

## Reading 3

### Conducting and Analysing Interviews

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#### REDIGUIDE 11: Guides in Educational Research

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## **Introduction**

Interviewing is the oldest and yet sometimes the most ill-used research technique in the world. Person A wishes to find out information, Person B has a point of view, is in possession of relevant facts or has undergone certain experiences. What could be more straightforward than Person A simply seeking out Person B, asking a direct face-to-face question and noting down the answer?

Yet consider the following pitfalls which describe but six out of countless opportunities for inaccuracy or distortion in interviewing.

### **Pitfall 1 Interviewer bias**

An interviewer's question can lead the respondent in a certain consciously or subconsciously desired direction: e.g.

"Is there too much sex and violence on television and what are you going to do about it?"

### **Pitfall 2 Sample bias**

An investigator interviews mothers in a shopping centre and concludes that "few parents understand ITA".

### **Pitfall 3 Hired interviewers**

Some studies of people hired to conduct interviews show that they may fake answers when subjects are unco-operative.

### **Pitfall 4 Race bias**

It is frequently the case that black pupils respond differently to a black interviewer than to a white one.

### **Pitfall 5 Straightjacket interview**

Some tightly structured interview schedules permit little latitude: e.g.

"Are you in favour of corporal punishment?" YES/NO

### **Pitfall 6 Respondent bias**

Respondents frequently give the interviewer an answer which is more public relations for their own group than an accurate response. For example when Mildred Collins (Students into Teachers (1969)) interviewed Heads and asked what they did for probationers they tended to say they were always helping, ever a cheery word. The probationers during interview reported lack of interest and few contacts.

## 1. Why interview?

Consequently researchers need to begin not so much by saying "I am doing research into home/school relations so I shall interview 50 parents", but rather by carefully outlining questions to which answers are sought, and then deciding which data-gathering techniques are most appropriate. In some cases questionnaires or tests will be better than interviews, in other cases interviews may be complementary to other modes of enquiry.

Suppose for example you are studying teachers' praise and children's learning, arguing that the better readers in the class receive more praise than the poorer readers. You might interview teachers, ask them who are the best readers and who are the poorest readers, and then require them to tell you how often they praise various children. A much more effective strategy, however, would be to use reading scores derived from an objective test, classroom behaviour description obtained from live observation or lesson transcripts, and use interviews to supplement this information.

Equally, if you have a lot of simple questions requiring short answers or ratings on five or seven point scales, a mailed questionnaire might reach a much wider audience and produce much more information. Alternatively if your questions are such as to require a great deal of careful thought or research rather than an off-the-cuff reply you should elicit a written response.

On the other hand if your target population consists of small children, illiterates or poorly educated people, you may obtain better results from talking to them rather than expecting them to write.

## 2. Where to interview

Environment is most important in our daily lives. Even professional people, used to meeting officials, attending meetings, using telephones, feel on their guard when interviewed in an office with the questioner behind a desk. Such things usually only happen in a crisis or in the Income Tax Office. Much more relaxed is the interview in a home or in comfortable chairs. Not that this is always perfect, as many people are kings in their own home and may be so over-confident as to give false information. What you need to ask yourself is what location, given the nature of your interview, makes most sense.

**Confidentiality** is also an important element. Few people will be frank if they are in earshot of an "audience". If you interview parents in a school, for example, it should be, whenever possible, away from other parents, teachers and their own children, unless their presence is desirable. When interviewing children, especially adolescents, it is also important to do this away from their peers, in whose company they often feel they must play a certain role. Investigators studying adolescents often find that in a group interview they strike a strong "anti-school" note, whereas in

individual interviews they are more likely to admit to being interested in their work and resenting their colleagues' attempts to disrupt lessons. Small children, however, may not communicate at all unless in the company of their parents or friends.

## 3. Whom to interview

Sampling is a problem throughout educational research. A single or a few respondents may be atypical, and a cast of thousands may be equally unrepresentative if badly selected. More information can be found about this question in Rediguide 4.

Basically the choice is between a **random sample** and an **opportunity sample**. An **opportunity sample** consists of those whom it is convenient to interview, either because they are willing to talk or because they come your way. The group of mothers out shopping referred to in Pitfall 2 above comprised an opportunity sample. The investigator was wrong, therefore, to make inferences about "parents" when his sample may have been predominantly of one social class or background, and when fathers had not been interviewed at all.

A **random sample** gives everyone an equal chance of being interviewed. If you were studying 10 year old children in a school and wished to interview a quarter of them you might, for example, interview every fourth child from an alphabetical list starting with one of the first four children in the alphabet chosen arbitrarily. However your final sample might, by chance, contain more boys than girls. You might prefer, therefore, a **stratified random sample**. To obtain a stratified random sample you specify in advance, as part of your research design, which sub-groups of the whole sample might be important. This is usually decided on the basis of previous research findings or professional judgment.

Suppose you are interviewing secondary school children and can manage 60 interviews in a school. You might specify age and sex as being important sub-categories of the whole school population. A stratified random sample might produce the following six sub-groups, allowing you to interview equal numbers of boys and girls of 11, 13 and 15 year olds. The 10 children in each "cell" would then be selected randomly from all those in that category.

|          | Boys | Girls | Total |
|----------|------|-------|-------|
| 1st year | 10   | 10    | 20    |
| 3rd year | 10   | 10    | 20    |
| 5th year | 10   | 10    | 20    |
| Total    | 30   | 30    | 60    |

**Stratified random sample of secondary pupils**

This design would be very simple with six "cells" each containing 10 children. Beware too many stratifications. If you wish to add colour of eyes, social class, IQ or personality, you could find yourself with a 200 or 300 cell design and either have empty cells (e.g. no pupil in the "female, 1st year, blue-eyed, middle-class, low IQ, introvert" category) or several thousand people to interview.

One further point to bear in mind is that you need to be open and honest about your sample. When a random sample is selected it is customary to have a "reserve list" in case anyone drops out of the sample or refuses to be interviewed. Interviewing in some areas invades well-defended privacy, and on topics to do with taboo subjects the refusal rate might be high. Consequently if many people drop out or refuse to be interviewed, and are replaced by others, one has an opportunity sample of people willing to be interviewed, rather than a genuinely **random sample**.

It should be said that there is nothing wrong with an opportunity sample provided that (a) the investigator states clearly that this is what has been

chosen, and (b) he or she does not make over-bold claims or inferences from the interview data. Many interesting pieces of research based on interviews have used opportunity samples.

#### 4. When to interview

This may seem a pointless question to ask, and yet it can be a quite critical issue, particularly if the interview is part of a battery of data-gathering devices.

Suppose one is interested in knowing something about how student teachers change during their training. Any preliminary interviews designed to elicit information about their attitudes, experience or behaviour would need to take place immediately before or at the very beginning of their course. If these were left until after the course had commenced important changes might already be underway. People's attitudes and behaviour often do transform over a period of time, a phenomenon which some researchers into personality call "function fluctuation".

A second consideration is the frailty of human memory. When respondents are being asked to describe or evaluate events, they should be interviewed as close to those events as feasible. A good example of this occurs in research into classroom interaction. If one tape records a lesson and plays it back to a teacher for discussion, this interview should take place within a very short time of the lesson. Some investigators have returned to the school some days later and been surprised at how little teachers could recall of the lessons in question. Teaching is a busy job and many thousands of incidents occur every day.

A third trap concerns extraneous circumstances, sometimes beyond the investigator's control. Children interviewed about "authority" might have a quite different view of it if a teacher has just arbitrarily punished the whole class than if they have just returned from a relaxed residential field course. It is not always possible to do anything about such circumstances, but grossly unsuitable timing should be avoided, and people should not be interviewed when markedly upset or euphoric unless this emotional condition is the subject of or central to the enquiry.

A further critical aspect of timing occurs when interviewing is supplementary to other modes of enquiry. Roy Nash, in his book "Classrooms Observed" (1973), interviewed teachers using the Kelly Rep Grid technique for assembling personal constructs (for a description see Rediguide 9). He then observed their classes and interpreted his constructs from what took place in their lessons. It might have been better, or at least a valid alternative, to assemble classroom descriptions first, then interview teachers afterwards. One needs, in particular, to bear in mind that the interview itself can exert quite a significant influence on events. If one interviewed a teacher to elicit, for

example, his attitudes to slower learners in the class, he might quite probably behave differently towards these children when subsequently observed.

Other aspects of timing are self-evident. Late evening is a time when both investigator and respondent may be fatigued. Parents who are shift workers are not always accessible at times when other workers can be found at home. Pupils in rural areas may not be available after school because of the prompt departure of school buses. These and other small but significant points of timing should be clarified before any programme of interviewing is undertaken. One experienced interviewer engaged in an evaluation of a national curriculum package made the mistake of interviewing a group of teachers after they had been to a meeting. He found that many used identical phrases in their replies, as these were fresh in their minds from the meeting they had just attended.

## 5. Using interviews in pilot studies

One common use of interviews is at the early stages of an enquiry which may or may not go on to use interviews in its main phase. Three typical examples are given below.

**Example A.** An investigator intends to study teachers' attitudes to new curricula. He hopes to use an attitude questionnaire, but in the first instance he interviews a sample of teachers known to be either hostile or particularly receptive to new ideas. He notes down actual phrases used in conversation, and eventually uses these as part of a pool of possible items for an attitude inventory. He also interviews the small group of teachers who respond to the pilot version of the attitude scale to see how they regard it.

**Example B.** A primary and secondary school Head are interested in making the transition from one school to the other as smooth and trouble-free as possible. Their principal intention is to establish and monitor an experimental programme for one year, but preparatory to this they interview a number of pupils, parents and teachers from each school to help them discover more about children's anxieties, any lack of communication between the two schools, teachers' ideas, parents' problems and so on. The experimental programme is then substantially influenced by what was discovered in the interviews.

**Example C.** A classroom researcher wishes to observe and study probationer teachers at work. One of his concerns is to know what to observe. He interviews several experienced teachers, getting them to describe their job. From these interviews he assembles a checklist of items such as "marking books", "preparing materials", "asking pupil question", "dealing with misbehaviour", "ordering equipment", etc. which he then uses to categorise the type of jobs various probationers find themselves doing in a day.

## 6. Types of interview

Three kinds of face-to-face interview are commonly distinguished: the structured, semi-structured and unstructured interview.

**Structured interviews.** These are based on a carefully worded interview schedule and frequently require short answers or the ticking of a category by the investigator. They are often like a written questionnaire in form, and indeed it is common for a sub-sample of people who have been given a questionnaire to be interviewed, partly to amplify and partly to check their written answers. The structured interview is useful when a lot of questions are to be asked which are not particularly contentious or deeply thought provoking. If the area under investigation does require more profound deliberation the respondent may become irritated at being press-ganged into one word or category answers. In such cases the semi-structured interview would be far better. Typical items in a structured interview schedule require YES/NO answers, some qualification of time such as "always, often, sometimes, rarely, never" or a demographic grid such as the one below.

Can you give me a few details of the people in this family? How many children are there? Can we start with the youngest?

|              |
|--------------|
| (pre-school) |
| (at-school)  |

|   | Christian Name | Relationship to Informant | Sex |   | Age on 1.12.77 | Name of School | Office Use |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|-----|---|----------------|----------------|------------|
|   |                |                           | M   | F |                |                |            |
| A |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| B |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| C |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| D |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| E |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| F |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| G |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |
| H |                |                           |     |   |                |                |            |

Demographic Grid

Since this sort of information can so easily be collected by questionnaire method, there is no reason to interview unless face-to-face questioning really is a superior method.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Again a carefully worded interview schedule is assembled, but in this case much more latitude is permitted. Often there is an initial question followed by probes. The schedule may contain spaces for the interviewer to record notes, or a tape recorder may be used. A semi-structured interview tends to be the one most favoured by educational researchers as it allows respondents to express themselves at some length, but offers enough shape to prevent aimless rambling. A typical item from a semi-structured schedule used during an enquiry into home/school liaison is shown below.

#### Question 34

Since last September, have you or your husband helped \_\_\_\_\_ at home with arithmetic or other subjects?  
(circle code as appropriate).

|                    | W | H |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Yes, often         | 1 | 4 |
| Yes, occasionally  | 2 | 5 |
| No, or hardly ever | 3 | 6 |
| No mother/father   | 7 | 8 |

If \* YES (1) (2) (4) (5)

(a) What sort of things do you do?

HUSBAND \_\_\_\_\_

WIFE \_\_\_\_\_

(b) how does \_\_\_\_\_ feel about it?

If \* NO (3) (6) why not? \_\_\_\_\_

\*Footnote; The numbers in brackets after YES (1) (2) (4) (5) and NO (3) (6) refer back to the codes at the beginning of the item, i.e. if the respondent answers the first question "yes often" or "occasionally" for husband or wife, the interviewer goes on to ask "what sort of things do you do?"

**Unstructured interviews.** Depth interviews require considerable skill and in areas such as psychotherapy, practitioners receive extensive training in the necessary techniques. Consequently it is not something which can be undertaken lightly or by anyone not well-informed about procedures or hazards. Yet sensitively and skilfully handled the unstructured interview, sometimes lasting for two or three hours, can produce information which might not otherwise emerge. One national manufacturer of prams once engaged a group of psychologists to give depth interviews to young mothers. Whereas the conventional market research interview might be concerned with price, shape, colour or convenience, the unstructured depth interview produced information of a different kind. Some young mothers eventually talked about their fears of babies suffocating, their conflicts with grandmothers who preferred coach-built prams and other examples of deep-rooted attitudes or anxieties such as would only emerge during skilful questioning. In general, novice interviewers are best advised not to embark on this kind of interview until they can confidently handle a more structured situation, and not before they are fairly clear about their own value systems.

## 7. Team and group interviewing

So far we have considered the common one-to-one interview, but, despite the warnings given earlier, it is sometimes useful for more than two people to be involved, provided this does not overawe the subjects.

**Group interviews** involve several respondents. Despite the problem of undue prominence being given to the statements of the very articulate or vociferous, an interview with a small group of perhaps three or four people can be quite useful. For example, if an investigator wishes to get a picture of classroom life this can often be assembled quite accurately with a small group. Pupils will correct each other on points of detail until a consensus is established. Nevertheless caution must be exercised. The consensus might still be fiction.

**Team interviews** normally involve two interviewers working in partnership. In some contexts, say a study of sex roles in adolescents, it might be useful to have a man and a woman present. Certainly, it would be extremely unwise in a study of adolescent sex, for example, for a male investigator alone to conduct an interview with a girl adolescent. Similarly in a multiracial context a white and black interviewer might work in tandem. The advantage of the team interview is threefold. Firstly it may facilitate responses from some subjects; secondly it allows one person to ask questions and the other to make notes, or to observe certain aspects of the respondent's behaviour; thirdly, since interviewing can be such a subjective process, it allows two people to make separate records of the events and then compare their two versions.

## 8. More than one interviewer

Sometimes, usually in funded research, a group of interviewers might embark on an interviewing programme. This occasionally happens in small-scale research where the investigator has friends or colleagues - fellow teachers, a spouse, a group of student teachers - who are willing to help out and increase the sample being studied. It is most important that training should be given to such collaborators. Ideally they should be given an explanation of the purposes of the research, told how to use the schedule and supervised whilst conducting a pilot interview. All should use whatever form of words is agreed for each question and not improvise. A videotape of an interview can be shown, and each person can use the schedule as if he or she were the interviewer. Careful scrutiny of the responses should show if different interviewers are misusing the schedule or not recording accurately. Differences between interviewers cannot be entirely obliterated but they can be minimised. If there are preliminary and follow-up interviews, lists can be exchanged so that interviewers do not see the same respondent on both occasions unless this is desired on other grounds.

## 9. Devising an interview schedule

It is highly skilled job to devise an interview schedule which elicits relevant information, contains no redundant items and eliminates questioner bias. Even a watertight schedule cannot totally excise the kind of bias inherent in tone of voice, gesture and facial expressions.

The investigator needs first of all to make a list of areas in which information is required. These should then be translated into actual questions and probes, bearing in mind the age and background of the respondent. Professional jargon should be left out unless the person being interviewed is fully familiar with it.

Let us take the example of you the investigator studying home/school liaison in junior schools in a working class area. Some schools have held meetings for second and fourth year parents to demonstrate and explain teaching methods, and the interviewer wants to know about these. You could ask "What did you think of the meetings?", but this might merely elicit non-committal answers such as "not bad" or "quite interesting". You might enquire, "How do you evaluate the school's attempts to communicate the principles of Science 5-13 to parents?" and receive a blank stare or a polite smile from most respondents. "Presumably you went ..." suggests the person must reply in the affirmative. What you should rather do is build up an item until it meets your requirements, bearing in mind the following:

- (1) Some parents might not have gone to the meetings because their children never delivered the invitation.
- (2) In some cases only one person might have attended, in others none or both. Why do people not go? Is it shift work, baby-sitting problems, lack of interest?
- (3) Some parents might say they were present because it looks negligent not to have attended, so they should be asked to describe what happened. Often people who say "Yes" in the first instance, retract when asked about the event.
- (4) If some of the information is to be coded for later data processing, a code might be built in for easy circling and transfer to computers, e.g.

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Yes        | 1 |
| No         | 2 |
| Don't know | 3 |

Consequently the final item, question, probes, data codes and all, would look like this:

### Question 8

In October last, parents were invited to a meeting where the teachers explained their teaching methods - one meeting for the second year pupils and one for the fourth years. Were you invited to either of them?

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Yes        | 1 |
| No         | 2 |
| Don't know | 3 |

| If YES (1) Did you or your husband go? | W | H  |
|----------------------------------------|---|----|
| Yes attended second year meeting       | 4 | 9  |
| Yes attended fourth year meeting       | 5 | 10 |
| No, did not attend either              | 6 | 11 |
| Don't know                             | 7 | 12 |
| No father/mother                       | 8 | 13 |

If YES (4) (5) (9) (10)

- (a) What can you remember of it?
- (b) How did you feel about the meeting?
- (c) Did you learn anything from it at all?

If NO (6) (11) Why did you not go?

N.B. Before making a final decision about coding read Rediguide 19 to ensure that your intended analyses are practicable.

## 10. Pilot interviews

When you have assembled a schedule **always** do two things:-

- (a) Pass it on to experienced people for comment. What is straightforward to you as the investigator may be baffling to another person not fully in the picture. Sometimes you are too close to something and others can be more objective.
- (b) **Do one or more pilot interviews.** Try out your completed schedule with one or two typical respondents. Do not make the mistake of trying it out on a sophisticated colleague or friend and then using it with children or less sophisticated people. If necessary ask one person to use the schedule and offer comments. Be prepared to modify it, considerably if necessary, in the light of informal comment. **Pilot the modified version again.** There are many instances of investigators committed to a round of interviews who only discover the ambiguity or other inadequacy of their instrument after the first few subjects have responded. By then it is often too late to modify it.

## 11. Organising Time and Travel

Pilot interviews can also give you some rough ideas about the amount of time needed to complete an interviewing programme.

Suppose, for example, someone conducting research into children's leisure activities cheerfully decides to interview 100 sets of parents to collect background information. Since it is fairly difficult to conduct an interview properly in less than an hour, and can take as long as two or three hours perhaps one and a half hours should be allowed on average. One then needs to add travelling time and "abortive visit" time, when no-one is at home and one has to try the next person on the list.

Consequently it is difficult, particularly for the part-time investigator usually working evenings and weekends, to do more than one interview a day. A full-time researcher might manage up to three. Clearly, therefore, assuming a part-time investigator can give up three evenings a week, the proposed 100 interviews would take most of the year. In some enquiries it might be undesirable to aggregate data collected in September with that assembled the following March. The plan for 100 interviews would thus be unrealistic in this context. A far better plan would be to select a smaller number of parents for intensive interview and collect the rest of the data in other ways.

Travel time and costs are also a consideration. Funded research usually has travel costs built in, but independent investigators have to pay their own bills. Travel by public transport can be very inefficient and a great deal of time can easily be wasted.

It is well worth the time spent in planning the interview visits carefully. If one is travelling to homes, for example, a local map should be used with the homes marked on it in red. One can then see at a glance where potential subjects live and "invade" a particular district. If someone is not at home there is often another person on the list just around the corner. If one is interviewing in school the same sort of careful advance planning is essential. Find out when teachers are free if they are to be interviewed, or make sure you know which lesson and classroom the children are in if they are to be involved. Check that your visits do not coincide with Sports Day, medicals, prize giving or half term. Then if Lassa Fever strikes suddenly, at least you did your best.

## 12. Analysing interviews

Analysis time is also frequently underestimated even by experienced investigators. Even quantitative data has to be added up or transferred to computers and qualitative analysis is immensely time-consuming.

If one tape records a one hour interview, play back time alone will be one hour. Transcribing will take much longer. A skilled audio typist would need about two hours, allowing for stopping and starting the machine etc; a shorthand typist would need three hours, and a well-meaning two-finger typist would need more like five hours. Indeed it might even need as much as seven or ten hours. The investigator then has a transcript containing perhaps 5000 words and running to 15 or 20 pages. These then have to be read and inferences drawn from them. Thus our optimist who earlier embarked on 100 interviews may have as much as 700 hours of transcribing time and lengthy analysis time. By the time it is reported, the research may be out of date.

It is not essential to transcribe interviews, and many interviewers rely on handwritten notes assembled during the interview. These need to be subjected to content analysis, a matter too complex to discuss in any depth here. Suffice to say that it is important for subjective content analysis to be double checked. The first reader might deduce from reading interview transcripts that certain points are being stressed by subjects. A second reader should **independently** make a list of salient points. Areas of disagreement can then be discussed and analysed further.

It is also useful to think of content analysis as being a two or three stage operation. Usually the investigator knows the reason for asking certain questions, but when all interviews have been completed other matters of importance often emerge. A first rapid reading of all transcripts by two independent readers can often be used to decide how the main analysis should be conducted. There may even be a "sandwich" model whereby this major analysis is followed by a final rapid re-read to see if anything has been missed or become distorted.

### 13. Validity and reliability

These concepts apply to interviews as much as to any other data-gathering device. Most handbooks of educational research discuss various kinds of validity and reliability, but a few brief thoughts are given below. Rediguide 10 deals with this topic in greater detail.

**Validity; Does the interview measure or describe what it purports to measure or describe?** How does the evidence collected compare with other sources of evidence such as written self-reports, questionnaires, test scores or observation data? Are the constructs employed meaningful ones? (e.g. would experienced practitioners regard them as important? Are they based on the findings of previous investigators?) Is the evidence collected in any way predictive of future behaviour or events?

**Reliability:** Test-retest and split-half types of reliability are not always feasible or relevant. Nevertheless one should ask: Would two interviewers using the schedule or procedure get similar results? Would an interviewer obtain a similar picture using the procedures on different occasions? This latter point can be checked by asking interviewers to code and report on the same videotape after intervals in time.

### 14. Conducting the interview

A great deal of common sense needs to be employed when interviewing people. The style should be a balance between friendliness and objectivity. The tight-lipped interview with a sphinx-like expression can alienate just as readily as the affable, matey interviewer, who too readily agrees with what his respondents say, can distort.

The beginning of an interview is very important. First of all you should carry some kind of credentials, especially as encyclopaedia and magazine salesmen now frequently use the "I'm doing a piece of research" gambit to gain entry. A letter from the Head of the school or from a research supervisor on headed notepaper explaining that you are a bona fide investigator will usually be sufficient.

Secondly make sure all the spadework has been done. If a Head is writing to parents or telling class teachers, then do not commence your interviews until you know the ground is cleared.

Thirdly explain to the subject the purpose of your interview, e.g. "I'm interviewing several parents in the area to try to find out what they think about their children's schooling", or "I'm talking to a lot of children in your class about what they do in their spare time". Avoid a tendentious opening like: "Most young people are browned off with school nowadays, so I'd like to know how you feel.", or "There's been a lot of publicity about falling standards lately, so I'd like to know what you think about it". Incidentally do not be put off too easily if doing home interviews. Many parents, for example, will tell you that they are too busy, and when you explain "It won't take long" are so glad of the chance to talk they will scarcely let you out of the house. It is not a bad idea to start off with easier personal questions which arouse interest and do not put off people apprehensive of authority figures.

Fourthly always remember to ask at the end of the interview if there is anything the subject would like to ask you. You have probably asked a lot of questions and it is the least you can do.

Finally, and most important, assure the subject that the interview is **confidential**. Do not under any circumstances break this promise. Although educational research does not have a professional code which, if broken, leads to dismissal from a profession, it does have a set of ethics which should

be followed. For some investigators this code of ethics requires that the interview "picture" should be given to the respondent for comment. In other words, if you conclude that a person is for or against something you should give the chance, subsequently, of amplifying what has been said, or correcting it if it is erroneous. You need to use your judgment about when this is an appropriate procedure. Incidentally, many interviewers, particularly when interviewing in a home or school, write up a little "scenario" describing in fairly free form the location and the interview. This can be useful supplementary material and refreshes the memory at a later date.

## 15. Difficult topics

Some topics, particularly to do with sex, religion, politics or private lives, may be too difficult to handle unless you are an experienced interviewer. Others are difficult but not impossible.

Sometimes one needs to use projective techniques or other devices to elicit an accurate picture. They are too involved to describe briefly, so below are four examples where the investigator uses a particular device to get round a difficult problem.

**Example 1 "Guess who" technique.** Your research investigates under-age smoking. You know that few children will admit to it, so you say, "Guess who this describes. This person often smokes secretly. Without telling me the names look through this class list and tell me how many people it might be". If a whole class comes up with a number like 12, 13 or 14 the investigator would have a rough idea of how many were involved without anyone having given away friends.

**Example 2 Critical event.** When people talk about some issues their language is often vague. For example, teachers often talk about classes being "busy" or someone "having a firm grip". A clearer picture of what this means can emerge if the person is asked to describe a few "critical events", i.e. things which happen in a lesson which indicated that the class was "busy" or that a certain teacher has a "firm grip".

**Example 3 Rank ordering.** Small children often have no idea if you ask them whether they are the best, the fifteenth or the worst reader in a class. Roy Nash in his "Classrooms Observed" gave the children a class list and asked them to say of each member whether that child was a better or a poorer reader. What transpired was a rank order very similar to that assembled by the teacher.

**Example 4 Projection.** People are often reluctant to talk about their own fears or desires, and projection offers a device which may produce valuable information. With young children the interviewer may say, "This is a picture of a child who looks worried about something. Can you tell me what the child might be worried about?" Many children rapidly begin to talk about themselves, some even switching to the first person. This needs skilful handling both in administration and interpretation and the advice of a good clinical psychologist should be sought.

## 16. Stereotypes to avoid

Interviewing is a complex if enjoyable way of collecting information and this booklet can only brush the surface of the topic. If you decide to do interviews, avoid the following stereotypes. They may read like crude, exaggerated caricature but rest assured they are alive and well. Try to avoid swelling their numbers.

**The ESN Squirrel.** Collects tapes of interviews as if they were nuts, only does not know what to do with them other than play them back on his HiFi.

**The Ego-Tripper.** Knows in his heart that his hunch is right, but needs a few pieces of interview fodder to justify it. Carefully selected quotes will do just that, and one has no idea how much lies on the cutting room floor.

**The Optimist.** Plans 200 interviews with a randomly selected group of secondary school Heads by Xmas. Is shortly to discover 200 synonyms for "get lost".

**The Amateur Therapist.** Although ostensibly enquiring into parents' attitudes to lacrosse, gets so carried away during interview she tries to resolve every social/emotional problem she encounters. Should stick to lacrosse.

**The Guillotine.** Is so intent on getting through the schedule pays no attention to the answers and chops respondents short in mid-sentence. (Actually does manage to do 200 interviews by Xmas).

## 17. Books to read

There are many books on the topic, some under the heading "Qualitative Methodology", others on educational or social science research methods. Below are but five of a huge selection.

BORG, W. R. (1963) *Educational Research : An Introduction*. London, Longmans. (pp221-236)

GOOD, C. V. (1966) *Essentials of Educational Research*. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts. (pp227-242)

|                             |                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| FOX, D. J.                  | (1969) <i>The Research Process in Education</i><br>New York, Holt, Rinehart and Wington<br>(Chap 18, pp524-569; Chap 22, p646-679) |
| LOVELL, K.,<br>LAWSON, K.S. | <i>Understanding Research in Education</i><br>London, University of London Press.(pp115-123)                                       |
| TUCKMAN, B.W.               | (1972) <i>Conducting Educational Research</i><br>New York, Harcourt Brace (Chap 8)                                                 |

## 18. A checklist

Finally, if you still intend to interview, go through the checklist below. It highlights many of the points brought out in this booklet. If there are too many NO's, you ought not to be interviewing. If the answer to question 1 is no, don't bother with the rest.

### BEFORE

- |                                                                                                                                     |     |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 1. Is interviewing <b>really</b> the best procedure for the research?                                                               | YES | NO |
| 2. Is the <b>purpose</b> of the interview clear?                                                                                    | YES | NO |
| 3. Have I made the best decision about whether to use a <b>structured, semi-structured, unstructured or mixed</b> interview format? | YES | NO |
| 4. Have the relevant authorities been consulted and <b>permission</b> obtained?                                                     | YES | NO |
| 5. Has the <b>sample</b> , random or opportunity, been properly assembled?                                                          | YES | NO |
| 6. Is the <b>time</b> schedule realistic?                                                                                           | YES | NO |
| 7. Is the <b>travelling</b> efficiently planned and manageable?                                                                     | YES | NO |
| 8. Has the <b>schedule</b> been skilfully assembled?                                                                                | YES | NO |
| 9. Is the <b>language</b> level suitable?                                                                                           | YES | NO |
| 10. Has a data processing <b>coding</b> been built-in?                                                                              | YES | NO |
| 11. Are the procedures for <b>administration</b> of the interview clear?                                                            | YES | NO |

- |                                                                                                                                                |     |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 12. If other interviewers are involved, have they been properly <b>trained</b> and their <b>reliability</b> checked?                           | YES | NO |
| 13. Has the schedule had a <b>pilot</b> run?                                                                                                   | YES | NO |
| 14. Have other people <b>used</b> and <b>commented</b> on the proposed schedule?                                                               | YES | NO |
| 15. Am I aware of my own possible <b>bias</b> on the issues?                                                                                   | YES | NO |
| 16. Have appropriate <b>analysis</b> and <b>data processing</b> procedures been worked out?                                                    | YES | NO |
| 17. Is there a clear <b>relationship</b> between the interview and other data gathering devices such as questionnaires, tests or observations? | YES | NO |
| 18. Have I decided whether to <b>record</b> by hand or by tape recorder?                                                                       | YES | NO |

### DURING

- |                                                                                            |     |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 19. Is the <b>timing</b> of the interview right?                                           | YES | NO |
| 20. Is the <b>location</b> favourable?                                                     | YES | NO |
| 21. Is the <b>rapport</b> sufficiently good for the respondent to be truthful and at ease? | YES | NO |
| 22. Does the subject know the <b>purpose</b> of the interview?                             | YES | NO |
| 23. Is there <b>privacy</b> ?                                                              | YES | NO |
| 24. Have I asked <b>all</b> the questions?                                                 | YES | NO |

### AFTER

- |                                                                                                                       |     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 25. Are the schedules properly <b>completed</b> ?                                                                     | YES | NO |
| 26. Is data processing going to take place as <b>soon</b> as possible?                                                | YES | NO |
| 27. Is <b>content analysis</b> properly conceived with safeguards against too subjective an interpretation or report? | YES | NO |
| 28. Should the interview report be <b>fed back</b> to the respondent for comment?                                     | YES | NO |
| 29. Have I respected my promise of <b>confidentiality</b> ?                                                           | YES | NO |
| 30. Are the interviews properly <b>written up</b> in the research report?                                             | YES | NO |