INTERACTION IN THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW: THE EFFECTS OF RAPPORT ON RESPONSE

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For over forty years, researchers have realized that the interview is a somewhat leaky receptacle to take questions out into the field and bring answers back. They have found that much can go awry during the interviewing. Accordingly, a good deal of effort has been devoted to studying who and what cause errors in reporting.

We can identify three main traditions in this research. The first tradition looks at the people involved: the interviewers and the respondents. It has studied their demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, etc.), knowledge, attitudes, and personality characteristics, in an attempt to locate the culprits on both ends of the interview tandem.

The second tradition of research on interviewing recognizes that the interview is an interaction. Each individual is only one party in a two-party set. The emphasis, therefore, has been on the match between interviewer and respondent-- on much the same kinds of characteristics that the first school has examined. Much of this research has focused on similarity and dissimilarity between interviewer and respondent on race, but there have been studies, too, of the effects of matching and non-matching in age, sex, social class, and religion.

The third major trend in interview research developed from the realization that, whatever the objective characteristics of the parties to the interview, the interviewer may be able to alter the respondent's perception of the situation by his behavior. He can provide cues that mediate the definition of the interview and establish the role that the respondent is to perform.

This line of investigation--looking at what actually goes on in the interview--appears particularly promising for a number of reasons. One is that studies of interviewer and respondent keep coming up with contradictory results. (This is partly because all other things are almost never equal. Aside from interviewer behavior, other important factors affect response, such as the topic of the interview and the degree of threat that the questions present.) But further, the study of the dynamics of interaction offers the promise of insight into behaviors that can be manipulated by the study director. If styles of interaction have an effect, then once he can define optimal interviewer behaviors, the study director can train interviewers to act in appropriate ways. Thus he increases his control over features of the interview that affect completeness and accuracy of response. There are indications that some status differences are so large-- e.g. between high status whites and low status blacks--that nothing that goes on in the interview

can affect the outcome, but there is a large intermediate range where interviewer behavior probably has important effects on the accuracy of response.

Few studies so far have looked directly at interviewer and respondent behaviors in the interview. Most of the research that has been done along these lines to date has been inferential. Thus, Ehrlich and Riesman (1961) found that young women interviewers received more "socially unacceptable" answers from 16-18 year old girls on parental norms and independence than did middle-aged or older women interviewers; but when middle-aged women were empathetic (as judged by personality test scores), they could bridge the age and authority gap and get more socially unacceptable answers, too. Williams (1968) and Dohrenwend, Colombotos, and Dohrenwend (1968), and Weiss (1968-69) have all found signs that the interviewer who takes a personal approach to respondents, or is friendly, or has good rapport, gets different responses from respondents than other interviewers. All of these studies, however, judged the interviewers' behavior at second hand--from personality inventories, interviewers' answers to questionnaires, or interviewer ratings of their rapport with the respondent.

You will notice that the word "rapport" has surfaced. Because there has been so little study of what interviewers and respondents say and do during the interview, the discussion of interaction in the research literature has tended to focus on the concept of rapport, and it is rapport that I intend to talk about in the rest of this paper.

First, let me get some assumptions out of the way. For standard survey interviews on routine topics with middle-class respondents, there probably is little difficulty in getting candid answers. Under two conditions, style of interaction is significant--and rapport has been assumed to be necessary:

> first, on questions that pose some degree of threat, either because they involve attitudes or behaviors that violate social norms (abortions, participation in riots, drug use), or because they threaten the respondent's self-image (not contributing to charity, making loans from finance companies.

> second, with special kinds of respondents-- blacks, low socio-economic groups, political elites, addicts, etc.

Another set of assumptions is that there are types of information that some respondents will

not reveal under any conditions to any interviewer; the reasons vary from lack of knowledge or lapse of memory to suppression and repression. And of course, the conceptualization of questions, their wording, and structure will affect the accuracy of reporting. Let us assume that all these things are true.

Now back to rapport. Much of the discussion in the research literature takes for granted that rapport is good. It motivates the respondent to talk. It makes anything he says acceptable. According to this prevalent view, it encourages completeness and accuracy, and for good measure, it rewards him for the effort of reporting.

The term "rapport," so far as I can tell, was imported into survey research from psychotherapy. There its main function is to overcome the patient's resistance to revealing himself, and to encourage him to pour out even undesirable and painful information in its accepting and supportive atmosphere. There is recognition in therapy of the dangers of over-rapport, but this is a matter of patient transference or of therapist over-involvement which gets in the way of the therapeutic task.

In survey interviews, over-rapport has been recognized as a risk, too. Hyman (1954) warned about the hen-party, the over-social relationship between interviewer and respondent that would lead the respondent to maintain the norms of polite social discourse and avoid unpleasantness, and might even influence the respondent to tailor responses to fit the perceived opinions or expectations of the interviewer.

Let us turn briefly to a few recent studies that have investigated the effects of rapport on response accuracy. The authors of these studies did not all use the term rapport; at least two purposely avoided it. But they all dealt with factors that others have construed as indicating rapport. An interesting fact that will emerge is that the results of these studies have been contradictory.

Williams, analyzing data from a 1960 study of Negroes' social and political attitudes in North Carolina, found that his first measure of rapport did not affect response. The measure was based on interviewers' scores on a personality test of "personal relations" and presumably tapped a dimension akin to friendliness. When he added another score--this one on "objectivity," there was a response effect, at least for Negro interviewers and low status Negro respondents. High friendliness/low objectivity can be interpreted as personal rapport. Negro interviewers who scored high on personal relations and low on objectivity (which meant to Williams that the interviewer was friendly and let his own opinions show) were more likely to receive liberal responses from low status Negro respondents--responses which were less "safe" in North Carolina

and presumably more honest. The same relationship did not hold for white interviewers.

Dohrenwend, Colombotos, and Dohrenwend analyzed responses given to white interviewers by black and white respondents in a 1960-61 community health survey. The questions involved reports of neuropsychiatric symptoms. The measure of rapport was based on interviewers' reports of embarrassment in asking personal questions; embarrassment indicated that the interviewer had established a personal rather than a professional relationship with the respondent. The data showed that these "personal-relationship" interviewers received more (and presumably truer) symptom reports from low-income and high-income white respondents, but fewer from middle-income whites, who were seen as most similar to the interviewers. There were no differences in the answers of Negro respondents.

Hill and Hall (1963) studied upper-middle and upper class whites in an adult education program. The measure of rapport was the interviewer's ratings on a 3-item index asking about the frequency with which the respondent or the interviewer felt ill at ease during the interview and the enjoyability of the interview. Validity was measured by agreement of interview responses with those given on a questionnaire. Results showed that high rapport was associated with a high rate of question response but also with low validity.

My study of black welfare mothers in New York City, who were interviewed in 1966 by black interviewers, used the interviewers' ratings of rapport for each interview. Interviewers rated respondents on a 5-point scale from "confiding" to "hostile." Answers on factual items were checked against official records of registration, voting, welfare, and children's school performance. The higher the rapport, the less valid were the answers. Similarly, on attitudinal items, higher rapport was associated with more "socially acceptable" responses.

Cannell and his associates have published two studies on actual interview behaviors (1967, 1968). In the first, they sent observers along to record events; in the second they analyzed tape recordings. These were health interviews, where the respondent was asked about illnesses and health conditions. In the second of the studies they trained interviewers to reinforce each answer that reported a symptom, condition, or illness by saying things like "Yes, that's the kind of information we need," or "We're interested in that." This reinforcement technique increased reporting an average of 25%, which on a topic noted for underreporting no doubt improved its accuracy. Respondents who scored high on a scale measuring need for social approval showed an interesting reaction. They evidently found themselves in a conflict between reporting more conditions as a response to the interviewer's approval and reporting embarrassing conditions that might decrease approval.

They resolved the conflict by reporting more illnesses for family members for whom they were reporting by proxy and slightly fewer for themselves. In that way they satisfied the interviewer with greater amounts of information, while displacing the embarrassment on to the proxy relative.

From this brief review, at least two important things begin to emerge. The first is, as promised, that with the best will in the world it is difficult to reconcile the findings. Within the same-race interviewer-respondent pairs, Williams finds that rapport reduces bias. Dohrenwend, Colombotos, and Dohrenwend find that it has a curvilinear effect, reducing bias for higher and lower status groups but increasing bias for the middle status group most similar to the interviewers. Weiss, and Hill and Hall find that rapport increases bias. Cannell finds that interviewer "approval" improves reporting, but for some respondents biases the shape of the answers.

A second conclusion may be even more important. Not only are the measures of rapport so different that they make the whole concept ambiguous; in at least one case, they are directly in conflict. Dohrenwend, Colombotos, and Dohrenwend use the interviewer's embarrassment in asking certain questions as an indication of the kind of personal relationship that many people consider rapport. Hill and Hall, on the other hand, use low interviewer and respondent embarrassment to indicate rapport. When a concept is as muddy as this, it obviously needs drastic overhaul.

I recently went through the research literature on rapport and found a wide variety of definitions and operational measures. Some of the measures of rapport that have been used are:

rate (high) of eye contact between interviewer and respondent

frequency (high) of interviewer smiles, nods, gestures

frequency (high) of non-task conversation (i.e. irrelevant to interview questions and answers)

frequency (low) of "no answers" to questions

frequency (high) of interviewer reinforcement of responses (e.g. "I see," "Mm-hmm")

degree (low) of interviewer embarrassment in asking sensitive questions

degree (high) of interviewer embarrassment in asking sensitive questions

interviewer ratings of liking for the respondent

respondent ratings of liking for the interviewer

amount (high) of respondent verbal output

respondent rating of pleasurability of the interview

respondent willingness to be reinterviewed

interviewer ratings of degree of rapport

respondent ratings of degree of rapport

interviewer scores on personality tests of ascendance, objectivity, personal relations, etc.

Since there is so little agreement, I would suggest that we abandon the concept of rapport at this point and concentrate on the specific attitudes and behaviors of which—in some formulation or other—it is constituted. To advance the state of research on interaction in the interview, researchers might be well advised to examine friendliness, liking, verbal reinforcement of responses, smiles, nods, irrelevant conversation, and whatever else goes on in the interview. Let us see what effect each of these kinds of behavior has on the completeness and accuracy of response. In that way, we can learn how to improve the conduct of interviews.

Let me throw in one other study that has some relevance to this point. Rosenthal, Fode, Friedman, and Vikan (1960) conducted an experiment in which experimenters were purposely induced, through instructions and higher pay, to bias their subjects to give more favorable responses on a picture rating assignment. After the experiment, the subjects—who were summer school students—rated their experimenters. The experimenters who were most successful in biasing their subjects' answers were rated significantly higher on these characteristics: more likable, personal, interested, slower speaking, and more given to the use of hand, head, and leg gestures and movements.

I am tempted to go out on a limb and speculate that rapport has been overvalued. To the extent that it encompasses friendliness, pleasantness, a personal approach, and kindred elements, it may be as much of a danger to validity as a help. There are indications that it is inexperienced interviewers who place the greatest weight on rapport and spend the most time trying to build a pleasant relationship. This may be due in part to their fear that an unhappy respondent will break off the interview, but perhaps more to their sense of apology for imposing on people and their desire for a comfortable conversation. With experience, they apparently can concentrate more effectively on the business of the interview.

Rapport seems to be necessary for one function: to motivate respondents to work hard at the business of supplying complete and accurate information. This, of course, is a crucial function. By and large the interview is not a salient experience for the respondent, and he has little incentive to expend the energy

necessary to understand, remember, and report fully. Studies have identified underreporting as the major problem in such fields as consumer expenditures, savings, health conditions, etc. If a friendly interviewer can coax better information-giving from the respondent, this is all to the good.

But we are becoming aware that such a benefit has its costs. On topics with a component of social desirability (e.g. voting, level of job responsibility, drinking, child rearing), biased reporting often presents more problems than underreporting. If rapport increases the peril of bias, we will have to learn to be more selective in our use of "rapport" and its component behaviors. We will have to gear the level of rapport to the topic under inquiry and the type of respondent group surveyed.

Perhaps interviewers who listen attentively and show that they understand and value the answers they receive are building as much rapport as they need. The important factor for securing valid answers is the respondents' understanding of his role as information-giver. Good professional performance by the interviewer, rather than personal comraderie, may do the job. Abetted by good question construction, the professional interviewer may be able to convey both the nature of the respondent role and its importance without getting caught up in other games (e.g. ingratiation, ego enhancement) that respondents play. The respondent may be able to get his rewards less from the interviewer as a person and more from the opportunity to talk and be listened to and understood. Sometimes he may enjoy the intellectual interest of the interview, and even on occasion (although this is apparently rare) derive satisfaction from the social value of the contribution he is making.

In the past, rapport has also served the unacknowledged function of rewarding the interviewer, who goes into the job because she likes people and enjoys pleasant relationships. Where rapport incurs the cost of biased response, we may be better advised to reward interviewers in other ways, e.g. by better pay or by greater involvement in the intellectual aspects of the research.

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