

RELATION OF RESPONDENT SOCIAL STATUS TO INTERVIEWER BEHAVIOR

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Let me start by asking a naive question: How can we standardize interviews with respondents who differ markedly in background or social status? How, for example, can we interview poorly educated lower class respondents and well educated middle class respondents so as to be sure that their answers on a given topic are comparable? The well established answer to this problem is that we write and pretest an interview schedule so that respondents at lower as well as higher levels of education will understand the questions, and then train interviewers to adhere to this interview schedule.

The general problem I would like to discuss is how this procedure actually works in practice. While this general problem translates into a number of empirical questions concerning how interviewers behave and how respondents perceive their behavior, I will deal with only one such question, to wit: How well does the traditional scheduled interview succeed in standardizing the behavior of interviewers regardless of respondent status?

As Cannell and Kahn [1] pointed out in their chapter on interviewing in the 1968 edition of The Handbook of Social Psychology, examination of verbatim transcripts of interviews reveals that interviewers routinely employ probes that are not part of the prepared schedule of questions (pp. 572-573). What I will report today are preliminary results of a study designed to determine whether these probes and other additional interviewer behavior vary as a function of the status of the respondent.

This study is based on a set of interviews that were conducted with approximately 200 residents of a section of New York City as part of a program of research in psychiatric epidemiology. The interviews were done by psychiatrists who had been specially trained in the use of the two interview schedules employed in the study. Both schedules covered psychological symptomatology, role functioning, recent stressful life events, and background information, and each contained about 125 questions. One schedule was more open-ended in style than the other, but the specific differences between them are not important for the present discussion, since the results relating to respondent status did not differ for the two schedules.

For the analysis that I will report respondents were divided into three levels of education and two types of ethnicity. The educational levels are less than eight years, eight to 11 years, and 12 or more years of schooling. The ethnic types are relatively advantaged groups, predominantly Jews and Irish, as against relatively disadvantaged groups, that is, Negroes and Puerto Ricans. The interviewers were all white and members of relatively advantaged ethnic groups.

Typed transcripts of the tape recorded interviews were coded to describe the number and types of interviewers' spontaneous probes and other spontaneous behavior, that is, all

behavior not dictated by the interview schedule. Measures derived from this coding are presented in Table 1.

Our hypotheses about how these measures will be influenced by respondent educational level are based primarily on a report by Strauss and Schatzman [3] of differences in the way interviewers questioned better educated and less educated respondents in a set of recorded non-scheduled interviews. Their results suggest three hypotheses: first, there will be more difficulty or confusion in communication with less educated respondents compared to better educated respondents; second, there will be more probing of answers given by less educated respondents; and, third, the probing of answers given by less educated respondents will include more closed and suggestive questions than the probing of answers given by better educated respondents.

The recent work of Marquis and Cannell [2] suggests similar hypotheses concerning the effects of respondent ethnicity on the questioning process. While in general their analysis of interviews conducted with a sample of employed white and Negro males did not reveal significant differences related to race of respondent, the authors suggested that certain trends were worth further attention. Specifically, they pointed to trends indicating more difficulty in communication and more extended probing by their white interviewers with Negro respondents than with white respondents. We will, therefore, look for these effects in our interviews.

The analysis, utilizing multivariate analysis of variance, showed, first, that there was no significant effect of the interaction of respondent ethnicity and education, and that only one of the 17 variables in Table 1 differed as a function of ethnicity. This single significant difference related to ethnicity indicated that the interviewers repeated more questions with respondents of disadvantaged than with respondents of advantaged ethnicity. This may, however, be largely due to Puerto Rican respondents for whom the language of the interview, English, was often a second language. This possibility will have to be tested before any other interpretation is considered.

In contrast to ethnicity, the respondents' education affected seven of the variables described in Table 1. The means for these seven variables according to respondents' education are shown in Table 2. We note first that the major difference in every case is between respondents with less than eight years of education and all others. On two variables there is even a reversal between those with some high school and those who graduated from high school, with the latter more nearly resembling the group with less than eight years of schooling.

The second point about Table 2 concerns the nature of the variables that show significant effects due to respondent education. All four of the variables classified in Table 1 as indicators of difficulty in communication are

Table 1

Measures of Spontaneous Interviewer Behavior

1. Indicators of amount of probing
 - a. Number of spontaneous probes
 - b. Number of different topics included in spontaneous probes
2. Indicators of style of probing - present of spontaneous probes that are:
 - a. Open questions
 - b. Closed identification question, e.g. Who, Where, When
 - c. Closed fixed alternative questions
 - d. Closed questions calling for Yes or No as response
 - e. Informed suggestions - questions suggesting a particular answer in which the suggestion is based on information previously given by the respondent
 - f. Uninformed suggestions - questions suggesting a particular answer in which the suggestion is not based on information previously given by the respondent
 - g. Questions with informed premises, i.e. based on a premise that is supported by information previously given by the respondent
 - h. Questions with uninformed premises, i.e. based on a premise that is not supported by information previously given by the respondent
3. Indicators of difficulty in communication with respondent
 - a. Number of times that a question previously asked is repeated with no change in meaning
 - b. Number of times that response is repeated in part or in whole exactly or nearly exactly in the respondent's words
 - c. Number of volunteered statements explaining a question or procedure
 - d. Number of statements in answer to respondents' comments or queries about questions or procedure
4. Expressions of positive affect or understanding
 - a. Number of instances of contentless positive feedback, e.g. "Um hmm"
 - b. Number of polite or sociable remarks
5. Indicator of disruptions from outside the interview
 - a. Number of statements or questions about events external to the verbal interaction between interviewer and respondent, e.g. statements about the tape recorder or a third person

Table 2

Mean Frequencies per Interview of Activities that Varied Significantly with Respondent's Education

Interviewer activity	Respondent's education		
	Less than 8 years	8 - 11 years	12 or more years
Spontaneous questions**	75.04	53.51	47.83
Repetition of question**	25.22	13.07	10.49
Repetition of response**	8.07	4.89	3.98
Response to query about interview procedure**	13.48	6.51	7.58
Volunteered statement about interview procedure **	10.89	6.24	6.02
Contentless positive feedback ⁺	17.00	7.14	8.30
Sociable remark*	2.07	1.20	0.99
(Number of Respondents)	(27)	(55)	(125)

⁺p(univariate F) = .055

*p(univariate F) < .05

**p(univariate F) < .01

significant, thus strongly confirming the prediction of greater difficulty in communication with less educated respondents. Consistent with this apparent difficulty is the finding that the number of spontaneous probes was greater with less educated respondents, while the number of topics probed did not differ with respondents education. That is, while Table 2 shows that the interviewers, on the average, asked half again as many spontaneous probes of poorly educated respondents as they did of better educated respondents, there was little variation in the mean number of topics probed. Specifically, this mean was 21 for the lowest educational group, 18 for the middle group and 17 for the highest group. The implication is that more questions were needed to get the same amount of information from less educated respondents.

While the level of polite and sociable remarks made during the tape recorded interviews was low, it was highest with the least educated respondents. Furthermore, the number of instances of contentless positive feedback, our second indicator of expression of positive affect or understanding, yielded a difference of borderline significance, just slightly greater than five percent, which is consistent with the result for sociable comments. Thus, encouraging and reinforcing behavior occurred most often with the type of respondent with whom the interviewers experienced greatest difficulty in communication, an understandable but perhaps unfortunate pattern of behavior. It may be unfortunate since it calls to mind the finding of Marquis and Cannell [2] that their interviewers tended to reinforce many behaviors other than adequate answers (p. 30), that is behaviors that should not have been reinforced. We wonder whether further analysis will reveal this tendency among our interviewers as well, and perhaps even reveal that it is particularly strong in interviews with poorly educated respondents.

Strikingly absent from Table 2 are any of the variables indicating differences in style of probing. Thus, the prediction of more directive probing with less educated respondents is not

supported in these interviews in which the interviewer's behavior is constrained to some extent by a prepared schedule of questions.

In general, then, our results indicate greater difficulty in communication with the least educated respondents together with more probing of the answers of these respondents. Whether this extra probing is a good or a bad thing for the standardization of interview responses remains to be determined. That is, it is possible that these probes serve to equalize across educational groups the respondents' level of understanding of the scheduled questions, or it is possible that they introduce systematic bias into the answers of the least educated group. Further analysis will be designed to answer this and other questions raised by our findings to date.

References

- [1] Cannell, C.F. and Kahn, R.L., "Interviewing" in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (Eds.), The Handbook of Social Psychology, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968, 526-595.
- [2] Marquis, K. H. and Cannell, C.F., A Study of Interviewer Respondent Interaction in the Urban Employment Interview, Survey Research Center, The University of Michigan, 1969.
- [3] Strauss, A. and Schatzman, "Cross-class interviewing: An analysis of interaction and communicative styles," in R.N. Adams and J.J. Preiss (Eds.) Human Organization Research: Field Relations and Techniques, Dorsey Press, 1960, 205-213.

Footnote

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