

- Moser, C.A. and Kalton, G. (1971) *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*. London: Heinemann. See Chapters 11 and 13.
- Oppenheim, A.N. (1966) *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement*. London: Heinemann. Rather old now, but still provides a wealth of information about questionnaire design.
- Scott, C. (1961) 'Research on mail surveys', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A* (124), 143–205. This article is well worth study, if it can be obtained. If not, many of the issues Scott discusses are covered in Moser and Kalton.
- Youngman, M.B. (1982) *Designing and Analysing Questionnaires*. Rediguides 12. University of Nottingham, School of Education. Also reproduced as Chapter 10 in Bell, J. *et al.* (1984) *Conducting Small-scale Investigations in Educational Management*. London: Harper & Row. One of the best and most straightforward guides to questionnaire design and distribution. A revised version of this Rediguides appears as Chapter 17 in Bennett *et al.* (1994) *Improving Educational Management through Research and Consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman.

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PLANNING AND CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

A major advantage of the interview is its adaptability. A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified.

There are problems of course. Interviews are time-consuming, and so in a 100-hour project you will be able to interview only a relatively small number of people. It is a highly subjective technique and therefore there is always the danger of bias. Analysing responses can present problems, and wording the questions is almost as demanding for interviews as it is for questionnaires. Even so, the interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses.

Moser and Kalton (1971: 271) describe the survey interview as 'a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent'. This, they continue, might appear a straightforward matter, but the attainment of a successful interview is much more complex than this statement might suggest.

Wiseman and Aron (1972) liken interviewing to a fishing

expedition and, pursuing this analogy, Cohen (1976: 82) adds that 'like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful preparation, much patience, and considerable practice if the eventual reward is to be a worthwhile catch'.

Preparation for interviews follows much the same procedures as for questionnaires. Topics need to be selected, questions devised, methods of analysis considered, a schedule prepared and piloted.

Though question wording is important, it may not be quite as important to be precise about the use of certain terms as for questionnaires, though of course the language you use must be understandable to the respondents. In the chapter on questionnaire design, I gave the example of students having been asked how much time they spent studying and suggested that 'a great deal', 'a certain amount' and 'not much', would mean different things to different people. In an interview, it would be possible to ask 'How much time do you spend studying?' and then to follow with a prompt on the lines of 'For example . . .'

Follow the rules laid down for questionnaire design (no leading, presumptive or offensive questions, etc.). Prepare topics and then questions on cards or on separate pieces of paper, so that you can decide the order of questioning when all topics have been covered. Consider which is likely to be the best order in which to ask questions. The order may be important in establishing an easy relationship with the interviewee. The manner in which you ask questions most certainly will be. Practise interviewing and managing your schedule to make sure your form of questioning is clear, does not antagonize the respondent and allows you to record responses in a way that you can understand when the interview is over.

Type of interview

Once you have decided what you need to know, a decision will have to be made about the type of interview which is most likely to produce the information required. Grebenik and Moser (1962: 16) see the alternative types as ranged somewhere on what they call 'a continuum of formality'. At one extreme is the completely formalized interview where the interviewer behaves as much like

a machine as possible. At the other is the completely informal interview in which the shape is determined by individual respondents. The more standardized the interview, the easier it is to aggregate and quantify the results. A structured interview can take the form of a questionnaire or checklist that is completed by the interviewer rather than by the respondent, and if you are a first-time interviewer, you may find it easier to use a structured format.

In the case of your investigation into barriers to learning, you might perhaps wish to find out the extent to which mature students have participated in the activities of the Mature Students' Society. In that case, you might prepare a schedule on the following lines:

Date of interview:	Name of interviewee:			
Venue:	Department:			
Topic:	Mature Students' Society participation			
	To what extent have you participated in the activities of the Mature Students' Society?			
Prompt	Social events?	1	2	3
	Representation on university committees?	1	2	3
	Peer support groups?	1	2	3
	Anything else?			
1 = not at all;				
2 = to a certain extent (ask for examples)				
3 = a great deal (ask for examples)				

If the interviewee provides information freely, then prompts will not be necessary, but if you particularly wish to know, for example, whether students made use of peer support groups and whether they found them useful, then a prompt may be needed.

The above format allows you to circle responses and if plenty of space is allowed, any interesting comments provided by the interviewee can be jotted down. It saves a great deal of time at the analysis stage and you can be sure all topics are covered. The problem about this format is that you, as the interviewer, decide what questions to ask – and you may not be asking the important questions.

Unstructured interviews centred round a topic may, and in skilled hands do, produce a wealth of valuable data, but such interviews require a great deal of expertise to control and a great deal of time to analyse. Conversation about a topic may be interesting and may produce useful insights into a problem, but it has to be remembered that an interview is more than just an interesting conversation. You need certain information and methods have to be devised to obtain that information if at all possible.

Preliminary interviews can probably be placed at the 'completely unstructured' end of the continuum of formality. This is the stage when you are trying to find out which areas or topics are important and when people directly concerned with the topic are encouraged to talk about what is of central significance to them. At this stage you are looking for clues as to which areas should be explored and which left out. Interviews of this kind require only the minimum of note-taking, and as long as your notes are clear enough to enable you to extract points of interest, and topics for inclusion in the study, they will suffice.

Most interviews carried out in the main data-collecting stage of the research will come somewhere between the completely structured and the completely unstructured point on the continuum. Freedom to allow the respondent to talk about what is of central significance to him or her rather than to the interviewer is clearly important, but some loose structure to ensure all topics which are considered crucial to the study are covered does eliminate some of the problems of entirely unstructured interviews. The guided or focused interview fulfils these requirements. No questionnaire or checklist is used, but a framework is established by selecting topics around which the interview is guided. The respondent is allowed a considerable degree of latitude within the framework. Certain questions are asked, but respondents are given freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time. The interviewer needs to have the skill to ask questions and, if necessary, to probe at the right time, but if the interviewee moves freely from one topic to another, the conversation can flow without interruption.

The advantage of a focused interview is that a framework is established beforehand and so analysis is greatly simplified. This is important for any research, but particularly so for limited-time studies.

The type of interview selected will to an extent depend on the nature of the topic and what exactly you wish to find out. Preliminary interviews are held to give you ideas about which topics to include in the study, and so an unstructured approach is needed. Where specific information is required, it is generally wise to establish some sort of structure or you may end with a huge amount of information, no time to exploit it and still without the information you need.

Bias

There is always the danger of bias creeping into interviews, largely because, as Selltitz *et al.* (1962: 583) point out, 'interviewers are human beings and not machines', and their manner may have an effect on the respondents. Where a team of interviewers is employed, serious bias may show up in data analysis, but if one researcher conducts a set of interviews, the bias may be consistent and therefore go unnoticed.

Many factors can influence responses, one way or another. Borg draws attention to a few of the problems that may occur:

Eagerness of the respondent to please the interviewer, a vague antagonism that sometimes arises between interviewer and respondent, or the tendency of the interviewer to seek out the answers that support his preconceived notions are but few of the factors that may contribute to biasing of data obtained from the interview. These factors are called *response effect* by survey researchers.

(Borg 1981: 87)

It is easier to acknowledge the fact that bias can creep in than to eliminate it altogether. Gavron, who carried out research into the position and opportunities of young mothers, was very conscious of the dangers inherent in research by solitary interviewers. She wrote, 'It is difficult to see how this [i.e. bias] can be avoided completely, but awareness of the problem plus constant self-control can help' (Gavron 1966: 159).

If you know you hold strong views about some aspect of the

topic, you need to be particularly careful about the way questions are put. It is even easier to 'lead' in an interview than it is in a questionnaire. The same question put by two people, but with different emphasis and in a different tone of voice can produce very different responses. Complete objectivity is the aim.

Recording and verification

If you are using a structured format which enables you to tick or circle a previously prepared questionnaire or checklist, you should leave the interview with a set of responses that can be easily analysed. If you are using a less-structured approach, you will need to devise some means of recording responses. Some researchers tape-record interviews (with the respondent's permission) and, if they have ample secretarial support, analyse responses from the transcript. You are unlikely to have such support readily available, and if you have to transcribe yourself, you will have to find something in the region of ten hours for each hour recorded. It is questionable whether you can afford so much time and whether the outcome will be worth the effort. Tape recordings can be useful to check the wording of any statement you might wish to quote and to check that your notes are accurate. They can also be useful if you are attempting some form of content analysis and need to be able to listen several times in order to identify categories. However, with experience, interviewers learn to devise shorthand systems of their own, and as long as notes can be written up immediately, or very soon after the interview ends, it is possible to produce a reasonable record of what was said in the key areas. Careful preparation of an interview guide or schedule will help you to record responses under prepared headings. Prompts listed on the schedule may never be used as prompts, but will serve as subheadings and will provide some structure for your note-taking.

Whenever possible, interview transcripts, and particularly statements that will be used as direct quotations in the report, should be verified with the respondent. The last thing you want is for a statement to be challenged at the report stage. However, remember some of the difficulties and time constraints Stephen Waters faced (Chapter 3). Just do your best in the time at your disposal.

Time, place and style of the interview

People who agree to be interviewed deserve some consideration and so you will need to fit in with their plans, however inconvenient it may be for you. Try to fix a venue and a time when you will not be disturbed. Trying to interview when a telephone is constantly ringing and people are knocking at the door will destroy any chance of continuity.

Before you begin to make appointments, make sure official channels, if any, have been cleared. A letter from your supervisor, your head or principal, saying what you are doing and why will always help.

It is difficult to lay down rules for the conduct of an interview. Common sense and normal good manners will, as always, take you a long way, but there are one or two courtesies that should always be observed. If your organization requires you to conform to an ethics protocol, or if you plan to use conditions and guarantees of your own, do your best to ensure your interviewee has sight of them beforehand. You should always introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the research, even if you have an official introductory letter. Make it quite clear what you will do with the information and check whether quotations and views must be anonymous or whether they can be attributed. When you make the appointment, say how long the interview is likely to last and do your best not to exceed the stated time. It is very easy to become so interested in the topic of discussion that time slips by and before you know it, you have exceeded the time limit.

Johnson (1984) makes the point that it is the responsibility of the interviewer, not the interviewee to end an interview. She writes:

It may have been difficult to negotiate access and to get in in the first place, but the interviewer who, once in, stays until he is thrown out, is working in the style of investigative journalism rather than social research . . . If an interview takes two or three times as long as the interviewer said it would, the respondent, whose other work or social activities have been accordingly delayed, will be irritated in retrospect, however enjoyable the experience may have been at the time. This sort

of practice breaks one of the ethics of professional social research, which is that the field should not be left more difficult for subsequent investigators to explore by disenchanting respondents with the whole notion of research participation.

(Johnson 1984: 14–15)

Interviewing is not easy and many researchers have found it difficult to strike the balance between complete objectivity and trying to put the interviewee at ease. There are particular difficulties in interviewing senior colleagues, as Stephen Waters found when he interviewed his headmaster. He wrote as follows:

When interviewing members of the senior staff in the school and, in particular, the headmaster, I was conscious of the degree to which my status as a teacher placed me in a subordinate position, while paradoxically my role as researcher gave me the kind of advantage which Platt (1981) reports is inherent in the interviewer–interviewee relationship. I never managed to relieve the feeling of discomfort which arose from trying to reconcile the two roles. I am certain that the headmaster must have felt a similar internal conflict. It could not have been easy to discuss the school's management process with an inexperienced researcher who was also a member of his own staff. It is to the credit of all the participants that I did not, as far as I can tell, experience anything other than openness and honesty and thereby overcame what might have been a serious limitation to my inside research. Naturally, respondents chose their words carefully as they were aware that colleagues were to be given the opportunity of reading the final report. Diplomacy rather than concealment seemed to be their overriding consideration.

It is difficult to know how these difficulties can be overcome. Honesty about the purpose of the exercise, integrity in the conduct and in the reporting of the interview and a promise to allow interviewees to see the transcript and/or the draft of the report if possible, will all help, though cost and time may make it difficult to circulate drafts. Whatever promises are made must be kept, so take care not to promise too much.

A few words of warning

Interviews are very time-consuming. If you allow one hour for the actual interview, there is also travelling time and time lost through any one of numerous mishaps (respondent late home, sudden crisis with children which causes delay, unexpected visitor who interrupts the interview, etc.). Then there is the time needed to consider what has been said during the interview, to go through notes, to extend and clarify points that may have been hastily noted. If you are working full-time, you are unlikely to be able to carry out more than one interview in an evening, and even if you are able to devote yourself full-time to the task, it is difficult to cope with more than three or four interviews during the course of a day. Your original project plan should take account of the time required for planning and conducting interviews, for coping with cancelled arrangements, second visits and finding replacements for people who drop out.

Interview checklist

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Decide what you need to know. | List all the items about which information is required. |
| 2. Ask yourself why you need this information. | Examine your list and remove any item that is not directly associated with the task. |
| 3. Is an interview the best way of obtaining the information? | Consider alternatives. |
| 4. If so, begin to devise questions in outline. | The final form of questions will depend on the type of interview (and vice versa). |
| 5. Decide the type of interview. | A structured interview will produce structured responses. Is this what you want, or is a more open approach required? |
| 6. Refine the questions. | Write questions on cards. Check wording (see questionnaire checklist). |
| 7. Consider how questions will be analysed. | Consult Chapter 12 before deciding finally about question type. |

- 8 Prepare an interview schedule or guide. Consider the order of questions. Prepare prompts in case the respondent does not provide essential information freely.
- 9 Pilot your schedule. Schedules need to be tested, and you need practice in asking questions and recording responses.
- 10 Revise the schedule, if necessary. Take account of pilot respondents' comments.
- 11 Do your best to avoid bias. If you have strong views about some aspect of the topic, be particularly vigilant. If someone else asked the same question, would they get the same answer?
- 12 Select who to interview. Interviews take time. Try to select a representative sample. Decide what to do if selected people are not willing or able to give an interview. Be realistic about the number of interviews that can be conducted in the time available.
- 13 Try to fix a time and place in which you will not be disturbed.
- 14 Make sure official channels have been cleared, and let interviewees see any protocol documents beforehand. A letter from your supervisor, head or principal, explaining the purpose of the research will be helpful.
- 15 Introduce yourself, explain the purpose of the research, even if you have a letter. Say what you intend to do with the information the interviewee gives. Agree anonymity or whether statements can be attributed (see Chapter 3).
- 16 Say how long the interview will last. Do your utmost not to exceed the time limit.
- 17 Try to check the accuracy of your notes with respondents (particularly

Don't promise to check with

- items to be quoted in the report).
- 18 Decide whether to tape-record the interview. Remember it will take a long time to transcribe. Permission must be given. Remember also that if an interview is recorded, it may affect the way a respondent words answers.
- 19 Honesty and integrity are important. Make no promises that cannot be fulfilled. Respect respondents' views about anonymity. If you know a respondent has been indiscreet in revealing confidential information, never take advantage.
- 20 Common sense and good manners will take you a long way. People who agree to be interviewed are doing you a favour. They deserve some consideration.
- 21 Don't queer the pitch for other researchers by disenchanting respondents with the whole notion of research participation. There are any number of ways in which participants can become disenchanted. Appointments not kept or the interviewer arriving late; taking longer than promised; promising to check for accuracy and not doing so; conducting the interview in a hostile manner; failing to thank the respondent.

Further reading

As in the case of questionnaires, most standard books on research methods will have chapters relating to interviewing. Some of the best known are as follows:

Brenner, M., Brown, J. and Canter, D. (1985) *The Research Interview: Uses and Approaches*. New York: Academic Press. This is a collection of readings which cover many of the problems as well as the advantages of interviewing in social research. Quite a hard read at times.

- Burgess, R.G. (1982) 'The unstructured interview as conversation' in Burgess, R.G. (ed.) *Field Research: A Source Book and Field Manual*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1994) 'The interview', Chapter 13 in *Research Methods in Education*, 4th edn. London: Routledge.
- Fidler, B. (1992) 'Telephone interviewing' reprinted as Chapter 19 in Bennett, N. et al. (1994) *Improving Educational Management through Research and Consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman.
- May, T. (1993) 'Interviewing: methods and process', Chapter 6 in *Social Research Issues, Methods and Process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Moser, C.A. and Kalton, G. (1971) 'Methods of collecting the information III – Interviewing', Chapter 12 in *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*. London: Heinemann.
- Powney, J. and Watts, M. (1987) *Interviewing in Educational Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wragg, E.C. (1980) *Conducting and Analysing Interviews*. Rediguide 11, University of Nottingham, School of Education. Also reproduced as Chapter 11 in Bell, J. et al. (1984) *Conducting Small-scale Investigations in Educational Management*. London: Harper & Row, and as Chapter 18 in Bennett et al. (1994) *Improving Educational Management through Research and Consultancy*. London: Paul Chapman.

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DIARIES

On the face of it, diaries are an attractive way of gathering information about the way individuals spend their time. Such diaries are not records of engagements or personal journals of thoughts and activities, but records or logs of professional activities. They can provide valuable information about work patterns and activities, provided subjects are clear what they are being asked to do, and why. Completing diary forms is time-consuming, and can be irritating for a busy person who has to keep stopping work to make an entry. If subjects are not fully in sympathy with the task, or have been press-ganged into filling in diary forms, they will probably not complete them thoroughly, if at all. As in all research activities it is essential to meet the people who will be giving up their time, so that you can explain the purpose of the exercise fully, inquire about likely problems and, if possible, resolve them. Reluctant subjects will rarely provide usable data, so preliminary consultation is of the utmost importance.

Oppenheim draws attention to a major problem with this technique:

that the respondent's interest in filling up the diary will cause him to modify the very behaviour we wish him to record. If, for instance, he is completing a week's diary of his television-viewing behavior, this may cause him to engage in 'duty