for you?” or “why not?” to encourage more reflection from the informant. Along similar lines, Lofland and Lofland (1984, p. 56) wrote the following:

In interview[s] . . . the emphasis is on obtaining narratives or accounts in the person’s own terms. You want the character and contour of such accounts to be set by the interviewees or informants. You might have a general idea of the kinds of things that will compose the account but still be interested in what the interviewees provide on their own and the terms in which they do it. As the informants speak, you should be attentive to what is mentioned and also to what is not mentioned but which you feel might be important. If something has been mentioned about which you want to know more, you can ask, “You mentioned ____________; could you tell me more about that?” For things not mentioned, you might ask, “Did ___________? or “Was ___________ a consequence?”

In standardized or semistandardized interviews, researchers incorporate a structured series of probes triggered by one or another type of response to some essential question. In nonstandardized interviews, it is still worthwhile to anticipate patterns of responses and to have in mind the kinds of probes that will encourage further elaboration, often by echoing back to the informant ideas that they have offered up themselves. Probes, then, are intended to be largely neutral. Their central purpose is to elicit more information about whatever the respondent has already said in response to a question.

**Wording of Questions** In order to acquire information while interviewing, researchers must word questions so that they will provide the necessary data. Thus, you must ask questions in such a manner as to motivate respondents to answer as completely and honestly as possible. As in the saying about computers, “garbage in, garbage out,” so it is in interviewing. If the wrong questions are asked, or if questions are asked in a manner that inhibits or prevents a respondent from answering fully, the interview will not be fruitful—garbage will come out.

We can think of our questions as invitations to the informants to speak their minds. While we do want to encourage full and truthful responses, we must never become either interrogators or therapists. We are, ideally, interested listeners. The truth is that we conduct interviews in order to learn what people think, not to tell them what we think. Most people, I assume, will readily see the problem with a set of interview guidelines written by a student of mine one time, beginning with “Have you ever had an abortion,” optionally followed by the probe “How could you?” But there are many subtle ways in which a question can discourage informants. The goal is often to seem both warmly human and coolly nonjudgmental.
Communicating Effectively

Perhaps the most serious problem with asking questions is how to be certain the intentions of the questions have been adequately communicated. Researchers must always be sure they have clearly communicated to the subjects what they want to know. The interviewers’ language must be understandable to the subject; ideally, interviews must be conducted at the level or language of the respondents. Some interviewers may view this as a matter of “dumbing down” the questions for nonspecialists, but one must not forget the part about educating oneself about the context, concerns, language use, slang, and histories of the groups that we recruit into our studies (“smarting up?”).

When developing surveys that will be applied to a large and diverse general population, many researchers choose what may be termed the zero-order level of communications. In such instances, the words and ideas conveyed by survey questions are simplified to the level of the least sophisticated of all potential respondents. Although this should tend to minimize potential communication problems with a range of respondents, it may also create some problems: This approach is somewhat condescending, and may easily come across that way. The more sophisticated respondents may also react negatively to questions asked in too simplistic a manner. When you are investigating a homogeneous subculture, this problem becomes somewhat less critical. However, when interviewing a cross section of subjects on the same topic, you may need to consider varying levels of language.

Similarly, you must allow for special languages (both real and symbolic) that certain groups may use. For example, in the Glassner and Berg (1980, 1984) study, the interviewer needed to be moderately versed in Yiddish idioms in order both to conduct many of the interviews and to assist transcribers in accurately reproducing interview transcripts. In another instance, when Berg and Doerner (1987) conducted a study of volunteer police officers, the interviewer needed a general understanding of “cop speak,” the jargonized symbolic language frequently used by police officers as illustrated earlier in this chapter. Of course, should you encounter specialized terms or local slang that you don’t understand, you can always turn that into an opportunity to explore your informant’s meaning system. For example, I have often found it effective to say, “I am not familiar with that phrase; can you explain it to me,” or words to that effect. Such strategies, however useful, should not be relied on as a substitute for being prepared.

It is important during the course of the interviews that the interviewer shares meanings for terms commonly held by members of the research population. This sometimes goes beyond mere language barriers. For example, in a study of Latino
men who have sex with men (Berg et al., 2004) regarding risk factors associated with men who have sex with other men (MSM), one obstacle was that the subjects spoke Mexican street Spanish. Another was that within the MSM community, certain words and terms are used with specific connotations. To the average outsider, these terms hold one meaning, but to the MSM community member such terms hold a dramatically different meaning. It was important, therefore, that the researchers be versed in these special words and terms.

The last point was underscored by Murray (1991), who suggested that researchers must be aware of what he referred to as language codes in linguistics. These may include widely shared idioms, such as various phrases used in Black English and Chicano or Mexican “street Spanish,” professional jargon, ethnic expressions that are commonly dropped into English language conversations (or non-English, depending on where you are), and even popular cultural references. I would not go so far as to say that a contemporary researcher needs to be fluent in texting abbreviations, but some of the most basic shorthands are entering into conversation as subtle variations on “standard” word usage. If the interviewer is not knowledgeable about a group’s special language use, various nuances of dialect may be lost during the interview.

A Few Common Problems in Question Formulation

Several other problems arise when constructing interview questions. Among the more serious ones are affectively worded (leading) questions, double-barreled questions, and overly complex questions.

Affectively Worded Questions

Affective words arouse in most people an emotional response that is usually negative. Although these questions may not be intended as antagonistic, they nonetheless can close down or inhibit interview subjects (McGivern, 2006). For instance, the word why, in American culture, tends to produce in most people a negative response. One possible explanation has to do with the punitive connotation of this question, as in “Why did you do that wrong thing?” Consequently, when subjects mention some form of conduct or an attitude and are then asked by the interviewers, “Why?” they may not respond accurately or completely. On the other hand, if asked in response to these same statements, “How come?” they may offer more thorough responses in a relaxed manner.
Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) similarly found that when affective topics were considered, neutralizing the sense of the questions (reducing their affects) improved the likelihood of a full answer. They cited, as an example, asking subjects in a study of human sexuality, “Do you masturbate?” Virtually all the initial respondents answered immediately, “I never masturbate.” Yet, when the question was reworded—“About how many times a week would you say you masturbate?”—suddenly many respondents were willing to offer responses. The second version of the question tends to neutralize or normalize the affect (sensitivity) of the question. Asking how often one masturbates implies that others do so as well, thereby reducing the affect of the word and concept masturbate. (Apart from the issue of question wording, it also matters who is asking and how the subject perceives them. As an instructor, I would not allow a lone female college student to interview men about their sexual practices, including masturbation. It would invite risks to the students and generally threaten the validity of the responses.)

There are also strategies for neutralizing the threat inherent in certain topics. For example, it is unlikely that you would elicit helpful answers from police officers if you were to ask them, “What steps would you take to protect yourself from liability if you made a mistake during an arrest?” The question itself implies that the informant has or would both make mistakes and try to cover them up. Furthermore, the topic potentially involves illegal activities. On the other hand, consider the following question: “If a fellow officer admitted to you that he or she had made a mistake during an arrest, it would raise a host of questions about how to handle it. Some of those questions involve the officer’s liability. How do you think you might advise them in order to protect themselves in this respect, separate from all of the other issues that need to be considered?” Such a question makes the issue more abstract, removes the personal risk, and still admits that the whole hypothesis involves treading some dangerous waters. The point is that there are valid pieces of information that we might want which refer to threatening contexts. We have to think about ways to take the question out of that context in order to remove or reduce the threat in order to get at the information.

The Double-Barreled Question

Among the more common problems that arise in preparing guidelines or schedules is the double-barreled question. This type of question asks a subject to respond simultaneously to two issues in a single question. For instance, one might ask, “How many times have you smoked marijuana,
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or have you only tried cocaine?” It should be noticed that the two issues in
this single question are slightly unrelated. In the first clause, the question
asks the frequency of marijuana usage. The second clause confuses the issue
and asks whether marijuana or cocaine has ever been used by the subject. By
lumping the two together, the researcher is creating a false dichotomy—the
idea that it has to be one or the other—without providing any opportunity
for an informant to separate the two. This “error” is sometimes introduced
deliberately in “push polls,” where the goal is to force respondents to give
a particular desired answer. In that situation, the question might resemble
this: “Do you favor collecting DNA samples from teachers, or do you not
care what happens to other people’s children?” Often, however, the error is
accidental and less obvious.

The logical solution to the double-barreled question, of course, is to sepa-
rate the two issues and ask separate questions. Failure to separate the two issues
may yield some answers, because people tend to be obliging during interviews
and may answer almost anything they are asked, but analysis of a response to a
double-barreled question is virtually impossible.

Complex Questions

The pattern of exchange that constitutes verbal communication in Western
society involves more than listening. When one person is speaking, the other
is listening, anticipating, and planning how to respond. Consequently, when
researchers ask a long, involved question, the subjects may not really hear
the question in its entirety. Their response, then, may be only to some small
portion of a greater concern woven into the complex question. Thus, keeping
questions brief and concise allows clear responses and more effective analysis of
the answers. In my experience, if you ask a subject about two things at once, he
or she will tell you about the second of them, losing sight of the first.

Pretesting the Schedule

Once researchers have developed their instrument and are satisfied with the
general wording and sequencing of questions, they must pretest the schedule.
Ideally, this involves at least two steps. First, the schedule should be critically
examined by people familiar with the study’s subject matter—technical
experts, other researchers, or persons fitting the type to be studied. This first
step facilitates the identification of poorly worded questions, questions with
offensive or emotion-laden wording, or questions revealing the researchers’
own biases, personal values, or blind spots.