At first, it may seem easy to question another person about various topics, but research interviewing is not so simple. What we do or say as interviewers can make or break a study. Respondents often react more to their feelings about the interviewer than to the content of the questions. It is also important for the interviewer to ask the questions properly, record the responses accurately, and probe meaningfully. To achieve these aims, the interviewer must be trained to carry out those procedures that foster a good interviewing relationship.

**Increasing Respondent's Receptiveness** The first goal in an interview is to establish a friendly relationship with the respondent. Three factors will help with respondent receptiveness.

- The respondent must believe that the experience will be pleasant and satisfying.
- The respondent must believe that answering the survey is an important and worthwhile use of his or her time.
- The respondent must dismiss any mental reservations that he or she might have about participation.

Whether the experience will be pleasant and satisfying depends heavily on the interviewer. Typically, respondents will cooperate with an interviewer whose behavior reveals confidence and who engages people on a personal level. Effective interviewers are differentiated not by demographic characteristics but by these interpersonal skills. By confidence, we mean that most respondents are immediately convinced they will want to participate in the study and cooperate fully with the interviewer. An engaging personal style is one where the interviewer instantly establishes credibility by adapting to the individual needs of the respondent.

For the respondent to think that answering the survey is important and worthwhile, some explanation of the study's purpose is necessary, although the amount will vary. It is the interviewer's responsibility to discover what explanation is needed and to supply it. Usually, the interviewer should state the purpose of the study, tell how the information will be used, and suggest what is expected of the respondent. Respondents should feel that their cooperation would be meaningful to themselves and to the survey results. When this is achieved, more respondents will express their views willingly.

Respondents often have reservations about being interviewed that must be overcome. They may suspect the interviewer is a disguised salesperson, bill collector, or the like. In addition, they may also feel inadequate or fear the questioning will embarrass them. Techniques for the successful interviewing of respondents in environments they control—particularly their homes—follow.

**The Introduction** The respondent's first reaction to the request for an interview is at best a guarded one. Interviewer appearance and action are critical in forming a good first impression. Interviewers should immediately identify themselves by name and organization and provide any special identification. Introductory letters or other information confirms the study's legitimacy. In this brief but critical period, the interviewer must display friendly intentions and stimulate the respondent's interest.

The interviewer's introductory explanations should be no more detailed than necessary. Too much information can introduce a bias. However, some respondents will demand more detail. For them, the interviewer might explain the objective of the study, its background, how the respondent was selected, the confidential nature of the interview (if it is), and the benefits of the research findings. Be prepared to deal with questions such as: "How did you happen to pick me?" "Who gave you my name?" "I don't
know enough about this." "Why don't you go next door?" "Why are you doing this study?"

The home interview typically involves two stages. The first occurs at the door when
the introductory remarks are made, but this is not a satisfactory location for many interviews. In
trying to secure entrance, the interviewer will find it more effective to suggest
the desired action rather than to ask permission. "May I come in?" can be easily coun-
tered with a respondent's no. "I would like to come in and talk with you about X" is
likely to be more successful.

If the Respondent Is Busy or Away If it is obvious that the respondent is busy, it
may be a good idea to give a general introduction and try to stimulate enough interest to
arrange an interview at another time. If the designated respondent is not at home, the
interviewer should briefly explain the proposed visit to the person who is contacted. It is
desirable to establish good relations with intermediaries since their attitudes can help in
contacting the proper respondent. Interviewers contacting respondents door to door
often leave calling or business cards with their affiliation and a number where they can
be reached to reschedule the interview.

Establishing a Good Relationship The successful interview is based on rapport—
meaning a relationship of confidence and understanding between interviewer and
respondent. Interview situations are often new to respondents, and they need help in
defining their roles. The interviewer can help by conveying that the interview is confi-
dential (if it is) and important and that the respondent can discuss the topics with freedom
from censure, coercion, or pressure. Under these conditions, the respondent can obtain much satisfaction in "opening up" without pressure being exerted.

Gathering the Data To this point, the communication aspects of the interviewing
process have been stressed. Having completed the introduction and established initial
rapport, the interviewer turns to the technical task of gathering information. The inter-
view centers on a prearranged questioning sequence. The technical task is well defined
in studies with a structured questioning procedure (in contrast to an exploratory inter-
view situation). The interviewer should follow the exact wording of the questions, ask
them in the order presented, and ask every question that is specified. When questions are
misunderstood or misinterpreted, they should be repeated.

A difficult task in interviewing is to make certain the answers adequately satisfy the
question's objectives. To do this, the interviewer must learn the objectives of each ques-
tion from a study of the survey instructions or by asking the research project director. It
is important to have this information well in mind because many first responses are
inadequate even in the best-planned studies.

The technique of stimulating respondents to answer more fully and relevantly is
termed probing. Since it presents a great potential for bias, a probe should be neutral
and appear as a natural part of the conversation. Appropriate probes (those that when
used will elicit the desired information while injecting a limited amount of bias) should
be specified by the designer of the data collection instrument. There are several different
probing styles:

* A brief assertion of understanding and interest. With comments such as "I see"
or "yes" or "uh-huh," the interviewer can tell the respondent that the interviewer is
listening and is interested in more.
* An expectant pause. The simplest way to suggest to the respondent to say more is a
pause along with an expectant look or a nod of the head. This approach must be used
with caution. Some respondents have nothing more to say, and frequent pausing could create some embarrassing silences and make them uncomfortable, reducing their willingness to participate further.

- **Repeating the question.** This is particularly useful when the respondent appears not to understand the question or has strayed from the subject.

- **Repeating the respondent's reply.** The interviewer can do this while writing it down. Such repetition often serves as a good probe. Hearing thoughts restated often promotes revisions or further comments.

- **A neutral question or comment.** Such comments make a direct bid for more information. Examples are: "How do you mean?" "Can you tell me more about your thinking on that?" "Why do you think that is so?" "Anything else?" 4

- **Question clarification.** When the answer is unclear or is inconsistent with something already said, the interviewer may suggest the respondent failed to understand fully. Typical of such probes is, "I'm not quite sure I know what you mean by that—could you tell me a little more?" or "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I understand. Did you say previously that . . . ?" It is important that the interviewer take the blame for failure to understand so as not to appear to be cross-examining the respondent.

A specific type of response that requires persistent probing is the "I don't know" answer. This is a satisfactory response if the respondent really does not know. But too often "I don't know" means the respondent does not understand, wants time to think, or is trying to evade the question. The interviewer can best probe this type of reply by using the expectant pause or by making some reassuring remark such as, "We are interested in your ideas about this." 5

**Recording the Interview** While the methods used in recording will vary, the interviewer usually writes down the answers of the respondent. Some guidelines can make this task more efficient. First, record responses as they occur. If you wait until later, you lose much of what is said. If there is a time constraint, the interviewer should use some shorthand system that will preserve the essence of the respondent's replies without converting them into the interviewer's paraphrases. Abbreviating words, leaving out articles and prepositions, and using only key words are good ways to do this.

Another technique is for the interviewer to repeat the response while writing it down. This helps to hold the respondent's interest during the writing and checks the interviewer's understanding of what the respondent said. Normally the interviewer should start the writing when the respondent begins to reply. The interviewer also should record all probes and other comments on the questionnaire in parentheses to set them off from responses.

Study designers sometimes create a special interview instrument for recording respondent answers. This may be integrated with the interview questions or may be a separate document. In such instances the likely answers are anticipated, allowing the interviewer to check respondent answers or to record ranks or ratings. However, all interview instruments must permit the entry of unexpected responses.

**Selection and Training** The job requirements for interviewers include some college experience, good communication skills, flexible schedules, willingness to tolerate intermittent work hours, and mobility. These requirements result in an interviewer profile that is largely composed of college-educated white females who have few child-care responsibilities. Little research evidence suggests that other profiles would increase
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performance or reduce error except in studies where the question directly involves ethnicity or religion or where volunteer interviewers are used. The former would imply that matching for race or religion should be considered, and the latter cautions against the use of volunteers because of attrition, recording error, and training-related problems.

Field interviewers receive varying degrees of training, ranging from brief written instructions to extensive sessions. Commercial research firms often provide lower levels of training, while governmental, educational, and similar research organizations provide more extensive training. Evidence supports the value of training. In one widely cited study, intensive training produced significant improvements in interviewer performance. The training effect was so great that performance of individual interviewers before training was a poor predictor of post-training performance.7

Written instructions should be provided in all studies. Instructions should cover at least the general objectives of the study and mention something about the problems encountered in tests of the interview procedure and how they were solved. In addition, most questions should be discussed separately, giving the interviewer some insight into the purpose of the question, examples of adequate and inadequate responses, and other suggestions such as how to probe for more information. Definitions of concepts or constructs should be included so interviewers can explain and interpret in a standardized manner.

Several sources suggest an interview training program should accomplish the following:

- Provide new interviewers with the principles of measurement: give them an intellectual grasp of the data collection function and a basis for evaluating interviewing behavior.
- Provide practice in introductions and introductory materials.
• Teach the techniques of interviewing.
• Teach wording and “skip” instructions to help with a smooth and consistent flow of questions.
• Teach how to probe.
• Provide experience in recording answers of different types and on different scales.
• Provide the opportunity for practice and evaluation by conducting interviews under controlled conditions.
• Offer careful evaluation of interviews, especially at the beginning of actual data collection. Such evaluation should include a review of interview protocols. ⁸

**Interview Problems**

In personal interviewing, the researcher must deal with bias and cost. While each is discussed separately, they are interrelated. Biased results grow out of three types of error: sampling error, nonresponse error, and response error.

**Nonresponse Error** In personal interviews, nonresponse error occurs when (1) you cannot locate the person whom you are supposed to study or (2) when you are unsuccessful in encouraging that person to participate. This is an especially difficult problem when you are using a probability sample of subjects. If the researcher must interview predesignated persons, the task is to find them. Failure to locate a predesignated respondent can be due to inaccessibility. In central cities, getting access to the respondent can be a problem, as apartment security and locations that produce safety problems for nighttime follow-up may complicate household access. ⁹ In suburban areas, gated developments prohibit free access to interviewees. One study of nonresponse found that only 31 percent of all first calls (and 20 percent of all first calls in major metropolitan areas) were completed.

Solutions to reduce errors of nonresponse include:
• Establishing and implementing callback procedures.
• Creating a nonresponse sample and weighting results from this sample.
• Substituting another individual for the missing nonrespondent.

**Callback** The most reliable solution to nonresponse problems is to make callbacks. If enough attempts are made, it is usually possible to contact most target respondents, although unlimited callbacks are expensive. ¹⁰ An original contact plus three callbacks should usually secure about 85 percent of the target respondents. Yet in one study, 36 percent of central city residents still were not contacted after three callbacks. ¹¹ One way to improve the productivity of callbacks is to vary them by time of day and day of the week. Sometimes neighbors can suggest the best time to call.

**Weighting** Another approach that has been used successfully is to treat all remaining nonrespondents as a new subpopulation after a few callbacks. A random sample is then drawn from this group, and every effort is made to complete this sample with a 100 percent response rate. Findings from this nonrespondent sample can then be weighted into the total population estimate. ¹² In a survey in which central city residents are underrepresented, we can weight the results of interviews that are completed with such residents to give them full representation in the results. The weakness of this approach is that weighted returns often differ from those that would be secured if callbacks were made. Thus, an unknown but possibly substantial bias is introduced. Weighting for nonresponse
after only one contact attempt will probably not overcome nonresponse bias, but respondent characteristics converge on their population values after two to three callbacks.\(^3\)

**Substitution** A third way to deal with the nonresponse problem is to substitute someone else for the missing respondent, but this is dangerous. “At home” respondents are likely to differ from “not at home” persons in systematic ways. One study suggested that “not at home” persons are younger, better educated, more urban, and have a higher income than the average.\(^4\)

If one must substitute, it is better for the interviewer to ask others in the household about the designated respondent. This approach has worked well “when questions are objective, when informants have a high degree of observability with respect to respondents, when the population is homogeneous, and when the setting of the interview provides no clear-cut motivation to distort responses in one direction or another.”\(^5\)

**Response Error** When the data reported differ from the actual data, *response error* occurs. Response error can occur during the interview (created by either the interviewer or respondent) or during preparation of data for analysis.

*Respondent-initiated error* occurs when the respondent fails to answer fully and accurately—either by choice or because of inaccurate or incomplete knowledge. One study found that respondents typically underestimated cash and other liquid assets by as much as 25 to 50 percent. Other data, such as income and purchases of consumer durables, are more accurately reported. Respondents also have difficulty in reporting fully and accurately on topics that are sensitive or involve ego matters. Consistent control or elimination of this bias is a problem that has yet to be solved. The best advice is to use trained interviewers who are knowledgeable about such problems.

*Interviewer error* is also a major source of response bias. From the introduction to the conclusion of the interview, there are many points where the interviewer’s control of the process can affect the quality of the data. Study designers should strive to eliminate several different kinds of error evolving from the interview techniques just discussed.

- **Failure to secure full respondent cooperation.** The sample loses credibility and is likely to be biased if interviewers do not do a good job of enlisting respondent cooperation. Certainly there is a question about the quality of the data collected from Edna during the Albany clinic study. Toward the end of the communication, there is some doubt about the seriousness with which questions were answered. Stressing the importance of the information to the upcoming surgery and having a receptionist serve as question interpreter/prober could reduce this type of error.

- **Failure to consistently execute interview procedures.** The precision of survey estimates will be reduced and there will be more error around estimates to the extent that interviewers are inconsistent in ways that influence the data. In the Albany clinic study, providing differing concept or construct definitions to different clinic patients would have created bias.

- **Failure to establish appropriate interview environment.** Answers may be systematically inaccurate or biased when interviewers fail to appropriately train and motivate respondents or fail to establish a suitable interpersonal setting.\(^6\) Since the Albany clinic study asked for factual rather than attitudinal data, interviewer-injected bias would have been limited. If the clinic had required the admissions clerk (who insulted Edna by referring to her negative attitude) to also conduct a postsurgery study of patient satisfaction, the results of the latter study may have been influenced by interviewer bias.
• **Falsification of individual answers or whole interviews.** Perhaps the most insidious form of interviewer error is cheating. Surveying is difficult work, often done by part-time employees, usually with only limited training and under little direct supervision. At times, falsification of an answer to an overlooked question is perceived as an easy solution to counterbalance the incomplete data. This easy, seemingly harmless first step can be followed by more pervasive forgery. It is not known how much of this occurs, but it should be of constant concern to research directors as they develop their data collection design.

• **Inappropriate influencing behavior.** It is also obvious that an interviewer can distort the results of any survey by inappropriate suggestions, word emphasis, tone of voice, and question rephrasing. These activities, whether premeditated or merely due to carelessness, are widespread. This problem was investigated using a simple structured questionnaire and planted respondents who then reported on the interviewers. The conclusion was “the high frequency of deviations from instructed behavior is alarming.”

• **Failure to record answers accurately and completely.** Error may result from an interview recording procedure that forces the interviewer to summarize or interpret respondent answers or that provides insufficient space to record answers as provided by the respondent.

• **Physical presence bias.** Interviewers can influence respondents in unperceived ways. Older interviewers are often seen as authority figures by young respondents, who modify their responses accordingly. Some research indicates that perceived social distance between interviewer and respondent has a distorting effect, although the studies do not fully agree on just what this relationship is.

In light of the numerous studies on the various aspects of interview bias, the safest course for researchers is to recognize that there is a constant potential for response error.

**Costs** While professional interviewers’ wage scales are typically not high, interviewing is costly, and these costs continue to rise. Much of the cost results from the substantial interviewer time taken up with administrative and travel tasks. Respondents are often geographically scattered, and this adds to the cost. Repeated contacts (recommended at six to nine per household) are expensive. In recent years, some professional research organizations have attempted to gain control of these spiraling costs. Interviewers have typically been paid an hourly rate, but this method rewards inefficient interviewers and often results in field costs exceeding budgets. The U.S. Bureau of the Census and the National Opinion Research Center have experimented with production standards and a formula pay system that provide an incentive for efficient interviewers. This approach has cut field costs about 10 percent and has improved the accuracy of the forecasts of fieldwork costs.

A second approach for reducing field costs has been to preschedule personal interviews. Telephone calls to set up appointments for interviews are reportedly to reduce personal calls by 25 percent without reducing cooperation rates. Telephone screening is also valuable when a study is concerned with a rare population. In one such case, where blind persons were sought, it was found that telephone screening of households was one-third the cost of screening on a face-to-face basis.

A third means of reducing high field costs is to use self-administered questionnaires. In one study, a personal interview was conducted in the household with a self-administered questionnaire left for one or more other members of the household to complete. In this study, the cost per completed case was reduced by half when compared
to conducting individual personal interviews. A comparison between a personal interview and a self-administered questionnaire seeking the same data showed that there was generally sufficient similarity of answers to enable them to be combined.\textsuperscript{22}