Empirical Political Analysis
Research Methods in Political Science

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chapter 8

Interviewing

The personal interview is simultaneously one of the worst and one of the best data collection tools available to political scientists. The most significant disadvantages of the interview stem from the fact that the interview situation is rich with opportunities for reactivity to affect measurement. Respondents’ reactions to the appearance or behavior of the interviewer, to the wording of questions, or to the interview setting can create artificial data that contain less information about the real world than about the interview process itself.

Researchers cannot hope to control all the variables involved in this process. They can, however, take steps to minimize predictable problems of reactivity and maximize the validity of responses. This chapter describes some of these steps. We will be concerned with the dynamics of interviewing both in sample surveys, in which respondents are considered representative of some larger population, and in what is called elite and specialized interviewing, in which respondents are selected because of their unique qualities. The two types of interviewing require different sets of skills and different procedures. This chapter provides some guidelines for either task. Readers should keep in mind that these guidelines are not substitutes for experience, because interviewing, like much in the social sciences, is at least as much an art as a science.

SAMPLE SURVEY INTERVIEWING

As a student of political science, you may want to do survey interviewing as research for a term paper, or you may be hired to work as an interviewer on one of your professors’ projects. As a political scientist, you may direct a survey as part of your professional research, or you may be called upon to judge others’ use of survey methods. In each of these cases, you need to understand the dynamics of the interview.
process and be familiar with the proper procedures to be followed in interviewing. Even though the procedure and the questioning technique that are most effective in any given set of interviews differ somewhat with the nature of the study and the character of the respondents, we can offer some general rules for interviewing that will apply in most cases.

If it is possible to identify respondents in advance, the researcher can get the interviewer off to a good start by sending a postcard informing potential respondents that they will be contacted by an interviewer who is part of an important study. This establishes credibility and improves the chances that respondents will agree to the interview.

In addition, the researcher will want to ensure (1) that interviewers have been supplied with a standardized introductory “speech” that lets them explain the survey simply and move quickly to asking questions; (2) that interviewers carry with them a letter of introduction, full identification, and a telephone number; respondents can call to verify interviewers’ purpose if necessary; and (3) that the local police have been notified of the survey and know to expect possible calls concerning it. Once the interview is under way, interviewers should observe the following rules:

1. Record on the interview schedule the time at which each interview begins and the time at which it ends.
2. Be certain to sign all interview schedules you complete, and enter an interviewer code if you have been assigned one.
3. Try to maintain eye contact with the respondent in order to create a conversational atmosphere.
4. To keep the interview moving, record responses to one question as you ask the next, if possible.
5. Record answers as inconspicuously as possible.
6. Read and record all answers yourself. Do not let the respondent handle the interview schedule as if it were a questionnaire.
7. If you are to record respondents’ comments, record them in exactly the words the respondents use rather than summarizing.
8. If respondents give indefinite answers, press for more specific responses.
9. When respondents qualify answers by saying things like, “No, but …,” record their qualifying remarks as well as the answer.
10. If you have to probe to get an adequate answer, indicate this on the interview schedule, and record the questions you use to probe (for example, Why is it so? In well-constructed surveys, appropriate probes are indicated on the schedule for any question that is likely to require them.
11. Never attempt to interview more than one person at a time.
12. Try to conduct the interview with only the respondent present. If other persons insist on sitting in, ask that they not interrupt. Do not change answers given by respondents if other persons persuade them to modify their initial response.
13. Do not allow yourself to be drawn into conversations with the respondent about the subject of the survey, because your remarks may bias responses.
14. If respondents object to question wording, or the alternative answers offered, do not defend the survey instrument but merely explain that you must ask the questions as written and that you are not responsible for them.

15. Note in the margin respondents' objections to questions, as these may be useful data later on.

16. Record only initial responses. Do not change the response you have recorded on one question because the respondent asks that you do so after hearing a subsequent question.

17. When respondents answer, "I don't know," pause before recording the response because people sometimes use that phrase as an unconscious introduction to a substantive answer (as in, "Oh, I don't know—I guess I feel that . . .").

18. Never intentionally alter the wording or the order of items.

19. Never tell respondents what others have answered in response to a given question even though respondents may ask.

20. Never attempt to interview from memory. Always have the schedule before you, and refer to it for question wording and order even if you are so familiar with the instrument that it takes only a glance to remind you of the items.

21. Upon completing an interview, always look back over the entire schedule before leaving the respondent to be certain that all questions have been asked and all responses recorded. It is generally better to ask omitted questions out of sequence, or to ask respondents to repeat a response, than to leave an item blank.

**QUESTION WORDING**

Researchers can make it easier for an interviewer to do a good job by providing clear instructions and by careful question wording. Properly phrased questions can often prevent problems in the field. For example, if it is easier for the interviewer to establish a good relationship with the respondent and avoid the appearance of "grilling" if questions are phrased so that respondents do not have to admit that they do not know some fact or have given no thought to it. A phrase such as . . . or haven't you had a chance to read about that? at the end of a question can considerably ease potentially tense situations.

No one can provide precise guidelines for correct wording, because the questions that have to be asked are determined by the subject under study. We can, however, describe some common errors in question wording that should be avoided. If questions do not contain any of these errors, they are very likely to be correctly worded. Here are some features questions should not have:

1. **Excessive length**. If there is a general rule about question wording, it is to use the shortest form of the question that communicates effectively. Longer questions not only consume more time but are also more likely to lose or confuse respondents. Longer questions are also more likely to con-
tain others of the errors listed in this section. Never use two words when one will do. Avoid conditioned phrases and unnecessary adjectives. For example, the question if the presidential election were to be held at this point in time, rather than in November, which of the following several candidates do you think you would vote for? can profitably be shortened to if the presidential election were held today, whom would you vote for? followed by a list of candidates.

2. Ambiguity. The quest for brevity should not lead to incomplete or imprecise wording. To be certain that questions contain all the information necessary to elicit an informed response, ask yourself whether the respondent might have to answer the question with a question. For instance, when asked, “Do you ever complain about public services?” a respondent could answer, “Complain to whom?” Public officials? Neighbors?” Questions are often ambiguous if they are too general (Do you feel that people think too much about politics?) or indefinite about time, location, or point of comparison (Did you vote in the last election? Do many Asians live here? Do you think Smith is the best candidate?).

3. Compound meaning. An especially harmful form of ambiguity is found in double-barreled questions. These are often impossible to answer with a single response, because they contain two distinct questions. For example, Do you feel that we are spending too much on the military, or do you feel it is important to maintain a strong national defense? cannot be answered “yes” or “no” if the respondent feels it is important to have a strong defense but also thinks that current expenditures are higher than necessary for that purpose. To avoid double-barreled questions, examine any question containing and or or to be certain it does not combine two questions that should be asked separately.

4. Bias. Questions can be worded so as to encourage one response rather than another. Such questions are often referred to as loaded questions. When asked, “You are opposed to busing innocent schoolchildren all the way across town just to achieve racial balance in the schools, aren’t you?” respondents will be far more inclined to agree than if asked, “Do you favor the use of busing to achieve racial balance in the public schools?” Phrases that evoke social norms (such as, How often do you fulfill your civic duty by voting?) clearly bias responses. Phrases that associate a position with authority figures or socially disapproved persons or groups can also distort results. For example, questions that begin with, Do you agree with the Supreme Court that … or Do you share the neo-Nazi view that … will probably produce biased results.

If there are opposing positions on an issue, it is important that questions be worded so as to make each seem legitimate. A useful approach here is to word items as follows: Some people feel that the federal government should take control of the nation’s oil companies and operate them as public utilities. Others think that would be a serious mistake. How do you feel about it? Do you think the federal government should take control of U.S. oil companies?
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their own opinions. Racial prejudice is a case in point. Since bigotry is generally condemned in American society, people may be reluctant to express prejudiced views.

We can suggest three tactics to use in getting genuine responses rather than conditioned or socially approved answers. The first is to indicate that socially unacceptable views are widely held or can be viewed as legitimate. For instance, ask, "Many people feel that having blacks in a neighborhood causes it to go downhill. Others don't think blacks make that much difference in a neighborhood. Do you agree that black residents generally cause neighborhoods to decline?" A second approach is to word questions so as to appear to assume that respondents engage in socially prescribed behavior or hold unpopular views so that they are forced to deny it if they do not. This makes it easier for them to "confess" to socially approved opinions if they hold them. For instance, the question "How much harm do you think it would do to this neighborhood if blacks began to move in?" makes it easier to express prejudice than a more neutral wording such as, "Do you think it would be harmful to this neighborhood to have blacks move in?"

10. Forcing a response. Many people feel that it is socially undesirable not to have an opinion on political issues and may express opinions on matters to which they have given no thought. This can distort survey results. To avoid such responses, it is generally wise to provide a no-opinion category in response options or to word questions so as to make having no opinion seem acceptable. For instance, try opening a question with wording such as, "Some people consider the national debt to be an important political issue while others are not too concerned with it. Do you think...?"

SELECTING INTERVIEWERS

Professional political scientists not only conduct survey interviews themselves but also often have to train others to do interviewing. When training interviewers, they have to impart to them the information presented in the foregoing sections on interviewing methods. The first step in preparing a team of interviewers, however, is to select appropriate people.

Because respondents react not only to questions but also to the person asking the questions and the manner in which they are asked, characteristics of interviewers that should be totally unrelated to the interview can, in fact, be crucial to its success. Experience with surveys in the United States has suggested the following general guidelines for selecting and instructing interviewers so as to minimize problems of reactivity.

1. Interviewers should be nonthreatening and inconspicuous. Professional survey organizations, for example, most frequently employ middle-aged women as interviewers because they have found that people are not intimidated or challenged by them. For the same reason, interviewers should be like respondents in relevant ways. For instance, when race relations are a subject
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3. The ideal interviewer is completely honest and dependable about interview
work, capable of giving careful attention to small details, and poised and
comfortable in face-to-face interactions.

It is important to look for these characteristics in prospective interviewers. There are times, however, when even the best suited and trained interviewers cannot provide the kind of information a researcher needs. In those cases, researchers have to conduct the interviews themselves and employ distinctive techniques.

ELITE INTERVIEWING

Many important research questions in political science can be answered only if we can learn how certain individuals or types of individuals think and act. For example, whereas we can always speculate about reasons for the passage of a specific piece of legislation, we can learn the actual reasons only by finding out what the legislators thought. Answering these types of questions requires elite interviewing rather than surveys of the general population. In this context, people are referred to as elite if they have knowledge that, for the purposes of a given research project, requires that

they be given individualized treatment in an interview. Their elite status depends not on their role in society but on their access to information that can help answer a given research question, though people who get elite treatment in research are often persons of political, social, or economic importance.

A central difference between sample survey interviewing and elite interviewing is the degree to which the interview is standardized. In sample surveys, each respondent is treated as much like every other respondent as possible. This is because the purpose of the interview is to obtain specific information that can be used to make quantitative comparisons between respondents in an effort to generalize to some larger population. In elite interviewing, each respondent is treated differently to the extent that obtaining the information that that individual alone possesses requires unique treatment. The purpose of elite interviewing is generally not the collection of prespecified data but the gathering of information to assist in reconstructing some event or discerning a pattern in specific behaviors.

A second major difference between elite interviewing and survey interviewing is that whereas survey interviews are generally highly scheduled interviews, elite interviews are largely unscheduled interviews. An interview is highly scheduled if the questions to be asked and the order of their appearance are predetermined and inflexible. In a totally unscheduled interview, the interviewer is guided only by a general objective (for example, to find out how a given decision was made in a particular state agency) and has no predetermined set of questions to ask. Highly scheduled interviews have the advantage of producing largely standardized data because they require that all respondents answer the same questions and select from the same options in answering. This has the advantage of allowing comparisons between respondents and facilitates data processing. Strict scheduling, however, has the disadvantage of restricting the information gained from interviews to that which the researcher has already decided is necessary for understanding the phenomena under study. Scheduling restricts the researcher's opportunities to learn what respondents consider relevant or important and to gain new theoretical insights.

Unscheduled interviews, by contrast, produce data that are difficult to condense and summarize and that may not allow precise comparisons among respondents. The asset accompanying this liability is a greater opportunity to learn from respondents and acquire unexpected information that can lead to truly new ways of understanding the events being studied. Unscheduled interviews are especially suited to elite interviewing, because in elite interviewing, the researcher is interested in learning what the respondent perceives as important and relevant to the research and lets the respondent's observations suggest what questions should be asked in order to gain useful information. The interviewer is concerned with discovering facts and patterns rather than with measuring preselected phenomena.

Elite interviews can provide crucial information about political events that is otherwise unavailable. Elite interviewing involves some very real scientific risks, however. It generally means asking people who are deeply involved in a political process to shape the researcher's definition of the process. This may threaten the scientific validity of the information obtained if respondents (1) have no narrow view of the events in question that they do not understand which aspects are important in explaining them; (2) have inaccurate information either because they misperceived events in the first place or because they have forgotten important el-
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ments); (5) have convinced themselves, in order to rationalize their own actions,
that things are one way when in fact they are another; or (4) intentionally lie in
order to protect themselves or others. For example, interviews with ranking mem-
bers of Ronald Reagan’s administration about the events referred to as the Iran-
Contra affair might produce instances of invalid information from each of these
sources.

Though researchers cannot control what respondents say, they can guard
against drawing invalid conclusions from elite interviews by following some general
guidelines. First, never treat what interviewees say as factual data, but rather treat
the fact that they said it as data. For an understanding of political behavior, it is
often as important to know what people believe or claim to be true as it is to know
what is true. For example, if you want to know why residents of a given community
have organized to demand the closing of a nearby chemical plant, finding out how
much of a safety hazard the plant actually poses may be less useful than finding out
how much of a safety hazard residents believe the plant poses.

Second, never rely on a single respondent for information about any event, but
obtain information about each event from as many respondents as possible before
drawing conclusions.

Third, always seek ways of verifying information from elite interviews by com-
paring it with information from outside sources. If we interview party leaders to
learn why a given candidate has been selected as the party’s nominee in an election
and respondents refer to “the obvious public support for the candidate” as their rea-
ses for supporting him or her, we will want to look for public opinion polls that sup-
ply evidence of the degree to which the public has supported the candidate.

Fourth, learn enough about the subject to be able to recognize incorrect state-
ments or to perceptively analyze responses for possible sources of invalidity. We
should be able to answer questions such as the following before engaging in elite in-
terviewing: Is there any reason why respondents might want to believe something
other than the truth or want to have others believe that they believe something other
than the truth? Do they stand to gain economically or politically from given acts or
statements? What answers are plausible given the facts we know about the subject
from other reliable sources?

So serious are the threats to validity in elite interviewing that Lewis Dexter, a
leading authority on the method, wrote:

no one should plan or finance an entire study in advance with the expec-
tation of relying chiefly on interviews for data unless the interviewers
have enough relevant background to be sure that they can make sense
out of interview conversations or unless there is a reasonable hope of
being able to hang around or in some way observe so as to learn what
is meaningful and significant to ask. . . . Any planning for a study as-
suming a heavy reliance upon elite interviews should have a contin-
gency plan . . . so that if elite interviews prove basically unininformative
some other technique can be substituted.1

1 Lewis Anthony Dexter, Elite and Specialized Interviewing (Urbana, IL: Northwestern University
Despite these drawbacks, elite interviewing has tremendous potential for shedding light on important political phenomena and can often be a valuable supplement to studies relying principally on other data collection techniques, as well as provide the sole basis for important conclusions. It is crucial to remember that information from people with inside knowledge is no substitute for a sound theoretical understanding of the subject. In order to reach scientifically valuable conclusions, political scientists must always impose their own analytic categories and conceptual schemes on the information gathered from elites.

TECHNIQUES OF ELITE INTERVIEWING

One of the first questions faced in elite interviewing is whom to interview. In survey interviewing, all of the respondents are treated as equally able to contribute information that can be used in answering the research question, and sampling methods are available to help determine whom to interview. Elite interviewers have to assume that potential respondents differ in how much they can contribute to the study and that each respondent has something unique to offer. Often, background research will identify the entire population of those likely to have relevant information. If we are studying the decisions of a presidential commission, for instance, a little research will identify the members of the commission and their staff personnel, as well as any experts they may have relied on. However, if we are doing a “community power study” to determine who controls public policy in a certain city, we will not find any official list of people who exercise political influence in the city. Finding out whom to interview in this case is one of the objectives of the interviewers themselves.

Once a group of potential interviewees has been identified, the question of what order to see them in arises. It is tempting to see first those people who should be most willing to talk and most sympathetic or to want to see first the person believed to have the most information. Two things should be kept in mind, however.

First, elite interviewing is a process of discovery. We seldom come to the interviews knowing everything important to ask. Early interviews may teach us things that help us get the most useful information from subsequent interviews. Often it is best to interview the most central figures late in the study.

Second, in elite interviewing, we are generally not dealing with isolated and uninvolved persons, as we are in surveys. Each respondent is likely to have a unique (perhaps self-interested) view of the situation under study and may intentionally or unintentionally give inaccurate advice about who should be interviewed. Under no circumstances should the researcher let early interviewees’ suggestions determine the choice or order of subsequent interviews, although those suggestions can provide partial data on which to base such decisions. Sometimes the fact that early interviewees have suggested certain other persons is evidence in itself, as it may reveal alliances or communication patterns. In addition, because elite respondents are likely to know each other and be involved with the subject matter, the researcher must be cautious that early interviews do not jeopardize the study by identifying it with a particular group among the potential respondents. If possible, it is best to avoid interviewing first the mavericks, opposition leaders, persons thought to have extreme
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viewers, opposition leaders, persons thought to have extreme
views, or leaders of any dominant coalition, because word of this may be passed to
other interviewees and make them hostile or defensive.

Considering all this, researchers may find that the best initial interviews may be
with people who are somewhat marginal to the situation but who are viewed as
neutral by most participants. In a study of politics in a state legislature, for exam-
ple, it may be best to interview members of the legislative council (a general ser-
vice agency used by all members of the legislature) rather than starting with
less important legislators. It is also wise to explain to the first respondents that the interview
is preliminary and exploratory and that you may want to see them again because you
may learn what other questions to ask or how to interpret answers only after
subsequent conversations.

Actually arranging interviews with elite respondents can be quite difficult, be-
cause these individuals are often busy people and such interviews generally demand
large amounts of their time (an hour or more is common). The following tips will
generally help in securing interviews, though it will sometimes be impossible or in-
advisable to follow them in particular situations.

1. Always call or write in advance to arrange for the interview rather than sim-
ply showing up, as in survey interviewing.
2. Be sure to request the interview by speaking with the person to be inter-
viewed rather than a secretary or aide. Your want to be certain the respon-
dent understands the purpose of the meeting so he or she will not feel you
are being deceitful.
3. Avoid asking questions that are personal or sensitive. The respondent
may be more interested in issues of public policy and may not want to
provide personal information.
4. Always try to determine the reasons for refusals, and try to see whether you
can remove the cause. For example, if scheduling is a problem, you may
offer to interview after work hours. If confidentiality is a problem, you may be
able to secure references from people the potential respondent trusts.
5. Always have on hand materials that identify you and the sponsor of the re-
search, in case questions arise.

Once an interview has been arranged, it should not proceed by the rules given
for survey interviewing. Dexter says that "the best way to interview in a concrete situation de-
pend upon the situation (including the skills and personalities of the interview-
ers)." Elite interviewers have to be more flexible and have a wider range of inter-
viewing styles than survey interviewers, but there are some general guidelines that
will fit most situations:

1. Always introduce yourself and restate the broad purpose of your study at
the beginning of each interview rather than assuming that the respondent
recognizes these facts from a letter of introduction or even a prior inter-
view session with you.

Dexter, p. 23; Dexter's Index.
2. The setting of an interview can be crucial. It is generally best to arrange a private interview away from potential distractions. Interviews over meals in restaurants or in the presence of the respondent’s children usually do not go well. Occasionally, however, it is useful to have an interview in an unorthodox place (a park, the Lincoln Memorial, a bus) if it serves to put respondents at ease or jog their memory of past events.

3. Though group interviews can sometimes help produce a consensus on facts or reveal personal relationships, it is normally best to interview only one person at a time.

4. The tone of the interview should be reflective and conversational. Avoid firing questions in rapid succession. Do not be afraid of pauses as you or the respondent processes information and collects thoughts.

5. Plan initial questions carefully. Though the bulk of the interview will be unstructured, the first few questions can be so important in focusing respondents' attention, stimulating their memory, and clarifying their perception of what you want that they should be planned in advance. Initial questions should be: (a) clearly related to the stated purpose of the study, (b) likely to be answered with ease so that no ego threat arises, (c) phrased to show the respondent that the interviewer has knowledge about the subject of the study, and (d) conducive to the kind of free-flowing answers that the researcher hopes to receive in the interview rather than to flat, factual answers (if you need background information on the respondent, it can be obtained later in the interview). Questions that stress the respondent's feelings about or definition of a situation can be especially useful opening questions.

6. In contrast to survey research, questions should often be subject to multiple interpretations. Remember that the objective is to learn how respondents see the situation and what they feel is relevant.

7. Comments, as well as questions, can be used to evoke a response. A remark like, That is not the way it is usually done, for example, can lead to revelations about how respondents believe things do work.

8. Always maintain eye contact when possible (unless interviewees seem uncomfortable with this), and make it clear that you are listening intently and sympathetically. Phrases like, I see, or, Of course, or simply a thoughtful Yes can serve to encourage respondents and keep them talking. Remember that one of the chief rewards respondents get from granting in-depth interviews is the chance to "teach" someone who is knowledgeable about and genuinely interested in a subject of great importance to them. It can be important to let them realize that they are, in fact, helping and informing you.

9. It is generally best to appear to accept whatever comments respondents make. Do not appear to reject their opinions or challenge their statements of fact.

10. An exception to rule 9 occurs when respondents are reluctant to reveal information you feel sure they have. In that situation, it may be necessary to employ what is often referred to as the Nadel technique. Here you play...
The role of critic or antagonist, questioning and challenging respondents' remarks in hopes of forcing them to reveal information in order to defend their views or prove a point.

11. Respondents who are reluctant to divulge information because they fear the way it may be used can sometimes be reassured by a reminder that the information will be kept confidential or that the researcher is really not in any position to affect the situation in any way.

12. Note-taking can be used as a tool to improve interviews. In eliciting interviewing, in contrast to survey interviewing, in which note taking should be kept inconspicuous, respondents can often be encouraged to give more information or stay on a given subject by the way an interviewer takes notes. Intense recording can serve as a cue that you find comments useful, and putting the pencil down altogether can signal that the respondent has ventured off the central topic. Because you have to take such extensive notes that it is probably impossible to be inconspicuous, you may as well use note-taking for all it is worth.

13. Always be sensitive to the interviewer's personality and personal style, and adapt your tactics to it. Some people are highly formal and others very casual. Some deal in ideas almost exclusively, and others tend to personalize everything. Some people are accustomed to interacting mainly with superiors, and others mainly with subordinates. You may be able to get more information by adopting one of these roles. Never enter an interview with a fixed idea of the style you will use, but decide what is necessary as you talk with the respondent.

14. Always review your interview notes as soon as possible after the interview to elaborate at points where you could get only an outline and to make comments about your interpretation of the interview. This may mean sitting in a cold parking lot or buying an unwanted cup of coffee in order to have a place to write, but it is important to trust to memory as little as possible.

15. Type up handwritten notes as soon as possible. Make several copies and store them in separate places to assure against loss.

Tape recorders are controversial tools in interviewing. Obviously they can help you avoid mistakes about what is actually said, and they can capture subtle facts about the way in which things are said. They can also help interviewers learn how they sound to respondents. This is useful because the way in which a question is asked can be important to consider in interpreting a response. A drawback is that respondents are often inhibited by a tape recorder, because it denies them the chance of claiming that they have not made some remark if it later proves embarrassing. Sometimes they fear that technicians can edit the tape to make it appear as if they had said things they have not. Moreover, the mechanics of working the recorder can distract from the interview.

Researchers must decide about the use of recorders on the basis of the type of question they are investigating, the nature of the interviews they expect, and the character of the respondents. If the subject matter is highly sensitive or respondents are likely to be inhibited by recorders, the costs of using them probably outweigh the benefits.
the advantages. If lengthy, detailed, and technical interviews are necessary and specific facts are crucial to the study, recorders may be necessary. If a recorder is used, the researcher should ask permission to use it and should place the device in full view of the respondent. Protest the recorder to ensure that it is suitable for the kind of interview anticipated (sufficiently sensitive, simple to operate, able to play long enough tapes). Never depend exclusively on a recorder. It can malfunction and cause the loss of an irreplaceable interview. Always take written notes as well.2

A final issue in elite interviewing is confidentiality. This can be more important with elite interviews than with surveys, because elites are often asked for information that, if revealed or misused, may have considerable public impact. If confidentiality is promised and it generally must be, researchers should make every reasonable effort to safeguard information. This is often easier than in survey research, because large numbers of personnel are not generally required in elite studies, but interviewers can buy a little insurance by storing records in secure places and keeping the purpose of the study from becoming general knowledge, if possible. The most common threat to confidentiality occurs when a typist is used to record handwritten notes or taped interviews. If researchers absolutely cannot do this work themselves, they should both employ only dependable people to do it and conceal from the typist the identity of respondents when possible. Never make interview records available to people not involved in the project.

SPECIALIZED INTERVIEWING

In some studies, political scientists do not want to obtain information from specific individuals, as in the case of elite interviewing, or from respondents who are representative of the general population, as in surveys, but need information from persons who are representative or typical of some particular group within the population. This often calls for specialized interviewing.

A specialized interview is any interview in which the characteristics of respondents demand procedures different from those employed in standardized survey interviewing. Interviews with children, inebriate adults, prison inmates, slum residents, non-English-speaking migrant workers, mental patients, and members of a religious cult are all examples.

Such interviews differ from survey interviewing in several features. One is that researchers cannot assume that they and their respondents share a common vocabulary. Words that researchers use frequently may not be understood by respondents. Similarly, respondents may use terms or slang with which the researcher is not familiar or may use conventional words in special ways the researcher does not understand. A second distinctive feature of specialized interviews is that interviewers often cannot assume that respondents can read or have the ability to reason or follow a line of argument that would be expected of an average person in the culture. In ad-

dition, specialized interview situations often involve distinctive relationships between respondents and interviewers. Whereas ordinary respondents regard interviewers largely as equals who can be trusted to a degree and treated cordially, specialized subjects may view interviewers as authority figures or may be hostile and suspicious. In these circumstances, communication can be difficult and the validity of responses can suffer.

All of these features of specialized interviews combine to create settings in which researchers cannot take communication for granted. Rather, interviewers have to carefully establish a basis for communication and then check to be sure that communication is occurring.

Consider this example. If we want to know the degree to which children consider the U.S. political system legitimate, we first need to define the concept of legitimacy and be sure that our young respondents know what we mean when we speak of the political system. Once we have verified their grasp of these concepts and have asked our central question, we need to ask additional questions to determine whether the children's answers mean to them what we expect the same answers to mean if they come from typical adults. One way to do this is to give our respondents examples of children acting in ways that suggest they accord either a high or a low level of legitimacy to some institution, then to ask our respondents to interpret the actions described as showing either high or low legitimation, and then to tell us whether or not they would be likely to take these same actions. If children frequently misinterpret the fictitious actions or say they would take actions that are inconsistent with the level of legitimacy they have told us they accord the political system, we will not feel safe in assuming that they understand their answers in the same way we do.

Interviews can be an enormously rich source of data for social scientists, but they require the development of almost artistic skills to be effectively used. No amount of reading about interviews can substitute for experience with them.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**


One of the best ways to understand the nature and potential of elite and specialized interviewing is to read the kind of studies that are based on it. The works collected in Richard G. Niemi and Associates, *The Politics of Future Citizens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), sug-
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geat what can be done with interviews of children. Examples of other forms of specialized interviewing are found in: E. Ransoors, "Sociological Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); and Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).


RESEARCH EXERCISES

1. State a research question that can be answered through elite interviewing. List the types of information you would need in order to answer the question, and identify either by name or by official position (for example, all federal district court judges in the eleven Southern states of the Confederacy), the people you would expect to interview in gathering that information. Tell what steps you would take to ensure the validity of your conclusions. How would you check the accuracy of what respondents tell you?

2. (Do not undertake this exercise without permission from your instructor.)

   a. State a research question dealing with the local government or your community or with decision making in your university that can be studied through elite interviewing. List the types of information you will be seeking and the specific persons you will have to interview.

   b. After the problem has been approved by your instructor, arrange and conduct interviews with some of the persons you need to interview. (Remember: You need to tell these people that this is part of a class assignment, so do not set your sights too high. You may well be unable to see the mayor of a large city or the president of a large university. Also, to avoid embarrassing yourself and creating a poor opinion of your school, you should do enough background research to ask intelligent questions on the subject you have selected.) Type up the notes from the interviews along with all of your observations about the significance and interpretation of different remarks. Explain what you have learned about the subject from these interviews, state what else you need to know, and tell how you would proceed if you were going to carry the research further. Also indicate any steps you feel could be used to verify the information gained in the three interviews.

TERMS INTRODUCED IN THIS CHAPTER

- elite interviewing
- scheduled interviews
- unscheduled interviews
- specialized interviewing