# NEW INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES DESIGNED TO IMPROVE VALIDITY OF RESPONSE

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In one of the first serious attempts to analyze the interview, Bingham and Moore,[1] in 1931, characterized the interview as "the conversation with a purpose." Nowadays, with their prescribed sets of questions, probing procedures, and restrictions on interviewer expression of their own feelings and views, survey interviews are not very conversational. These standardized procedures and conventions, however, do help interviews to fulfill their primary purpose of providing reliable and valid information.

The nature of interviewing has changed since Bingham and Moore wrote their book. It has changed because methodological studies have indicated that respondents do not perform their role as well as we would like them to. Respondents do not work hard enough to recall information and formulate accurate answers, and they often are unwilling to endure even minimal amounts of embarrassment or discomfort that may be involved in reporting accurately. Moreover, they do not understand and accept the measurement purpose of the interview, nor do they understand how they can best go about fulfilling this purpose.

The novelty of the interview experience contributes to these problems. Lacking experience with research interviews, most respondents are likely to look to everyday conversation as the model to draw upon. Unfortunately, everyday conversation provides a poor model for research interviews. In conversation, people talk about what comes to mind easily and avoid what makes them uncomfortable. They usually do not feel called upon to exert much effort to recall thoroughly and accurately, nor to be completely candid. In contrast to conversation, interviews are likely to require more diligence and frankness if they are to yield accurate and complete reporting. Respondents who do not understand and accept this or who do not know how to apply themselves well to their reporting tasks are unlikely to do a good job of reporting. While information that is nonthreatening and easy to produce is likely to be reported, information that requires much effort to produce or which strains respondent willingness to report may well go unreported.

The new interviewing techniques described here represent a direct attack on these motivational deficiencies and lack of understanding about interviews. These techniques were developed in the course of a number of experimental studies of interviewing techniques carried out by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan under a grant from the National Center for Health Services Research. The techniques were designed to provide respondents with a more adequate understanding of the purpose of the interview and of how they can contribute to it, as well as to motivate them to put forth the requisite effort. The three techniques are called instructions, feedback, and commitment.

The instructions technique gives respondents two types of information about the interview. First, it describes the general purpose of the interview, which is to obtain accurate and complete information, and second, it suggests specific things respondents can do to help them provide this information.

A recent experimental study by Oksenberg, Vinokur, and Cannell[2] provides some examples. After introducing the topic of the interview, interviewers told respondents, "In order for your answers to be most helpful to us, it is important that you try to be as accurate as you can. Since we need complete and accurate information from this research, we hope you will think hard to provide the information we need." Interviewers also gave respondents the following specific advice: "Some people want to know what they can do to give accurate and complete information. We know that people do better when they think carefully about each question, search their memory, and take their time in answering. People also do better if they give exact answers, and give as much information as they can. This includes important things as well as things which may seem small or unimportant. Also, please tell me when a question is not clear, and I will read it again. Finally, for some questions you may want to take time out and look for the answer by checking whatever is available to you in the house, so we can be sure we get complete and accurate answers." Brief, pertinent instructions about how to go about answering particular questions also were attached to a number of individual questions throughout the questionnaire.

The second technique gives respondents feedback about how well they appear to be performing their reporting tasks. Feedback serves both to teach respondents further how to go about their reporting tasks by pointing out strengths and weaknesses in their performances, and to reward them when they appear to have done their job well. In contrast to instructions, which are the same for all respondents, the feedback respondents receive depends on the apparent quality of their reporting performance on particular questions. Interviewers are provided with objective criteria for judging reporting performance for each question, printed right in the questionnaire. Depending on performance quality as judged by these criteria, interviewers select the appropriate feedback statements, which also are printed in the questionnaire.

The experimental study mentioned earlier provides an example of how feedback works. For a question concerning recent bodily injuries, a brief instruction preceding it read, "Let me just say that it helps to think back carefully

over the time period we are talking about."
Following this was the question, "People often
get injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns,
and so on. Have you been injured in any way
within the last two weeks?" Any report of
an injury was taken as evidence that the respon-
dent had made an effort to do a good job of
reporting, and respondents making such a report
were told, "Uh-huh. We are interested in
getting details like this." This was followed
by a standard probe question, "Was there any-
thing else, even something small?"

In contrast to this sequence, respondents
who quickly replied that they had had no injuries
were judged not to have made enough effort
to recall possible injuries, and were told,
"You answered that quickly." This was followed
by the standard probe question, "Was there
anything at all, even something small?" Finally,
respondents who reported no injuries, but who
appeared to have devoted some thought to the
matter (interviewers were instructed to count
slowly to five to determine this), were asked
just the standard probe question, "Was there
anything at all, even something small?" By
means of feedback such as this, the expectations
for complete and accurate reporting were related
to respondent behavior in answering particular
questions. In addition, respondents were coached
on specific ways they might improve their report-
ing performance, and were rewarded when they
appeared to be making an effort to do a good
job. Thus, feedback served both to instruct
respondents further about their reporting tasks
and to motivate them.

The third technique has respondents overtly
commit themselves to do their best to provide
accurate and complete information. For example,
in the same experimental study interviewers
solicited respondent commitment with the follow-
ing appeal, made after the respondent had an-
swered several introductory questions:

"That's the last of this set of questions.
The rest of the questions are about health,
your daily life, and how you have been feeling
lately. It is important for us at the University
of Michigan to get an accurate picture of these
things in this area. We have selected a small
scientifically chosen sample of people to repre-
sent this area. We are asking these people
to give us extra cooperation and try hard to
answer accurately, so that we get accurate
information about health. You are one of the
people who we hope is willing to make this
effort.

"Here is an Agreement which explains what
we are asking you to do. As you can see, it
says, 'I understand that the information from
this interview must be very accurate in order
to be useful. This means that I must do my
best to give accurate and complete answers.
I agree to do this.' We are asking people
to sign this agreement so that we can be sure
they understand what we are asking them to
do. The agreement is for you to keep for your-
self. It is up to you to decide. If you are

willing to agree to do this, we'd like you
to sign your name here. Down below there is
a statement about confidentiality, and I will
sign my name here. Are you willing to make
the extra effort to continue the interview?"

As this example illustrates, the commitment
technique represents a direct attack on the
problem of respondent motivation. Respondents
who sign the agreement—in this study, 96 percent
of them did—in effect obligate themselves
to put forth some effort to meet the measurement
purpose of the interview.

Taken together, these three new techniques
form a coherent, integrated approach to inter-
viewing. Perhaps the best overall description
of these techniques is that they work together
to emphasize for respondents the information-
reporting purpose of the interview.

There are two important questions to be
asked about this way of interviewing. First,
does it improve respondent performance, and
second, how do respondents react to it?

To turn to the first question, do respon-
dents increase their reporting efforts, and
is the information they report in fact more
complete and accurate? In the experimental
studies, interviews incorporating the new tech-
niques were compared with two kinds of control
interviews. In one kind, interviewers were
restricted essentially to asking the questions
and specified probes. In the other kind, inter-
viewers were free to use any techniques they
themselves felt would improve respondent perfor-
mance. Respondent performance has been assessed
in several ways. The most general measure
has been the amount of information reported.
This measure is based on the assumption that
increased respondent effort should lead to
increased reporting completeness, which should
be reflected in the amount of information re-
spondents report. Other performance measures
have included the amount of detail and speci-
ficity of the answers, the level of reporting
of information particularly likely either to
be embarrassing to report or to be desirable
to report, and indicators of effort such as
consultation of records.

In the Oksenberg, Vinokur, and Cannell
study, using such measures of performance quality,
interviewers obtained better reporting perfor-
mances from their respondents when they used
the new techniques than in a control procedure
in which they were limited essentially to asking
the questions and specified probes. Respondents
interviewed with the new techniques reported
20 percent more information to open questions
about health, 17 percent more doctor visits,
and 35 percent more presumably embarrassing
information about symptoms and conditions in
the pelvic region of the body, and made 204
percent more attempts to improve their reporting
by consulting their own records or other infor-
mation sources. When asked to report when
certain health events occurred, they were consid-
erably more likely to specify particular dates

instead of less exact indicators of time.

In a study of reporting of exposure to various communication media,[3] the new interviewing techniques again yielded superior reporting performance. The comparison here was with a control procedure in which interviewers were free to use any techniques they felt would help to obtain complete and accurate reporting. As in the Oksenberg, Vinokur, and Cannell study, respondents reported more information when the new techniques were used. In particular, they reported more time spent in contact with various media and more details about the content.

Of particular interest was the effect of the new techniques on reports of having read the newspaper editorial page the previous day and reports of the number of books read in the last three months. Although most media exposure was expected to be underreported, these two instances were expected to be over-reported because of their prestige value for respondents. In both instances, use of the new interviewing techniques led to fewer claims of these activities. It appears that the new techniques not only can increase reporting of less easy to recall or embarrassing information, but also can discourage exaggerated reporting of particularly desirable information.

The evidence is that these techniques do improve reporting. The second question about the techniques is, "How do respondents react to them?" One might fear that respondents would react negatively to being interviewed in this manner. Since the techniques are incorporated in the questionnaire itself, the questionnaire essentially becomes a script for the interviewer's part in the interview, in which every word she utters is directed toward the task at hand. Do respondents see an interviewer using these techniques as a taskmaster, imposing excessive--or at least tiresome--demands upon them? Perhaps interviews cannot diverge so far from the conversational model without risking respondent displeasure. Perhaps interviewers need to be free to jolly respondents along with "rapport-building" techniques.

Respondents, however, have reacted quite favorably to the new techniques. In the Oksenberg, Vinokur, and Cannell study, about half the respondents reported having been "very interested" in the interview. Most of the remainder reported having been "somewhat interested," with very few reporting having been "not very interested."

In another study,[4] respondents were asked to describe how the interviewer behaved during the interview by selecting appropriate descriptors from a list including both positive and negative items. Except for one respondent who checked one negative item, respondents described their interviewers exclusively in favorable terms. All of the positive items were checked by a majority of the respondents. In order of decreasing popularity--ranging from selection by 94 percent of the respondents down to 68 percent

--these items were "did her job well," "was pleasant," "was polite," "listened carefully," "gave me enough time," "was warm and friendly," "helped me to understand the question," "was considerate of my feelings," and "didn't waste time." In addition, 59 percent of the respondents said the interviewer "was businesslike." Interviewers appeared to have established an interview atmosphere that was at once pleasant, gracious, and businesslike. This was accomplished with interviewers who treated the questionnaire incorporating the new techniques essentially as a script, without embellishing it with additional comments or conversation.

I'd like to turn now to what using the techniques entails for the researcher and for the interviewer. In some ways these techniques simplify the interviewers' job. Since the questionnaire provides a complete script for their part in the interview, they no longer are responsible for devising their own ways of insuring that the information they obtain meets the study objectives. Interviewers, of course, must solicit respondent commitment, deliver the instructions, evaluate respondent performance according to the objective criteria provided to them, and deliver the appropriate feedback statements. These activities, however, are not burdensome. With practice the techniques become easy to use, and interviewers say they are happy to be relieved of the responsibility for "ad-libbing" to achieve response objectives.

Certain skills, however, must be developed. First, interviewers must be able to apply the performance criteria quickly and reliably in order to select the appropriate feedback. In the experimental studies, training interviewers to do so has presented no difficulty. Second, interviewers must improve their speaking performance. Since the questionnaire is the script for their part in the interview, they need to practice to the point where they appear spontaneous and natural. Not only must they play their part in a natural and convincing manner, but they must speak slowly and clearly to ensure that the respondent understands what they say, and they must maintain a slow pace consistent with the seriousness of the task. For the experimental studies a major portion of interviewer training was devoted to supervised practice in which pairs of interviewers played the roles of interviewer and respondent, with a member of the research staff providing immediate feedback on the interviewer's performance. Interviewers also listened to tape recordings of actual field interviews, accompanied by simultaneous evaluations of the interviewer's behavior by the research staff. In addition, interviewers evaluated their own tape-recorded interviewing performances on a question-by-question basis according to a number of criteria. These proved to be effective means of developing the speaking and judgmental skills important for effective use of the new techniques.

To turn now to the researcher, these techniques clearly require more researcher involvement in the interview process than is

usual. At present, researcher involvement
is likely to be limited to providing a field
staff with a set of questions, perhaps accom-
panied by descriptions of question objectives
for interviewers to consult. The field staff
assumes responsibility for interviewing with
these questions in a manner that obtains good
data.

The new techniques, however, require the
researcher to specify in detail how the inter-
view is to proceed. The researcher can no
longer merely provide the interviewer with key
lines, but through inclusion of instructions,
feedback, and commitment procedures, must provide
a complete script for the interviewer to follow.
To do this well, moreover, the researcher will
need to undertake thorough pretesting of the
questionnaire. Such pretesting is essential
for evaluating the appropriateness of the per-
formance criteria included in the questionnaire
as well as the appropriateness of the instruc-
tions and feedback themselves.

Using the new techniques also means that
researchers may need to formulate more precise
question objectives than they do at present.
Often missing from question objectives at present
is specification of what respondents are to
base their answers upon. For example, take
the question, "In the past 12 months, how many
times did you see or talk to a medical doctor?"
Left ambiguous here is whether the respondent
should try to recall and tally each contact
with a doctor, or whether an estimate of the
total number of times is better. The researcher
must decide which of these will best serve
his research objectives in order to write appro-
priate instructions and feedback for the ques-
tion. If the respondent is to recall and tally
doctor contacts, instructions preceding the
question might read, "On this question we'd
like to get an exact number--not just an estimate
--so you will need to think carefully." In
contrast, instructions to estimate might read,
"The next question asks for your estimate of
the number of times you contacted a doctor
in the past year. You don't need to think
of every time--just your best estimate."

The need to formulate more precise question
objectives occurs for attitudinal questions
as well as factual questions. For example,
a question to measure job satisfaction might
read, "In general, how satisfied are you with
your current job--would you say very satisfied,
somewhat satisfied, or not at all satisfied?"
The issue again is on what does the researcher
want respondents to base their answers. If
a quick reaction to the question is wanted,
an instruction might read, "For this next ques-
tion, we'd just like a quick, overall impres-
sion." If more thoughtful consideration is
wanted, an instruction might read, "The next
question is about how satisfied you are with
your job. To answer this question please take
your time and think carefully about all the
things that may affect how you feel about your
job." As with factual questions, instructions
and feedback for the question will depend on
what kinds of answers will best meet the research

objectives.

To sum up, the new techniques do not burden
interviewers or respondents. However, they
do require more work from researchers and a
different type of interviewer training. By
specifying and controlling more interviewer
behavior, these techniques come closer to meeting
the standardization requirements of good measure-
ment. We think these techniques present effec-
tive means for substantially improving the
quality of survey data.

### FOOTNOTES

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