

Interviewing

Preview

Introduction

This topic deals with the subject of interviewing, with a focus on the practical problems involved. The differences between structured and unstructured interviews are also discussed. Using a prepared questionnaire in an interview is certainly less of a challenge for the interviewer than conducting a more open, 'unstructured' interview, but there are other factors to be considered. The principal interview objective is to make the respondent feel as though they are participating in an ordinary social chat.

This topic offers advice to both the ultra-confident and the diffident, with words of warning for both. Because of the nature of interviewing—the various settings, personalities and time constraints involved—there is no 'right' way to proceed every time. The intention here is to point out the types of situations you might encounter, rather than to give 'best' solutions for handling them. Recommendations are offered, but you are encouraged to extrapolate from them what is best for your particular interviewing situation.

The term 'depth interview' is commonly used as a synonym for virtually any one-to-one personal interviewing situation. This is not always proper, of course; there are times when the interviewer's intention is simply to gather information, without delving into hidden or subsidiary motives. Properly speaking, a depth interview is outside the scope of conventional research; it is psychotherapeutic and requires more than one session. However, through common usage, the term can now legitimately be used to describe an interview in which qualitative data is sought. The important point to keep in mind is that a depth interview is less structured and more intensive than an interview in which a set questionnaire is administered.

Structured and unstructured interviews

To conduct a structured interview means to use a prepared questionnaire in a face-to-face interview situation. Questions are to be asked in the required sequence; there are to be no changes to the wording of any question, and no skipping over anything.

As to the physical aspects of the interview situation, if you are visiting the respondent you cannot assume that the two of you will be neatly arranged at a desk or table. There is an astonishing variety of possible settings. At worst you might find yourself ensconced in a deep armless chair so soft and low that just taking notes—let alone showing you are paying attention to the respondent—will call for all the creative contortion you can muster.

Therefore you should practise everything involved in the act of using the questionnaire. Even turning the pages properly can look clumsy if it has not been rehearsed. Decide whether you prefer a clipboard or a solid folder. Will turning the pages and holding them down be a smooth, inconspicuous process? If it doesn't appear so, the impression might be that you have

not given adequate thought to other matters, either, and therefore why should the respondent take the trouble to answer the questions you are asking?

It might help too to go through the questionnaire with a friend to see that you can comfortably write down answers while looking up at the respondent fairly often. You never want to appear obsequious, of course, but paying attention, and showing that you are listening, is necessary in every interview situation.

Unstructured interviews are more difficult. The above remarks apply, but because you are doing exploratory work, there is no formal questionnaire, just a list of topics. The idea is to cover the topics in whatever way the respondent seems most comfortable. In order to be sure you cover them all, you need to find the most suitable way of working. You will be turning pages and making notes, yet must always have access to your list of topics. Should it be at the top of each page? Perhaps at the bottom of the page is better, since it should be unobtrusive, or perhaps it should be on a small slip of paper taped to your folder. Decide what is best for you.

In an unstructured interview, it is best for it not to seem as if you are working to specific points. The interview should 'flow' as loosely as possible, so that it is always open to any of the respondent's ideas or observations. That will not be as likely if he or she catches sight of a neatly arranged list in front of you. (Remember that most astute people in all fields can read fairly well upside-down; it is a useful ability. So handwrite the points you want to cover in a small, casual, unimportant-looking scrawl.)

Depth interviews

There are many books and articles that offer advice on the best way to interview respondents. They generally start, however, a few steps ahead of some very basic questions that most people have. They recommend establishing a good rapport with the respondent; they tell you to relax. However, many people need answers to questions like: 'I have never interviewed anyone, and my project will require an unstructured format. How am I going to manage to do it well?' or 'I'm sure I'll be a bit nervous at the start, yet I'm supposed to be running the show. How can someone respond properly if they see that I'm nervous?'

If you do not have any concerns of this sort, that's excellent. Your natural advantages will serve you well. But please do not feel complacent. There are potential interviewing problems peculiar to each interviewer's personality, which we will discuss shortly.

Interviewer demeanour

Let us attempt first, even if it is impossible to give answers that are always right for every situation, to at least openly confront these questions. If you are one of the potentially nervous interviewers, the main thing is to be quite clear in your mind about one thing—namely, that this is not necessarily a disadvantage. Let us consider this point.

First of all, the nature of the job at hand is to extract information from the respondent. If an interviewer was to give the impression of being supremely confident in his or her work, what do you think the respondent's reaction would be? With most people it is seldom an effusion of utter rapport. There is generally, in fact, some feeling of setting oneself at least slightly 'on guard'. They see the interviewer as someone who quite obviously knows more about what is

going to happen than they do. It will probably only be slight, but depending upon the meshing or otherwise of the personae, it could possibly be much stronger. (It could even be something like the feeling you get when you are looking at houses to buy, and the real estate agent showing them to you is driving a Mercedes. You hardly feel that it is *your* interests that are going to be uppermost in this relationship.)

The result of such a perception by the respondent—even if it is not very strong—can inhibit their willingness to open up. And the result of that can be problematic in the extreme, because ‘opening up’ is the main thing you want them to do. Data follows, and out of that data will eventually come your report, which, if your project relates to a real situation in your organisation, might well eventually lead to some crucial decision-making.

The data will, of course, be gleaned from the respondent, not the interviewer. Therefore, the longer we keep him or her to the subject, the more words we will gain. Very often, important points show up only after the respondent has become ‘wound up’ so to speak; that is, been allowed to go on virtually uninterrupted for a while. This will generally require the interviewer to say absolutely nothing during the very short periods of hesitation by the respondent, as he or she ‘zeros in’ on that vital point they are trying to express.

Overconfident, gregarious people can have some difficulty keeping absolutely still for these eight or ten—for them, excruciating slow—seconds, whereas people who are somewhat shy have no trouble at all. (A lecturer who is only accustomed to speaking to large groups would probably make a poor interviewer; a teacher who speaks to small ones, and is sensitive to the students as individuals, would make a good one. Good salespeople would probably make brilliant interviewers. They are attuned to the nuances of speech in order to gauge a person’s attitude, they read body language signs, they know how to encourage people to talk in order to discover their needs, and they know when to say nothing.)

Obviously, it would not be expected—or desirable—for certain individuals to have the traits that would make them a good interviewer. It could well be inimical to their work, or to their personalities.

Some professional interviewers even go out of their way to appear a bit less confident than the respondent. Certainly they will do so if the respondent is obviously somewhat nervous about the interview, or is just naturally diffident. They know that all that matters is to come away with data—preferably usable data, of course—but better more than less.

This sort of thing is particularly common in product research, both in one-to-one interviews and in focus groups. In order not to inhibit the respondent when getting their opinion about a new exhibition, musical and so on, the interviewer will do anything that is required to give the impression that they themselves have no more knowledge than the respondent. They do not want that respondent to feel as if they are talking with someone who has already interviewed a few dozen people, or who has a vested interest in the research result, or who knows what the answers ‘should be’.

‘This sample program has just been designed; I’m curious about it myself’, the interviewer might say, in order to make the respondent feel that his or her response will most certainly be fresh and interesting. Or, if recording the interview, and saying ‘I’d like you to listen to the monologue on this tape’ they will set up the recorder quickly and unobtrusively—but not so quickly and unobtrusively that they give the impression they could do it with their eyes closed

if they wanted to, and thus drawing attention to the fact that the interview with this respondent is just one more of countless interviews that have gone before.

We do not wish to belabour this aspect of interviewer demeanour, but, since it is generally glossed over in research texts, it seems best to cover it at some length. Most textbooks on interviewing tell you to dress suitably, not to smoke, to establish rapport, and, most importantly, to *relax*! If you are happy with that, you are one of the lucky ones. But remember, at least, to beware of speaking during short pauses. This is easy to practise in everyday conversations with people, and will pay off immensely if personal interviews are required in your research project.

Realistically speaking, establishing rapport is not always an attainable goal. For example, and perhaps in your research, you might be talking to people who deserve—or perhaps do not deserve, but expect—respect rather than rapport. This is a subtle and subjective point, of course, which must be tempered with the fact that you can hardly be expected to be someone you are not, nor should you try. Be aware of such points, but generally speaking, just showing a polite concern for the respondent's feelings is sufficient to create a mutually pleasant situation.

A final remark on the subject of nerves: Don't go out of your way to make things difficult for yourself. For example, if you are even the least bit nervous, don't accept an offered cup of coffee if there is a chance it will come balanced on a saucer, which will almost certainly tinkle about merrily as you attempt to steady your hand. Best to politely refuse, and give yourself a few somewhat safer moments to calm down, as will certainly happen once you get started.

Sometimes it takes only the slightest degree of nervousness to telegraph its presence if you insist upon looking for a way to sabotage yourself. The small muscles of the hand and fingers are almost always the first to betray you. A firm grip with the entire hand on the folder will remain steady, whereas a finger hold on papers will make them rustle like leaves in the wind if the fingers are shaking a bit. The shot putter, nervous before the final toss, at least looks steady because of having to hold on to such a weight; they don't have to worry, as does the golfer before the deciding, delicate putt, about being struck with an attack of 'the yips'. These are commonsense points, but are often not remembered when they most matter.

Bias

Because an interview is a social situation, consider too this major social point: We often tend to adjust our remarks to people and our replies to their questions in ways that we consider proper for the given situation. If a respondent does that in an interview, the result can be inaccuracies, bias and insufficiency of information. It is inevitable to some degree that this 'adjustment' occurs, but the less the better for our purposes.

To give you an idea of some of the countless things that fall into this category, consider one of the most common: voice inflection. It is easy to give someone the impression that you agree with a statement they make by offering them the merest murmur of approval. There are all kinds of problems that can occur if an interviewer does that: the respondent can head off on an 'approved' tangent, which would not have happened otherwise, or can just get the feeling of what sort of answers are expected, and skew virtually every answer that follows.

It takes a conscious effort not to make these voice inflections, especially if you are a bit nervous, and feel uncomfortable about appearing impolite. (Keep in mind that the interview is only physically identical to a conversation between two people. It should feel like a social situation to the respondent, but not to you.) Voice inflections are best thought of, perhaps, as the subtle equivalents of saying ‘isn’t it?’, ‘don’t you?’ ‘doesn’t it?’ or ‘right?’ at the end of a sentence. In a conversation this can be seen as a polite way of keeping the conversation going, of passing the subject over to the other person; in a depth interview it’s as bad as asking a leading question. It would be a shame (wouldn’t it?) if you were to manage your self control so as not to speak during those short pauses we talked about, in order to get the respondent to do the talking, and then give some indication of approval (or disapproval) and thus corrupt those very words you had managed to evoke.

The same advice stands for non-vocal ‘encouragement’. Slightly shaking the head, nodding, pursing the lips and so on, can all ‘lead’ the respondent, and thus bias the interview data.

Qualities of a good interviewer

A list of the qualities required of an interviewer is given by Berent in *Consumer Market Research Handbook*:

- (a) the ability to relax in the interviewing situation;
- (b) a friendly manner;
- (c) the ability to instil confidence;
- (d) to like people and be interested in them;
- (e) to be broadminded.

(cited in Sampson 1986, p. 43)

We spoke at length on *relaxing*: it is extremely important. Adopting a *friendly manner* is obviously important, but remember not to be so friendly that your voice rather than the respondent’s dominates the interview. There is one particular point that you will want to decide for yourself with regard to being friendly. Everyone knows that using a person’s name in conversation is polite and considerate. However, the research report does not mention names and the respondents are promised anonymity. If you use their name during the interview, will this make them a bit uneasy? Isn’t there perhaps a touch of contradiction there? Decide for yourself, but do consider the question.

The idea of *instilling confidence* is to make the respondent feel they are helping out—that their information is important. That is helped by not appearing critical about anything (anything at all!) they say. And since their input truly *is* important to you—you want that project of yours done—an appreciative manner will certainly come naturally to you.

It is worth keeping in mind that there is a difference between *being interested* in someone and liking someone. You cannot be expected to like all your respondents; it would be convenient if you did, but we want to be realistic here. You do not want to give any negative impressions to the respondent, however, since this will inhibit them from talking freely to you, and impressions are conveyed at a subconscious level. So what is to be done? Take an interest in something about them—anything! Direct your attention to their face, their hair, their dress sense or lack thereof. The point here is that consciously directed interest—even if it is in something you are strongly *unimpressed* by—will at least come across as interest,

attentiveness, concern. Do not comment on their appearance, of course, and do not stare at people, or at parts of them.

In regard to the last point in Berent's list of qualities—'to be *broadminded*'—you might have no need for this quality in the course of your interviews for your project, but for the sake of completeness, it must be considered. Some respondents, unlike the ones from whom it is difficult to elicit information, tell us too much. This was addressed earlier as no great problem, but here we mean *much too much* (i.e. extreme political leanings, bizarre racial attitudes, outdated conceptions of a woman's 'place' in the industry). The extraordinary thing about such people is first that they can link their feelings on such subjects to virtually anything you are asking them, and, second, they assume you share their beliefs. In your research, you might not need to concern yourself with this point at all, but it is best to be prepared, just in case. You do not want to be shaken if such things occur. Certainly you are not there to counter the respondent's beliefs, and, if they are extreme, you couldn't anyway. All you can do is control your feelings. Being psychologically prepared to handle the unexpected will be an advantage.

Most professional researchers recommend that 'broadmindedness' be handled with no more concern than one's attitude toward appearance. If the way you usually dress is totally foreign to your respondents, then don't dress that way. If you are a smoker, don't be for the interview. The same applies to 'broadmindedness'. You are not there to make or dispute any sort of statement; you just want the interview.

Barriers

Oppenheim has divided the problems in the respondent's mind that must be overcome into four 'barriers'. You might find it helpful to refer to them like that. They are as follows:

- (a) barrier of awareness—when people are unaware of their own attitudes and motives;
- (b) barrier of irrationality—to overcome the rationalizations that people make when they talk about themselves;
- (c) barrier of inadmissibility and self-incrimination—when people are disinclined to admit things in a conventional interview situation;
- (d) barrier of politeness—when respondents are disinclined to be critical because they are, by nature, polite and tend to behave so towards the interviewer.

(cited in Sampson 1986, pp. 40–41)

To these might perhaps be added *barrier of modesty* and *barrier of exaggeration*.

The other method involves going a step beyond our recommendation to stay silent for a few seconds in order to encourage the respondent to fill that silence. It is also used when the respondent has given a reply or a remark, but it is insufficient for our purposes—we want to know more. This is called 'probing', and it is more difficult than it might seem.

Probing

Ostensibly, 'probing' is simply asking for more information. The difficulty for the interviewer arises, however, in avoiding leading questions, avoiding leading attitudes (the voice inflections we mentioned), avoiding wrong assumptions about what a respondent means in a particular statement, using open and closed questions appropriately, and avoiding asking subsequent questions based upon wrong assumptions. There is one particular general

difficulty too that is often overlooked: in probing for answers, the interviewer must be careful not to inadvertently instil an attitude about something where none may have existed. Do not forget, in other words, that people's feelings about certain issues may well be neutral, with no stronger or hidden feelings lurking beneath the surface.

Proper probing is easy to learn. Like some of the other aspects of interviewing that have been discussed here, all that is necessary is a bit of self-control to avoid doing the wrong thing.

If someone says: 'That was not a very satisfying performance', and we want to know why they feel that way, we do not say: 'You didn't think the wind section was up to scratch?' or 'You didn't like the new conductor?'. The problem here is not that we might be guessing the wrong thing, but that the person might agree, and we will never know if something else was even more of a disappointment to them. We can ask a few questions later, but it is almost always of interest to us, even if we are not conducting a formal interview, to discover the very first thing that has influenced the person's remark.

To discover in the above situation—to 'probe' properly—we would simply say 'Why do you say that?' or 'And by that you mean ... ?' or even just 'Oh?'. In this way, their next statement will not have been led by us in any way; it will be unbiased. We spoke earlier about open-ended questions. Probing questions fall into that category: they should *never* be answerable by 'yes' or 'no'. Even a questioning look can be thought of as 'probing', since its intention is to elicit more, or clarifying, information without influencing the nature of that information. If you feel a respondent needs a bit more prodding than 'Oh?', something like 'That's interesting. Can you tell me more?' would be suitable. Reflective questioning, a technique used often in psychology, can be useful here. Reflective questioning is where you simply turn the person's comment around without adding anything of your own. In the above example, when the respondent says 'That was not a very satisfying performance' you would reply 'It was not very satisfying?' thus prompting the respondent to enlarge without leading in any way.

There are many times too when the probe need not be so subtle. If someone says they go to the opera 'a lot', just ask them how often they go, if that is something you need to know. Probing is often just for clarifying or making an answer more precise. But it takes skill—really, attentiveness—to recognise those times when the respondent might be inadvertently led by you. With some respondents, it can take real patience and determination to probe, and probe again, without giving them any 'hints' (such as nods of 'encouragement'). It will pay off, however. Anything that will keep the data 'honest' will eventually be reflected in the validity of the recommendations you advise at the conclusion of your research.

Recording the interview

The benefits of using a tape recorder are a matter of opinion. Most respondents are not troubled by a tape recorder if it is accorded the bare minimum of attention. You must ask for permission to tape an interview, but this can be done very casually by taking out the tape recorder and asking 'Do you mind?'. If the respondent does seem uncomfortable about being recorded, you can suggest that you need it to help a faulty memory, to ensure accuracy or because you can't take shorthand. This requires the respondent to empathise with your difficulties and almost always evokes a generous response. Never tape an interview secretly, because any information you gain without permission cannot be used. The respondent is also entitled to tape the interview so that you cannot 'doctor' the results.

A tape recording also entails more work than taking notes. Make sure that your batteries are new and that you have a spare set of batteries, check that your tape settings are correct, and your chosen place for interview has minimal background noise and vibration. After the interview, listening to the tape again involves virtually sitting through the interview again.

If the extra work is not a problem for you, do not hesitate to record interviews. General consensus is that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, provided of course that the particular respondent involved does not mind. (A tape recorder should *always* be used in a group interview.)

If you do record your depth interviews, take advantage of an extremely important opportunity: When the interview ends, thank the respondent for their time, help, and so on, and then turn off the machine—‘click’ it off in an obvious manner; that is, let them be aware that it has been turned off. Then say ‘Is there anything else ... anything at all ... that you can add?’. Say absolutely nothing more. The next person who speaks *must not be you*. Some of the most important information comes at this time. If they have nothing to add, they will say so, and the interview is over. If they do add something, write it down the moment you are outside their door.

If you take notes, be sure to look up continually. The casual situation you wish to create is not compatible with an interviewer who seems only to be interested in transcribing (i.e. interested in the notes, not the person). Here, too, at the end of the interview, close the notebook, put away your pen or pencil, thank the respondent, and say ‘Is there anything else ... anything at all ... that you can add?’. Say nothing more until they speak, and again, if they add anything, write it down as soon as you are on your own.

A few final words: Do not attempt too many interviews in a single day. The optimum situation is to give yourself time to transcribe your notes, or listen to the tape, before the next interview. That way you might get an idea of how to proceed better in the next one. Maybe you even forgot to ask something, or probe something. It is best to discover that before conducting another interview. An experienced interviewer who knows what to ask, and is doing relatively straightforward work, would still try to avoid doing more than five or six one-hour interviews in a day. Otherwise, in some way or another, it would affect the quality of the work.

Review

Summary

Interviewing is a common data-gathering technique in research. It is at its most structured form in the ‘doorstop’ interview done regularly by large market-research companies, in which the interviewer must hold precisely to the exact wording of every question and the exact recommended wording of the ‘probes’. Because hundreds of people will be asked the same questions in this case, it is absolutely necessary that interviewer bias be kept to the bare minimum.

Interviewing is at its least structured in the exploratory depth interview, in which a set of general topics is covered, with a great deal of freedom allowed for the respondent to talk about the topics. Respondents are even, in many cases, allowed to introduce related topics themselves.

In addition to explaining structured and unstructured interviews, this topic has offered practical advice on interviewing techniques and has given examples of the sorts of problems commonly encountered.

Reference

Sampson, P. 1986, 'Qualitative and motivation research', *Consumer Market Research Handbook*, ed. R. M. Worcester, 3rd edn, McGraw-Hill, London.