DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 044 931 EM 008 589

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TITLE The Interview: An Educational Research Tool. An Occasional Paper from ERIC at Stanford.
INSTITUTION Stanford Univ., Calif. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Media and Technology.; Stanford Univ., Calif. Inst. for Communication Research.
SPONS AGENCY National Center for Educational Research and Development (DHEW/CE), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 70
CONTRACT OEC-1-7-070-073-4581
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.90
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research, Educational Research, *Field Interviews, Question Answer Interviews, Research Design, Research Directors, Researchers, *Research Tools, Social Behavior, *Social Sciences, *Surveys

ABSTRACT

Like all good social research methods, the interview demands careful planning and intelligent administration. The study director formulates the goals of the study, which serve as the basis for the interview schedule or instrument. The interview schedule decided upon may be standardized or unstandardized. Questions may be closed-ended or open-ended. In the field, the interviewer has four major tasks: (1) selecting or locating the respondent, (2) establishing rapport with him, (3) asking the questions in the schedule, and (4) recording the answers. Errors in interview results may be the respondent himself, by a poor relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, and by the intrviewer. Despite possible pitfalls, the interview offers many advantages to people who want to know what other people have to say. (MF)

# THE INTERVIEW: AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH TOOL

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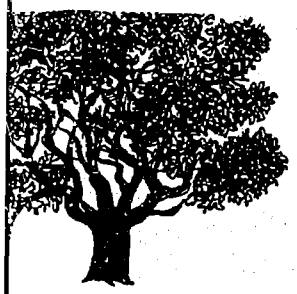
Issued as an Occasional Paper
By the ERIC Clearinghouse on
Educational Media and Technology
In December 1970



A PAPER FROM

# ERIC at Stanford

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Media and Technology
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## FOREWORD

Certainly the interview is nothing new; it has been employed frequently in the past to obtain needed educational information. It also seems certain that some of us involved in such interviewing could have benefited from the guidelines contained in this introductory paper.

Though the Collins paper itself contains specific examples, and though each reader will be able to think of some of his own, one potentially promising application of the guidelines comes to my mind. As Thomas F. Baldwin and Stuart H. Surlin put it in the *Journal of Broadcasting* (Spring, 1970), "The FCC has held that a principal ingredient of the obligation to serve the public interest consists of a diligent, positive and continuing effort by the licensee to discover and fulfill the tastes, needs and desires of his service area." A canvass of the listening public is specifically required of commercial broadcasters, but Baldwin and Surlin report that only a small proportion of such broadcasters seems to have attempted such a survey.

Baldwin and Surlin conclude that even non-commercial broadcasters could benefit greatly from such audience research. Even people who have no connection with broadcasting, I conclude, can benefit from some kinds of the "expert" opinion (gained through interviews) which is the subject of this paper.

Don H. Coombs
Clearinghouse Co-Director

## I. INTERVIEWING: A WAY TO GET INFORMATION

Asking questions is the most common way to get information from other people. As soon as we are able to talk, we begin to ask questions: about things and situations, and about people and how they act, think and feel. Even as adults, the wisest and most efficient way for us to get information often is simply to *ask* someone who knows the answer.

Who do you ask? An expert?

If possible, yes. But "expert" means different things in different cases. If you want to know about genetics or chemistry, you ask Joshua Lederberg or Linus Pauling, or at least someone who has specialized knowledge about those technical subjects. But if you want to know about attitudes, opinions or needs based upon a particular kind of experience, the "experts" are any people whose thoughts and feelings interest you. They may be experts because they represent the public at large or because they speak for a smaller group whose experiences qualify them to give you the information you want. In either case, the best way to get information is often to *ask* them for it in a carefully planned and executed interview.

Let's consider two examples. First, suppose that a Chamber of Commerce has asked educators to cooperate in launching a program to employ young people from minority groups. The organization wants to establish proper goals and procedures to make the program effective. What types of jobs and experiences are best suited to the needs of minority-group teenagers? How can job applicants be evaluated? One source of information is urban specialists, vocational counselors, educators, social workers and others experienced in dealing with similar problems. Interviews with these "experts" would tap this rich store of experience.

Here's another way in which interviews can be used to get valuable information: A school district set out to revise its vocational education curriculum to meet the realistic needs of the students. In this case, the "experts" were people in the community who actually filled the vocational roles that the training program was meant to teach. A random sample of these informants were asked questions such as: What are the special demands of your job? Which of (selected) topics would be of most use to you in doing your job? The results enabled the district to streamline its curriculum to make it more relevant to the post-graduate situations the students would face.

In both the above cases, the interview is a tool—a method for gathering information from "experts." All the interviews together represent a survey or poll of these experts. Of course, other tools besides the interview can be used in surveys; one example is the mail questionnaire, which is filled out and returned by the informant. However, the interview usually provides more complete and more reliable information than questionnaires and the like.

Unfortunately, there are many possible ways for the interview to fail in its purpose of finding out what people know, think and feel. This paper is designed to help prospective interviewers by (1) warning them about the possible pitfalls in the interview and (2) helping them make the most of its strong points. It includes information about the planning of an interview, about the important relationship between the interviewer and the respondent (the person who answers the questions), and about the duties of the interviewer.

## II. PLANNING THE INTERVIEW

Long before the interviewer actually sees the person he is to interview, others are busy planning the survey. Many of the decisions made during this pre-field work period directly affect the interviewer, so let's review some of the basic issues.

### Who Plans the Study?

The early work in a survey falls to the study director. He is the person responsible for deciding what questions need to be answered and how those answers can best be gotten. This is the way the process usually unfolds:

Someone wants to solve a problem or perform duties that require specialized information. He decides to gather the information by direct questioning of certain "experts." The first step is to carefully establish the goals of his study. He eliminates confusing and irrelevant aspects of the problem and concentrates only on those directly related to his particular needs.

This formulation of goals then serves as the basis for carefully planned questions, designed to get as much clearly stated information as possible from the people he wants to survey. In other words, the questions in an interview are a kind of *definition* of the goals of the study.

The final list of questions, in proper order, is called the interview schedule or instrument. It is used by the interviewer in getting the desired information to meet the goals of the study.

### What Types of Interview Schedules Are There?

One important decision faced by the study director—and by the interviewer—is the extent to which the interview will be standardized. In other words, will every respondent be asked exactly the same questions as every other respondent?

**Standardized interviews.** In the completely standardized interview schedule, there is a list of carefully worded questions, and the interviewer is expected not to deviate from the schedule in getting the respondents' answers. In other words, every respondent is asked the same questions in the same order. This assures that the information from every respondent is obtained under approximately the same conditions.

When the conditions are the same, you can be more sure that differences in peoples' answers are due to real differences in the people, and not to variations in the way the interview was conducted. On the other hand, some variation may be desirable for the sake of naturalness in the interview situation; a disadvantage of the standardized format is that the interviewer isn't free to follow the respondent's natural flow of conversation.

**Unstandardized interviews.** At the other extreme, the unstandardized interview permits the interviewer to vary his questions from respondent to respondent, as long as he gets information on certain points during the course of the interview. That is, the interviewer can ask any question he likes in order to get the same *information* from every respondent. This approach has the advantage of being more natural and flexible than the standardized interview, but it requires a sensitive and skilled interviewer to ask the right questions at the right time in the right way. Even under the best conditions, the differences between the way one interview and another are conducted may wipe out the comparability of the respondents' answers.

Most interview schedules are highly standardized, although some study directors sometimes use the unstandardized format and others use a combination of the two.

What Types of Questions Are There?

Another decision to be made is whether the respondent will be asked to select his answer from several prepared ones or will simply answer in his own words. Two basic types of questions are used in interview schedules, open-ended and closed-ended questions.

Closed-ended questions. In the closed-ended or fixed-alternative question, the respondent selects his answer from several possible alternatives. For example:

"What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?"

a. Elementary School
b. Junior High
c. High School
d. College
e. Graduate Work

Another example is this question about the respondent's feelings:

"What did you most dislike about school?"

a. The required subjects
b. The teachers
c. The rules
d. Everything

The disadvantage of this format, especially for collecting opinions or feelings, is that the precoded answers may not carry the shades of meaning that the respondent wants to convey. However, having the same alternatives for everyone makes the answers easier for the study director to compare.

Open-ended questions. The second type, the open-ended question, provides no specific alternatives. The respondent is free to say as much or as little as he likes *in his own words,* and the interviewer is obligated to record it all as faithfully as possible. Here is an example of an open-ended question:

"How do you think your life will be different five years from now?"

In other words, the open-ended question allows the respondent to express his answer uniquely, without having to force it into an arbitrary category. Of course, the answers from many different respondents must eventually be made comparable; consequently, from the study director's standpoint, the real difficulty with the open-ended answer comes in categorizing (or coding) the individual responses after the interview.

Both types of questions serve particular purposes and are frequently used together in interviews. From the interviewer's point of view, they make very different demands. With a closed-ended question, he merely needs to make a check by the correct choice of the respondent, but with an open-ended question he has the difficult task of trying to record verbatim the freely-spoken response.

## III. THE ROLE OF THE INTERVIEWER[1]

Once the schedule is ready and field work begins, the major responsibility for the quality of the survey falls on the interviewer. In the field, he has four major tasks: (1) selecting or locating the respondent, (2) establishing rapport with him, (3) asking the questions in the schedule, and (4) recording the answers.

### Selecting or Locating the Respondent

In order to contact the particular group of "experts" from whom he wants information, the study director devises sampling schemes. These are plans for deciding who the respondents will be and how the interviewer will locate them. Because the sample represents the group you are trying to study, it is very important that the sampling scheme be followed conscientiously. The validity of the survey (its faithfulness to the target group's true knowledge, thoughts and feelings) depends as much on interviewing every respondent in an adequate sample as it does on making those interviews as complete and accurate as possible.

**Quotas.** Sometimes the sampling scheme consists of simply giving the interviewer a certain quota of respondents to interview. The quota usually includes a certain number of representatives of special groups in the sample. For example, a given quota might include so many minority-group members, so many housewives, so many blue-collar workers, etc. The interviewer is free to choose the particular individuals, as long as he finds enough of them to meet his quota of each type.

This method places great responsibility on the interviewer, since no names or addresses of respondents are given to him. It also makes it difficult to tell whether the results of the survey apply to the population at large or only to those people whom interviewers happened to select. Interviewers often follow a natural inclination to choose people who look pleasant or attractive to them, rather than striving to select respondents at random. For example, to meet his quota of black respondents, an interviewer might question only middle-class blacks, ignoring the large number of working-class blacks.

**Assignment of Respondents.** Fortunately, the quota method is rarely used in polling today. Instead, most study directors select their respondents in advance of the interview—usually in a way whereby the over-all sample is representative of the group of respondents they are interested in. Then names of specific respondents are assigned to interviewers, who are responsible for locating and interviewing those particular individuals.

### Establishing Rapport

Once the respondent has been located, the interviewer must establish the kind of friendly relationship that will permit him to ask and get truthful answers to the questions on the schedule. Here are some specific suggestions:

**Appearance and manner.** The interviewer should always take care that his personal appearance and manner do not interfere with the main purpose of his visit: getting the interview. Unfortunately, clothes *do* make the man in the minds of many people who might be respondents in a survey. Consequently, the interviewer should strive to look neutral,

[1]The information in this section is partly paraphrased from a section by Paul B. Sheatsley in the book *Research Methods in Social Relations* by C. Selltiz, M. Jahoda, M. Deutsch and S. Cook (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959). It is also partly based on the experiences of the author and his colleague, Gary C. Lawrence.

rather than conspicuous. For example, his clothes should not be obviously out-of-place in the neighborhood where he is working. He should also avoid the appearance of a salesman; he should carry only a clipboard and some interview schedules.

His manner should be casual and friendly, but businesslike. In speaking, he should be as natural as possible, avoiding jargon or technical language, as well as slang and ungrammatical usage.

**The introduction.** From the beginning the interviewer should be friendly and to-the-point. Besides his own name, he should introduce himself to the respondent by telling:

1. Who is sponsoring the survey
2. The general purpose of the study
3. How the respondent happened to have been chosen (usually by chance, to assure representativeness)
4. That the interview is confidential (although this should not be over-emphasized, unless necessary to reassure the respondent).

**The questions.** Above all, the interviewer must make it clear that he is unbiased. He should give the impression that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to the questions, only the respondent's particular answer. Furthermore, he should never show—by words, actions or expression—surprise, agreement or disagreement with a response. Nor should he express his own opinion about the questions in any way. If the respondent presses him to take a position, the interviewer should avoid doing so as tactfully as possible, perhaps by remarking that his job at the moment is to *get* opinions, not to *have* them.

## Asking the Questions

Unless the interview is unstandardized, the interviewer is obligated to ask the questions exactly as they are worded on the schedule. One way to assure himself of doing this is to become thoroughly familiar with all the questions and their sequence in the schedule before the interview.

**Explaining questions.** Questions should never be explained to respondents or re-worded to make them clearer unless the interviewer has been instructed to do so. If a respondent doesn't understand the question, the interviewer can only re-state it exactly as it is written, slowly and with proper emphasis. If the respondent still doesn't understand, the interviewer should ask him to answer it according to his best understanding and note on the record that the respondent claimed not to have understood it.

**Probing.** Sometimes a respondent obviously does not really answer the question an interviewer has asked. In these cases the interviewer may have to probe (ask for clarification or further information). Here are the main situations in which probing is necessary:

1. When the response is irrelevant to the question asked
2. When an answer is unclear
3. When an answer seems incomplete
4. When an answer is suspected of being untrue.

Obviously, probing requires great skill and tact. The most appropriate probes are simply asking a respondent, "What do you mean by _____?", referring to the word or phrase that needs explanation. For example, the phrase, "They say . . . " in a response should be probed by asking, "What do you mean by 'they'?." Similarly, if a respondent attributes something to "the Government," the interviewer might need to probe to find out whether he means local, state or federal government, or perhaps to find out whether he

means the President, or Congress or the courts.

In any case, the interviewer must never suggest that he is looking for a particular answer, either by partially stating the answer for the respondent ("leading" him) or by the inflection of his voice.

## Recording the Responses

**Fixed-alternative answers.** We have already said that fixed-alternative answers are much simpler to record than open-ended answers. The interviewer's main problems are accuracy and completeness. Before leaving the respondent, he should carefully check to see that he has asked and recorded answers to all the items.

**Open-ended answers.** Schedules with open-ended questions are more difficult to record. Here the respondent is free to say as much or as little as he likes in his answer, and the interviewer's job is to record it fully.

**Verbatim recording.** Getting every word of a respondent's answer is the only sure way to reduce recording error in open-ended questions. But sometimes verbatim recording is beyond human capability, and in these cases a careful paraphrase of the respondent's answer is a strong second best. Even in paraphrases, the interviewer should use the respondent's own words whenever possible, especially in the cases of nouns and verbs that figure prominently in the respondent's meaning.

**Abbreviations and omissions.** One way to improve verbatim recording is to leave out certain nonessential words—as long as doing so doesn't change the meaning of the answer in any way. For example, the articles (a, an, the) and parenthetical expressions such as "you know," "well," etc., can usually be omitted. Suppose a respondent provides a wordy answer to a question about his views on an action of the local school board:

> "Well, I think they should, you know, should always consider the welfare of, uh, you know, the students. Well, after all, the schools aren't run for the teachers, are they? They're there to give the kids an, uh, education. At least, I think so."

The interviewer can report this answer quite accurately, but using half the utterances, by writing:

> "(Board) should always consider the students' welfare. Schools not run for teachers. Schools there to give kids education. (I think.)"

Commonly used abbreviations (Rd. for Road, Cal. for California) may also save time. However, the interviewer should be careful not to use abbreviations that few others besides himself would recognize. Even better, all interviewers on a study should use the same abbreviation techniques, so that the study director can interpret their records more confidently.

**After the interview.** Immediately after the interview (before he talks to another respondent), the interviewer should read over the completed schedules, completing half-finished answers and adding whatever information can be recalled. Answers to probes should be set apart by parentheses.

Any unanswered questions should be fully explained. For example, "Respondent refused to answer because. . . . "

## IV. PITFALLS IN THE INTERVIEW

The purpose of an interview survey is to collect as much accurate information as possible about the subject in which the study director is interested. He wants to know the respondent's *true* knowledge, thoughts and feelings with respect to that subject. Anything less is inaccurate and incomplete data and cannot readily be used to draw conclusions. Whenever the completed interview schedule shows some answer that is not the respondent's true knowledge, attitudes or opinions, there is error in the survey data.

What causes error in interview results?

There are three major sources: (1) the respondent himself; (2) a poor relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, and (3) the interviewer.

### Respondent Error

Sometimes respondents, for reasons of their own, do not answer questions truthfully. (In one survey, as many as half the respondents did not tell the truth on simple items of fact, such as whether they owned a telephone or had a library card. Telephones and library cards are status-engendering things, in our society.) The interviewer can do little about this kind of error. Study directors should (1) be aware of it, (2) try to reduce it by careful construction of the interview schedule, and then (3) allow for it in compiling their results.

### Interviewer-Respondent Interaction

We have already mentioned the importance of establishing rapport between the interviewer and respondent. This is not always an easy task, especially when an interviewer must meet many different respondents from all kinds of living situations. The more "different" the respondent and interviewer are, the more difficult it is to establish rapport.

What do we mean by "different"?

Social distance. In general we mean "from different social backgrounds and different standards of living." The amount of difference in the backgrounds of two people is a sort of social distance between them in the same way that the amount of space between two people is the physical distance between them. For example, there would be a good deal of social distance between an interviewer who lives in a white upper-middle-class neighborhood, dresses in obviously expensive clothes and uses very formal English and a respondent who lives in a ghetto, works the night shift in a factory and speaks the "language of the streets." The question is, how will this affect the interview?

**Too much social distance.** It depends upon the interviewer and the respondent, of course. But generally, if a respondent judges the interviewer to be of higher social class than himself, he will tend to answer the questions in a way that he thinks the interviewer would approve of. For example, he might say that he opposes welfare payments to the poor, although he really favors them. In other words, a respondent of lower social distance may try to ingratiate himself to the interviewer by showing that he has opinions similar to the interviewer's own.

Even if this social distance between them doesn't change the substance of the respondent's answers, it could make him hostile, so that he would be generally uncooperative.

**Too little social distance.** There may also be a problem of too *little* social distance between interviewer and respondent. If a respondent thinks an interviewer is someone very much like himself, he may give answers that he thinks will measure up to what the

interviewer expects of him as a peer. For example, he might say that he earns more money than he does, so that the interviewer will think well of him.

In other words, both too much and too little social distance can cause distortions in the respondent's answers. That is why we advise interviewers to dress and behave in a subdued, neutral fashion: to make it less likely that the respondent will feel too much or too little social distance between himself and the interviewer.

### Interviewer Error

Sometimes by accident, but most often by failing to fulfill his responsibilities, the interviewer himself may distort the results of the survey. We have already mentioned the possible perils to the study when an interviewer selects his own respondents and fails to overcome some perceived social distance between himself and the respondent. Now let's consider the other two major responsibilities of the interviewer: (1) asking the questions and (2) recording the answers.

**Asking the questions.** The interviewer may ask the questions on the schedule in such a way as to affect the respondent's answers.

First, questions may be worded so as to suggest a possible answer to the question. Perhaps the most familiar example of biasing questions is the leading question (for example, "You *do* support the war, don't you?").

Fortunately, most interviews are standardized and provide the exact wording for every question. Still, there are other opportunities in the interview (for example, when probing) for question wording to lead to an answer other than the one the respondent would have given on his own.

There is a second way in which getting the answers to questions can interfere with expression of the respondent's true answer. The interviewer may use facial expressions, gestures or sounds that encourage a respondent in a particular line of comment which he might not otherwise follow. Many laboratory studies have shown that if the interviewer smiles, leans forward, or says "mm-hmm" or "good" when the respondent uses particular words or phrases, the respondent will tend to use those expressions even more often. The same things happen if these encouraging signals are given when a particular attitude is expressed; it comes to be expressed even more often and strongly. This is all the more reason why the interviewer should maintain a neutral, unbiased stance in the interview, never giving the respondent reason to think that the interviewer himself favors one position or another.

**Recording.** When the survey is over, the study director has only one source of evidence for what his "experts" know, think and feel—the completed interview schedules brought in by the interviewers. If the schedules completely and accurately reflect what the respondents said, then the study director can have faith that he got the information he wanted from the respondents.

What if the schedules are not faithful records of the respondent's answers? How could the errors have happened?

It could have been simple clerical error. Some interviewers are better than others at keeping accurate records; they are less likely to make simple mistakes, like missing a response or marking the wrong alternative. Still, any interviewer can improve accuracy by carefully checking the schedule before leaving the interview, and afterward as well.

Other errors occur because the interviewer writes down what he *expects* the respondent to say, instead of listening to what he actually says. Everyone forms impressions of others and imagines "missing information" about them in line with things that are already known. For example, if we know that a man voted for George Wallace in 1968, we probably would expect him also to favor a militaristic policy in Vietnam and a tough line

against rioters on campuses and in the cities. Regardless of his answers to questions about these things, we might very well stick to our expectation. When this happens—as it sometimes does—it is not the respondent's answer but the interviewer's that gets into the completed schedule. It then distorts the results.

A third way in which the interviewer causes error in survey data is this: Sometimes he paraphrases the respondent's answer in his own words to such an extent that it is more nearly the interviewer's answer than the respondent's. In one large survey, for example, the three interviewers who did the most work were found to have turned in completed schedules that were noticeably different from each other. That is, Interviewer A's schedules were very much like each other in the particular words they contained and in the length of the answers they reported, but they were different from the schedules submitted by Interviewers B and C, which were also different from each other. In other words, the three sets of completed records seemed to be marked by certain characteristic verbal habits of the three interviewers who had completed them, instead of reflecting the different styles of each interviewer's respondents.

When the interviewer *intrudes* into the record this way, we can't assume that the completed interview really gives us the respondent's information—and that's what we wanted from the interview in the first place. The suggestions for verbatim recording already given in Section III will help reduce intrusion of the interviewer's style.

## A Final Word

Lest these many pitfalls discourage you, let's evaluate the interview as a way to get information.

Like all good social-research methods, the interview demands careful planning and intelligent, sensitive administration. Perhaps more than most, it relies on the conscientious performance of many individuals—many of them interviewers—to assure that the results of the survey provide reliable information about the problem being studied.

That is what this paper is all about: helping interviewers prepare themselves to return error-free data. If we have seemed at times to accentuate the negative, it was only in the interest of succinctness—and better interviews. Knowing a pitfall is there may keep you from falling into it.

Despite all the possible pitfalls, the interview still offers many advantages to people who want to know what other people have to say. We should "continue to use it with bravado, all the while sensitive to its weaknesses"[2] and profiting from its strengths.

[2]E. Webb and J. Salancik," The Interview, or The Only Wheel in Town," *Journalism Monographs*, No. 2, November 1966.

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