

# Hanging by a Thread: the Telephone Interviewers Tell (Their) Story

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## **Abstract**

From behaviourism to cognitivism and to constructivism the role attributed to the interviewer changes but remains central. Specific methodological studies have shown that during the interview it is rare to find the strict application of the behaviouristic dictates which, still today, impose a passive role on the interviewer; often, the interviewers act in a non-programmed manner and reformulate the questions, adapting them to the needs of the interviewees.

In order to get more insight on interviewer's typical interventions (distinguish between opportune and inopportune), and on interviewers' performance, we asked 26 telephone interviewers to relate their experiences; to say what they think about the structured questionnaire; and to express their opinion of surveys. In the first phase of the research we listened (with semi-structured interview) to 20 interviewers. The situation they described highlights a series of problems which should encourage serious reflection among researchers. The second phase (6 focused interviews) concentrates on best practice: the telephonic interviews on sensitive themes entrusted by the National Institute of Statistics to some opinion-research companies.

Analyzing the focused interviews we have highlight problematic deviations and non deviations. Furthermore, we focused on the role of telephone as a medium of interview; on the effect of selection and training procedures; and on the consequences of the interest of the interviewer in the research theme.

**Key Words:** Interviewing; interviewers; survey research – telephone.

## **1. Introduction**

The centrality of the figure of the interviewer is widely recognised in all the noted research traditions and approaches. All agree – those fearing this figure's presence and possible effects as well as those who laud its merits – on his importance, from the moment in which he presents himself to the prospective interviewee to ask for his collaboration, in helping the interviewee to carry out their task in the most useful way for the ends of the research.

This topic is inextricably linked to the problem of the standardization of the interview (Conrad and Schober 2000). If we think of a continuum of ideas, at the pole of maximum standardization is the notion of the interviewer as a mere instrument; at the other is the interviewer as a resource, a constituent part of the interview situation, a protagonist – for good or ill – of the process of data construction.

Obviously, to think of the interviewer as a neutral research instrument is typical of the behaviorist approach; while their active role is claimed principally by the constructivists (on this issue see Suchman and Jordan 1990). But even a researcher with vast experience, and a declared preference for the structured interview, affirms that “good and motivated interviewers have always obtained data of a better quality based on the norms of interpersonal communication and conversation” (Dillman 2002, 498). In reality the debate is still open on the suitability of restricting the interviewer's liberty to intervene, forgetting that he's not a machine: inevitably even the voice, the intonation, and the interviewer's manner can influence the interviewee. To many it seems more apt and helpful to recognize this than to remove the fact.

Some scholars are concerned to remember that, unlike the researcher, the interviewer actually faces the interviewees and all the potential problems that they pose. Milaski observes that “the interviewer is the researcher's representative on the front line – the one responsible for our (the researcher's) image with that section of the public which interests us most – the interviewee” (Milaski 1987, 438). It is the only contact with that part of the work which remains opaque to the researcher and that most researchers prefer to ignore so as not to lose faith in the following results (Milaski 1987, 439).

In the literature generally there is a schizophrenic attitude among those who on the one hand dream of an aseptic and impersonal situation, as close as possible to that of the laboratories in which experiments are carried out; but on the other hand they seem conscious that most of the time they wouldn't obtain answers without the intervention, the mediation, and indeed the process of negotiation between interviewee and interviewer. Fowler and Mangione, strenuous supporters of a rigid standardization of the interview and so of the behaviour of the interviewer, admit that when the first reading of the question doesn't produce an adequate response (that is classifiable using the list of given options) the interviewer “has to take some initiative to obtain the desired result. The behaviour of the interviewer can't be entirely planned, because the problems to resolve change from situation to situation... The objective is to have interviewers capable of resolving the problem”, without introducing unwanted semantic variations, and without influencing the interviewees (Fowler and Mangione 1990, 35).

Obviously, in the telephone interview the role of the interviewer is configured in terms that are different, but no less significant for that, especially in motivating the interviewee. In any case, lacking all the precious resources of non-verbal communication, even the most able interviewer has difficulty in maintaining control of the situation and capturing in different ways the attention of the interviewee (Shuy 2003) – as is possible in the personal interaction in which gestures and facial expressions contribute to keeping communication lively (Holbrook *et al.* 2003). The telephone interview precludes, in fact, all the expressions of mutual comprehension that during a face-to-face interview let the interviewer know if the interviewee has understood the question and if he's interested in the subject. In the same way, it won't be easy to distinguish expressions of embarrassment, fundamental to evaluate, for example, the sincerity or insincerity of the subject.

Another consequence of the attenuation of control is the impossibility of knowing (and so of signalling) if during the interview other people are present, who could influence the responses of the interviewee or even simply distract him. What's more, the interviewer can't signal possible evident lies about age, nor distinguish the ethnic origin and other observable traits of the interviewee. The researcher misses the precious information that in the face-to-face interview the interviewer can give on the status of the interviewee: evaluations of the neighbourhood, the apartment, the furnishings, and the appearance of the interviewee. It is not even possible to know if the interviewee responds (distractedly) while doing something else – cooking, eating, or watching TV (Holbrook *et al.* 2003).

Telephonic communication furthermore necessarily gives the interview a very fast pace, because it can last no longer than 20-25 minutes; and so a very sensible recommendation by Converse and Presser is violated: “administer the questions slowly in such a way that the interviewee will have time to think” (Converse and Presser 1986, 13). Another aspect of telephonic communication is that, by its nature, it doesn't tolerate silences – so precious and meaningful in face-to-face interaction.

As against all that the telephone interview first of all allows total control of the interviewer's performance. At least in principle, the presence at the workplace of supervisors takes away any discretion from the interviewer in the choice of subjects, who are contacted according to the automatic procedures of specific programmes. As well, the centralization of the work should prevent the interviewers from modifying the formulation of the questions (for example, Presser and Zhao 1992). Finally it's added that the commissioner of the research can follow it in progress and make, if necessary, any changes.

We will clarify in the course of the paper why, it seems to us, some of these advantages attributed to the telephone interview are only theoretical. We asked 26 telephone interviewers to recount their experiences of work; the strategies that they put into effect to confront problems and difficulties; their opinion of the structured questionnaire as an investigative instrument and more generally about their surveys.

## **2. Looking for the Best Practices**

The research was conducted in two successive phases: in the first place 20 interviewers who worked in the call centers of some research and polling companies in Naples and Rome were listened to with semi-structured interviews.<sup>1</sup> The sample was constituted by 17 women and 3 men, all with high educational qualifications (3 with high-school diplomas, 13 university students and 4 university graduates); the average age was 25, and most of the interviewers had had roughly a year of experience as an interviewer. The sample was quite varied in terms of the types of research they had conducted, having worked, as happens in many call centers, both on market research and on political and social research projects commissioned by major research institutes or national associations.

The second phase was projected to start from the results of the first 20 interviews. After having listened to the many problems and inaccuracies provoked by the call center interviewers, we tried to understand what happens in the best practices: the telephone interviews conducted for the National Institute of Statistics (Istat). Six in-depth interviews were conducted with the Istat interviewers who had worked on two surveys on particularly delicate themes: violence against women and health (the multi-purpose investigation “Women's Safety” and the investigation “Health Conditions and Recourse to Health Services”). In these investigations, given the particular theme dealt with, the attention to the training and checking of the interviewers is particularly high. As well, for its surveys Istat can invest more conspicuous sums than private research companies.

## **3. The Selection and Training of the Interviewers**

Most of the twenty interviewees of the first phase were selected based on the evaluation of resumés and a short meeting. Three of them, in any case, claim to have been co-opted through acquaintances, without having to pass any kind of selection, nor present their

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted by Emanuela Nicoloro, who we thank, for her degree thesis

résumé. In the research projects commissioned by Istat (Violence and Health), instead, the selection of the interviewers was conducted based on well-defined criteria: only graduates (preferably in psychology or sociology) and with a specific experience in the field were called for two interviews, one with the research company and one with a psychologist.

Those who pass the selection are put through a training phase that lasts from two days – as claimed by some interviewees of phase 1 – to 15 days – according to the lengths reported by most of the Istat interviewees.

In the literature the briefing that precedes each research project is seen as the central part of the equipping of the interviewer. Billiet and Loosveldt (1988) state that an in-depth training of the interviewers adds to the quality of the data gathered in various ways: the trained interviewers have higher levels of response on some particularly delicate questions (for example on the problem of health); are more prompt in giving the definition of especially difficult questions or in reassuring the interviewee and inviting him to reflect with calm, taking the necessary time etc.; give more feedback, even if not always adequate, to the responses of the interviewees; intervene with appropriate probing, cutting down for some questions the number of leading probes.

According to the claims of the interviewers heard in the first phase, instead, in some Italian research institutes the briefing is a purely formal act, to be rushed through: some last only 10 minutes<sup>2</sup>; the longer ones at most two hours. The training required by Istat for the research on violence against women is much more in-depth, and concerns various aspects, first of all the theme of the research.

The explanations of the questionnaire's various articulations, and the instructions on the reading of the questions, on the codification of the data and on the management of the open questions were not missing. This phase is followed by a test phase, that required the carrying out of a certain number of interviews: 10 according to what one interviewer remembers, 50 according to another. Even during the phase of investigation, what's more, intermediary meetings were required to compare the difficulties encountered and correct possible errors of conduction. This careful training was appreciated by the interviewers.

In general, a 8 years experienced Unicab interviewer says that the attention to the training of interviewers was progressively reduced with time: *“A lot of colleagues have told me absurd things about why they arrived there, did the job interview, here's the questionnaire, start”* (Maria C.).

#### **4. The Interviewer's Performance: Persuading.**

According to Durand the expression 'interviewer's performance' is “used and understood in two different ways in the literature, referring either to interviewers’ ability to elicit cooperation from respondents or to the quality of the interviews they conduct” (Durand 2005, 763).

The first meaning makes reference to the first of the tasks of the interviewer, persuading. This ability is based on many indicators of performance: refusal rate (number of refusals divided by refusals plus completed interviews); “efficiency,” the number of completed interviews per hour of work on the project; cooperation rate (the reverse of the refusal rate). The emphasis placed on the phase of initial telephone contact is justified by the effects that high non-response rate interviewers have on the quality of the sample. As Gobo remembers, “Fitzgerald and Fuller, and Marradi maintain that refusals are not

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<sup>2</sup> Schwartz and Jacobs complain the same problems in United States (Schwartz and Jacobs 1987, 169) .

randomly distributed but are correlated with precise demographic variables” (Gobo 2001, 2; Marradi 1989, 73; Fitzgerald and Fuller 1982, 7-11).

Also in Italy many investigations conducted by telephone interview are based on sampling by quota. This is the recurring case among the interviewers listened to in phase 1: the criteria of sampling are rarely respected (16 interviewers out of 20 violated them at least once), and they are modified at need to “bring an interview home”; as two Naples interviewers explain “ if we don't succeed in finding a precise person we change”; “if we're looking for a 26-year-old man and a girl of 25 answers, the girl becomes male and is 26 years old.”

The problems related to the construction of the sample, however, remain even if the sampling required is probabilistic: “Because most telephone interviewing is centralized and distribution of phone numbers to interviewers is largely automated, interviewers often do not follow up on phone numbers they call initially” (Durand 2008, 742).

An Istat interviewer who worked on various research projects, among them an investigation for Rai (the national broadcasting company) on radio listening, states that the profuse task of obtaining the interview is inversely proportionate to the number of possible contacts:

*«It depends also on how many addresses I have available. Because obviously to do 30 interviews you have 1,500 addresses is one thing. If to do 30 interviews you have 40 addresses you must know how to manage them [...] At that point you know to play them; that is, if you can waste an address, to say, “OK, it doesn't suit you to respond? Thanks and goodbye!” or you have to solicit, something like: “Look, excuse me, can we talk some other time? You tell me when”» (Roberta A.).*

In the Istat investigations the contact phase is begun with the sending of an advance letter to the interviewees. According to scholars, “advance letters underscore the legitimacy of a survey, take away suspicion, communicate the value of the survey, and evoke the principles of social exchange and reciprocity, thereby positively influencing response [...] Sending an advance letter does have a positive effect on both response rate and cooperation rate” (de Leeuw et al. 2007, 414). The Istat interviewers too stated that “the letter did a lot. At times the people said: 'if the letter hadn't arrived to me [I wouldn't be available]'. Then the letter arrived and I was available” (Clara B.). The problem is, as Patrizia D. underlines, that at the moment of the phone call 1 letter out of 4 have arrived.

## 5. The Interviewers Performance: Interviewing

Conducting an interview is anything but a simple task. The ideal of the standardized survey interview requires that the interviewer reads the question exactly as it's written, and “the respondent only mentions his choice of the set of presented response alternatives, whereupon the interviewer can proceed to the next question” (Van der Zouwen and Smit, 2006; see also Dijkstra and Ongena, 2006). But this idealized vision is hard to see in the practise of research, where various factors intervene, for example the problems of understanding the question, or incomplete correspondence between the alternative responses required and the subject's own condition.

The supporters of standardization respond to the critics by claiming that problems of comprehension are resolvable by placing particular attention to the formulation of the question, the alternative responses and the pre-test phase. Various research projects show, though, that it's almost never possible to foresee all the possible forms of poor comprehension of the question (Belson, 1981; Schober and Conrad, 1997, 578; Van der Zouwen and Smit 2006, 254).

So, it's the task of the interviewer to intervene with persuasive attempts to repair an inadequate initial response. The results of other research shows that “the interviewer in most cases intervenes, and unfortunately not always in the best ways, especially when they're not well-trained to do it” (Pitrone, 2009, 355-356). Various studies investigate inaccuracies and distortions more or less relevant to the standardized form in different percentages but in any case relevant: in 85% of the interviews analysed by Cannel (Cannel *et al.* 1968), in 50% of the questions recorded by Sormano (Sormano 1988), in 70% of the question/response sequences studied by Fowler and Mangione (Fowler and Mangione 1990).

It is quite difficult to decide whether an attempt at repair by the interviewer may be called ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’. Viterna and Maynard (Viterna and Maynard 2002) have shown that survey research centers differ considerably with respect to the probing strategies that are instructed and trained in these centers.

Nevertheless more than 20 years of debates and the volumes of empirical evidence produced, the manuals still today describe the role of the interviewer in a mechanical way, as a “passive instrument for the investigation of reality” (Palumbo, 1992, 33); a good interviewer must:

*«Read the questions exactly as worded; read each question slowly and enunciate clearly; repeat questions when they are misunderstood; use neutral probes and comments [...] Never interpret or explain; assume; skip questions» (Gallup Europe 2004, 22).*

Many other manuals consulted report the same instructions, and often use identical formulations. The way in which an interviewer deviates from the rules of standardization, according to Dijkstra and Ongena, may be “problematic or unproblematic: problematic interviewer deviations concern utterances by the interviewer that are expected to affect the validity of eventual response negatively [...] Problematic deviations may also concern absence of behavior that is required, such as failure to provide a response, or failure to clarify a question, if the respondent asks for such clarification” (Dijkstra and Ongena 2006, 985) .

### **5.1. Problematic Deviations and non deviations**

Some interviewers suit the role outlined for them by the manuals. The routine of the interview makes moreover makes it easy to stay true to the original formulation of the question: “You learned them by heart and went on automatic” (Tiziana R.).

Others instead infringe the rules simply to shorten the time to administer the questionnaire, skipping something, or they try to “guess the answer” without losing too much time with long forays probes: “The other question that if Istat had made a check about would have had me fired on the spot is the professional typology (very detailed, we had a booklet of definitions as thick as this) because I went on intuition, very often making mistakes” (Patrizia D.).

Sometimes they resort to reformulation to make the work less alienating and repetitive, and on the whole the less mechanical interview is more pleasant for the interviewee. At other times it's the case that the sequence of questions, too many and always formulated with a repetitive format, make a reformulation inevitable. According to Suchman and Jordan (Suchman and Jordan 1990), “the interview, rigidly constrained by an externally imposed, often repetitious script, becomes observably boring to respondents”. As Dijkstra observes, in fact, “a personal style of interviewing [...] yielded more valid responses than a formal style of interviewing” (Dijkstra 2006, 1002).

*«I remember that I was supposed to read the same phrase 80 times just to stick to the rules of the questionnaire [...] You find a more colloquial manner too. You don't effectively do much damage» (Clara B.).*

However, good intentions are not always enough “not to do much damage” (Van der Zouwen and Smith 2006). According to what the interviewers said, some of their probes even risk directing the interviewee’s reply, suggesting for example some of the alternative responses.

At other times the interviewers use strategies that are counter-productive, at least, to obtain an answer (any at all). So, faced with an interviewee who refuses to describe in detail what they have done during the day the interviewer encourages them like this:

*«“You can say what you like anyway, they'll never be able to check”. And they feel reassured; and then they lie shamelessly, they're persuaded» (Roberta A.).*

As we recalled earlier, problematic deviations may also concern the absence of required behavior. Often the cognitive schema imposed by the researcher in the questions is not shared by the interviewee, who gives a response anyway, producing “invented data, or data not corresponding to the effective state of the subject” (Palumbo 1992, 31). Interviewers faithful to the behaviourist mandate, for example, don't intervene even if they have the impression that the interviewee hasn't understood the sense of the question, or after having repeated the question, respond to the persistent doubts of the interviewees with a typical<sup>3</sup> neutral probe: “whatever it means to you”. Roberta A., for example, does it this way, when she finds herself faced with a case which relates to “type of work” the answer is not easily determinable (similar examples in Schober and Conrad 1997).

Even when an interviewer notices a contradiction between answers, and would like to call the attention of the interviewee back, awareness of the rules leads them to pretend it's not there. This is one of the cases where consciousness of being under the control of a supervisor induces the interviewer to conform, even against their wishes, to the obligations of standardization:

*«If you notice a contradiction maybe you can draw attention to it, but you're not obliged to do it [...] If you're under [observation] [...] with me anyway if I need to be as faithful as possible to the questionnaire I maintain the question as it is and if they contradict themselves I pretend not to notice. It's not my problem. It can't be my problem, unfortunately» (Roberta A.).*

Still worse results are had when interviewers are called to rigorously respect the sequence of the questions, and so to submit to all the interviewees questions that seem at best useless, but often downright disrespectful. As Pitrone says (Pitrone 2009), so as not to violate the taboo of the order they pose questions that don't apply to the specific situation. Some examples referred to by our interviewers are emblematic:

*«The first person who I interviewed was a lady who must have been a good sixty years old and who since she was 35 had had multiple sclerosis; so I had to ask her questions like: “Can you get out of bed easily, with difficulty...”. It didn't make sense, she was in a wheelchair! Apart from that she was very available and answered to the end of the questionnaire» (Roberta A. - investigation on health conditions).*

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<sup>3</sup> This is what Fowler and Mangione (Fowler and Mangione 1990) recommend doing.

Also in the investigation on violence against women some questions were particularly onerous for the interviewer that is obliged to pose questions that produce foreseeable answers:

*«The hardest questions were the ones we already had an answer for: “Your husband is a police officer and he beats you. Why haven't you reported it?” It's difficult to ask because you know it causes pain. The reactions went from irony (“Report it to who, Miss?”) to desperation: “I don't know what to do, I don't know who to ask”. And there was often the temptation to skip the question – the reason was obvious and you had to ask it just the same, hurting them» (Patrizia D.).*

Various interviewers, furthermore, complain of the excessive rigidity of the criteria on the basis of which were decided the “in-depth explorations” at the course of the interview. In the survey on violence, for example, after having asked a list of questions about violence suffered (that provided for very different situations, from molestation on a bus to rape), they went in-depth, with a long list of questions, only on the most recent violence suffered. “It was difficult to ask a lady what had happened to her in the bus the other day, after she'd told you that 7 years earlier she was raped. Basically it was hard when you couldn't respect the pain of the other person”, maintains Patrizia D., who in cases like this decides anyway, at the end of the questionnaire and without recording the answers, to listen to the stories on the episodes that in her opinion were more painful or relevant.

The words of the interviewers put in doubt once again that an interview conducted in a rigid way succeeds to produce faithful data. According to Schaeffer “respondents may apply rules learned in other speech events and reject imposing interview rules” (Schaeffer 2002, 98). Suchman and Jordan (Suchman and Jordan 1990) argue that the way a survey interview is standardized, and is not like a conversation, may hamper the quality of the data. The words of one of them sum up well, and put into debate, the idea of the interview as an interrogation (as opposed to a relationship) and of the interviewer as a mere executor:

*«The truth is this: the questionnaire doesn't provide for dialogue. I mustn't interact with you on whether [...] you liked the transaction or not. You have to just give me a rating. And this is the limit of our work: the questionnaire doesn't provide for dialogue» (Roberta A.).*

## 6. Interaction Via Telephone

As Bailey observes “with the telephone responses can be obtained in less time than it would take just to begin planning a postal interview or a survey by means of face-to-face interviews” (Bailey 1980, 234). So, in all the cases in which time efficiency is one of the fundamental standards to evaluate the quality of research (if you think for example of polls on voting intentions, of those carried out to evaluate in advance the reaction on the part of the public to one specific social intervention destined for the public themselves) the decision to turn to a telephone survey seems absolutely rational.

Telephone interviews seem rational too at the level of costs. As Sapignoli mentions (Sapignoli 2006, 65), academics agree on attributing to telephone surveys a significant advantage compared to face-to-face surveys in terms of costs. The quantitative esteem of the advantage varies from author to author, but always around a range from 50% to 75% of savings (Groves *et al.* 2002).



Moving the discussion to a decidedly methodological level, the telephone interview seems characterized by structural defects that can't be ignored. The telephone inhibits some crucial aspects of the processes of communication / interaction. Compared with a face-to-face interview, interviewer and interviewee have less elements to form an idea of each other. The detachment that the telephone maintains between the two speakers hinders the construction of mutual trust, inducing in the interviewee a series of attitudes and strategies that potentially entail distortions: lack of attention, the desire to close the conversation in a hurry, controlling of their image (§ 1). Moreover the lack of mutual trust can in some ways invalidate the work of the interviewer as well, who – not succeeding to form a solid idea of the way in which their respondent is taking part in the interview – finds himself unable to play his role (Corbetta 2003, 213; Cassell 2005).

This kind of worry presupposes a conception of the interview's interaction opposed to that of the behaviorists, that is the awareness that the two actors – just as happens normally in any conversation – are constantly busy making sense of verbal and non-verbal signs. Between interviewer and interviewee a rich and complex interaction is established. More or less consciously each of the two actors forms an idea of the other, of their intentions, of the degree of interest with which they're taking part in the interview, and of the opinions that the other is making of them. Inhibiting this interpretative activity and making it uncertain, the telephone can become a source of distortion.

If the building of trust is a crucial aspect, it would be desirable, then, to train the interviewer to be able to maintain an expressive and communicative interview style with which to counterbalance the structural coldness of the telephone as a means of communication, rather than asking them to be neutral and impersonal. In fact neutrality and the construction of trust seem two patently contradictory objectives.

Furthermore, the cold nature of the telephone as a means of communication can be seen in some areas of research as a resource more than a limitation. When the interview deals with difficult subjects, the lack of direct contact can reduce embarrassment and so favor sincere responses on the part of the interviewee (Aquilino 1994). From the accounts of the interviewers we talked with confirmation of this thesis emerges and further specifications: the telephone can act as an effective protective screen as much for the interviewer as for the interviewee. The former has the task of conducting the development of the interview; apart from recording the answers and giving clarifications, the interviewer has the responsibility of guiding the interviewee from one question to another, of bringing them back onto the track of the interview, of asking for clarifications when certain responses are obscure, of agreeing with the interviewee a determinate closed answer, etc. The naturalness and efficiency with which the interviewer carries out this operation can be threatened by an excess of empathy and by shared experience. In consequence, the reflections and the methodological studies on surveys on difficult themes should interest themselves as much in the interviewer as in the interviewee.

## **7. Scales and Mismatching Answers**

The use of the telephone poses some methodological questions linked to the use of the technique of scaling, created and developed for face-to-face interview administration methods.

Groves maintains that the telephonic use of scales of 1 to 10 doesn't introduce particular divergences compared with the results obtained through face-to-face administration (Groves 1988). Some interviewers even declare that “the little game 'tell me from 1 to 10 how much you're...' works”<sup>4</sup> (Luciana S.). Probably, from the experience of other

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<sup>4</sup> In Italy the system of evaluation in high-school provides for votes from 1 to 10.

interviewers, older people and those with lower educational qualifications have greater difficulty in using the numbers to indicate their position. At other times it's difficult for subjects who don't want to expose themselves to give a judgment by means of a number, and despite the requests of the interviewer some use scales of judgment with greater semantic autonomy. These problems return in the more general classification of Houtkoop-Steenstra as “unformatted answers” or “mismatch answers” (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000), that is, answers that don't “unequivocally point to a score that can be filled in by the interviewer” (Dijkstra and Ongena 2006, 1005).

*«People are incapable or afraid to give a vote... for example you ask them 'How satisfied are you on a scale of value from 10 to 1?', and they answer: 'Good'; you press them and say: "Yes, but from 10 to 1", and again: 'Good'. They don't manage to give you a vote, so you press them for one» (Maria C.)*

A case of problematic respondent deviation is if the score chosen by the subjects doesn't represent their position on the matter: the interviewer realizes the incongruence from comments made together with the vote: “They described to you the number they'd chosen for a judgment in words that frankly weren't suitable for the number” (Clara B.).

Another problem connected to the use of the scales, administration methods aside, is that of the differing meanings attributed to the positions on the scale by different interviewees, but also by researchers and interviewers. In a survey on satisfaction with the assistance service of a car manufacturer that almost all the interviewers took part in, an exploration of reasons for dissatisfaction was programmed for scores of 7 or less, on a scale of 1 to 10. For many interviewees, in any case, 7 was a vote that expressed full satisfaction:

*«The teachers are terrible because they say: 'I give votes at school everyday: for me 7 is the maximum vote' [...] and so they tell you: 'But if I told you that I'm fully satisfied why do you keep asking me all these questions?'» (Maria C.)*

The more alert interviewees, says Roberta A. smiling, after a while understand that giving 7 led to a series of in-depth questions, and so “to avoid wasting time they give you 8”.

## 8. Involvement

The interviewers have no shortage of temptations to speed up their work. Recording a different reply from the one given by the interviewee, inventing an interviewee or part of one, interviewing a person who lacks the required characteristics, are frequent forms of falsification of data (Bichi 2007, 95). What's more, the fact of being paid on the basis of interviews completed and not on the hours of work (a very common practise above all in private research centers) constitutes a structural incentive to fall prey to similar temptations.

From this perspective a motivated interviewer interested in the theme of the investigation they're participating in is the best control in itself. Sharing the ends of the research, they will have every interest in respecting the standards of quality required of them; tiredness – inevitably connected to the more routine aspects of their work – will be made up for by a genuine curiosity about the answers of the interviewees that induces them to conduct the interviews with scrupulousness and concentration. This virtuous attitude can be reinforced by contextual elements: if the interviewer perceives interest and dedication in their colleagues too, they will be further motivated to carry out their own work with care

and not to opportunistically exploit the spaces of autonomy that any system of checks inevitably leaves them.

The interviewers we heard from attribute a decisive role to involvement. Many of them, thinking back on their experiences in different areas of research, clearly distinguish between research conducted on themes of evident social relevance and commercial surveys on customer satisfaction<sup>5</sup>. In the first case it's moral uneasiness that they would feel adopting opportunistic behaviour that effectively inhibits the temptation to falsify some interviews; the respect for the quality standards of the data seems thus protected more by the ethical sense of the interviewers than by strategies of control adopted by the supervisors. In the commercial surveys, lacking this pull towards noble or high-minded cognitive objectives, the interviewer feels more free to act selfishly, consciously damaging the quality of the research. This quotation from the interview with Clara C. effectively exemplifies the topic in question:

*«In the sense [that] at the hundredth interview you do, really you don't care. Because of this the theme of the interview is important. Because on violence it's not easy. If this lady is telling you she was beaten you're not about to say: if I put in this answer how far ahead will I get in the questionnaire? But on a Mercedes one or about whatever else... it's easier to do it. Because you say: "No one's going to die; she cares even less than me". Neither of us care and it's all fine».*

Involvement also entails some risks. Another interviewer (Luciana S.) described to us in much detail the briefing that she took part in for the Istat survey on the victimization of women. More than a moment of training / socialization, this seems to have been an occasion to extol the themes of the ethical and social aims of the research; in this way involvement risks turning into militancy, becoming a source of distortions. Interpreting the research as a mission, the interviewer can be induced to assume an almost inquisitorial attitude and to interpret the uncertainties and indecisions of the interviewee as cases of reticence to be smoked out. What's more, as emerges from the quotations that follow, the interviewer can be brought to believe that the interviewee is deliberately lying:

*«I had cases of violence in almost 50% of the women I interviewed, for a very simple reason: I'm used to talking to them so I understand if they're lying and I'm able little by little to convince them to tell me the truth» (Patrizia D.).*

Various methodological studies have amply testified as to how social desirability and acquiescence are distortions typical of the structured interview.<sup>6</sup> The theme of the interviewer's involvement gains relevance also by virtue of this. In fact, a highly motivated interviewer can unconsciously create expectations that the interviewee is pushed to conform to; above all in the cases in which the interviewee doesn't have – in reference to the specific theme of the study – such strong opinions or life experiences.

## 9. Conclusions

In social and political enquiries in Italy (as all over the world), not to mention market research, the collection of data is becoming more and more often entrusted to specialized

<sup>5</sup> On this matter see again Schwartz and Jacobs (1987, 171).

<sup>6</sup> See (Edwards 1957), (Wiggins 1968), (Deutscher 1973), (Pitrone 1984), (Presser e Traugott 1992), (Javeline 1999), (Corbetta 2003), (Roccatò 2003), (Marradi 2007), (Pitrone 2009).

companies for telephonic surveys, if not to call centers; both cases involve operators unable to boast much experience of research, because of which they can't be expected to pay particular attention to the implications of a good (or bad) data collection on its final results.

This is in some ways paradoxical because the success of the research depends on the number of subjects who refuse the interview (a high number of refusals, as noted, invalidates the randomness of the sample) and on the quality of the responses obtained. It would be desirable first of all to improve the interviewers' training phase. The briefings of a few minutes are practically useless; those concerned with the gathering of data should receive an in-depth training on the objectives of the research and the purpose of each question. Moreover it would be appropriate to provide for continuous training of the interviewers, who should also be listened to during the execution of the survey.

The atmosphere of trust required in the interviewer/interviewee relationship should be recreated also in the relationship between groups of researchers and interviewers: the passage from the logic of check to that of trust means that the interviewers are not judged (and paid) exclusively based on the number of interviews done in a certain period of time; but that rather they are trained, and left free to intervene in appropriate ways if they detect contradictions or incomprehension in the course of the interview.

All this also means to recognize in telephone interviewers a professionalism that seems to be understated them still, both from the point of view of economic recognition and of valorization of their expertise. Involving the best interviewers in the creation of the questionnaires, and seeking their opinions during the survey, could also teach researchers a lot.

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