised nearly a hundred interviews with Holocaust survivors and family members. Focusing in on a few of the interviews with mother–daughter pairs, the authors show how questioning activities serve as crucial devices for constructing the telling of events that eventually become the culturally official version of 'history'. Oral narrative interviews do not merely capture people's experiences, as so commonly is assumed, but through the way questions in these interviews are posed, pursued, reformulated, and so on, the questioning becomes a key tool in constructing what the historical memory will be.

NOTES

1. Question (n.d.) *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, available online at: [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/question], accessed 10 June 2008.

2. Question, n. question, v. (n.d.) *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, available online at: [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50194867?query_type=word&queryword=question&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=lN0O-ob6EO9-9153&hilite=50194867], accessed 10 June 2008.

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