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THE INTERVIEW

Reading 4:

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INTRODUCTION

Although the interview as a research technique is normally considered as one of a range of survey methods in social research, we treat it separately here chiefly to give us additional room to address ourselves more effectively to the details involved. The purposes of the interview in the wider context of life are many and varied. It may thus be used as a means of evaluating or assessing a person in some respect; for selecting or promoting an employee; for effecting therapeutic change, as in the psychiatric interview; for testing or developing hypotheses; for gathering data, as in surveys or experimental situations; or for sampling respondents' opinions, as in doorstep interviews. Although in each of these situations the respective roles of the interviewer and interviewee may vary and the motives for taking part may differ, a common denominator is the transaction that takes place between seeking information on the part of one and supplying information on the part of the other. As our interests lie primarily in reviewing research methods and techniques, we will subsequently limit ourselves to the use of the interview as a specific research tool. Interviews in this sense range from the formal interview in which set questions are asked and the answers recorded on a standardized schedule; through less formal interviews in which the interviewer is free to modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them; to the completely informal interview where the interviewer may have a number of key issues which she raises in conversational style instead of having a set questionnaire. Beyond this point is located the non-directive interview in which the interviewer takes on a subordinate role.

The research interview has been defined as 'a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction, or explanation' (Cannell and Kahn, 1968).¹ It is an unusual method in that it

Box 13.1 Summary of relative merits of interview versus questionnaire

Consideration	Interview	Questionnaire
1 Personal need to collect data	Requires interviewers	Requires a clerk
2 Major expense	Payment to interviewers	Postage and printing
3 Opportunities for response-keying (personalization)	Extensive	Limited
4 Opportunities for asking	Extensive	Limited
5 Opportunities for probing	Possible	Difficult
6 Relative magnitude of data reduction	Great (because of coding)	Mainly limited to rostering
7 Typically, the number of respondents who can be reached	Limited	Extensive
8 Rate of return	Good	Poor
9 Sources of error	Interviewer, instrument, coding, sample	Limited to instrument and sample
10 Overall reliability	Quite limited	Fair
11 Emphasis on writing skill	Limited	Extensive

Source: Tuckman, 1972

involves the gathering of data through direct verbal interaction between individuals. In this sense it differs from the questionnaire where the respondent is required to record in some way her responses to set questions. By way of interest, we illustrate the relative merits of the interview and the questionnaire in Box 13.1. It has been pointed out that the direct interaction of the interview is the source of both its advantages and disadvantages as a research technique (Borg, 1963).² One advantage, for example, is that it allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection. A disadvantage, on the other hand, is that it is prone to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer.

As a distinctive research technique, the interview may serve three purposes. First, it may be used as the principal means of gathering information having direct bearing on the research objectives. As Tuckman describes it, 'By providing access to what is "inside a person's head", [it] makes it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs)' (Tuckman, 1972).³ Second, it may be used to test hypotheses or to suggest new ones; or as an

explanatory device to help identify variables and relationships. And third, the interview may be used in conjunction with other methods in a research undertaking. In this connection, Kerlinger⁴ suggests that it might be used to follow up unexpected results, for example, or to validate other methods, or to go deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding as they do.

There are four kinds of interview that may be used specifically as research tools: the structured interview; the unstructured interview; the non-directive interview; and the focused interview. The structured interview is one in which the content and procedures are organized in advance. This means that the sequence and wording of the questions are determined by means of a schedule and the interviewer is left little freedom to make modifications. Where some leeway is granted her, it too is specified in advance. It is therefore characterized by being a closed situation. In contrast to it in this respect, the unstructured interview is an open situation, having greater flexibility and freedom. As Kerlinger notes, although the research purposes govern the questions asked, their content, sequence and wording are entirely in the hands of the interviewer. This does not mean, however, that the unstructured interview is a more casual affair, for in its own way it also has to be carefully planned.

The non-directive interview as a research technique derives from the therapeutic or psychiatric interview. The principal features of it are the minimal direction or control exhibited by the interviewer and the freedom the respondent has to express her subjective feelings as fully and as spontaneously as she chooses or is able. As Moser and Kalton put it,

The informant is encouraged to talk about the subject under investigation (usually himself) and the course of the interview is mainly guided by him. There are no set questions, and usually no predetermined framework for recorded answers. The interviewer confines himself to elucidating doubtful points, to rephrasing the respondent's answers and to probing generally. It is an approach especially to be recommended when complex attitudes are involved and when one's knowledge of them is still in a vague and unstructured form.

(Moser and Kalton, 1977)⁵

The need to introduce rather more interviewer control into the non-directive situation led to the development of the focused interview. The distinctive feature of this type is that it focuses on a respondent's subjective responses to a known situation in which she has been involved and which has been analysed by the interviewer prior to the interview. She is thereby able to use the data from the interview to substantiate

or reject previously formulated hypotheses. As Merton and Kendall explain,

In the usual depth interview, one can urge informants to reminisce on their experiences. In the focused interview, however, the interviewer can, when expedient, play a more active role: he can introduce more explicit verbal cues to the stimulus pattern or even *represent* it. In either case this usually activates a concrete report of responses by informants.

(Merton and Kendall, 1946)⁶

We shall be examining both the non-directive interview and the focused interview in more detail later in the chapter.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE INTERVIEW

In his examination of views of the interview held by those who write theoretically about it and those who actually use it as a research tool, Kitwood lucidly contrasts three conceptions of it. The first conception is that of a potential means of pure information transfer. He explains that:

if the interviewer does his job well (establishes rapport, asks questions in an acceptable manner, etc.), and if the respondent is sincere and well-motivated, accurate data may be obtained. Of course all kinds of bias are liable to creep in, but with skill these can largely be eliminated. In its fullest expression, this view accords closely with that of the psychometricians, who apparently believe that there is a relatively permanent, consistent, 'core' to the personality, about which a person will give information under certain conditions. Such features as lying, or the tendency to give a socially desirable response, are to be eliminated where possible.

(Kitwood, 1977)⁸

This conception of the interview appears to be widely held.

A second conception of the interview is that of a transaction which inevitably has bias, which is to be recognized and controlled. According to this viewpoint, Kitwood explains that 'each participant in an interview will define the situation in a particular way. This fact can be best handled by building controls into the research design, for example by having a range of interviewers with different biases.' The interview is best understood in terms of a theory of motivation which recognizes a range of non-rational factors governing human behaviour, like emotions, unconscious needs and interpersonal influences. Kitwood points out that both these views of the interview regard the inherent features of interpersonal transactions as if they were 'potential obstacles to sound

Box 13.2 Attributes of ethnographers as interviewers

Trust: There would have to be a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee that transcended the research, that promoted a bond of friendship, a feeling of togetherness and joint pursuit of a common mission rising above personal egos.

Curiosity: There would have to be a desire to know, to learn people's views and perceptions of the facts, to hear their stories, discover their feelings. This is the motive force, and it has to be a burning one, that drives researchers to tackle and overcome the many difficulties involved in setting up and conducting successful interviews.

Naturalness: As with observation one endeavours to be unobtrusive in order to witness events as they are, untainted by one's presence and actions, so in interviews the aim is to secure what is within the minds of interviewees, uncoloured and unaffected by the interviewer.

Source: Adapted from Woods, 1986

research, and therefore to be removed, controlled, or at least harnessed in some way'.

The third conception of the interview sees it as an encounter necessarily sharing many of the features of everyday life (see for example, Box 13.2). Kitwood suggests that what is required, according to this view, is not a technique for dealing with bias, but a theory of everyday life that takes account of the relevant features of interviews. These may include role-playing, stereotyping, perception and understanding. One of the strongest advocates of this viewpoint is Cicourel⁹ who lists five of the unavoidable features of the interview situation that would normally be regarded as problems. Briefly, these state that:

- 1 There are many factors which inevitably differ from one interview to another, such as mutual trust, social distance and the interviewer's control.
- 2 The respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the questioning is too deep.
- 3 Both interviewer and respondent are bound to hold back part of what it is in their power to state.
- 4 Many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to the other, even when the intention is genuine communication.
- 5 It is impossible, just as in everyday life, to bring every aspect of the encounter within rational control.

The message that proponents of this view would express is that no matter how hard an interviewer may try to be systematic and objective, the constraints of everyday life will be a part of whatever interpersonal transactions she initiates. Kitwood pointed

The solution is to have as explicit a theory as possible to take the various factors into account. For those who hold this view, there are not good interviews and bad in the conventional sense. There are simply social encounters; goodness and badness are predicates applicable, rather, to the theories within which the phenomena are explained.

(Kitwood, 1977)

SOME FEATURES OF THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

We turn our attention now to the structured interview since this is one of the most frequently used methods of eliciting information in social and educational research. From here onwards, we shall comply with convention and refer to it as the 'research interview'. After reviewing the types of schedule items used, we shall examine question format and the kinds of answers, or response modes, that may be elicited.

Construction of schedules

Three kinds of items are used in the construction of schedules used in research interviews (see Kerlinger, 1970). First, 'fixed-alternative' items allow the respondent to choose from two or more alternatives. The most frequently used is the dichotomous item which offers two alternatives only: 'yes-no' or 'agree-disagree', for instance. Sometimes a third alternative such as 'undecided' or 'don't know' is also offered.

Example:

Do you feel it is against the interests of a school to have to make public its examination results?

Yes
No
Don't know

Kerlinger has identified the chief advantages and disadvantages of fixed-alternative items. They have, for example, the advantage of achieving greater uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability; of making the respondents answer in a manner fitting the response category; and of being more easily coded. Disadvantages include their superficiality; the possibility of irritating respondents who find none of the alternatives suitable; and the possibility of forcing responses that are inappropriate, either because the alternative chosen conceals ignorance on the part of the respondent or because she may choose an alternative that does not accurately represent the true facts. These weaknesses can be overcome, however, if the items are written

with care, mixed with open-ended ones, and used in conjunction with probes on the part of the interviewer.

Second, 'open-ended items' have been succinctly defined by Kerlinger as 'those that supply a frame of reference for respondents' answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression' (Kerlinger, 1970). Other than the subject of the question, which is determined by the nature of the problem under investigation, there are no other restrictions on either the content or the manner of the interviewee's reply.

Example:

What kind of television programmes do you most prefer to watch?

Open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they are flexible; they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and help establish rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. Open-ended situations can also result in unexpected or unanticipated answers which may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships or hypotheses. A particular kind of open-ended question is the 'funnel'. This starts with a broad question or statement and then narrows down to more specific ones. Kerlinger quotes an example from the study by Sears, Maccoby and Levin:

All babies cry, of course. Some mothers feel that if you pick up a baby every time it cries, you will spoil it. Others think you should never let a baby cry for very long. How do you feel about this? What did you do about it? How about the middle of the night?

(Sears, Maccoby and Levin, 1957)¹⁰

Third, the 'scale' is a set of verbal items to each of which the interviewee responds by indicating degrees of agreement or disagreement. The individual's response is thus located on a scale of fixed alternatives. The use of this technique along with open-ended questions is a comparatively recent development and means that scale scores can be checked against data elicited by the open-ended questions.

Example:

Attendance at school after the age of 14 should be voluntary:

Strongly agree Agree Undecided Disagree Strongly disagree

It is possible to use one of a number of scales in this context: attitude scales, rank-order scales, rating scales, and so on. We touch upon this subject again subsequently.

Question formats

We now look at the kinds of questions and modes of response associated with interviewing. First, the matter of question format: how is a question to be phrased or organized? Tuckman (1972) has listed four such formats that an interviewer may draw upon. Questions may, for example, take a direct or indirect form. Thus an interviewer could ask a teacher whether she likes teaching: this would be a direct question. Or else she could adopt an indirect approach by asking for the respondent's views on education in general and the ways schools function. From the answers proffered, the interviewer could make inferences about the teacher's opinions concerning her own job. Tuckman suggests that by making the purpose of questions less obvious, the indirect approach is more likely to produce frank and open responses.

There are also those kinds of questions which deal with either a general or specific issue. To ask a child what he thought of the teaching methods of the staff as a whole would be a general or non-specific question. To ask him what he thought of his teacher as a teacher would be a specific question. We have already made reference to that sequence of questions designated the funnel in which the movement is from the general and non-specific to the more specific. Tuckman comments, 'Specific questions, like direct ones, may cause a respondent to become cautious or guarded and give less-than-honest answers. Non-specific questions may lead circuitously to the desired information but with less alarm by the respondents' (Tuckman, 1972).

A further distinction is that between questions inviting factual answers and those inviting opinions. To ask a person what political party he supports would be a factual question. To ask her what she thinks of the current government's foreign policy would be an opinion question. Both fact and opinion questions can yield less than the truth, however: the former do not always produce factual answers; nor do the latter necessarily elicit honest opinions. In both instances, inaccuracy and bias may be minimized by careful structuring of the questions.

We may also note that an interviewee may be presented with either a question or a statement. In the case of the latter she will be asked for her response to it in one form or another.

Example question:

Do you think homework should be compulsory for all children between 11 and 16?

Example statement:

Homework should be compulsory for all children between 11 and 16 years old.

Agree Disagree Don't know

Response modes

If there are varied ways of asking questions, it follows there will be several ways in which they may be answered. It is to the different response modes that we now turn. In all, Tuckman (1972) lists seven such modes.

The first of these is the 'unstructured response'. This allows the respondent to give her answer in whatever way she chooses.

Example:

Why did you not go to university?

A 'structured response', by contrast, would limit her in some way.

Example:

Can you give me two reasons for not going to university?

Although the interviewer has little control over the unstructured response, it does insure that the respondent has the freedom to give her own answer as fully as she chooses rather than being constrained in some way by the nature of the question. The chief disadvantage of the unstructured response concerns the matter of quantification. Data yielded in the unstructured response is more difficult to code and quantify than data in the structured response.

A 'fill-in response' mode requires the respondent to supply rather than choose a response, though the response is often limited to a word or phrase.

Example:

What is your present occupation?

or

How long have you lived at your present address?

The differences between the fill-in response and the unstructured response is one of degree.

A 'tabular response' is similar to a fill-in response though more structured. It may demand words, figures or phrases.

Example:

University	Subject	Degree	Dates	
			From	To

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It is thus a convenient and short-hand way of recording complex information.

A 'scaled response' is one structured by means of a series of gradations. The respondent is required to record her response to a given statement by selecting from a number of alternatives.

Example:

What are your chances of reaching a top managerial position within the next five years?

Excellent Good Fair Poor Very Poor

Tuckman draws our attention to the fact that, unlike an unstructured response which has to be coded to be useful as data, a scaled response is collected in the form of usable and analysable data.

A 'ranking response' is one in which a respondent is required to rank-order a series of words, phrases or statements according to a particular criterion.

Example:

Rank order the following people in terms of their usefulness to you as sources of advice and guidance on problems you have encountered in the classroom. Use numbers 1 to 5, with 1 representing the person most useful.

Education tutor
Subject tutor
Class teacher
Headteacher
Other student

Ranked data can be analysed by adding up the rank of each response across the respondents, thus resulting in an overall rank order of alternatives.

A 'checklist response' requires that the respondent selects one of the alternatives presented to her. In that they do not represent points on a continuum, they are nominal categories.

Example:

I get most satisfaction in college from:

the social life
studying on my own
attending lectures
college societies
giving a paper at a seminar

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This kind of response tends to yield less information than the other kinds considered.

Finally, the 'categorical response' mode is similar to the checklist but simpler in that it offers respondents only two possibilities.

Example:

Material progress results in greater happiness for people

True False

or

In the event of another war, would you be prepared to fight for your country?

Yes No

Summing the numbers of respondents with the same responses yields a nominal measure.

SOME PROBLEMS SURROUNDING THE USE OF THE INTERVIEW IN RESEARCH

A number of problems appear to attend the use of the interview as a research technique. One of these is that of invalidity, at least as far as the first two conceptions of the interview that we spoke of earlier are concerned. Studies reported by Cannell and Kahn (1968), for instance, in which the interview was used, seemed to indicate that this was a persistent problem. In one such study, subjects interviewed on the existence and state of their bank accounts often presented a misleading picture: fewer accounts were reported than actually existed and the amounts declared frequently differed from bank records, often in the direction of understating assets. The reviewers suggest that inferences about validity are made too often on the basis of face validity, that is, whether the questions asked look as if they are measuring what they claim to measure. The cause of invalidity, they argue, is bias which they define as 'a systematic or persistent tendency to make errors in the same direction, that is, to overstate or understate the "true value" of an attribute' (Lansing, Ginsberg and Braaten, 1961).¹¹ The problem, it seems, is not limited to a narrow range of data but is widespread. One way of validating interview measures is to compare the interview measure with another measure that has already been shown to be valid. This kind of comparison is known as 'convergent validity'. If the two measures agree, it can be assumed that the validity of the interview is comparable with the proven validity of the other measure.

Perhaps the most practical way of achieving greater validity is to minimize the amount of bias as much as possible. The sources of bias are the characteristics of the interviewer, the characteristics of the

respondent, and the substantive content of the questions. More particularly, these will include: the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer; a tendency for the interviewer to see the respondent in her own image; a tendency for the interviewer to seek answers that support her preconceived notions; misperceptions on the part of the interviewer of what the respondent is saying; and misunderstandings on the part of the respondent of what is being asked. Studies have also shown that race, religion, social class and age can in certain contexts be potent sources of bias. Various writers have suggested the following as means of reducing bias: careful formulation of questions so that the meaning is crystal clear; thorough training procedures so that an interviewer is more aware of the possible problems; probability sampling of respondents; and sometimes by matching interviewer characteristics with those of the sample being interviewed.

In his critique of the interview as a research tool, Kitwood draws attention to the conflict it generates between the traditional concepts of reliability and validity. Where increased reliability of the interview is brought about by greater control of its elements, this is achieved, he argues, at the cost of reduced validity. He explains,

In proportion to the extent to which 'reliability' is enhanced by rationalization, 'validity' would decrease. For the main purpose of using an interview in research is that it is believed that in an interpersonal encounter people are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves, their thoughts, their feelings and values, than they would in a less human situation. At least for some purposes, it is necessary to generate a kind of conversation in which the 'respondent' feels at ease. In other words, the distinctively human element in the interview is necessary to its 'validity'. The more the interviewer becomes rational, calculating, and detached, the less likely the interview is to be perceived as a friendly transaction, and the more calculated the response also is likely to be.

(Kitwood, 1977)

Where either of the first two conceptions of the interview outlined earlier is held, Kitwood suggests that a solution to the problem of reliability and validity might lie in the direction of a 'judicious compromise'; with the third conception, however, reliability and validity become 'redundant notions', for 'every interpersonal situation may be said to be valid, as such, whether or not it conforms to expectation, whether or not it involves a high degree of communication, and whether or not the participants emerge exhilarated or depressed' (Kitwood, 1977).

A cluster of problems surround the person being interviewed. Tuckman (1972), for example, has observed that when formulating her questions

an interviewer has to consider the extent to which a question might influence the respondent to show herself in a good light; or the extent to which a question might influence the respondent to be unduly helpful by attempting to anticipate what the interviewer wants to hear; or the extent to which a question might be asking for information about a respondent that she is not certain or likely to know herself. Further, interviewing procedures are based on the assumption that the person interviewed has insight into the cause of her behaviour. It has now come to be realized that insight of this kind is rarely achieved and that when it is, it is after long and difficult effort, usually in the context of repeated clinical interviews.

As the interview has some things in common with the self-administered questionnaire, it is frequently compared with it. Each has advantages over the other in certain respects. The advantages of the questionnaire, for instance, are: it tends to be more reliable; because it is anonymous, it encourages greater honesty; it is more economical than the interview in terms of time and money; and there is the possibility that it may be mailed. Its disadvantages, on the other hand, are: there is often too low a percentage of returns; the interviewer is able to answer questions concerning both the purpose of the interview and any misunderstandings experienced by the interviewee, for it sometimes happens in the case of the latter that the same questions have different meanings for different people; if only closed items are used, the questionnaire will be subject to the weaknesses already discussed; if only open items are used, respondents may be unwilling to write their answers for one reason or another; questionnaires present problems to people of limited literacy; and an interview can be conducted at an appropriate speed whereas questionnaires are often filled in hurriedly.

One of the problems that has to be considered when open-ended questions are used in the interview is that of developing a satisfactory method of recording replies. One way is to summarize responses in the course of the interview. This has the disadvantage of breaking the continuity of the interview and may result in bias because the interviewer may unconsciously emphasize responses that agree with her expectations and fail to note those that do not. It is sometimes possible to summarize an individual's responses at the end of the interview. Although this preserves the continuity of the interview, it is likely to induce greater bias because the delay may lead to the interviewer forgetting some of the details. It is these forgotten details that are most likely to be the ones that disagree with her own expectations.

One final point concerns the analysis and interpretation of data derived from unstructured interviews, particularly where the data have been transcribed from tape-recordings. Hull, in an article on this topic, contrasts the historical perspective with his own preference for the

traditions of criticism, and in particular literary criticism when analysing data. As he explains, 'From such traditions may be drawn frameworks for the interpretation and analysis of transcript data and the requirement that research be a public discourse' (Hull, 1985).¹² For further information, we refer to Hull's article.

PROCEDURES

As a guide for those using the interview as a research technique perhaps for the first time, we outline a possible sequence of stages for such an undertaking.

The preliminary stage of an interview study will be the point where the purpose of the research is decided. It may begin by outlining the theoretical basis of the study, its broad aims, its practical value and the reasons why the interview approach was chosen. There may then follow the translation of the general goals of the research into more detailed and specific objectives. This is the most important step, for only careful formulation of objectives at this point will eventually produce the right kind of data necessary for satisfactory answers to the research problem.

This stage having been accomplished, there follows the preparation of the interview schedule itself. This involves translating the research objectives into the questions that will make up the main body of the schedule. This needs to be done in such a way that the questions adequately reflect what it is the researcher is trying to find out. It is quite usual to begin this task by writing down the variables to be dealt with in the study. As one commentator says, 'The first step in constructing interview questions is to *specify your variables by name*. Your variables are what you are trying to measure. They tell you where to begin' (Tuckman, 1972).

Before the actual interview items are prepared, it is desirable to give some thought to the question format and the response mode. The choice of question format, for instance, depends on a consideration of one or more of the following factors: the objectives of the interview; the nature of the subject matter; whether the interviewer is dealing in facts, opinions or attitudes; whether specificity or depth is sought; the respondent's level of education; the kind of information she can be expected to have; whether or not her thought needs to be structured; some assessment of her motivational level; the extent of the interviewer's own insight into the respondent's situation; and the kind of relationship the interviewer can expect to develop with the respondent. Having given prior thought to these matters, the researcher is in a position to decide whether to use open and/or closed questions, direct and/or indirect questions, specific and/or non-specific questions, and so on.

As a general rule, the kind of information sought and the means of

Box 13.3 The selection of response mode

<i>Response mode</i>	<i>Type of data</i>	<i>Chief advantages</i>	<i>Chief disadvantages</i>
Fill-in	Nominal	Less biasing; greater response flexibility	More difficult to score
Scaled	Interval	Easy to score	Time consuming; can be biasing
Ranking	Ordinal	Easy to score; forces discrimination	Difficult to complete
Checklist or categorical	Nominal (may be interval when totalled)	Easy to score; easy to respond	Provides less data and fewer options

Source: Tuckman, 1972³

its acquisition will determine the choice of response mode. Data analysis, then, ought properly to be considered alongside the choice of response mode so that the interviewer can be confident that the data will serve her purposes and analysis of them can be duly prepared. Box 13.3 summarizes the relationship between response mode and type of data.

Once the variables to be measured or studied have been identified, questions can be constructed so as to reflect them. If, for example, one of the variables was to be a new social education project that had recently been attempted with 15-year-olds in a comprehensive school, one obvious question would be: 'How do you think the project has affected the pupils?' Or, less directly, 'Do you think the children have been given too much or too little responsibility?' It is important to bear in mind that more than one question format and more than one response mode may be employed when building up a schedule. The final mixture will depend on the kinds of factors mentioned earlier – the objectives of the research, and so on.

Where an interview schedule is to be used as part of a field survey in which a number of trained interviewers are to be used, it will of course be necessary to include in it appropriate instructions for both interviewer and interviewees.

Setting up and conducting the interview will make up the next stage in the procedure. Where the interviewer is initiating the research herself, she will clearly select her own respondents; where she is engaged by another agent, then she will probably be given a list of people to contact.

Tuckman has succinctly reviewed the procedures to adopt at the interview itself. He writes,

At the meeting, the interviewer should brief the respondent as to the nature or purpose of the interview (being as candid as possible without biasing responses) and attempt to make the respondent feel at ease. He should explain the manner in which he will be recording responses, and if he plans to tape record, he should get the respondent's assent. At all times, an interviewer must remember that he is a data collection instrument and try not to let his own biases, opinions, or curiosity affect his behaviour. It is important that the interviewer should not deviate from his format and interview schedule although many schedules will permit some flexibility in choice of questions. The respondent should be kept from rambling away from the essence of a question, but not at the sacrifice of courtesy.

(Tuckman, 1972)

Once data from the interview have been collected, the next stage involves coding and scoring them. Coding has been defined by Kerlinger as the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis (see Kerlinger, 1970). As we have seen, many questions are precoded, that is, each response can be immediately and directly converted into a score in an objective way. Rating scales and checklists are examples of precoded questions.

Perhaps the biggest problem concerns the coding and scoring of open-ended questions. Two solutions are possible here. Even though a response is open-ended, the interviewer may precode her interview schedule so that while an interviewee is responding freely, the interviewer is assigning the content of her responses, or parts of it, to predetermined coding categories. Classifications of this kind may be developed during pilot studies.

Example:

Q. What is it that you like least about your job?

A. Mostly the way the place is run – and the long hours; and the prospects aren't too good.

Coding:	colleagues	
	organization	X.....
	the work	
	conditions	X.....
	other	future prospects.....

Alternatively, data may be postcoded. Having recorded the interviewee's response, either by summarizing it during or after the interview itself, or verbatim by tape recorder, the researcher may subject it to

content analysis and submit it to one of the available scoring procedures – scaling, scoring, rank scoring, response counting, etc.

Finally, the data are analysed and interpreted in the light of the research objectives.

GROUP INTERVIEWING

One technique within the methodology of interviewing to have grown in popularity is that of group interviewing. Watts and Ebbutt, for example, have considered the advantages and disadvantages of group interviewing as a means of collecting data in educational research. The advantages the authors identify include the potential for discussions to develop, thus yielding a wide range of responses. They explain, 'such interviews are useful . . . where a group of people have been working together for some time or common purpose, or where it is seen as important that everyone concerned is aware of what others in the group are saying' (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987).¹³ For example, Lewis (1992)¹⁴ found that 10-year-olds' understanding of severe learning difficulties was enhanced in group interview situations, the children challenging and extending each other's ideas. There are practical and organizational advantages, too. Pre-arranged groups can be used for the purpose in question by teachers with minimum disruption. Alternatively, the group interview can bring together people with varied opinions, or as representatives of different collectivities.

As regards the disadvantages of group interviews, Watts and Ebbutt note that they are of little use in allowing personal matters to emerge, or in circumstances where the researcher has to aim a series of follow-up questions at one specific member of the group. As they explain, 'the dynamic of a group denies access to this sort of data' (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987). For further guidance on this topic and the procedures involved, we refer the reader to Watts and Ebbutt (1987), Hedges (1985),¹⁵ Breakwell (1990),¹⁶ Spencer and Flin (1990).¹⁷

THE NON-DIRECTIVE INTERVIEW AND THE FOCUSED INTERVIEW

Originating from psychiatric and therapeutic fields with which it is most readily associated, the non-directive interview is characterized by a situation in which the respondent is responsible for initiating and directing the course of the encounter and for the attitudes she expresses in it (in contrast to the structured or research interview we have already considered, where the dominating role assumed by the interviewer results in, to use Kitwood's phrase, 'an asymmetry of commitment' (Kitwood, 1977)). It has been shown to be a particularly valuable

technique because it gets at the deeper attitudes and perceptions of the person being interviewed in such a way as to leave them free from interviewer bias. We shall examine briefly the characteristics of the therapeutic interview and then consider its usefulness as a research tool in the social and educational sciences.

The non-directive interview as it is currently understood grew out of the pioneering work of Freud and subsequent modifications to his approach by later analysts. His basic discovery was that if one can arrange a special set of conditions and have his patient talk about his difficulties in a certain way, behaviour changes of many kinds can be accomplished.¹⁸ The technique developed was used to elicit highly personal data from patients in such a way as to increase their self-awareness and improve their skills in self-analysis. By these means they became better able to help themselves. As Madge observes, it is these techniques which have greatly influenced contemporary interviewing techniques, especially those of a more penetrating and less quantitative kind.¹⁹

The present-day therapeutic interview has its most persuasive advocate in Carl Rogers who has on different occasions testified to its efficacy. Basing his analysis on his own clinical studies, he has identified a sequence of characteristic stages in the therapeutic process, beginning with the client's decision to seek help.²⁰ He is met by a counsellor who is friendly and receptive, but not didactic. The next stage is signalled when the client begins to give vent to hostile, critical and destructive feelings, which the counsellor accepts, recognizes and clarifies. Subsequently, and invariably, these antagonistic impulses are used up and give way to the first expressions of positive feeling. The counsellor likewise accepts these until suddenly and spontaneously 'insight and self-understanding come bubbling through' (Rogers, 1942). With insight comes the realization of possible courses of action and also the power to make decisions. It is in translating these into practical terms that the client frees himself from dependence on the counsellor.

Rogers subsequently identified a number of qualities in the interviewer which he deemed essential: that she bases her work on attitudes of acceptance and permissiveness; that she respects the client's responsibility for his own situation; that she permits the client to explain his problem in his own way; and that she does nothing that would in any way arouse the client's defences.²¹

Such then are the principal characteristics of the non-directive interview technique in a therapeutic setting. But what of its usefulness as a purely research technique in societal and educational contexts? There are a number of features of the therapeutic interview which are peculiar to it and may well be inappropriate in other settings: for example, as we have seen, the interview is initiated by the respondent; his motivation is

to obtain relief from a particular symptom; the interviewer is primarily a source of help, not a procurer of information; the actual interview is part of the therapeutic experience; the purpose of the interview is to change the behaviour and inner life of the person and its success is defined in these terms; and there is no restriction on the topics discussed.

A researcher has a different order of priorities, however, and what appear as advantages in a therapeutic context may be decided limitations when the technique is used for research purposes, even though she may be sympathetic to the spirit of the non-directive interview. As Madge explains, increasingly there are those 'who wish to retain the good qualities of the non-directive technique and at the same time are keen to evolve a method that is economical and precise enough to leave a residue of results rather than merely a posse of cured souls'.

One attempt to meet this need is to be found in a programme reported by Merton and Kendall (1946) in which the focused interview was developed. While seeking to follow closely the principle of non-direction, the method did introduce rather more interviewer control in the kinds of questions used and sought also to limit the discussion to certain parts of the respondent's experience.

The focused interview differs from other types of research interview in certain respects. These have been identified by Merton and Kendall as follows:

- 1 The persons interviewed are known to have been involved in a particular situation: they may, for example, have watched a TV programme; or seen a film; or read a book or article; or have been a participant in a social situation.
- 2 By means of the techniques of content analysis, elements in the situation which the researcher deems significant have previously been analysed by her. She has thus arrived at a set of hypotheses relating to the meaning and effects of the specified elements.
- 3 Using her analysis as a basis, the investigator constructs an interview guide. This identifies the major areas of enquiry and the hypotheses which determine the relevant data to be obtained in the interview.
- 4 The actual interview is focused on the subjective experiences of the people who have been exposed to the situation. Their responses enable the researcher both to test the validity of her hypotheses, and to ascertain unanticipated responses to the situation, thus giving rise to further hypotheses.

From this it can be seen that the distinctive feature of the focused interview is the prior analysis by the researcher of the situation in which subjects have been involved.

The advantages of this procedure have been cogently explained by Merton and Kendall:

Fore-knowledge of the situation obviously reduces the task confronting the investigator, since the interview need not be devoted to discovering the objective nature of the situation. Equipped in advance with a content analysis, the interviewer can readily distinguish the objective facts of the case from the subjective definitions of the situation. He thus becomes alert to the entire field of 'selective response'. When the interviewer, through his familiarity with the objective situation, is able to recognize symbolic or functional silences, 'distortions', avoidances, or blockings, he is the more prepared to explore their implications.

(Merton and Kendall, 1946)

In the quest for what Merton and Kendall term 'significant data', the interviewer must develop the ability to evaluate continuously the interview while it is in progress. To this end, they established a set of criteria by which productive and unproductive interview material can be distinguished. Briefly, these are:

- 1 *Non-direction*: interviewer guidance should be minimal.
- 2 *Specificity*: respondents' definitions of the situation should find full and specific expression.
- 3 *Range*: the interview should maximize the range of evocative stimuli and responses reported by the subject.

Box 13.4 Further education college principals and their views on training and enterprise councils (TECs)

Interviewee 14

'I'm afraid the TECs have started life with the arrogance of MSC (Manpower Service Commission), with the ignorance of MSC, with the almost blinding lack of knowledge ...'

Interviewer's note: an enigmatic grimace accompanied this remark.

'... lack of vision, lack of leadership. I don't think any of them (directors of the TEC) have any interest or active involvement in Further Education ...'

Interviewer's note: further facial expression possibly indicating, 'what are people like this doing on the management of the TEC'.

'I took a view about the TECs. You can either sit back on your hands and hope they will go away or you can work with them from day one and get a pole position on the starting grid. That's what I did!'

Interviewee 8

'They seem to have this dreadful image of college principals being a load of twisting no-gooders who are a load of rubbish.'

Interviewer's note: spoken vociferously, fiercely castigating perceived attitudes of TEC officials.

Source: Ashton, 1994

Box 13.5 Extract from a focused interview

Notes	Transcript
	147 Is there any special interest which you and Oliver share – something that the two of you follow together – would you say?
nothing yet	M Mmmm ... I don't <i>think</i> so.
	148 Is there anything which he and his Daddy are both specifically interested in?
may be pause to think – but definite negative	M (pause) ... <i>No</i>
	149 No special thing ... would you say he's closer now to you or to his Daddy?
	M He ... is ... closer ...?
deliberately defuses by addition	Would you say Oliver is closer to you, or to his Daddy? ... or is it about equal?
	M About equal ... might be a shade towards me.
	150 Does your husband like doing things with him?
ALERT quiet, but words quick and definite WAIT – nothing comes – probe probe is a challenge, retreat expected M retreats	M (sigh) ... Mmmm ... not really – no.
	I (pause) ... How do you mean?
I accepts retreat	M Well – I suppose he <i>does</i> like doing things with him, but opportunity doesn't often present itself.
	I I see – yes ... yes ...
	M He's ... he's ... well, he's home tonight, but some nights he's not home till 7 or 8, so he just sees them go to bed, really, and get up in the morning.
accepts, but probes from another angle, forcing issue	I ... yes ... and does he give Oliver a lot of attention when he <i>is</i> there – would you say, um, about average, or more or less than most fathers?
M enabled to advance again	M Well, I sometimes think he could give <i>more</i> ... um ... he could perhaps take them <i>off</i> more – the boys – and <i>play</i> with them more;
voice rises	if the boys play games, they play games with me! (... yes ...) – this is what I <i>find</i> , you know? (I see yes ... yes ...) 'Cause he's always ... <i>out</i> , or <i>busy</i> , (... yes ...) or doing something (... yes ...)

semi-retreat		I suppose it's circumstances not deliberate . . .
I accepts retreat	I	You're, sort of, more available . . .
M advances	M	Yes . . . yes. If we go to the cricket match – <i>he's playing cricket – I play with the boys!</i>
unbiased re-statement (giving I time)	I	(laughter in which M joins) . . . And the boys sort of <i>feel</i> really that you're more available – that, er, you're the person they play with, I suppose?
M advances, voice rising	M	Yes! Now Oliver asks <i>me</i> to take him swimming – he doesn't ask his Daddy!
(Interview continues, but this is now recognized as a sensitive area and may be returned to if opportunity arises.)		

Source: Adapted from Shipman, 1976

- 4 *Depth and personal context*: The interview should bring out the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects' responses, to determine whether the experience had central or peripheral significance. It should elicit the relevant personal context, the idiosyncratic associations, beliefs and ideas.

By way of example of productive interview material, Ashton (1994)²² used focused interviews to ascertain the strengths of beliefs and the personal reactions of principals of Further Education Colleges to various changes being pressed upon them by central government and local agencies (see Box 13.4).

Box 13.5 gives part of a transcript from the Newsons' longitudinal study of child-rearing practices.²³ It illustrates the skills involved in focused interviewing; notice particularly the subtle ways in which the interviewer (I) is able to get beneath the rather conventional initial response of the mother (M) to Question 147.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA

Before giving examples of the use of the interview in educational research, we refer the reader to a study by Hycner in which he sets out procedures that can be followed when phenomenologically analysing interview data. We saw in Chapter 1 that the phenomenologist advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value and sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality. Hycner points out that there is a reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps in research methods for fear that they will become reified. The steps suggested by Hycner, however, offer a possible way of

¹ I was looking at Mary and ² all of a sudden I knew ³ I was looking at her like I never looked at anybody in my whole life – and ⁴ my eyes were sort of just kind of staring at her and the reason that ⁵ I realized that it was tremendous was that she said to me – what are you doing – ⁶ and I just said I'm looking at you – ⁷ and so we just sat there and ⁸ she sort of watched me look at her – and ⁹ she was getting kind of uncomfortable ¹⁰ and yet also kept saying – what's going on ¹¹ but not really wanting to hear – ¹² just letting me – have enough sensitivity to let me experience it – ¹³ a lot was going on – ¹⁴ I didn't realize what – what it was – ¹⁵ I was just sort of sitting there – ¹⁶ I <i>couldn't move</i> – ¹⁷ I didn't want to move – ¹⁸ I just want to continue looking at her.	¹ Was looking at Mary ² Suddenly he knew ³ He was looking at her like he never looked at anybody in his whole life ⁴ His eyes were just staring at her ⁵ Realized it was tremendous when she said 'What are you doing?' ⁶ He just said, 'I'm looking at you.' ⁷ Both just sat there ⁸ She sort of watched him look at her ⁹ She was getting kind of uncomfortable ¹⁰ She kept saying 'What's going on?' ¹¹ She didn't seem to want a response ¹² She had enough sensitivity to let him experience it ¹³ A lot was going on ¹⁴ He didn't realize what was going on ¹⁵ He continued to just sit there ¹⁶ He <i>couldn't move</i> ¹⁷ Didn't want to move ¹⁸ Just wanted to continue looking at her.
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Source: Hycner, 1985

analysing data which allays such fears. As he himself explains, his guidelines 'have arisen out of a number of years of teaching phenomenological research classes to graduate psychology students and trying to be true to the phenomenon of interview data while also providing concrete guidelines' (Hycner, 1985).²⁴ In summary, the guidelines are as follows:

- 1 *Transcription*: having the interview tape transcribed, noting not only the literal statements but also non-verbal and paralinguistic communication.
- 2 *Bracketing and phenomenological reduction*: for Hycner this means, 'suspending (bracketing) as much as possible the researcher's meaning and interpretations and entering into the world of the unique individual who was interviewed' (Hycner, 1985). The researcher thus sets out to understand what the interviewee is saying rather than what she expects that person to say.
- 3 *Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole*: this involves listening to the entire tape several times and reading the transcription a number of times in order to provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes later on.

Box 13.7 Units of relevant meaning

- ¹Was looking at Mary
- ²Suddenly he knew
- ³He was looking at her like he never looked at anybody in his whole life
- ⁴His eyes were just staring at her
- ⁵Realized it was tremendous when she said 'What are you doing?'
- ⁶He just said, 'I'm looking at you.'
- ⁷Both just sat there
- ¹²She had enough sensitivity to let him experience it
- ¹³A lot was going on
- ¹⁴He didn't realize what was going on
- ¹⁵He continued to just sit there
- ¹⁶He *couldn't* move – ¹⁷Didn't want to move
- ¹⁸Just wanted to continue looking at her

Source: Hycner, 1985

- 4 *Delineating units of general meaning*: this entails a thorough scrutiny of both verbal and non-verbal gestures to elicit the participant's meaning. Hycner says, 'It is a crystallization and condensation of what the participant has said, still using as much as possible the literal words of the participant' (Hycner, 1985). (See Box 13.6 for Hycner's own example. This is the second page of transcription describing an experience of wonderment and awe. On the previous page, the participant discussed the background where he and his girlfriend were up in the mountains on vacation. The scene being described is the beginning of an experience of wonder.)
- 5 *Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question*: once the units of general meaning have been noted, they are then reduced to units of meaning relevant to the research question. In the case of Hycner's study, the original eighteen general units (see Box 13.6) are reduced to thirteen units of meaning relevant to the research question (see Box 13.7).
- 6 *Training independent judges to verify the units of relevant meaning*: findings can be verified by using other researchers to carry out the above procedures. Hycner's own experience in working with graduate students well trained in this type of research is that there are rarely significant differences in the findings.
- 7 *Eliminating redundancies*: at this stage, the researcher checks the lists of relevant meaning and eliminates those clearly redundant to others previously listed.
- 8 *Clustering units of relevant meaning*: the researcher now tries to determine if any of the units of relevant meaning naturally cluster together; whether there seems to be some common theme or essence that unites several discrete units of relevant meaning. Box 13.8 gives an example of clustering units of relevant meaning.

Box 13.8 Clusters of relevant meaning

- I *The tremendousness of the looking at Mary*
 - A Looking at Mary in a way totally different than he had ever looked at anyone in his life.^{1,3}
 - B His eyes were just staring.⁴
 - C Realized it was tremendous when she said 'What are you doing?'⁵
 - D Was (just) looking at her.⁶
 - E A lot was going on.¹³
 - F Just wanted to continue looking at her.¹⁸
- II *Realization*
 - A A sudden realization² (Almost like it breaks in).
 - B Realized how tremendous it was (through her question).⁵
 - C A lot was going on and he didn't realize what was going on^{13,14} (rhythm of awareness).
- III *Continuation of what was happening*
 - A Both just (continued) to sit there.⁷
 - B He continued to sit.¹⁵
- IV *Inability to move*
 - A *Couldn't* move¹⁶ (issue of volition).
 - B Didn't want to move¹⁷ (didn't desire to move).
- V *Interpersonal dimension*
 - A Was looking at Mary in a way he had never looked at anyone in his whole life.^{1,3}
 - B Her question elicited the realization of how tremendous it was.⁵
 - C He just said 'I'm looking at you.'⁶
 - D Both just sat there.⁷

Source: Hycner, 1985

- 9 *Determining themes from clusters of meaning*: the researcher examines all the clusters of meaning to determine if there is one (or more) central theme(s) which expresses the essence of these clusters.
- 10 *Writing a summary of each individual interview*: it is useful at this point, the author suggests, to go back to the interview transcription and write up a summary of the interview incorporating the themes that have been elicited from the data.
- 11 *Return to the participant with the summary and themes, conducting a second interview*: this is a check to see whether the essence of the first interview has been accurately and fully captured.
- 12 *Modifying themes and summary*: with the new data from the second interview, the researcher looks at all the data as a whole and modifies or adds themes as necessary.
- 13 *Identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews*: the researcher now looks for the themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations. The first step is to note if there are themes common to all or most of the interviews. The second step is to note when there are themes that are unique to a single interview or a minority of the interviews.

- 14 *Contextualization of themes*: at this point it is helpful to place these themes back within the overall contexts or horizons from which these themes emerged.
- 15 *Composite summary*: the author considers it useful to write up a composite summary of all the interviews which would accurately capture the essence of the phenomenon being investigated. The author concludes, 'Such a composite summary describes the "world" in general, as experienced by the participants. At the end of such a summary the researcher might want to note significant individual differences' (Hycner, 1985).

Issues arising from this procedure are discussed in some detail in the second part of Hycner's article.

CONCLUSION: EXAMPLES OF THE USE OF INTERVIEWING IN RESEARCH

Many examples of interview studies and the use of interview techniques are to be found throughout the literature of social and educational research, the range varying from the comprehensiveness and sophistication of national polls at one extreme to small-scale investigations into educational issues at the other. We conclude this chapter with brief references to two educational studies. We choose them for their dependence on interview techniques and also their accessibility.

In his ethnographic study of a secondary school, Woods (1979)²⁵ uses interview techniques as part of his overall strategy of participant observation to describe and analyse the principal areas of experience and methods of adapting to school life for both pupils and teachers. Numerous extracts of interview material are given throughout the text.

Box 13.9 Reasons for subject choice

Linda: I didn't want to do commerce.
 Int: Why have you chosen it then?
 Linda: Because my mother said so.
 Int: Why did she say that?
 Linda: Because she wants me to work in an office.
 Int: And what do you want to do?
 Linda: Be a hairdresser.
 Int: If it were left to you what to do, what would you have chosen?
 Linda: I haven't thought about it.
 Int: Will you be allowed to do commerce, do you think?
 Linda: I hope I'm knocked out.
 Int: What form will you go in?
 Linda: I'd go in 4L straight away.

Source: Adapted from Woods, 1979

One such example is given in Box 13.9. For a thorough account of the role of interviewing in ethnographic research, see the author's later work.⁷

Another ethnographic study, this time by MacPherson (1983)²⁶ working in an Australian school, directs its attention on pupils' accounts of relations and activities with classmates. The principal method of research was interviews with pupils. We give a sample of his questions in Box 13.10.

Finally, for further examples of the use of interviewing in educational research, see Powney and Watts;²⁷ and for instances of the use of the technique in educational and social research see Finch.²⁸

Box 13.10 Sample questions used in ethnographic study in an Australian state high school

1. If you don't understand Mr . . . (teacher) what do you do?
2. When lessons get boring what do you do?
3. When people start to muck around what do you do?
4. Have you ever informed on any one for any reason?
5. How do you feel about others informing on people?
6. In what ways have you helped teachers?
How did other pupils feel about it?
7. What pupils often help teachers?
How do they help them?
8. Do you talk to teachers after class?
What do you talk to them about?

Source: Adapted from MacPherson, 1983

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